

Allan MacRae, Ezekiel Lecture 2:

Last time I was speaking about capital D, "The Historical Background of the Book." But I'd like to go back for a few minutes to capital C, "The Higher Criticism." There are a couple of things about the theory that I think are quite important that I had not specifically mentioned last time. One thing that is very important in connection with it is the fact that early in the development theory of the Pentateuch, in which the book of Ezekiel was considered as a unit written by a man, Ezekiel, written at a particular time and thus giving a basis from which there could be examples to show the development from the previous stage to the later stage. It was the putting of this "development theory" into the study of the Pentateuch that made it gain its wide acceptance. First in Germany, then in France, England, and then over to America. But that "development theory" has been twisted so that it has lost most of its shape by now, although even in practically every university in the world where anything is taught about religion, the higher criticism of the Pentateuch is taught as an established fact. And Ezekiel, which was the fulcrum upon which that theory was developed, is now itself divided up by the critics just the same as the other books are. So at present the modernist writers will say that Ezekiel himself wrote only about a third of the book. Others will say that very little of it can be traced to Ezekiel. Some even put it as late as the last century before the coming of Christ.

The other thing that I want to stress about the higher criticism is that the higher criticism, as it was called a century ago, was supposed to be an approach made to all literary works in order to determine who was the author and what were the works behind our present text, or how they come into existence and when were they written. Some of our evangelical books even to this day will say that's what the higher criticism is; that there is nothing wrong with higher criticism; it simply is a misuse of it because that's what they say that higher criticism is. But the interesting thing is that that usage of the term has disappeared almost completely from literary study, and it is only in the study of the Bible that the term is still kept. About twenty years ago, I got all the books I could find in a large university library written in the previous twenty or thirty years on literary

criticism. And in all of them I looked in the index for "higher criticism" and most of them didn't even mention the term! In the Encyclopedia Britannica, the fifteenth edition, and you look up "higher criticism," it says simply, "See Biblical criticism". So this which was common in the very divisive approach that was taken to all literary sources by most scholars a century ago has been given up almost entirely except in relation to the Bible. And the departments of religion or Bible study in our universities, and at most of the seminaries of any age, today teach as an established fact a method in relation to the Bible that has just disappeared as far as most other literary study is concerned.

I was interested to find that comparatively fewer references made to this method anymore, though before, say 1930, it was very common in literary study. Professor Helen Gardner of Oxford, in her book The Business of Criticism, in 1959, said, "The modern scholar or critic concentrates in the first place on what he can make of his text that has come down to him. There has been a strong reaction against the study of even extant and known sources, much more against the discussion of hypothetical ones. The importance of the single author and the single work dominates literary study." Now there are very few people in the field of religion who realize that fact at all. I was much surprised twenty years ago when I found it to be a fact. But your department in religion in the universities and in all the modern seminaries give as established literary method something that literary students in all other fields have practically abandoned.

There was a very interesting article by C.S. Lewis in his book, I believe the name, Biblical Perceptions, I forget the exact name, but in that book there is an article that he had published previously and that later on was reprinted in *Christianity Today* about twenty years ago. And in this article C.S. Lewis said that there had been many reviews of books he had written in which the critic had tried to tell just how the book came into existence and how it developed in his mind and how he put the different parts together. And he said not one of them had come anywhere near the way it had actually happened. And if that's true, in trying to discuss how contemporary writing comes into existence, how can you expect people to be able to take books written thousands of years ago and divide them up into sections that are supposed to come from different sources and say

how these come together. But they go right on in our great universities in their departments of Bible or religion teaching is as established fact regarding the Bible. I've had the sad experience in the last two or three years of coming across cases of men who had been professors in fine evangelical seminaries, and have been greatly beloved for their fine stand of the Bible, who have gone to a school like Harvard to take work for a doctor's degree and have come out of there convinced that we must use this critical method, literary criticism, in our study. They don't accept the whole theory, some of them do, but most of them don't but they insist upon that this is the right approach. But if we take this approach, it will lead us just where it has lead all the modernists. So I feel that we have to be aware of this and then we have to be on the watch for it.

In fact, there has even been a book written recently, I understand, that takes up the Gospel of Matthew; how did the book of Matthew come into existence? It has worked out a theory that it is a historical novel and that the author of it, believing the great doctrines of Christ, set to work to imagine how different events probably took place. It was written by a man considered as a very godly, evangelical man, but moving in that direction. I think that it is very important that we be careful not to move ourselves in that direction and also to help others who get moved in that direction at all.

Now at the end of the hour we were speaking about the historical background of Ezekiel, and all that I was able to say about that was to give you the names of the last five kings and their dates, which you all have in your notes. The historical background is tremendously important in relation to the book of Ezekiel. There are books in which the historical background is unimportant, but in this case, the whole book is tremendously affected by it. It constantly refers to the historical background, and to really understand the book, we have to have the historical background in mind. The background is one of exile and captivity. Those two words, "exile" and "captivity," are quite frequently used by students of the Old Testament as if they were synonymous. But of course, they are not. There is a real difference between exile and captivity.

The exile occurred when the people from Judah were compelled, the great bulk of them, to cross the land to Babylonia and to live in various countries that the Assyrians

and the Babylonians later conquered. This was the exile. Once they would be permitted to come back, the exile came to an end, whether they took advantage of the permission or not. So we say that the exile ended in 538 B.C. when Cyrus gave the edict permitting the Jews to go back to Jerusalem and to rebuild the city and the temple. That was the end of the exile. But it was not the end of the captivity.

The captivity of the Northern Kingdom was subject to the control first of the Assyrians, then to the control of the Babylonians, later to the control of the Persians, and then to the control of the Hellenistic rulers. The captivity continued until about 165 B.C. when Antiochus Epiphanes tried to destroy the Jewish religion and many fled into the wilderness, but under the leadership of the Macabees they gained their freedom. So the captivity lasted until about 165 B.C. and after that they were free for nearly a hundred years until the Romans took over control of them and the captivity then continued after that. Then there was a new exile after 70 A.D. when they were scattered throughout the world. And you might say, perhaps, that that exile came to a full end when they were permitted freely to go back to the land of Israel within the last few years in 1948.

Well now, Ezekiel is near the beginning of this long captivity of the Southern Kingdom. And he is near the beginning of the exile of the Southern Kingdom. The exile of the Northern Kingdom, as you should all know, occurred in 721 B.C. when the Assyrians conquered it and took the people off into Mesopotamia and to other areas. The Northern Kingdom is often called the Kingdom of Israel, but all the people considered themselves to be Israel. The Southern Kingdom was called the Kingdom of Judah, but all the people considered that they were part of Israel too, even though it was a separate kingdom from the Kingdom of Israel, in the north. The people of the north were taken into captivity and then in 721 B.C. and about a hundred years later, the exile of the Southern Kingdom began, although the captivity of Judah didn't begin until the destruction of Jerusalem, although the captivity of many of the people did when they were taken off into exile.

So in 604 B.C., which would be during the reign of Jehoiakim, during that reign, Nebuchadnezzar came into Jerusalem and said they were to be under his control even

though he did not actually incorporate them into his kingdom, and took Daniel and other young men off into exile in 604 B.C. We don't know how many other people he took into exile in 604. But six years later, Nebuchadnezzar again came to Jerusalem. This time Jehoiakim, the king, was killed. We don't know the details of his death; it seems likely that he was killed before Nebuchadnezzar came. But Jehoiakim's son, Jehoiachin, succeeded him. Jehoiachin had reigned three months when king Nebuchadnezzar took Jehoiachin into exile along with a large number of the people.

So there was another large section of exile occurred in 598 B.C. Even years after that, Nebuchadnezzar captured Jerusalem after a long siege, destroyed the city, and took most of the rest of the people into exile in 586 B.C. So we have three different beginnings of the exile of the Southern Kingdom: in 604, 598, and finally in 586 B.C. when the Solomonic first temple was totally destroyed.

Now, the greater part of the book of Ezekiel was written between 598 and 587 B.c. and in the very first verse of the book it says that it was in the first year of Jehoiachin's captivity. This illustrates the fact that many of the Jews consider Jehoiachin as continuing to be their king even though he was a prisoner over in Babylonia. They considered him to be their king, and they looked forward with longing to his being released and coming back and beginning to reign in Jerusalem. Jehoiachin's uncle Zedekiah who was enthroned as king, wasn't recognize many of the people of Judah; they considered him as one who was holding on until Jehoiachin should come back. And so Ezekiel says that the events of chapter 1 occur, the events in chapter 1 occurred during the fifth year of Jehoya Kim's captivity. And he dates many of the sections of the book from Jehoya Kim's captivity.

Now there are some today who say that the book of Ezekiel must have been written in Jerusalem. It can't have been written in the exile because it deals with Jerusalem. It deals with the problem of the people's relation with God and the threat of coming destruction and exile, and so they say that it must have been written in Jerusalem. Those who say this are, of course, part of the higher critical approach, but it is not a logical one. They say Ezekiel was written in Jerusalem because Ezekiel is very

nationalistic and patriotic to be an exile. But the most nationalistic people of the are those who are in exile. You often find that the people in exile are more patriotic, more nationalistic than those who are at home. And they tend to look at their homeland through a rose colored glasses.

So Ezekiel had a very difficult task just as his contemporary, Jeremiah, did. It is interesting that Ezekiel and Jeremiah lived at the same time. Both were active at the same time, but neither mentions the other in his book. Their messages were substantially the same. Jeremiah, in Jerusalem, was rebuking the people for their sin and saying that if you continue in your sin, God is going to send you into exile. Ezekiel, among those who were already in exile in Babylon, was saying “Do not expect that God is going to free Jehoiachin and take him back and let you go back and grant you again freedom for Judah. You are a wicked people. You, and even more so, the people in Jerusalem; and so God is going to punish you.

So Jeremiah had a very difficult task; he was looked on as a traitor by his people in Jerusalem. But Ezekiel had an even harder task because although he wasn't cast into prison like Jeremiah was or put into a dungeon like Jeremiah was, yet he had his people around him who felt even more strongly against him than did those in Jerusalem feel against Jeremiah, for they were giving the same message.

It is interesting in Jeremiah chapter 29 that Jeremiah wrote to the people who were in exile in which he said, “Don't think that you are going to come back soon; don't be looking forward and expecting to come back, but settle down and build houses; establish yourselves in the land of exile; you are going to be there for a long time before you can come back again”. But Ezekiel was already there in exile. We don't know when he went; whether he went with the first group in 604 B.C. or the second group in 598 B.C. Some have even suggested that he might have been from the Northern Kingdom originally, among those who had been there long before, and I think that is probably very unlikely. But Ezekiel had a very difficult task and he knew that once he began saying to the people “You are not going to come back, you are a stiff-necked, disobedient people and God is going to punish you further. He is not going to restore the freedom of Jerusalem; he is

even going to cause the city to be destroyed." That once he began giving a message like that, there is no knowing what the people might do to him. It was very difficult just to get up the courage to give such a message. It is difficult to give a message that flatly contradicts the feelings, the desires, the attitudes among the people that you live. Ezekiel had to face that difficult task. Ezekiel looked forward once God gave him his commands and looked forward to one of the most difficult tasks that anyone has ever had.

Now that completes our Roman numeral I, "The Introduction to the Book." Now Roman numeral II we will call "Ezekiel's First Vision." Ezekiel 1:1 to 3:4. And I asked you to consider the purpose of this vision. And it is rather easy if you know the historical background to imagine what the purpose is. I think one can fairly easily gather from the beginning from the beginning of the book. But perhaps one element that might not occur to you to be mentioned right here. Ezekiel was living far away from Jerusalem in the land of the Chaldeans where the people would say, "Why do you go on believing in this God that you don't even have a statue of?" You would see the great procession going through the streets with the statues of the Babylonian gods being carried there. All the ceremonies of the Babylonian religion you would see, and that the people would say, "Why do you go on believing in this God? He couldn't protect Jerusalem, he couldn't protect you from being conquered and carried off, yet why do you go off believing in him?" You would see all these ceremonies and these very, very attractive, complicated rituals carried on and it was very tempting to give up their belief in God and to turn to that kind of religion and God wants Ezekiel right at the start of his ministry to have a tremendous consciousness of the glory of God, of the reality of God, of the tremendous power of God. He wants to show him that God was just as complex in his nature as any of the rituals of the Babylonians; even though you could not see it, he's just as complex in his nature and far more powerful. So in order to enable Ezekiel to do something that was so very difficult to do, to undertake and carry a message that would be so extremely unpopular among the people to whom he went, God wanted him as he started his activity to become very aware of the glory of God and of the power of God. So the great purpose of the vision was to prepare him for his ministry, but a secondary purpose was to offset

the attractiveness of the Babylonian religion by showing that here is something or more complex in all its ramifications; that here is a power, a tremendous power; here is the greatest force in the universe that you are representing even if the people are not to recognize it.

So we will call capital A under II, "The Glory of God in Chapter 1." I gave you a couple of possible ways that the prophets' eyes might conceivably move in looking at the vision that God showed him. I trust that all of you recognize that the possible ways that I suggested are very far from the actual picture that we have there. Yet the average reader of the book of Ezekiel gets no conception of the picture. Chapter 1 is just a lot of involved, confused detail to the average reader of the book. But when you look at it carefully to see the order in which it is presented and the way in which the prophet's eye moves in connection with the presentation with the picture, I think that it makes it much more vivid to you.

And so, under A- "The Glory of God", we look at number 1, "The Whirlwind and Fire." And God begins with nature. He begins with nature. I believe nature is perhaps the first point for a person to begin to recognize the existence and the power of God. Number 1, "The Whirlwind and Fire," and the word "fire" is mentioned six times in this chapter. The tremendous force of the whirlwind that he sees in verse four, he sees it coming out of the North, this immense cloud with flashing lighting and surrounded by brilliant light and the center of the fire looked like glowing metal. He give references to the fire constantly throughout. The picture is that of all the tremendous, overwhelming forces of nature, God is in control of them all. God is the God of nature. Men have made tremendous advances in science in controlling nature, and yet every now and then, we have tremendous acts of nature that destroy a large part of what man has created. The power of God as shown through nature is something that is impressive even with the tremendous advances in science. Man is petty in comparison with the great and tremendous power of God. So God wanted to stress to Ezekiel that God was in control of the tremendous forces of nature. So he saw this great whirlwind and this great fire. He began then with this work; he began with nature. God led him on from there into the realization of the glory of God.

Then number 2 I call “The Four Living creatures”: verses 5 to 14. And he sees here in these 10 verses, he has a picture of what is simply called "The Four Living Creatures." They are not identified; we don't know what kind of animals they appear to be. They certainly were different from animals that you would see ordinarily. But it brings the power of God a step higher, you might say, because animal nature is powerful, but the complexity of what God has created is beyond our imagination. If I recall correctly, everyone of us in his eye, in each eye, has more individual rods and cones in his eye than the whole number of the population of the United States. That is just beyond our imagination, that there could be developed within us this tremendous number of individual rods and cones in every human eye. The rest of the human body represents the tremendous complexity far beyond anything man has ever been able to reproduce. But God has produced all the tremendous variety of life. So the distinctive thing that he sees for 10 verses is these four living creatures.

His vision doesn't actually get to what you might say is truly representing God until we get quite a distance on in the picture. He sees the great whirlwind as Elijah did down in Sinai, but we read in Kings that God was not in the whirlwind. He saw the great fire, but God was not in the fire. God spoke to Elijah and gave him a message.

Now communication is a miraculous thing. I have seen accounts to show how the Bible, if you correctly interpret it, is such an involved thing. People are recently writing long books on hermeneutics, and when you get through some of them, you get the impression that actually communicating ideas from one mind to another is so complex that we certainly can't believe that God could have given us a communication of his mind of exactly what he wants us to believe. Yet one of the commonest things in life is communication from one person to another. If we can do it, certainly God can do it. And so we believe that God has given us a communication in his book. A communication that conveys to us the ideas that he wants us to have, and that we can depend upon. Ideas that we properly derive from this book as being the ideas that God wants us to have and are entirely true and free from error.

Now we say that we believe in the inerrancy of the Scripture, and by that we mean that any idea that can be properly derived from the Scripture is true. We do not mean that you can grab three words out at random and squeeze those words to get a thousand ideas from them and that every idea you get that way is going to be true. We have to compare Scripture with Scripture.

I think that we make a great mistake when we get terribly excited about whether we have every word exactly as God gave it. I believe that for every word, we can depend upon our Scripture to be very close to what God gave, and that it is close enough to convey all the ideas that he wants to give to us. But when we find a textual difference, if it affects something important, look elsewhere because every idea that God wants to give us, he has given repeatedly in the Scripture not just once. If there is a textual criticism of a verse, let's look elsewhere where there is no question. You will find that the important ideas are all given repeatedly, not just in one passage of two or three words. But we do have an inerrant Scripture, and it is not the ideas in there, but the words, the words are inerrant in the sense that when properly studied, they will not give us any false ideas. But the properly studied will give us the very ideas that God wants us to have.

So here we have this picture of these four creatures, and we have a little detail about the physiology, but not a great deal. We know that their form is somewhat like that of a man, but that each of these four has four faces and four wings. They would seem to face in four different directions. Each one goes straight ahead, and they don't turn as they move. It is pretty hard to visualize it. But perhaps it means that one of them is going straight ahead and the other one is going in another direction. It is hard to visualize exactly what it is. But the vision begins with the seeing the four creatures. We see God first through what he has given that is around us, and we have not gotten to the being of God, at least not in his fullness, simply with the four creatures. But we are told certain details about the four creatures.

I am going to call a small 'a' about them: "The Four Faces". Each of the four creatures has four faces. Verse 10 says their four faces looked like this, "Each of their faces looked like the face of a man," showing that there is something human about this

representation. But that is only one of the four faces. The face of a man and, "On the right side the face of a lion and on the left the face of an ox." But it doesn't say on the back the face of an eagle. It says "Each also had the face of an eagle". I believe a strong argument can be made for the idea that in this God was giving a picture of the way in which he would reveal himself later in the incarnation. These creatures are on the level of the ground. They are moving on the ground. Each of them has these four faces, and God is giving an inkling of the way he would reveal himself through the Lord Jesus Christ.

You notice that each one has the face of a man, and on the right side he has a face of a lion. The lion makes you immediately think of royalty, think of power, we speak of the lion as the king of the beasts and Jesus Christ is presented to us in the book of Matthew as a king, and you see the regal features of the king. You can trace Christ's kingship all through the book of Matthew beginning with his miraculous birth and his proclamations of the principles of his kingdom; and his being tempted by another king. You can see all through a picture of a king.

Then the creatures have on the left side the face of an ox, the patient burden bearer. In Mark we get an entirely different picture: we get a picture of the doer, the one who accomplishes things, and that's what Mark was particularly interested in, in his gospel.

Then we have, we have the face of a man, which perhaps represents the gospel of Luke, which shows the picture of the most perfect man who ever lived. As the many little human touches that are not so stressed in the other Gospels.

Then they also had the face of an eagle, but it doesn't say in the back. Was it higher up than the others? What was it? It makes us think the difference between the gospel of John which was written much later than the other three. There is a separation between John and the synoptic Gospels. Yet it is by the one who was closest to him and peers furthest into the true nature of Christ and shows us his deity as the great God. Is this the picture of the eagle that flies overhead? Now, whether I wouldn't be dogmatic about that being the meaning of the four faces, but it seems to be a possible suggestion, and it seems to fit with the way that Christ was revealed later on. How much Ezekiel

would have understood of that is, of course, hard for us to say. But he sees God revealing himself on a human level in different aspects, different forms, different ways. But very much systematized, very definite. We have these four faces under this picture of the four creatures.

Then number 3 we have "The Wheel," chapter 1 verses 15-21. We have beside each of these creatures a wheel on the ground. "And these wheels sparkling like crystal light, and all four look alike. And as they moved they would go in any one of the four directions the creatures faced; the wheels didn't turn about as the creatures went. Their eye rims were high and awesome and all four rims were full of eyes all around" (verse 15-18). The picture shows us the tremendous complexity of God's revelation and the tremendous complexity of his activity as he accomplishes what he wants on the level of the ground. So we don't start at the top and go down. We don't start at the top and then go across to the next level and come down, but we start on the ground. Here on the ground we have the wheels on the ground which are beside the living creatures. And so "The Wheels" is number 3, verses 15-21, the wheels which were beside the living creatures.

But then number 4 is difficult to name. The NIV calls it "The Expanse," the King James calls it "The Firmament" as verse 22. In verse 22 we read it was "Spread out over the heads of the living creatures," so as Ezekiel looked what was on his level, he saw the four creatures; he saw the four wheels on the ground and then he looked at what was above it: "Spread out above the heads of the living creatures was what looked like an expanse, sparkling like ice and awesome." Now, how does an expanse sparkle like ice? It seems to me that "expanse" doesn't quite represent it, but I don't know what quite would. I'm sure in this translation rejected "firmament" because it sounds like something firm, and of course the modernists say that the biblical picture of the world is having something like a metal dome around us as a firmament that God created. That was an old mystical idea of the universe, of the world surrounded by this great metal dome called a firmament. Well, that's not the picture anywhere in the Bible, and the word "firmament" is therefore not a good picture, and in Genesis 1 they translated the word "expanse," but

maybe it would be more like the various groups of materials around the world which are important in the surrounding air. Perhaps "sphere" would be better because it is certainly not solid and yet it is certainly not just emptiness. So the word "expanse" sounds like something empty, but he says here that it was sparkling like ice and awesome. So what he saw as he looked higher up, above these four creatures, he sees something sparkling like ice and awesome, but certainly something not solid altogether because he can see above it. "Under the expanse their wings were stretched out towards one another, and each had two wings covering its body," but then in verse 25 he hears a voice from above the expanse over their heads, as they stood with lowered wings. This would be very high up in the air above the expanse. Over their heads was what looked like a throne, and then above the throne there is a figure like that of a man. So we see God revealing himself on earth through this great complexity--these many aspects illustrated by the four living creatures, each with four faces and the wings. And yet we see, as we look higher as the prophet did, above the creatures is this expanse, or sphere, or whatever, and that's number 4, "The Expanse."

Then number 5 we will call "The Throne" in chapter 1 verse 26. Ezekiel looks higher and above this expanse he sees a throne, a throne that looks like a throne of sapphire.

Then number 6, "The Figure of a Man," a figure that looks like that of a man above on the throne. "From what appeared to be his waist up looked like a glowing metal as if full of fire and from there down he looked like fire and a ray of light surrounded him like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him" (v. 27) So we have Ezekiel here seeing the evidence of the great complexity of God's creation, the evidence of God's presence on this earth, controlling all things here. We see his glory, his earthly glory, but then we look higher and we see the expanse which you might say illustrates his control over the whole universe, far beyond what we can reach. But then above the expanse, we see a throne which, of course, is figurative; it is not a literal throne but it is the way that it is presented for the idea of God's control over it all. Above that was what looked like the figure of a man but also looked like

glowing metal as if full of fire, the ineffable glory of God. Yet having personality, looked like a man. There is a person there; there is thought. Some people have an idea of God that is simply static and that is not the picture that the Scripture gives us at all. God is a spirit; he has feelings; he has desire; he has joy; he has sorrow; he has all that is common to human life that way but without the limitations of human life. He is a spirit with thought, with purpose with ideas, with control over all things, and so the prophet is beginning with God's manifestations here on the earth. Then his vision goes higher and sees the great expanse; goes higher and sees the throne, goes even higher and gets a glimpse of the personality of God. Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day so was the radiance around him. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. "When I saw it I fell face down and I heard the voice of one speaking."

Then capital B will be "The First Message," in chapter 2 verse 1 to chapter 3 verse 3. The message here is that Ezekiel is not to be afraid of the people for they are a rebellious house. He is to step out and serve God despite the tremendous opposition, the tremendous difficulty that will come to him when he begins to rebuke the people for their sin and to declare God's message to them.

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