

## Chapter II

# The Beginnings of Merkabah Interpretation

We are not, however, yet ready to deal with rabbinic *merkabah* exegesis.

Rabbinic Judaism, innovative as it was, was hardly a novel creation of the years after 70 A.D. Judaism had been a Scripture religion for centuries before the birth of the rabbinic movement. When the rabbis took up and read their Bible, they did so equipped with a rich inheritance of exegetical tradition; and this was as true of the *merkabah* vision as of any other part of Scripture.

We know far less than we would like to about the Scripture exegesis of pre-rabbinic Judaism. Yet the sources that survive allow us to trace something of the early development of the lines of *merkabah* interpretation that the rabbis were later to follow. With their aid, we can have a perspective on rabbinic *merkabah* exegesis that the rabbinic texts themselves would not permit us.

In this and the following chapter, I have not tried for a chronological arrangement of the materials to be discussed. The Septuagint Greek translation of Ezekiel, which I discuss in section 3 of this chapter, is probably some decades at least earlier than the Qumran texts treated in section 2. The apocalypses, which require a chapter to themselves, include sources both earlier and later than the Septuagint and the Qumran writings. Rather, I have aimed at an arrangement that will allow the exegetical themes, and the issues that I see developing in them, intelligibly to emerge.

The first source of *merkabah* exegesis we will examine, however, is also the oldest. It is the Book of Ezekiel itself. Ezekiel the book interprets the visions attributed to Ezekiel the prophet; and it is the task of our first section to examine how.

### 1. The Book of Ezekiel

*a) Introduction.* At first sight, the proposal that we treat the Book of Ezekiel as a commentary on its own contents is bound to seem paradoxical, not to say eccentric. The book sets forth a series of visions and messages within the framework of a unified narrative, written from beginning to end in the first person. The "I" who speaks is Ezekiel the son of Buzi the priest,

a Jewish exile in the land of Babylonia by the river Chebar. It is clear enough, we might think, that this Ezekiel wrote the book himself. Yet, on closer reading, this turns out not to be clear at all. Tensions, disguised at first by the book's appearance of unity and structure, rapidly begin to appear. Some of them are perhaps the creations of hyper-critical modern scholars. But others cannot be dismissed so easily; they suggest that some process of editing, rewriting, and annotation lies between the earliest materials preserved in the Book of Ezekiel, and the book as we now have it.

What was this process, and how large a role did Ezekiel himself play in it? Scholars have not settled on any consensus. The "radicals" of the early twentieth century begrudged Ezekiel more than a few scattered verses of the book named after him; while the more "moderate" scholars of the past few decades have declared the book substantially Ezekiel's, although arranged and expanded by faceless editors [12,14]. Of the three major commentaries published in this century, Cooke's (1936) notes what are supposed to be secondary accretions to the text, but takes little interest in who added them or why; Zimmerli's (1969) boldly dissects the alleged strata of the book and tries to explain the significance of secondary as well as original materials; while Greenberg's (1983, to chapters 1–20 only) sees the Book of Ezekiel as a skillfully crafted composition which may derive, in its entirety, from Ezekiel himself [1,19,6].

Greenberg sharply and effectively criticizes the approach of Zimmerli and his confreres. Their operations, he argues, rest on subjective and arbitrary prejudices about what the prophet must have been trying to say; they prove their assumptions by excising whatever does not conform to them. Significantly, though, Greenberg himself occasionally speaks of editorial activity in the Book of Ezekiel (on pages 125–126, 199, for example). Ezekiel, indeed, may have been his own editor. But, once we are prepared to see the creation of the Book of Ezekiel as a complex process involving more than a single act of composition, we have opened the door to the possibility that the process may have extended beyond Ezekiel's lifetime. I thus find myself, for reasons that will become clearer as we go on, in agreement with Zimmerli's basic position that much editorial labor, involving many years and many contributors, lies between Ezekiel and his book. Even if we cannot hope to reconstruct the details of this labor (and here I disagree with Zimmerli and the rest), we cannot ignore it when we come to consider the visions of the divine entourage and their relation to the book that contains them.

*b) Hayyot and cherubim.* How this affects us will become clear in connection with the *hayyot* (sing. *hayyah*)<sup>1</sup>, the beings whose description

<sup>1</sup> The word is usually translated, in accord with the basic meaning of the Hebrew root *hay*, "living

occupies the first part of chapter 1. The *hayyot* emerge from the great fiery cloud that Ezekiel sees approaching from the north. There are four of them. This is what they look like:

Their likeness was human. Each of them had four faces, each four wings. Their legs were straight; the soles of their feet were like the sole of a calf's foot; they sparkled [?] like polished brass. On their four sides they had human hands underneath their wings. ... This was the likeness of their faces: a human face, a lion's face on the right for all four of them, an ox's face on the left for all four of them, and an eagle's face for all four of them. ... This was the likeness of the *hayyot*: their appearance was like blazing coals of fire, like the appearance of torches, going [?] up and down among the *hayyot*. The fire was splendid, and lightning shot out of the fire. The *hayyot* ran and returned [?] like the appearance of lightning [?]. [Ezekiel 1:5-14]

We later learn something about the function of the *hayyot*: they are the bearers of a crystalline "firmament," which itself supports a throne on which God sits (Ezekiel 1:22-28). But we do not understand very well what they are, or why God, who normally appears to his prophets without such elaborate fanfare, chooses to have such creatures in attendance when he reveals himself to Ezekiel.

Where the opening vision leaves us in the lurch, however, the sequel comes — or seems to come — to our rescue. In chapters 8-11, Ezekiel is transported in a vision from the place of his exile in Babylonia to Jerusalem, where he sees how the people of Jerusalem have polluted the Temple and hears how they have filled their city with sin. He then sees what seem like the very same creatures, with their attendant "wheels," that he saw in his first vision in Babylonia by the river Chebar; and he describes the ensemble all over again (ch. 10). Only here the creatures are no longer called *hayyot*, but cherubim; and the writer takes pains to emphasize that the two are the same:

The cherubim lifted themselves up — this was the *hayyah* that I saw at the river Chebar. ... The glory of the Lord went forth from the threshold of the Temple and stood over the cherubim. The cherubim lifted their wings and rose from the earth while I was watching ... with the glory of the God of Israel resting above them. This was the *hayyah* that I saw beneath the God of Israel at the river Chebar, and [now] I realized that they were cherubim. [10:15, 18-20]

And now we know what is going on; for, while we have never heard of the *hayyot* before Ezekiel 1 describes them, we know very well what cherubim are. They are winged beings on which God sits enthroned (I Samuel 4:4) or rides through the air (II Samuel 22:11). Moses sculpted two of them in gold for the desert Tabernacle, facing each other from opposite ends of the ark-cover, sheltering the ark with their spread wings (Exodus

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creatures." But *hayyah* more commonly means "beast." I cannot guess which nuance was foremost in the author's own mind; and, since both played a role in Jewish interpretation of the *hayyot* and their significance, I prefer to keep the ambiguous Hebrew word rather than to decide between the two. (We find a similar ambiguity — intentional, I think — in Exodus 1:19, where *hayot* may mean that the Hebrew women are "lively, vigorous"; or, that they are "beasts.")

25:18–22, 37:7–9); God spoke to Moses from a spot above the ark and between the cherubim (Exodus 25:22, Numbers 7:89). Similar creatures, of monstrous size, made of gold-plated olive wood, perched in the Holy of Holies of Solomon's Temple, filling the room with their wings (1 Kings 6:23–28, 8:6–7); it was no doubt there that Ezekiel saw them on his visionary trip to Jerusalem. We get a better idea of what cherubim look like from parallels outside Israel. As winged monsters with animal bodies – usually a lion's or a bull's – and human faces, they guard the entrance to Babylonian temples. The Egyptian sphinx, with its lion body, is perhaps the best known cherub of the ancient world [4,18,20,32].

Ezekiel's *hayyot* do not look very much like cherubim. The *hayyot* have basically human bodies (Ezekiel 1:6) and animal faces; cherubim have the reverse. The four faces of the *hayyot* are, as far as I know, unheard of outside Ezekiel [7,18]; and Exodus 25:20 makes clear that Moses' cherubim had only one face each. To accept the equation proposed in Ezekiel 10, we have to overlook a good deal. But, if we are nonetheless prepared to accept it, we gain one apparent advantage: we understand, or think we understand, what the *hayyot* are doing in Ezekiel 1. God travels to Babylonia enthroned, as Israelite tradition depicts him, on his cherubim. Ezekiel does not understand this until, more than a year later (8:1), he has a chance to compare the real cherubim with the models set up in the Holy of Holies, and realizes that the two are the same. The *hayyot* of the river Chebar and the Temple cherubim merge; the latter become mobile; and, carrying the glory of the God of Israel, they abandon the polluted Temple (10:18–19) and the sinful city (11:22–23). The lesson of this solemn withdrawal appears to be that God is not bound to the Temple of Jerusalem. When he pleases, he can abandon it to its destruction, taking the cultic apparatus that expresses his holiness and his power with him to his people in Babylonia (11:15–16). But there is more. Chapters 40–48 describe in meticulous detail the rebuilt and purified Temple of the future. To this Temple it will someday please God to return, reversing the procession with which he once departed:

Then he [the angelic being who, in Ezekiel's vision, gives him a guided tour of the future Temple] brought me to the gate facing eastward. The glory of the God of Israel was approaching from the east; his voice [or, "its sound"] was like the sound of many waters [cf. 1:24], and the earth shone from his glory. The vision that I [then] saw was like the vision I had seen when I [?] came to destroy the city, and like the vision I had seen at the river Chebar; I fell on my face<sup>2</sup>. The glory of the Lord entered the house through the gate that faced eastward ... and the house was filled with the glory of the Lord. ... And he said to me: "Son of man, [this is] the place of my throne, the place where my feet will rest. I will dwell here among the children of Israel forever. ..." [43:1–7]

2 The Hebrew text of 43:3 seems to be corrupt; the word "vision" is mentioned too often. I translate rather freely, as I understand the writer's drift.

The destroyed Temple is rebuilt, the departed glory has returned; the sin of the Israelites is purged, the wounds of their punishment healed. The action of the Book of Ezekiel, which began at the river Chebar, is concluded on the mountain of the Temple to come (40:2), and its rhythms are marked by the comings and goings of God's glory and the *hayyot*-cherubim that carry it [12b,13]. The initial vision of God and his entourage, which once seemed so purposeless, now appears as a foreshadowing of the grand cycle that underlies the rest of the book.

To put it another way, the Book of Ezekiel has provided a context for the vision of chapter 1, and has thereby proposed an interpretation for it. Were we to assume that the prophet Ezekiel wrote the Book of Ezekiel as we now have it, we could have little hesitation about accepting this interpretation. But, since I am not prepared so to assume, I find matters rather more complicated. I must ask whether it was Ezekiel himself — or, at any rate, the author of chapter 1<sup>3</sup> — who provided this interpretation of the initial vision. If not, is the interpretation nevertheless correct? And, given the scope of our study, I must ask a third question: to what extent did this interpretation influence later expositors of chapter 1?

I think the answer to the first question is probably no. As I have already indicated, I consider the Book of Ezekiel the creation of multiple authors, all of whom wrote under the "I" of Ezekiel. In chapters 8–11, and particularly chapter 10, the original text appears to have been so overlaid by repeated interpretations and expansions that it is almost impossible to distinguish the original, or to separate the several layers that were later added [10]. Ezekiel 10:9–17, I believe, is secondary in its entirety, and consists mostly of a brief commentary on 1:15–21 which was deposited in chapter 10 at some point in that chapter's formation [9]. (We will soon have to look more closely at this important passage.) Beyond this, I am not prepared to go into the very difficult question of who wrote what in chapter 10, let alone the rest of the Book of Ezekiel; especially since, once we reach the point when Jews have come to regard both the primary and the secondary

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3 For the purpose of this study, I see no need to decide whether or not it was a prophet of the Babylonian captivity who wrote the first chapter of Ezekiel. If I call the author "Ezekiel" in what follows, it is a matter of convenience only, and not a judgment on this question. — It may perhaps seem more urgent for us to decide whether the chapter had in fact a single author, or whether it consists of a series of additions to an original nucleus [11,12]. But I think we can sidestep this issue as well. Our concern is with the impact of the *merkabah* vision on later writers, and with their ways of understanding it. Now, as far back as we can trace the impact of Ezekiel 1 on other sources (including secondary material in the Book of Ezekiel itself), it had this impact as a unified piece of work, evidently not much different from the text that we now have. Of secondary interpretation of chapter 1 preserved in chapter 1 itself, I can find no trace (below). The developmental history of Ezekiel 1 is, as far as we are concerned, its prehistory. I therefore leave it aside, and treat the chapter as if it were a single source by a single writer.

material as the words of Ezekiel and therefore the object of exegetical attention, the issue loses its importance for us.

I do not, however, believe that it was the author of chapter 1 who announces, in chapter 10, that his bizarre *hayyot* are none other than the familiar cherubim. It is true that the *hayyot*, like the cherubim, carry the deity and mark the place where he gives revelation; it is true that the language of chapter 1 occasionally suggests the language describing the Tabernacle or Temple<sup>a)</sup>. But the *hayyot* are so unlike the cherubim that I cannot imagine that anyone who knows, on whatever subconscious level, that the two are identical, would describe them with all the idiosyncrasies of Ezekiel 1. Given that so much of chapter 10 was written to interpret chapter 1, it seems to me more likely that the *hayyot* = cherubim equation was made by someone who was baffled by the *hayyot* and needed a context in which he could make sense of them. He found this context in the Jerusalem Temple. He, or some later editor, used this perception as one of the principles around which he organized the Book of Ezekiel.

After this discussion, it should come as no surprise that my answer to the second question is also no. Whatever the *hayyot* were originally supposed to be, I do not think they were the cherubim familiar from Israelite tradition and cult.

But to the third question — about the influence of the *hayyot* = cherubim identification on later Jewish expositors — we would expect a somewhat more positive answer. After all, the whole organization of the Book of Ezekiel seems to vouch for this equation's being the key to the meaning of the *merkabah* vision. The later interpreters who dealt with Ezekiel could hardly be expected to ignore this clear message.

Surprisingly, they do. Not absolutely: the idea that Ezekiel's *hayyot* are the guardians of the ark and the denizens of the Holy of Holies has indeed left its traces on *merkabah* exegesis, particularly outside the rabbinic literature<sup>b)</sup>. Most Jewish interpreters take their identity as cherubim seriously enough that it is not until the *Hekhalot* literature that we find *hayyot* and cherubim mentioned side by side, as distinct classes of angels. But, all in all, the impact of this conception on later *merkabah* interpretation is surprisingly slight. We frequently find the *merkabah* placed in a ritual context, sometimes of the Temple, more often of the synagogue. But the presence of the *hayyot* in the role of the Biblical cherubim is rarely more than a minor detail.

Our first foray into history of exegesis has thus reached what is by and large a dead end. Not because it does not lead us back to what the *hayyot* meant to the man who first described them — that is not the question we want to answer here — but because it does not lead us forward into any of the main roads of *merkabah* exegesis in post-Biblical Judaism.

Yet we have not wasted our time. We have touched on the important

issue of context and its role in ancient Bible interpretation. The people who first added their interpretations to Ezekiel's visions and organized them into the book that bears Ezekiel's name dealt with a baffling and idiosyncratic image by fitting it into a context where it seemed to make sense: the central shrine of the Temple whose destruction Ezekiel prophesied. The expositors who came after them found this context far less meaningful. Unlike the modern commentator, they felt few qualms about ignoring it and looking for the meaningful context elsewhere in Scripture. In Origen's image of the house of locked rooms, the key will not be found next to the door it opens. One must look for it elsewhere in the Bible.

c) "*Blessed be the glory of the Lord from his place.*" We find evidence of one such extended search for context in the form of a significant scribal error in Ezekiel 3:12-13 — truly a Freudian slip of the pen. The mistake is in one letter only of the Hebrew text; and yet for centuries it had the deepest influence on the way Jews perceived the *merkabah*.

If we reconstruct the text of verse 12 the way nearly all critical commentators agree it must be reconstructed [19], we can translate the passage as follows:

A spirit [or, "wind"] lifted me. I heard behind me the sound of a great quaking as the glory of the Lord arose from its place [*berum kebod YHWH mimmeqomo*], and the sound of the wings of the *hayyot* rustling against each other, and the sound of the wheels [*'ofannim*] opposite them, and the sound of a great quaking.

Clear enough. But our extant Hebrew text (known as the Masoretic Text, commonly abbreviated "MT") has the graphically similar *barukh* in place of *berum*, with the following result:

A spirit lifted me. I heard behind me the voice<sup>4</sup> of a great quaking: "*Blessed be the glory of the Lord from his place!*" [*barukh kebod YHWH mimmeqomo*]. And [I heard] the voice of the wings of the *hayyot* rustling against each other, and the voice of the *'ofannim* opposite them, and the voice of a great quaking.

We cannot be sure just when *berum* was changed to *barukh*. But the error is certainly an early one, for it was already in the Hebrew text that the Jews of Alexandria used when they translated Ezekiel into Greek, probably in the second century B.C. (see below).

What caused the error? Any hand-copied text, sacred or profane, is bound to have its share of random blunders made by overworked or distracted scribes. But I do not think this is one of them. I believe that the copyist had found a context for the *merkabah* vision in another dramatic vision, this time described by Isaiah. Perhaps unconsciously, he altered Ezekiel's text in accord with this context:

4 *Qol* can mean both "sound" and "voice." It will soon become clear why I translate it "voice" this time round, and why I leave the *'ofannim* in Hebrew.

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting on a high and exalted throne, his train filling the Temple. Seraphim were standing over him. Each of them had six wings: with two he would cover his face, with two he would cover his feet, and with two he would fly. And one would cry out to the other: "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts! The whole earth is full of his glory." The bases of the thresholds then shook at the voice of the one crying out, and the house [that is, the Temple] would be filled with smoke. [Isaiah 6:1-4]

Once *barukh* has replaced *berum*, the resemblance of Ezekiel 3:12-13 to this passage in Isaiah is almost eerie. Ezekiel's "great quaking" corresponds to the shaking of the bases of the thresholds in Isaiah. Isaiah ties this shaking to a great cry of praise uttered by the Lord's winged attendants<sup>5</sup>. Ezekiel now has a corresponding doxology, nearly meaningless and therefore profoundly evocative: "Blessed be the glory of the Lord from his place<sup>6</sup>." And, just as Isaiah suggests that the attendant beings cry out their formula antiphonally, so the altered text of Ezekiel: the "voice of the *'ofannim*" answers the "wings of the *hayyot*." The wings of the *hayyot* thus give the impression of being their organs of song – a remarkable idea that we will meet again and again – and the *'ofannim*, "wheels," no longer appear as the mechanical objects we might have imagined, but as active supernatural beings who correspond to the *hayyot*.

d) *The wheels*. We do not know how deliberately our unknown scribe changed *berum* to *barukh*, or whether he was aware how much that tiny alteration had brought Ezekiel's vision into line with Isaiah's. Perhaps he would have been astonished to see, as we will, how later generations dealt with the text he had created. But the change he made is not isolated. One aspect of his new text, the new role hinted at for the *'ofannim*, seems to link it to the treatment of the *'ofannim* in Ezekiel 10:9-17, and to suggest that these two passages belong to the same exegetical process.

Ezekiel 10:9-17, I have argued [9], paraphrases and interprets the description of the "wheels" in the original *merkabah* vision (1:15-21). Although its author assumes and supports the equation of the *hayyot* with the cherubim, made throughout chapter 10, his real interest is in the *'ofannim*. He turns these "wheels" from machines into angels, almost literally fleshing them out. In verse 11, he equips them with heads; in verse 12, with flesh, arms, and wings. (It is clear both from the context of these

5 We know very little about the seraphim. The root of their name suggests the idea of burning (cf. Isaiah 6:6). The Bible elsewhere uses "seraph" for snakes, perhaps mythological (Numbers 21:6 Deuteronomy 8:15), who are sometimes supposed to be able to fly (Isaiah 14:29, 30:6). But the seraphim of Isaiah 6, who have to cover their feet, do not sound like flying snakes.

6 "I have seen him [the Israeli scholar David Flusser] disconcert other scholars by insisting that the errors in sacred texts and the ignorant misreadings of them were really the constructive element in the history of civilization, since the religious ideas that have had most success have mainly been founded upon them." — Edmund Wilson [79].



verses and from their relationship to 1:17–18 that their subject is the *'ofannim* — not, as commentators normally assume, the *hayyot*-cherubim.) While he does not go so far as to specify what the heads of the *'ofannim* look like, a later author made up for his reticence by inserting verse 14 into his text (in MT only: the Alexandrian translators did not know this passage):

Each one had four faces: first, a cherub's face; second, a human face; third, a lion's face; and, fourth, an eagle's face.

When I originally discussed 10:14, I tried to show that its author had taken his cue from a corrupt reading at the end of Ezekiel 1:15 (according to MT), which suggested that the *'ofannim* have the same four faces as do the *hayyot*. (He does not, however, give them precisely the same four faces; we will return to this point.) But this suggestion only went so far, because I could not think of any real reason why either the author of 10:14 or the earlier author of the rest of 10:9–17 should want to turn the *'ofannim* into a second order of angels, differing from the *hayyot*-cherubim only in their names and perhaps a few of their features. But now I think the alteration in Ezekiel 3:12–13 provides the clue. Influenced either by the altered text itself, or by the exegetical tradition that gave rise to the alteration, the writers of 10:9–17 wanted to affirm that the *'ofannim* stand over against the *hayyot* as a second angelic choir. The two groups can now cry aloud to each other, as 3:12–13 suggests they do: “Blessed be the glory of the Lord from its place!”

The process we are seeing here is a bit paradoxical. Ezekiel 10:9–17, by reinforcing the equation of the *hayyot* and the cherubim, confirms that the *merkabah* belongs in the context of the Jerusalem Temple, and that its importance is to mark the changes in God's attitude toward this Temple. But the Temple setting suggests something else: that Ezekiel's vision should be coupled with Isaiah's, which also takes place both around God's throne and in his Temple. Once this happens, Ezekiel's *merkabah* begins to vibrate to rhythms set by Isaiah. The *hayyot* and the *'ofannim*, for all their idiosyncrasies, absorb some of the energy of the seraphim and begin to act like them. Later on, we will find all three groups of angels calling out their doxologies from everlasting to everlasting, in realms considerably more exalted than the Jerusalem Temple; the historical context that the editors of the Book of Ezekiel gave to the *merkabah* is left far below.

I do not know how far this midrashic process had gone when Ezekiel 10:9–17 was written, or when someone made the change that turned *berum* into *barukh*. It seems clear, however, that we have at least its beginning in the text of the Book of Ezekiel itself. We will presently see that it develops into a tradition of *merkabah* exegesis so distinct that it will be useful to give it a name. We will call it, for the time being, the *hymnic tradition*.

In the meantime, why does the writer of 10:14 change the four faces of the *hayyot* when he transfers them to the *'ofannim*? Why does he delete the ox's face of 1:10, and replace it with a not very informative "cherub's face"? Here, too, we seem to be at the beginning of a tradition. We will see, again and again, that the bovine features of the *merkabah* (1:7 and 10) particularly engage expositors' attention. They must therefore engage ours. Let us file this question away, until we can do more with it.

*e) Expansions of Ezekiel 1?* In describing the *merkabah* exegesis preserved within the Book of Ezekiel, I have said nothing about exegetical expansions of chapter 1 itself. This is because, with one trivial exception to be noted below, I do not think there were any. If the text of Ezekiel 1 were in fact open to such expansions, as many modern scholars think it was, it is very strange that it occurred to none of the busy glossators to insert into it some hint that the *hayyot* are in fact cherubim. More likely, chapter 1 was a fixed text from relatively early times. The later editors and commentators, who filled chapter 10 with their exegetical suggestions, considered chapter 1 too sacred to meddle with.

It is true that MT's text of Ezekiel 1 contains words and even sentences that we do not find in the Alexandrian Greek translation (the Septuagint; abbreviated "LXX"), and that modern scholars often regard these as interpolations which were added too late to find their way into the text that the Alexandrians translated. This is a plausible hypothesis; as I have said, I think it is true for 10:14. But, in chapter 1, it is normally possible to show either that MT's "pluses" derive from mechanical scribal error — from which even chapter 1 was never immune — rather than deliberate alteration (as in 1:27); or else that MT's reading is in fact older and better than the shorter LXX text (as in 1:14, 24, 25–26) [34]. We will see shortly that the Alexandrian translators had their own exegetical axes to grind.

There is only one place in chapter 1 where I would say that MT contains an exegetical addition missing from LXX: verse 22, where MT adds a single word that characterizes the crystalline firmament as "terrible" or "awesome." To this, I would add 8:2, where, in the brief gloss "like the appearance of splendor," an annotator of MT makes the earliest attempt we know of to explain the mysterious word *hashmal*. Add also 10:14, and we have the only three MT "pluses" I can think of in the *merkabah* materials that seem to represent deliberate exegesis.

*f) The merkabah as Scripture.* We do not know when the Book of Ezekiel came to be essentially the document we now have, or when it was enrolled among the Prophetic books of the Hebrew canon. The second development need not have followed directly upon the first. An ingenious suggestion of Robert H. Pfeiffer (following A. B. Ehrlich) would, if correct, imply that

not all of the book's early readers approached it in a spirit of reverence. Three Hebrew words that break the context of Ezekiel 45:20, Pfeiffer thinks, were originally a marginal gloss, a reader's disgusted comment on Ezekiel's eccentric Temple legislation: "From [the pen of] a man mistaken and foolish" [43].

This unknown critic, if he indeed existed, did not prevail. The Book of Ezekiel could hardly have been preserved if it had not come to be regarded as a true oracle of God, deserving its place among the words of the prophets. We can be fairly sure that this happened before about 200 B.C. Early in the second century, a Palestinian scribe named Joshua b. Sira listed Ezekiel in his catalog of ancient pious men, placing him between Jeremiah and "the twelve prophets"; this order reflects the sequence of books in the Jewish canon (Sira 49:6-10 [45])<sup>7</sup>. As far as Ben Sira was concerned, Ezekiel's main claim to attention was that he had seen the *merkabah*: "Ezekiel saw a vision, and told about varieties of chariot [*zene merkabah*]." We do not know what Ben Sira meant by "varieties of chariot." We may take comfort from the fact that Ben Sira's grandson evidently did not know either; in his translation, Ezekiel "saw a vision of glory, which [God] showed him upon a chariot of cherubim."

This is the first time this chapter that we have seen the word *merkabah* inside quotation marks. The Hebrew text of the Book of Ezekiel never uses "chariot" to designate the totality of what Ezekiel saw; and Sira 49:8 is, with the possible exception of I Chronicles 28:18<sup>8</sup>, the first surviving Hebrew source to do so. (LXX Ezekiel 43:3, which we will look at below, may be nearly as early, but it is in Greek.) The choice of this title reflects a natural enough interpretation of Ezekiel's vision. But it is worth noting that it is an interpretation; for, thanks to this name, the *merkabah* vision can and will find new Biblical contexts which extend its implications far beyond what we have seen so far.

With the beginning of the second century B.C., our study of the *merkabah* exegesis in the Book of Ezekiel is over. Our study of the exegesis of the Book of Ezekiel must begin.

7 The Greek translation of Ben Sira's book, made by his grandson late in the second century, was included in the Apocrypha under the title of "Ecclesiasticus," or "The Wisdom of Jesus son of Sirach" (the Greek form of Ben Sira's name). Substantial portions of the Hebrew original, including the passage that now concerns us, were found in the Cairo Genizah [45].

8 The detailed instructions that David gives Solomon for building the Temple include a plan for "the model of the chariot [*merkabah*], the cherubim, in gold, for those who spread their wings and shelter the ark of the covenant of the Lord." This may or may not refer to Ezekiel's vision. (The Greek translation of this verse, incidentally, seems to have influenced the translation of Sira 49:8.)