

Intersections



SESSION 14: Passages from Ezekiel 1, Psalm 24, Acts 1, John 14, and Luke 24

Way up in the middle of the air...

Comment 1

In some parts of Africa and Europe, “Ascension Day” is a major Christian celebration. In fact, in some African and European countries, “Ascension Day” is so important that it’s recognized as a public holiday.

Christ’s ascension is always celebrated on a Thursday, forty days after Resurrection Sunday. This year, “Ascension Day” is Thursday, May 25. So this week in our Bible study, we will seek to listen for God’s voice in the midst of five “intersecting” biblical passages, each of which can be seen as connected in some way with this ancient Christian celebration.

Ezekiel 1:1–21 (slightly abbreviated)

From the Jewish Publication Society translation

¹ In the thirtieth year, on the fifth day of the fourth month, when I was in the community of exiles by the Chebar Canal, the heavens opened and I saw visions of God....

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⁴ I looked, and lo, a stormy wind came sweeping out of the north—a huge cloud and flashing fire, surrounded by a radiance; and in the center of it, in the center of the fire, a gleam as of amber.

⁵ In the center of it were also the figures of four creatures.

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And this was their appearance: They had the figures of human beings. ⁶ However, each had four faces, and each of them had four wings;

⁷ the legs of each were [fused into] a single rigid leg, and feet of each were like a single calf’s hoof; and the sparkle was like the luster of burnished bronze....

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¹² And each could move in the direction of any of its faces; they went wherever the spirit impelled them to go, without turning when they moved....

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¹⁵ As I gazed on the creatures, I saw one wheel on the ground next to each of the four-faced creatures.

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¹⁶ As for the appearance and structure of the wheels, they gleamed like beryl.*

*“Beryl” is a rock, often used in ancient times as a gemstone. It has a bluish-green color.

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All four [wheels] had the same form; the appearance and structure of each was as of two wheels cutting through each other....

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²⁰ Wherever the spirit impelled [the creatures] to go, they went—wherever the spirit impelled them—and the wheels were borne alongside them; for the spirit of the creatures was in the wheels.

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²¹ When those moved, these moved; and when those stood still, these stood still; and when those were borne above the earth, the wheels were borne alongside them—for the spirit of the creatures was in the wheels.

Musical recording

“Ezekiel Saw the Wheel”

For Discussion

What are some of the images from Ezekiel’s vision that strike you as particularly interesting—and why?

What do you suppose it was about this remarkable vision that sparked the old spiritual, “Ezekiel Saw the Wheel”?

What might this first part of Ezekiel’s vision say to us today?

Comment 2

The book of Ezekiel begins during the terrifying and destructive days of exile. The prophet is living with other exiles near a canal. They are in a foreign land, a land that most likely feels far from hope. It feels distant from those friendly places where God had once seemed so real.

But at some point while he is living near the alien and depressing Chebar Canal, while he is feeling alone and bewildered, Ezekiel encounters “visions of God.”

Comment 3

It’s not that he literally *sees* God, of course, for the God of the Hebrews was Spirit. It was Breath. It was Word. From a human perspective, there’s nothing *tangible* about God to see.

What the prophet “sees” *instead* are “creatures.” On one level, says the prophet, these dream-like creatures look like ordinary human beings. But on another level, they are so strange and seemingly so unlike anything we know that we can hardly fathom them. We are told, for example, that each had four faces, one face looking in each direction. And each creature was standing—or somehow mounted—atop a wheel within a wheel.

Comment 4

As the text repeatedly reminds us, these strange details serve as a “revelation” of sorts to the prophet, for it’s as if these “creatures” serve as a visual illustration of how *all* of God’s “crea-

tures” are to live. In that sense, they are a dramatic lesson to us all.

The text repeatedly reminds us that the reason that they have four faces is so that they can immediately move in whatever direction God’s Spirit might need them to move. And the reason that they stand on a wheel within a wheel is so that the wheel can instantly roll them in whatever direction God’s Spirit needs them to roll.

Comment 5

It’s no wonder, then, that a visionary and instructive song was fashioned from this text.

If you are living in a harsh and oppressive world—if you are living under the cruel fist of people who claim to be God’s own but don’t move as God says move and don’t love as God says love—then the “wheel within a wheel” that Ezekiel saw is both a reminder of our holy calling and a reminder of the Spirit that longs to fill us, the Spirit that longs to move us, the Spirit that longs to make us so authentically God’s own children that it’s as if we are “way up in the middle of the air.” When we move as God says move, it’s as if we are riding on a “big wheel run by faith” and a “little wheel run by the grace of God.”

Ezekiel 1:22—2:7 (slightly abbreviated)

From the Jewish Publication Society translation

²² Above the heads of the creatures was a form: an expanse, with an awe-inspiring gleam as of crystal, was spread out above their heads....

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²⁴ When [the creatures] moved, I could hear the sound of their wings like the sound of mighty waters, like the sound of Shaddai,* a tumult like the din of an army....

*“Shaddai” is an ancient Hebrew name for God, sometimes translated as “the Almighty.”

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²⁶ Above the expanse over their heads was the semblance of a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and on top, upon this semblance of a throne, there was the semblance of a human form.

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²⁷ ...There was a radiance all about him.

²⁸ Like the appearance of a bow which shines in the clouds on a day of rain, such was the appearance of the surrounding radiance, the appearance of the semblance of the Presence of the LORD....

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And I heard the voice of someone speaking.

¹ And He said to me, "O mortal, stand up on your feet that I may speak to you."

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² As He spoke to me, a spirit entered into me and set me upon my feet; and I heard what was being spoken to me. ³ He said to me, "O mortal, I am sending you to the people of Israel, that nation of rebels, who have rebelled against Me...."

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⁶ "And you, mortal, do not fear them and do not fear their words, though thistles and thorns press against you, and you sit upon scorpions.

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"Do not be afraid of their words and do not be dismayed by them, though they are a rebellious breed; ⁷ but speak my words to them, whether they listen or not...."

For Discussion

What are some of the images from this second portion of Ezekiel's vision that strike you as particularly interesting or important—and why?

What might this second part of Ezekiel's vision say to us today?

Comment 6

After envisioning a host of remarkable "creatures" who instantly move in whatever direction their Creator Spirit impels them to move, Ezekiel sees—and "hears"—something else. It, too, is a "revelation." It, too, is an instruction.

Although these Spirit-responsive "creatures" are already "way up in the middle of the air," it's as if there is something farther up, farther above them. It's "an expanse." It's an "awe-inspiring gleam, as of crystal." It's spread out above their heads. And in the midst of this "gleam," there's

the "semblance" of a throne.

Comment 7

In Ezekiel's mind, it's almost as if someone is sitting on this gleaming throne, though it's hard to see. It's hard to tell for sure. Ezekiel says that the "radiance" in his vision was almost blinding. He says that this shadowy object that had the "semblance" of a throne was as bright and shining as a rainbow glittering in the "clouds" on a day of drenching rain and distant sun.

For Ezekiel, there is a "cloud" that "gleams" above those creatures way up in the middle of the air, way up above those creatures who move on a big wheel run by faith and a little wheel run by the grace of God. Ezekiel calls it "the semblance of the Presence of the LORD."

Comment 8

In Ezekiel's vision, he doesn't just "see." He also "hears."

As the Spirit-led creatures move, Ezekiel *hears* something that seems to him like the sound of countless "wings." It's the roar of "mighty waters."

Although it is the creatures themselves that are moving, they are moving at the Spirit's leading. So the sound they make, says Ezekiel, is the very sound of "Shaddai." It's the trumpet call of the Almighty. It's a "tumult" that will out-shout and out-last the ugly and frantic cries of the world's worst tyrants.

Comment 9

Perhaps it was this text from Ezekiel that partly inspired a hymn by Fanny Crosby. Although its words are seldom included in hymnals any more, they reflect some of what Ezekiel seemed to have been learning through his visions.

The words of her hymn were these:

*Like the sound of many waters
rolling on through ages long;
in a tide of rapture breaking—
Hark! the mighty choral song!*

*Lo! the Morning Star appeareth,
o'er the world, its beams are cast;
God the Alpha and Omega,
God the Great, the First, the Last.*

*Clap your hands with exultation!
Sing aloud, rejoice with mirth,
peace her silver wing hath folded:
Lo! she comes to dwell on earth!*

*Savior, not with costly treasure
so we gather at thy throne,
all we have, our hearts, we give thee—
consecrate them, thine alone.*

Comment 10

Finally, after hearing the roar of “mighty waters” set in motion by those faithful servants who are moving in tune with the ever-moving Spirit that emanates from a holy “throne”—and after being knocked over, as it were, by an overwhelming gleam in “clouds” that are glowing with the radiance of God’s own Presence—Ezekiel hears something.

He hears a “Word.”

Comment 11

“O mortal,” Ezekiel hears this Voice saying, “I AM sending you to a nation of rebels. I AM sending you to a world that refuses to live in my radiance. I AM sending you to make a difference in a world that is over-filled with thorns and thistles, a world cruelly ruled by those who know only the biting behavior of scorpions.

“The world to which I AM sending you may seem overwhelming. But fear not. Be not dismayed. Though they are a rebellious breed, speak my words to them. Speak, whether they listen or not, for when you ride on a big wheel run by faith and a little wheel run on the grace of God, you will not—you cannot—ride in vain.”

Psalm 24

From the Psalms Anew translation

¹ The world and all that is in it belong to

Yahweh,
the earth and all who live on it.

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² Yahweh built it on the deep waters,
laid its foundations in the oceans’ depths.

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³ Who has the right to climb Yahweh’s
mountain?

Or stand in this holy place?

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⁴ Those who are pure in act and in thought,
who do not worship idols
or make false promises.

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⁵ Yahweh will bless them.

God their Savior will give them salvation.

:::

⁶ Such are the people who come to God,
who come into the presence of our God.

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⁷ Fling wide the gates,
open the ancient doors,
and the Holy One will come in!

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⁸ Who is this Holy One?

Yahweh, strong and mighty,
Yahweh, victorious in battle!

:::

⁹ Fling wide the gates,
open the ancient doors,
and the Holy One will come in!

:::

¹⁰ Who is this Holy One?

Yahweh, the glorious.

For Discussion

What lines in this psalm speak to you most strongly—and why?

Is there anything about this psalm that you find puzzling or surprising? If so, what?

In what ways, if any, do you feel this psalm “intersecting” with what we saw in Ezekiel 1?

Comment 12

As in Ezekiel’s day, we and those around us might be a “rebellious breed.” We and those

around us may forget that “the world and all that is in it”—as well as “the earth and all who live on it”—*belong* to Yahweh. An unseen Spirit, a Voice that cannot be silenced, and a Wind that cannot be stilled unite in declaring, “You are mine!”

Who has the right to “climb Yahweh’s mountain” or “stand” in God’s “holy place?” asks the psalmist. Who can enter that amazing radiance? Who can find themselves lost in those “clouds” that forever gleam with God’s own Presence?

Comment 13

We all can, declares the psalmist, for we and the “fullness” of the world share the *same* Maker, share the *same* Creator. If we allow the Spirit to move us—if we allow the “big wheel” beneath our feet to be run by faith and the “little wheel” to be run by the grace of God—God will bless us. God will renew us. God will use us.

So “fling wide the gates,” cries the psalmist. “Open the ancient doors, and Holy One will come in.” In other words, “Yahweh, strong and mighty,” invites *all of us* to open our lives to the glorious but unseen Spirit that seeks to move us, the glorious but unseen Spirit that seeks to turn us into a mighty, flowing stream, washing and reshaping the world around us with such intense justice and saving hope that it’s as if we become the very “sound” of Shaddai’s own self.

Acts 1:1–12

*From a translation by the scholar
Richmond Lattimore*

¹ The first book I wrote, O Theophilus, was about all the acts and teachings of Jesus ² until that day when, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen, he was taken aloft.

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³ It was to these that he showed himself after his ordeal with many proofs that he was alive, and for forty days he would appear to them and tell them about the Kingdom of God.

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⁴ And while he was staying with them he told

them not to remove from Jerusalem, but said: Await my father’s promise which you have heard of from me; ⁵ because John baptized with water, but after not many days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.

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⁶ So those who were with him questioned him, saying: Lord, are you restoring the Kingdom of Israel in this time?

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⁷ He said to them: It is not yours to know the times and occasions which the Father has appointed by his own authority; ⁸ but when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be given power, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and all Judaea and Samaria and as far as the end of the earth.

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⁹ When he had said this and as they watched, he was raised aloft, and a cloud hid him from their eyes.

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¹⁰ And as they stared into heaven where he went, behold, two men clothed in white stood near them ¹¹ and said: You men of Galilee, why do you stand there looking toward heaven? This same Jesus who was taken up from you to heaven will come back in the same way that you saw him going to heaven.

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¹² Then they returned to Jerusalem from the hill which is called the Mount of Olives; it is near Jerusalem, a sabbath’s walk away.

For Discussion

In what ways, if any, does this scene speak to you?

Which details in this account that feel to you especially significant—and why?

Can you see any ways in which the imagery in this short account “intersects” meaningfully with what we saw in the passages that we looked at earlier today? If so, what?

Comment 14

Acts—and to a lesser extent, Luke—include a

short scene in which Jesus—to use the language of an old spiritual inspired by imagery in the first chapter of Ezekiel—is taken “way up in the middle of the air.”

After convincing “the apostles” that he had indeed been raised from that cold tomb that sought to hold him, the need for continued appearances and instructions by Jesus came to an end. And so, in some remarkable manner that we will never understand, it’s as if the apostles—like Ezekiel—were granted a vision. It was a vision in which they were blessed to see the risen Christ being “taken aloft.”

Comment 15

However, just as was true for Ezekiel, this wasn’t just a random glimpse of glory. It wasn’t just a jump-up-and-down, shout-and-sing, feel-good-all-over encounter with the divine radiance. It was, rather, a solemn commissioning event. It was a divine “sending.”

The apostles were being sent to Jerusalem, the very city whose Roman and religious leaders had pursued, arrested, unjustly tried, and executed their dear friend. In other words, like Ezekiel, they were being sent to “a rebellious breed,” a world in desperate need of transformation, a realm in which “thistles, thorns, and scorpions” were ever ready to do their worst.

Comment 16

In the scene as Acts presents it, as Jesus departs, he seems tell his disciples that they need to be *moved*—just as Ezekiel needed to be moved—by a Spirit from Above. They will need to have a “face” ready to move in any direction, whether to Jerusalem or Samaria or all the way to “the ends of the earth.”

Down at their feet, it’s as if they will need a wheel within a wheel, a wheel ready to roll in whatever direction the Spirit might lead them. “When the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be given power, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and all Judaea and Samaria and as far as the end of the earth.”

Comment 17

When read in connection with the text of Ezekiel, the scene in Acts 1 gains added power. In Ezekiel, “clouds” serve as a stand-in for the Presence of the Holy One. In like manner, Acts 1 says that when Jesus had finished all that he had been called to do, “he was raised aloft, and a cloud hid him from their eyes.”

It’s as if, from the perspective of the apostles, Jesus ascends and is absorbed into the Presence of God. He’s hidden in the divine glory. He’s been integrated into the “radiance” of the One to whom we *all* belong.

A hymn written in 1739 by Charles Wesley puts it this way:

*Hail the day that sees him rise,
to his throne beyond the skies.
Christ, the Lamb for sinners given,
enters now the highest heaven.*

*There for him high triumph waits;
lift your heads, eternal gates.
He has conquered death and sin;
take the King of glory in.*

*Highest heaven its Lord receives;
yet he loves the earth he leaves.
Though returning to his throne,
still he calls us all his own.*

*Still for us he intercedes;
his atoning death he pleads,
near himself prepares our place,
he the first fruits of our race.*

*There we shall with you remain,
partners of your endless reign,
see you with unclouded view,
find our heaven of heavens in you.*

Comment 18

In the scene as it is presented in Acts, the apostles are overwhelmed. We can readily identify with them, for like Ezekiel and like we so often do, they stare into the expanse above them,

trying to make sense of what they see, what they feel, and what they hear.

Two figures clothed in white find the apostles staring upward in amazement. And then in a partial echo of words that were spoken in Ezekiel, these divine messengers say, in effect, “Fear not. Be not dismayed. For the Christ who has *gone from you* into the divine Presence will *come to you* in the same manner.”

Comment 19

In other words, say these gleaming messengers, “as you move and as you serve as divine ‘witnesses,’ he will *come to you*.”

“He will *come* in the sound of ‘mighty waters.’ He will *come* in a ‘big wheel’ run by faith and a ‘little wheel’ run by the grace of God. He will *come* in the saving ‘tumult’ of Shaddai and Shaddai’s people, transforming empires, freeing captives, and gently embracing all those whom this world has written off.”

Comment 20

“So watch for the glory,” they seem to say. “As you work and as you witness, watch for the radiance. Or, to quote Psalm 24, ‘fling open the gates’—and watch for the sun rising in the eastern sky. ‘Swing back those ancient doors’—and watch for the Spirit’s rainbow, shining bright where you least expect it.

“For the Christ who has slipped into the divine Presence will *come again to you*, and he’ll be wrapped in the same Presence into which he now has gone.” In other words, just as in the case of Ezekiel, what they saw “way up in the middle of the air” was supposed to have a powerful impact on their lives—right here on the ground, right here in an earth that is still filled with thistles and thorns, right here in a world that still knows the terror wrought by “scorpions” and violent, unjust forces of all kinds.

John 14:27–29

From the Revised English Bible translation

²⁷ “Peace is my parting gift to you, my own

peace, such as the world cannot give.

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“Set your troubled hearts at rest, and banish your fears.

∴

²⁸ “You heard me say, ‘I am going away, and I am coming back to you.’ If you loved me, you would be glad that I am going to the Father; for the Father is greater than I am.

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²⁹ “I have told you now, before it happens, so that when it does happen, you may have faith.”

For Discussion

In light of the other passages that we’ve examined today, what strikes you as most important about these verses from the Fourth Gospel?

Comment 21

The Fourth Gospel has no “ascension” scene as such. There is no effort to portray in any concrete way a final appearance to those who have been commissioned as God’s “witnesses.”

Yet throughout the Fourth Gospel there are periodic reminders that a day is coming when Jesus will depart from his earthly disciples. And within these reminders, the message is remarkably similar to what we find elsewhere.

Comment 22

“Set your troubled hearts at rest,” says Jesus in the Fourth Gospel, “and banish your fears,” for “peace is my parting gift to you, my own peace, such as the world cannot give.”

Yes, he continues, “I am going away, but remember this: I am coming back to you.” He adds that he is telling them this so that they—and we—will “have faith.” It’s the kind of faith that allows us to be impelled by God’s own Spirit, serving as faithful witnesses to God’s will and God’s ways, even when those around us seem to be a “rebellious breed.” It’s the kind of faith that finds us confidently riding into even the most challenging of storms, for the wheel within a wheel—the wheel that ever moves at the Spirit’s whisper—knows exactly where we need to be.

Luke 24:45–52

From the Revised English Bible translation

⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures.

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⁴⁶ “So you see,” he said, “that scripture foretells the sufferings of the Messiah and his rising from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and declares that in his name repentance bringing the forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

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⁴⁸ “You are to be witnesses to it all.

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⁴⁹ “I am sending on you the gift promised by my Father; wait here in this city until you are armed with power from above.”

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⁵⁰ Then he led them out as far as Bethany and blessed them with uplifted hands; ⁵¹ and in the act of blessing, he parted from them.

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⁵² And they returned to Jerusalem full of joy.

For Discussion

In light of the other passages that we’ve examined today, what images or phrases in these brief verses speak to you most strongly—and why?

Comment 23

The short description of Jesus’ departure here in the Gospel According to Luke is filled with surprising twists and ironic pairings.

Jesus’ disciples undoubtedly *thought* that they understood the scriptures—but Jesus leads them toward a new way of hearing the Holy Voice.

Jesus’ disciples, like so many of God’s people, assumed that God’s Anointed Messiah would storm through the world in triumph—but Jesus shows them that God has instead chosen the way of suffering.

Comment 24

Jesus’ disciples, like so many of God’s people, figured that the divine “rainbow” was for them

and them alone—but Jesus declares that the Spirit of forgiveness is for “all nations” and for all peoples.

Jesus’ disciples, like so many people even today, assumed that lasting power came through great wealth, military weapons, and lots of clever scheming—but Jesus promises his “witnesses” that they will be “armed” with a power from Above, a gentle power more profound than any human conniving.

Comment 25

The Gospel that we call Luke ends not with a description of Jesus physically rising through the air but rather with a description of Jesus lifting up his hands and blessing those from whom he is parting.

For centuries, services of Christian worship have ended with an echo of that parting benediction. We sometimes treat that benediction as “routine,” nothing more than a trivial marker, indicating that a service has finished. But it’s really meant to serve as a powerful reminder of Jesus’ own “ascension,” his remarkable parting from us, his rising into God’s own Presence, and his commissioning of us to serve forevermore as Spirit-empowered witnesses.

Comment 26

As Acts reminds us, the benediction that was part of Jesus’ parting was also a reminder of his coming.

Just as he leaves us to be hidden in that gleaming “cloud” that signifies God’s Presence, so too he will be manifested again and again to us through that Presence, through the sound of “wings” and “mighty waters,” through the roar of Shaddai and Shaddai’s people, faithfully moving through this world atop a wheel within a wheel, transforming even the most “rebellious breed” into a repenting multitude, an inclusive people ready to *return with joy* “to Jerusalem,” that Breath-filled place where we “fling wide the gates” to the holy abode of the Most High.