

A World of Vision and Symbol

Thomas Robinson, *Apocalypse Today* 2, June 3, 2018

Isaiah 6:1-12 (742 b.c.)

¹ In the year that King Uzziah died (742 b.c.), I saw my Lord (Adonai) sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple.

² Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. ³ And one called to another and said:

"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD (Yahweh) of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory."

⁴ The thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke.

⁵ And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD (Yahweh) of hosts!"

⁶ Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷ The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out."

⁸ Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"

⁹ And he said, "Go and say to this people: 'Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.' ¹⁰ Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed."

¹¹ Then I said, "How long, my Lord?" And he said: "Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is utterly desolate; ¹² until the LORD (Yahweh) sends everyone far away, and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land."

Ezekiel 1:1-14 (593 b.c.)

¹ In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the Chebar canal, the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God. ² On the fifth day of the month (it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin), ³ the word of the LORD came to Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the Chebar canal, and the hand of the LORD was upon him there.

⁴ As I looked, behold, a stormy wind came out of the north, and a great cloud, with brightness around it, and fire flashing forth continually, and in the midst of the fire, as it were gleaming metal. ⁵ And from the midst of it came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance: they had a human likeness, ⁶ but each had four faces, and each of them had four wings. ⁷ Their legs were straight, and the soles of their feet were like the sole of a calf's foot. And they sparkled like burnished bronze.

⁸ Under their wings on their four sides they had human hands. And the four had their faces and their wings thus: ⁹ their wings touched one another. Each one of them went straight forward, without turning as they went. ¹⁰ As for the likeness of their faces, each had a human face.

The four had the face of a lion on the right side, the four had the face of an ox on the left side, and the four had the face of an eagle. ¹¹ Such were their faces. And their wings were

spread out above. Each creature had two wings, each of which touched the wing of another, while two covered their bodies. ¹² And each went straight forward.

Wherever the spirit would go, they went, without turning as they went. ¹³ As for the likeness of the living creatures, their appearance was like burning coals of fire, like the appearance of torches moving to and fro among the living creatures. And the fire was bright, and out of the fire went forth lightning. ¹⁴ And the living creatures darted to and fro, like the appearance of a flash of lightning.

Daniel 7:2-7

² Daniel declared, "I saw in my vision by night, and behold, the four winds of heaven were stirring up the great sea. ³ And four great beasts came up out of the sea, different from one another. ⁴ The first was like a lion and had eagles' wings. Then as I looked its wings were plucked off, and it was lifted up from the ground and made to stand on two feet like a man, and the mind of a man was given to it. ⁵ And behold, another beast, a second one, like a bear. It was raised up on one side. It had three ribs in its mouth between its teeth; and it was told, 'Arise, devour much flesh.' ⁶ After this I looked, and behold, another, like a leopard, with four wings of a bird on its back. And the beast had four heads, and dominion was given to it. ⁷ After this I saw in the night visions, and behold, a fourth beast, terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong. It had great iron teeth; it devoured and broke in pieces and stamped what was left with its feet. It was different from all the beasts that were before it, and it had ten horns. ...

Daniel 7:9-10

⁹ "As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days took his seat; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire. ¹⁰ A stream of fire issued and came out from before him; a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him; the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened. ...

Daniel 7:13-14

¹³ "I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. ¹⁴ And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

Daniel 7:17-18

¹⁷ 'These four great beasts are four kings who shall arise out of the earth. ¹⁸ But the saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever, forever and ever.'

Revelation 4:1-2, 6-8

¹ After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." ² At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne....

⁶ Before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal. And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: ⁷

the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like an eagle in flight.⁸ And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!"

Revelation 13:1-3

¹ And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns and blasphemous names on its heads. ² And the beast that I saw was like a leopard; its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And to it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority. ³ One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth marveled as they followed the beast.

Revelation and the Language of Visions

Revelation is an Uncovering (*apokalypsis*) of things we don't ordinarily see. It begins with John's vision on Patmos of the astonishing appearance of Jesus as Son of Man standing among golden lampstands. The book is a narrative of visions: God's throne, the Lion/Lamb, Elders and Living Creatures, vast throngs, angels and plagues, stars falling, dragons and beasts, souls under an altar crying "How long?", a heavenly city on earth, tree of life

Especially for us moderns, such visions and symbols are challenging because they seem strange and arbitrary, perhaps a strange code, we don't understand them. It's important to see that they carried mystery from the start, but were in a long tradition of prophecy.

Vision of the Meeting of God's Realms of Heaven and Earth

The prophets challenged Israel's leaders and people to live their covenant connection with God.

That fundamental failure, starting from Sinai, gave Yahweh's prophets their message of judgment and hope. People thought Yahweh distant and dangerous. Other gods malleable.

Visions helped prophets see the meeting of God and people: Isaiah 6, filling Temple, both near and majestic. From that meeting, the events of human life looked different. Isaiah's call.

Ezekiel (6th cent), as the disaster of exile and destruction of Jerusalem exploded, saw the vision of God's throne, moving on wheels (not only in Temple), surrounded by living creatures/cherubim, able to rise and withdraw. The strange creatures unite animal-human-angel.

Daniel in the long reality of exile looking down across centuries, sees the great, powerful, empires as flawed human images destroyed by uncut rock, later as beasts rising from the chaos of the sea, judged and destroyed by God. The truly human one – Son of Man – receives God's kingdom, and everlasting authority. Radical change of perspective.

All of these and many more provide language that John uses to describe his visions.

Seeing God's Judgment in Changing Perspectives

The exile and aftermath marked the changing language and understanding of prophets. Early prophets spoke to an "independent" kingdom betraying its covenant relation with Yahweh.

For later prophets, Judah was directly under the thumb of empires – Babylon, Persia, Greece.

Attempts at reform didn't stop that slavery. The visions gave language for seeing that situation of oppression and for envisioning God overcoming those powers, giving new life.