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**THE INAUGURAL VISION OF EZEKIEL
IN A CHRISTIAN LECTURE**

– ABSTRACT –

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Key words: vision, theophany, metaphors, merkabah, cherubim, all eye, the four living creatures

Phenomena attributed to a divine inspiration manifested in many religions of the Antiquity, but the biblical prophecy of the Old Testament has its own features. Inspiration may be connected to certain rites of initiation or to oracular experiences, to the participation to certain religious feasts or to certain divination practices. Cases of inspired individuals are attested even from the 18th century BC in Mari, on the Euphrates, or in the 8th century BC in Hama on the Orontes. It is certain that the so-called prophetism existed in ancient Mesopotamia and in Canaan. In Israel it is mentioned in the time of Moses (Num 11:26-29; Deut 18:15-22; 34:1; but also Abraham is called a prophet! – cf. Gen 20:7), and in the 11th century BC, together with Samuel, prophetism occurs in an “institutionalized” form (1 Samuel 10:5-6; 2 Chron 29:25).

Prophets are, firstly, mediators between God and his people. The respective word, although inspired in terms of content, is transmitted, regarding the “rhetoric clothing”, according to the personality of the one that transmits it. Also, we must not forget about the public, the historical context because the prophetic message within the Bible is only rarely addressed to a single individual, and most often it targets a whole nation (other times even more than one nation).

One of the most obscure prophets of the Old Testament, through his closed character, marked by obscure passages and by his visions and prophetic acts that are hard to decipher, is Ezekiel. From ancient times until today, the book of prophet Ezekiel has drawn the researchers’ attention and they emphasized the multiple difficulties that the text and its content present. Thus, it is unanimously acknowledged the fact that the text from Ezekiel has numerous problems, generated partially by its special content.

The first chapter from Ezekiel – which presents nothing else but a vision of the divinity – constitutes an opening for the entire book. One of the central themes of the book is the retreat of YHWH’s glory from Jerusalem, in chapters 8-11 and its return in chapter 43. But here in the inaugural vision, the divinity is already seen in Babylon, and the chapter to the forefront his presence in exile, even before (in narrative terms) leaving Jerusalem. This is an anticipation of the central theme of the book, as it is confirmed when in 43:3 a retrospective specification mentions these passages not in their biblical order, but in their logical or temporal order, namely

ch. 8-11 before ch. 1: “The vision I saw was like the vision I had seen when he came to destroy the city and like the visions I had seen by the Kebar River, and I fell facedown”. As an opening for the entire book, ch 1 from Ezekiel can be compared with ch. 1 from Isaiah: the themes of the book as a whole are mentioned here, anticipated and granted priority. The priority of the chapter within the book found its echo along the centuries through its overwhelming importance in interpretation, within Christianity and all the more so in Judaism, where it is the deep root of the mystical merkabah tradition and also, debatable – of the apocalyptic tradition.

In this thesis, “The Inaugural Vision of Ezekiel in a Christian Lecture” I propose the analysis of a rather controversial biblical chapter that wasn’t commented much on by the Romanian literature, namely the 1st chapter from the book of prophet Ezekiel.

The research project is divided into two major directions: the first is the textual analysis and the second is the reception of the text by the patristic authors.

The thesis comprises three chapters, preceded by an introduction in which I present the stages of the development of the research project, the reason for which I chose *The Inaugural vision of Prophet Ezekiel* as object of the analysis, directions of research and the difference between them and what has already been explored by the biblical scholars that treated this biblical chapter as well as indicating the current state of research (status questionis).

In the 1st chapter I developed certain isagogic marks referring to the book of prophet Ezekiel, in order to have a perspective of the whole book, focusing on the history of the text. This chronology regards the journey (transmission) of the biblical text of prophet Ezekiel from the oldest manuscripts to the critical edition nowadays.

The 2nd chapter indicates the methodological fundamentals of the analysis: it is used the comparative method for the text of the 1st chapter in the book of prophet Ezekiel in the Hebrew and Greek editions to emphasize, as much as we could, the notable differences between them and the philological and exegetical consequences that they produce. Also, the comparison emphasizes the existence of several chronologic (temporal) and grammatical anomalies observed either in the Hebrew text or in both variants used for comparison, these being assessed from a historical, philological and exegetical point of view. Last but not least, in this chapter the thesis focuses on the identification and presentation of the literary structure of the text analyzed a reason for which its presentation is divided into sections, according to the content, in order to emphasize the possible stylistic and/or rhetorical devices.

The third chapter is more ample and comprises five subchapters. The first three of them indicate the manner in which the Christians of the first centuries, starting with Gregory the Great and Irenaeus of Lyon interpreted the 1st chapter of the book of prophet Ezekiel and the extent to which they tried to clarify its theological message. During this period, three dominant exegetical themes were outlined. A “dominant theme” is a theme that can be found within tradition as well; once exposed, it is often taken and modified, even developed by the subsequent commentators to the extent in which they are trying to understand and live according to the Scripture. But such an interpretation is not simple, repetitive, it is substantial from a theological point of view. There are also several explanations of some specific details from the prophet’s vision, but they don’t cause major problems, hence they are not considered as “dominant”. For example, numerous authors observed that the word “cherubim” used to describe the living creatures, means “fullness of knowledge”¹. But this is almost always an observation, a parenthesis, it does not occupy a central place in a theological explanation of the text studied, which is why it was almost never granted attention. Because I focus on commentaries (I study especially commentaries) which approach significant problems, this thesis does not represent an exhaustive research of the patristic treatises on Ezekiel 1. It is rather a study of the manner in which the interpretation of this text evolved – *Wirkungsgeschichte*, and what this tells us about the exegetical habits of the Christians from the first centuries.

Although the exegetical themes mentioned above overlap often and develop together, for reasons of clarity and coherence, I will treat each of them separately, in individual subchapters. The first exegetical theme regards the nature of the Christian exegesis. Because the patristic authors consider that some aspects of the vision prove its inherent Christocentric character, they thus show that the Old Testament and the New Testament form a unitary book, and the texts taken from the Old Testament may be clarified only if they are understood in the light of Jesus Christ. The second exegetical theme has its origins in Irenaeus’ debates with the Gnostics and culminates in the Christian literature from the 4th and 5th centuries, illustrating what Ezekiel 1 presents on the human knowledge of God.

As these theme develop, the patristic authors manifest a special care for the literary structure and the vocabulary of the text from Ezekiel 1. Moreover, with few exceptions, the

¹ The link between cherubim and living creatures was first made in Ezekiel 9:3. However, when the patristic authors speak about Ezekiel 1 they often call them “cherubim”.

patristic authors do not pay attention only to the lexical details, but they are preoccupied with the exegesis of their predecessors for this text.

Since these themes occur adjacent in the same author, and thus they develop together, the fact that I speak about them separately might seem artificial. However, I chose this method because by separating them we can see better the relations between different exegetes and we can observe clearer how a certain motif evolves in time. To this respect, Gregory the Great offers us an instructive example. In his work *Homilies to Ezekiel*, Gregory the Great takes as starting point an interpretation that already existed and then develops it in a creative manner. If we do not take this into account, his interpretation might seem forced and arbitrary.

It is worthy to remember the fact that when they comment on the text from Ezekiel 1, the patristic authors admit that the prophet experienced indeed what the text describes: the vision is a real historical event that transmits God's revelation. Hence, in the context of the debates with neo-Arians, John Chrysostom asks himself "What did Ezekiel see?" and what can people know about God. His question is the catalyst of all the interpretations given to this text by the Christians of the first centuries. Each of the two themes is an attempt to answer this question of John Chrysostom and to elucidate what do the answers given mean for the Church.

After the research on this subject I came to the conclusion that Ezekiel's image with the four creatures that were all eyes proved to be a metaphor used frequently by various characters such as the parents of the desert, the ascetics from Gaza, Pseudo-Dionysius and Gregory Palamas. The subchapter that focuses on the image of Ezekiel with the four creatures interposes between these thinkers the neo-Platonic philosopher, Plotinus, who used a similar metaphor in his 6th Ennead. In the case of the authors that haven't been influenced much by Plotinus, the metaphor often received connotations of spiritual super-glory, lack of passions and vigil, but for the figures influenced by him to a greater extent, the metaphor referred exclusively to the first two concepts. This limitation of the interpretative richness for Ezekiel's vision was most probably due to the complete lack of interest that Plotinus proved in his ethical questions.

In the end of this chapter I carried on an analysis regarding the parallels between the Johannine prologue and the 1st chapter of the book of Ezekiel. Thus I tried to emphasize the uniqueness of the Johannine prologue, by the fact that this reflects the motifs identified in Ezekiel's inaugural vision.

Also, it is well known the fact that this book of Ezekiel was a source of controversies between the rabbis. Most of this dispute focused on the mysterious vision of God's chariot, *merkavah*, and in the past decades a considerable number of researches focused on the Judaic *merkavah* traditions.

Ezekiel's vision is similar to at least two other experiences described in the New Testament, namely: the Christophany from Apocalypse 1:12-20 and the experience of the heavenly liturgy of Apostle John from Apocalypse 4. The relation between Ezekiel 1, Apocalypse and other epiphanies both canonical and non-canonical, was thoroughly researched and the presentation of this complex connections exceeds the purpose of the present thesis.

In the period between the 2nd and the 4th centuries, four exegetical treatises on Ezekiel 1 written and they were preserved until today. Amongst them Origen's *Homilies to Ezekiel* (the first homily deals with the inaugural vision), two commentaries that present the entire book of the prophet, one in Latin by Jerome and one in Greek by Theodoret and Gregory's work, *Homilies to Ezekiel*, in which he preaches to chapters 1-4:3 and 40. While these texts may be considered the spine of the exegetical tradition a great deal of the significant theological interpretations are included in the commentaries or homilies to other biblical books, or treatises on other specific themes, by various authors (Irenaeus of Lyon, Eusebius of Caesarea and Ambrose of Milan, Macarius of Egypt pseudo-Dionysius and Nicholas Kabasilas).

Modern exegesis on the book of Ezekiel is dominated by two names: Walther Zimmerli and Johan Lust, personalities that left to the theological environment massive volumes of commentaries of high scientific level.

Taking into account the existence of these contributions, the present thesis is not an analysis of the hermeneutical theory, but rather of the exegetical practice. This is in fact the novelty brought by this thesis in the field of the Romanian biblical research. Since theology and the interpretation of the Scripture are essential in the patristic era, as we follow the evolution of the interpretative tradition on Ezekiel 1, inevitably major problems and controversies occur. However, I limited these researches to what is necessary in order to understand the role that the text from Ezekiel 1 plays within these controversies.

Finally, here are some mentions regarding the nature of this exegetical endeavour and its relation to other such approaches. There is no intention in this thesis to focus on each problem of the book of Ezekiel, much less to repeat all the significant ideas that were written for each of

them. These duties are admirably solved, in various forms, by Zimmerli and Block. My purpose is to bring a contribution to the interpretation and understanding of the 1st chapter from the book of prophet Ezekiel, especially regarding its theology, also taking into account the historical research, the literary sensitivity and the exegetical practice. My intention is to extract the theological ideas from Ezekiel 1 (as much as possible) according to my own conditions, using instruments of the textual, historical and literary critique. This leaves the work of constructive assimilation of the text to the other, either Jewish, Christian or of other religion. I hope that the present thesis can bring a contribution to that important task as a sort of fundament. Although it is based on the Hebrew text (MT) and on the Greek one (LXX), my exegesis refers also to the Synodal Bible, BBVA Bible and the English version NSRV.

Summarizing my personal contribution to the exegesis of the first chapter from the book of prophet Ezekiel, I may state that from the point of view of the literary architecture chapter 1 starts with a double introduction (vv. 1 and 2-3) followed by the description of the divine visions in five paragraphs (vv. 4, 5-14, 15-21, 22-25 and 26-28) attested (and linked together) through the key expression *k^e 'ên* (“like glowing metal”) in vv. 4, 7, 16, 22, 27. The first (v. 4) and the last paragraph (v. 26-28) present the one Who sits on the chariot and forms an *inclusio chiastic* for the three paragraphs from the middle which describe the creatures (vv. 5-14), their relation with the wheels underneath them (vv. 15-21) and with the sky above them (vv. 22-25).

After the textual analysis I identified the main difficulties that the text from chapter 1 of prophet Ezekiel’s book proposes. Hence, the Hebrew text (MT) of this chapter is often problematic, and LXX seems to translate a Hebrew text that is somewhat different from MT because the differences observed don’t seem to facilitate an understanding according to which they could simply be the result of the scribes’ mistakes (both in MT and in LXX).

Also, I may state that the text of chapter 1 constitutes one of the most difficult passages of the Old Testament also because of its heavy symbolic content as it results from the exegetical analysis, of complex theological concepts, which reveal the virtues of divine image of the prophet priest Ezekiel. The divine visions in chapter 1, belonging to (or inaugurating) the episode of the prophet’s calling to speak the divine judgements over the house of Israel, have a dramatic character similar to the one in 1 Kings 22 (or to the one from Isaiah 6). Given their preparing role for such a prophecy, one may say that the purpose of the inaugural vision is to reveal God as Judge (Whom Ezekiel will represent, as His prophet, before his exiled fellows).

Furthermore, the research on the interpretation that the patristic authors gave to the text from Ezekiel 1 proved that they used this text to explain some significant problems: 1) the different Christian interpretation of the Scripture (including the relationship between the Old and the New Testament); 2) the human nature and the level of knowledge of God. When they interpreted this complex text, the patristic author did not impose a preconceived understanding, but they examined thoroughly both the structure and literary context and the lexical details of the text, and they placed it within the larger context of the whole Scripture. The approach of these authors is guided by the conviction that Ezekiel's vision as well as the whole Scripture, convey a message that is not limited to the spatial-temporal coordinates of Ezekiel. Therewith, the conviction that the message of the Holy Scripture must become fruitful in the lives of those who listen to it or read it is essential in the patristic exegesis, as Lubac also admits, when he describes one of the central hypotheses of the patristic authors. These authors have studied and commented on the biblical books as writings in which the Living Word of God is present, who guides the Church and each Christian, and not as historical books. Interpreting the text from Ezekiel 1 in the light of the Holy Scripture as a whole and in terms of the Incarnation of the Son of God, they found the confirmation of the unity of the sacred writings from one wheel to the other of the divine chariot and they found that the One who reveals Himself in this vision is above man's power of understanding.

Then, distinguishing the ideas influenced by Plotinus from those of the patristic authors analysed, I observed that the metaphor of the cherubim "full of eyes" refers to the super-sensitive glory, to vigil and lack of passions (except for Gregory the Great). Abba Visarion tried to reproduce/present these symbols, though in an incoherent manner, in his vision of angelology, presented in his work *Apophtegma of the Fathers*². Abba Barsanuphius is also influenced by *Epistle 207* of Abba Visarion and by the use of the words such as glory, work, ἡσυχία. The perspective of Gregory the Great on the metaphor of the cherubim "full of eyes" was only partially applied by him, as it was understood by the two monks, but he added the idea of the exterior vigil.

In Plotinus I identified another similitude between the metaphor of the cherubim "full of eyes" and the idea of the super-sensitive glory. But, one must take into account the fact that Plotinus was a non-religious philosopher, who was not extensively preoccupied with ethical

² AVVA VISARION 11, *Patericul Egiptean* (Alba-Iulia: Ed. Episcopia Ortodoxă a Alba-Iuliei, 1990), 34.

matters. Ezekiel's vision of the cherubim and Plotinus' idea from Ennead (VI) on the Creature that has life in its essence bears important similitudes. Pseudo-Dionysius and Gregory Palamas, the Christian successors of Plotinus' philosophy took the idea of the super-sensitive glory from the world of angels and linked it to the lack of passions, and not to vigil. Pseudo-Dionysius did this by stating that the cherubim receive the divine light instead of emotions, and Gregory Palamas took the first step towards the mystical vision. Hence we discover a decrease of the multitude of interpretations on the vision of Ezekiel simultaneous with the interaction of the Christian and neo-Platonic ideas.

Last but not least, as a result of the investigation of the parallels between the Johannine prologue and chapter 1 of the book of prophet Ezekiel, I observed that the uniqueness of the prologue of Evangelist John may be broadly explained by his wish to reflect the motifs identified in the inaugural vision of Ezekiel. I discovered that the agglomeration of motifs in these 51 verses presents numerous thematic and linguistic parallels with the first three chapters from the book of prophet Ezekiel. Although some are more obvious than others (i.e. λόγος/רִבְרִב parallels; Yahweh//Jesus' glory; introduction of a prophet; the heavens that open; the use of the expression "Son of Man"), the relations that form start to get more and more meaning in the light of these parallels. However, if the hypothesis formulated above must be demonstrated, then other structural and thematic clues of the parallelism between John and Ezekiel should come to light as the text of the fourth gospel unfolds.

In conclusion, one of the novelty elements of this doctoral thesis is represented by the harmonious combination between the historical-critical approach, the philological analysis and the patristic exegesis of the text from chapter 1 of the book of prophet Ezekiel. Another novelty element is represented by the interpretation of the text from Ezekiel 1 in a Christological key. Ezekiel's prophetic message comprises the "universal" history. Through the text God speaks to His people along the history and to the extent to which the text is read and applied it comes to fulfilment. Observing the variety of approaches related to the inaugural vision of prophet Ezekiel, I tried, through the present thesis to offer to the Romanian theological literature, and also to the international one, a clear image on the importance of the prophet's vision who sends a message that cannot be restricted to its spatial-temporal coordinates, and also to bring an important contribution to the interpretation and understanding of chapter 1 of the book of prophet Ezekiel, and especially regarding its theology, related both to the historical research and to the

literary sensitivity and exegetical practice. I consider that this thesis did not exhaust the subjects that refer to the text of chapter 1 of the book of Ezekiel, on the contrary it opened new horizons for research.

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