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“WHEELS WITHIN WHEELS”

WILLIAM BLAKE AND THE EZEKIEL'S  
MERKABAH IN TEXT AND IMAGE

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## "WHEELS WITHIN WHEELS" WILLIAM BLAKE AND THE EZEKIEL'S MERKABAH IN TEXT AND IMAGE

This year marks the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the birth of William Blake, the English poet, engraver, and self-styled prophet. His stanzas, popularly known as "Jerusalem," have become the unofficial national anthem for millions of British people. The words, from Blake's "Preface to Milton," are familiar:

And did those feet in ancient time  
Walk upon England's mountains green?  
And was the holy Lamb of God  
On England's pleasant pastures seen?

And did the Countenance Divine  
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?  
And was Jerusalem builded here  
Among these dark Satanic Mills?

Bring me my Bow of burning gold!  
Bring me my Arrows of desire!  
Bring me my Spear: O clouds unfold!  
Bring me my Chariot of fire!

I will not cease from Mental Fight,  
Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand,

Christopher Rowland

Till we have built Jerusalem,  
In England's green & pleasant Land.

Would to God that all the Lord's people were  
Prophets.  
Numbers xi. 29V.

The four stanzas may be familiar. What will be less so is the fact that Blake penned the words "Would to God that all the Lord's people were Prophets" underlining the importance of prophecy for all people. This was not a specialist vocation, for "Every honest man is a prophet; he utters his opinion both of private and public matters." Prophecy is not about prediction, but about "speaking out," particularly in the ways that the biblical prophets spoke against iniquity, injustice and oppression.

This lecture marks the anniversary of Blake's birth by considering the way in which this remarkable figure in English literature and religion looked back to his prophetic predecessors such as Ezekiel, as both his inspiration and his spiritual ancestor. In his "Marriage of Heaven and Hell," Blake imagines sitting with Ezekiel and asking him questions about his prophetic ministry. This indicates that among the prophets Ezekiel was crucial. This is borne out by Blake's writing and his painting. The lecture today will consider aspects of this and also show what an important inheritance of interest and fascination in the prophecy of Ezekiel there was for Blake to draw on.

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## I. MERKABAH MYSTICISM

One of the most significant discoveries over the last fifty years of biblical scholarship has been the recognition of the importance of merkabah mysticism for understanding the New Testament and emerging Judaism at the beginning of the Common Era. In recent years the Theology Department in this university has made an important contribution to that, and it is a privilege to be able to explore one, perhaps surprising aspect of that, in this year's Père Marquette Lecture.

Thirty years of studying Jewish mysticism has led to a growing unease with all sorts of abstractions, of which mysticism must be one of the most obfuscating. William Blake the English prophet, poet and artist, is often described as a mystic, in order to separate his work from the mundane and the material. Such dualism is not only a poor encapsulation of Blake's thought but perpetuates a view of mysticism which sees it as otherworldly and escapist. No doubt mystics down the centuries, whether through their visions or their detachment, have encouraged a world-denying attitude, but this hardly represents the extraordinary mix we find between the practical and the imaginative or intellectual. Nowhere is this better exemplified than in the case of Paul, who has interest in divine mysteries but also evinces a rare ability in word and deed to engage in the practical politics of community organisation.

April DeConick helpfully points out that "mysticism" is not a word actually used by ancient people to describe their experiences.

"When the early Jews and Christians describe their mystical experiences in a single word, they do so most often by employing the term 'apokalypsis,' an 'apocalypse' or 'revelation.'" In the Jewish and Christian period-literature, these religious experiences are described as waking visions, dreams, trances and auditions which can involve spirit possession and ascent journeys. The culmination of the experience is transformative in the sense that the Jewish and Christian mystics thought they could be invested with heavenly knowledge, join the choir of angels in worship before the throne, or be glorified in body. As a modern term, therefore, it refers to a "tradition within early Judaism and Christianity centred on the belief that a person directly, immediately and before death can experience the divine, either as a rapture experience or one solicited by a particular praxis."<sup>1</sup>

Merkabah mysticism is a very general way of describing a phenomenon often alluded to in rabbinic texts as *ma'aseh merkabab*, which had to do with the interpretation of the first chapter of Ezekiel. This

1 April D. DeConick, "What is Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism?" in *Paradise Now: Essays on Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism*, ed. April D. DeConick, Symposium Series 11 (Society of Biblical Literature: Atlanta, 2006), 1-24.

describes that dramatic moment when the prophet Ezekiel, in exile in Babylon, sitting by a river has a dramatic vision in which he sees God enthroned in glory, on what appears to be a chariot, the Hebrew *merkabab*. The tortuous description offered reflects the prophet's difficulty in putting into words exactly what he saw. He saw creatures, eyes, flame of fire and above a dome God enthroned, appearing in human form. Not surprisingly this text caught the imagination of later interpreters, and it is almost certain that in addition to explaining what went on for Ezekiel these interpreters also believed that like Ezekiel they could catch a glimpse of what Ezekiel had seen. To put it in the words of one of these most distinguished interpreters of the history of the interpretation of this chapter, David Halperin: "When the apocalyptic visionary 'sees' something ... we may assume that he is seeing the ... vision as he has persuaded himself it really was, as (the prophet) would have seen it, had he been inspired wholly and not in part."<sup>2</sup>

It is probable that meditation on passages like Ezekiel 1, set as it is in exile and the aftermath of a previous destruction of the Temple, would have been particularly apposite, as the rabbis sought to come to terms with the devastation of 70 CE. Of course, if the practical methods were among the most closely guarded secrets of the tradition, and if some influential rabbis were hostile to them, we should expect

2 D. Halperin, *Faces of the Chariot: early Jewish responses to Ezekiel's vision* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1998), 71.

the sources to be very reticent about them, especially when the practice was liable to cause theological and halakic deviance. Controversy concerning the status and legitimacy of the tradition is likely to have occurred during the first century, probably because of the way in which such traditions were developed in extra-rabbinic circles, not least Christianity. We know Paul was influenced by apocalyptic ascent ideas (2 Cor 12:2-4); he emphasises the importance of this visionary element as the basis of his practice (Gal 1:12 and 16; cf. Acts 22:17). Paul's apocalyptic outlook enabled him to act on his eschatological convictions; his apocalypse of Jesus Christ became the basis for his practice of admitting Gentiles to the messianic age without the practice of the Law of Moses. Problems with apocalypticism were a common feature of emerging Christianity and Judaism. In this there was common ground even if there was not much evidence in their literature of either tolerance on the part of Christians or interest on the part of the Jews.

There were many things that fascinated the ancient interpreters, but, arguably, most important of all was the way in which the prophet dared to describe the enthroned divinity. The Hebrew of this already shows signs of increasing the reserve. In addition to the piling up of similitudes such as 'in the likeness of ...'; the Masoretic text by the omission of one letter almost certainly changes in the likeness of a man to in the likeness of fire, thereby reducing the anthro-

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pomorphism, though this could not be eradicated completely, as the following verse goes on to describe the bodily form of the divinity. This became the basis of extravagant speculations about the body of God in later mystical Judaism, which may have both had their antecedents in Judaism and affected Christianity as it presented Christ as the visible, bodily, appearance of the unseen divinity, the words used in both John 1:18 and Col 1:15. So, despite the prohibition of images and the repeated assertion that humans could not see God and live, passages like Ezekiel and its companion visionary text Isaiah 6 indicate that not only was God visible in human form but that humans did manage to see the divine and live. Without wanting to get into the complexities of the relationship between the manifestation of the unseen god in human form and the prohibition of images, two points need to be made. Firstly, in Genesis 1:26-7 the Hebrew which is used for "let us create man in our image" is a word which concerns physical representation (as in a statue) and not some vague likeness which might be related to moral or ethical qualities. Secondly, within the earliest strands of the Hebrew Bible there are references to the *mal'ak YHWH*, the angel of the Lord, which appears in human form, sometimes indistinguishable from humans (Genesis 16), at other times more apparently 'otherworldly' (Judges 13). These biblical examples provide us with parallels to the picture in which a heavenly being possibly (Judges 13:3) acts as God's representative in such a way that

he could be thought of as God himself (e.g. Judges 13:5ff.). The distinguished biblical commentator, W. Eichrodt has recognised this aspect of Jewish theology and comments on it in the following way:

Among the narratives relating to the angel one particular group stands out because it describes an emissary of Yahweh who is no longer clearly distinguishable from his master but in his appearing and speaking clothes himself with Yahweh's own appearance and speech ... Consequently when the words of the *mal'ak* in Gen. 21:18 and 22:11 make use of the divine 'I', this is not to be regarded as a naive self-identification on the part of the emissary with the one who has given him the orders but as a sign of the presence of God in the angel-phenomenon.<sup>3</sup>

While little detail is given about these angelophanies, it appears that in the earliest strands of biblical tradition there could be an appearance of an angel which in some sense was regarded as communicating the presence of God himself. Thus it was possible to call this being God (Gen. 31:11 and 13) despite the fact that this attribute was derived from his function as God's representative.

My intention in pointing to all this is not to pick out pieces of information which may be of interest to the ancient interpretation of the first chapter of Ezekiel, so much as to pave the way for the main con-

<sup>3</sup> W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (London: SCM 1967), ii.33.

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cerns of today's lecture: the art and writing of William Blake.

## 2. WILLIAM BLAKE (1757-1827)

William Blake was a visionary who communed with angels and even his dead brother regularly. Memorably in a later work he outlines his peculiar visionary experience in words which are central to Blake's imaginative and allegorical style:

What it will be Questioned When the Sun rises do  
you not see a round Disk of fire somewhat like a  
Guinea O no no I see an Innumerable company  
of the Heavenly host crying Holy Holy Holy is  
the Lord God Almighty I question not my Corporeal  
or Vegetative Eye any more than I would  
Question a Window concerning a Sight I look  
thro it & not with it.

(Catalogue 1810, on "The Last Judgement")

Blake resists staying with what *appears* to be there as if it has no other dimensions to its meaning. One looks through it or around it to appreciate another dimension of existence. This is the same as the ancient Jewish mystics (John included) who, as they read, meditated upon and studied the prophetic visions, found that—in biblical words—the 'door of perception' opened up to them another realm of existence.

For Blake seeing with the imaginative eye was on a par with the physical sight.<sup>4</sup> In the reader's engagement with Blake's texts, word and image jostle with each other in the page. Blake demands the involvement of the reader/spectator in creating meaning from poems in which there is no definitive meaning waiting to be discovered. The kind of interpretative process set up by Blake is illustrated by a passage from one of his letters, which offers a way of understanding the heart of Blake's hermeneutics. Here Blake comes as close as anywhere to describing what is going on in his work, and it is an emphasis on the effects of the text. It is in a letter where Blake is asked precisely for a code to help the reader/viewer understand his work:

You say that I want somebody to elucidate my ideas. But you ought to know that what is grand is necessarily obscure to weak men. That which can be made explicit to the idiot is not worth my care. The wisest of the ancients consider'd what is not too explicit as the fittest for instruction, because it rouses the faculties to act. I name Moses, Solomon, Esop, Homer, Plato... Why is the Bible more Entertaining & Instructive than any other

<sup>4</sup> M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: Norton 1971). Cf. Blake, "We are led to Believe a Lie When we see not Thru the Eye," and "I question not my Corporeal or Vegetative Eye any more than I would Question a Window concerning a Sight I look thro it & not with it."

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book? Is it not because they are addressed to the Imagination, which is Spiritual Sensation and but mediately to the understanding or reason?<sup>5</sup>

Blake came from an artisan background and was apprenticed to an engraver in London. His expertise in this craft was fundamental to his art. He so refined and perfected his skill that he evolved a way of producing the exercise of his own imagination in his own unique method of engraving. The engraving technique he perfected enabled him to translate the fruits of his inspiration immediately onto copper plates. Thereby inspiration and execution came to be united in a way with few parallels in the history of artistic production.

In his work, Blake was able to develop his own mythology, rooted in the symbols and images of the biblical prophecies and apocalypses, to challenge the domination of deference to the old words and phrases. He was an implacable enemy of devotion to 'memory' (tradition) at the expense of inspiration or imagination. Blake's relationship with the Bible was a complex one, and it would be possible to devote this lecture to what Blake wrote about the Bible. While there can be few writers and artists whose work is so permeated with biblical themes, Blake is at the same time one of the Bible's fiercest critics, not least in the way he inveighed against a theology which viewed God as a remote monarch and lawgiver as well as the

<sup>5</sup> "Letter to Trusler," in Blake, *Complete Writings*, (Oxford, 1966), 793-4.

preoccupation with the words of the text. Throughout his life the Bible dominated Blake's imaginative world, even in the early period when he was more critical.

### 3. BLAKE, PROPHECY AND EZEKIEL

The central image of Blake, from whenever he first formulated his mythology, is Ezekiel's, the *Merkabah*, Divine Chariot or form of God in motion. The Living Creatures or Four Zoas are Ezekiel's and not initially Blake's, a priority of invention that Blake's critics, in their search for more esoteric sources, sometimes evade. Ezekiel, in regard to Blake's *Jerusalem*, is like Homer in regard to the *Aeneid*: the inventor, the precursor, the shaper of the later work's continuities. From Ezekiel in particular Blake learned the true meaning of prophet, visionary orator, honest man who speaks into heart of a situation to warn: if you go on so, the result is so; or as Blake said, a seer and not an arbitrary dictator.<sup>6</sup>

Blake recognizes the prophets of the Bible as kindred spirits; in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, he dines with Isaiah and Ezekiel:

6 H. Bloom, "Blake's *Jerusalem*: The Bard of Sensibility and the Form of Prophecy," in H. Bloom, *The Ringers in the Tower: Studies in Romantic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 65-79.

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The Prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel dined with me, and I asked them how they dared so roundly to assert that God spake to them; and whether they did not think at the time, that they would be misunderstood, & so be the cause of imposition .... Ezekiel said, "The philosophy of the east taught the first principles of human perception: some nations held one principle for the origin & some another; we of Israel taught that the Poetic Genius (as you now call it) was the first principle and all the others merely derivative, which was the cause of our despising the Priests & Philosophers of other countries, and prophesying that all Gods would at last be proved to originate in ours & to be the tributaries of the Poetic Genius; it was this that our great poet King David desired so fervently & invokes so pathetic'ly, saying by this he conquers enemies & governs kingdoms; and we so loved our God that we cursed in his name all the deities of surrounding nations, and asserted that they had rebelled; from these opinions the vulgar came to think that all nations would at last be subject to the Jews."

"This," said he, "like all firm persuasions, is come to pass; for all nations believe the Jews' code and worship the Jews' god, and what greater subjection can be!"

I heard this with some wonder, & must confess my own conviction. After dinner — I then asked Ezekiel why he eat dung, & lay so long on his right & left side? he answer'd, "the desire of raising other men into a perception of the infinite; this the North American tribes practise, & is the honest

who resists his genius or conscience, only for the sake of present ease or gratification?"

The various ways in which Ezekiel's vision informs Blake's art and illuminated books represent a significant part of his distinctive interpretation of the Bible and are closely related to the understanding of politics and theology which make him such a distinctive (and neglected) interpreter of the Bible in the history of English theology. Whether Blake was influenced by merkabah mysticism itself, I cannot at this stage decide. Many have pointed out that Blake seems to allude to a kabbalistic doctrine that Adam was a microcosm of the whole universe (*Jerusalem*, Plate 27). It may be possible to make a case for Blake being influenced by other aspects of Jewish kabbalistic tradition. What is clear is that Blake is part of the account one would want to give of the influence of Ezekiel 1 on Christian interpreters.

Whether or not Blake used Ezekiel's vision as the trigger of his own visions is unclear. We cannot, therefore, respond to the title 'Blake and merkabah mysticism' by suggesting that Blake was influenced by merkabah mysticism itself, though he was deeply indebted to the prophetic inspiration of Ezekiel. What is not in doubt, however, is that Ezekiel's *merkabah* has a prominent place in Blake's work, forming the inspiration of his major poetic work *The Four Zoas*, in which the mysteries of the human character are plumbed.

#### 4. HUMANITY IN DIVINITY

The link between humanity and divinity, as well as the complexity of human personality is hinted at in Blake's painting 'Ezekiel's Wheels' (1804, Museum of Fine Art, Boston), and redolent of that humanity in divinity found in the Jewish midrash and early patristic exegesis of the *merkabah*. What is striking about this picture is the prominence of the human figure among the four creatures (man, lion, ox and eagle) that surround the divine throne-chariot.

Whether Blake knew the details of Jewish interpretation, we cannot be sure, though many have suggested that he may have been influenced by cabalistic ideas, especially in his later works. It is less the establishment of a genealogical connection than the demonstration of an affinity of interest in the *merkabah* and its relation with the human that I want to suggest. In Gen 28:12 Jacob's vision of angels ascending and descending to God was painted by Blake and was in antiquity the subject of much speculation about the link between heaven and earth:

R. Hiyya the Elder and R. Yannai disagreed. One maintained: they were ascending and descending the ladder; while the other said: *they were ascending and descending on Jacob* ... Thus it says, Israel in whom I will be glorified; it is thou whose features are engraved on high; they ascended on high and

scroll. Given the way the lamb is such a prominent feature in Blake's writing from the early *Songs of Innocence* to the later *Jerusalem*, the lamb in this picture is curiously passive and anonymous. Just as interesting in the light of its enormous impact on modern biblical study was Blake's fascination with the then newly discovered Apocalypse of Enoch.

The Apocalypse of Enoch, brought back from Ethiopia where it had been preserved by the Ethiopian Church, was first published at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Though Blake may have been aware of the book and had access to excerpts of translations from it for several years before, at the time of his death he left his illustrations for the Apocalypse incomplete.<sup>15</sup> Among the unfinished sketches, one depicts I Enoch 14:8ff, a chapter which has much exercised the minds of students of Second Temple Judaism, as it offers an extended description of the vision of God, "The Great Glory," enthroned in the inmost recesses of the heavenly Temple. I Enoch 14 is full of imagery borrowed from Ezekiel 1, which, as we have seen, itself became the basis for later visionaries to glimpse again the awesome vision that appeared to the prophet by the waters of Babylon.

Blake's harshest caricature parody of the enthroned monarchical law-giver and insistence on the need for

15 J. Beer, "Blake's Changing View of History: the Impact of the Book of Enoch", in *Historicizing Blake*, ed. S. Clark and D. Woerall (London: Macmillan, 1994), 159 ff.

an understanding of God less abstract and remote is well exemplified by Plate 11 from *Europe*.<sup>16</sup> The one enthroned with a book of brass, holds the power which holds humanity in thrall through the web of religion binding them to obedience to a religion of law rather than encouraging mutual forgiveness. Here is the forbidding deity characteristic of the religion of Europe, according to Blake, the remote deity, too exalted to wipe tears from eyes. For Blake, the worship of God involves a recognition of God not as remote creator divinity, captured in his Ancient of Days in part of the preface to *Europe, a Prophecy*, but in the person of others: "The worship of God is: Honouring his gifts in other men, each according to his genius..."<sup>17</sup>

#### BLAKE THE LATTER DAY EZEKIEL

Neither Ezekiel nor Blake was primarily a mystic. Both thought of themselves as prophets. There is one further aspect of Blake's indebtedness to Ezekiel that we need to explore: Blake's role as a prophet.

At the end of Ezekiel's prophecy, the prophet is shown the buildings of a city and is told to note

16 *Europe, a prophecy*, 1794. Cf. *The Book of Urizen*, 1794, 4:40, where the book of brass concerns "one King, one God, one Law." Blake, *Complete Writings*, 224.

17 *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Plate 22; Blake, *Complete Writings*, 158.

what he sees in it and tell it to the people (Ezekiel 40:4). He has the opportunity to walk through its streets and describe what he sees. John as an Ezekiel for his own day, and his contemporary, the writer of 4 Ezra likewise, are similarly commanded to explore the beauty of the cities they are shown in their vision. In 4 Ezra 10:55, for example, Ezra is commanded to "go into the city and see the great buildings in all their splendour."

The seer on entering the city, will encounter such things that his eye cannot take them all in. We may account for the experience described by comparing it with the revelation of the ideal temple city in Ezekiel 40-48. The "man" who holds the measuring tools says to the prophet: "The man said to me, 'Mortal, look closely and listen attentively, and set your mind upon all that I shall show you, for you were brought here in order that I might show it to you; declare all that you see to the house of Israel'" (Ezekiel 40:4). Ezekiel is expected to comprehend everything that he sees and hears and to transmit it to Israel. We should recall that the measurements and parts of the heavenly temple/city were a subject of speculation already from ancient times, and a somewhat later analogous text is the Aramaic "New Jerusalem," extant in a number of copies at Qumran.<sup>18</sup> In a forthcoming article, "The

<sup>18</sup> See Michael E. Stone, "Apocalyptic Literature," *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period*, ed. M. E. Stone (Compendia Rerum Judaicarum ad Novum Testamen-

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City in 4 Ezra" in *The Journal of Biblical Literature*, Michael Stone has explored the significance of this reference in 4 Ezra and its possible links with early Jewish mysticism.

It is the command to explore the streets of the city, which infuses Blake the poet prophet in his wonderful poem "London:"

I wander through each chartered street,  
Near where the chartered Thames does flow,  
A mark in every face I meet,  
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every man,  
In every infant's cry of fear,  
In every voice, in every ban,  
The mind-forged manacles I hear:

How the chimney-sweeper's cry  
Every blackning church appals,  
And the hapless soldier's sigh  
Runs in blood down palace-walls.

But most, through midnight streets I hear  
How the youthful harlot's curse  
Blasts the new-born infant's tear,  
And blights with plagues the marriage hearse.  
"London" from *Songs of Experience*

This poem encapsulates his prophetic vocation and his understanding of his activity as well as any other (Assen and Philadelphia: van Gorcum and Fortress, 1984), 385.

er. It is as a latter day Ezekiel or John that Blake the poet walks the streets of London and sees the marks of the beasts and of the eschatological woes in his midst in this poem.<sup>19</sup> The old man guided by the child is an image which recurs in Blake's illuminated books. Here is the sense that it is the prophet as the child who has access to the mysteries and is able to go through the door into the darkness. The imagery echoes the door open in heaven, but here the illumination is that which belongs to every honest person who is a prophet. Blake would not have known about this but as the poet prophet discerning what Ezekiel (and the author of 2 Esdras, a work which had great importance for early modern radicals<sup>20</sup>) were saying and like them expects to do, in and exploring the city. Yet, more in the tradition of Ezekiel, this time it is to discern "marks of weakness, marks of woe," not the glories of the celestial city or the divine *merkabah*.

Blake like Ezekiel and John of Patmos, but unlike the early *merkabah* mystics, explicitly thought of himself as a prophet to his generation. For him the visions became not a kind of retreat into some kind of spiritual comfort zone. Nor that the mysti-

19 E.P. Thompson, *Witness against the Beast* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993), 179-94.

20 A. Hamilton, *The Apocryphal Apocalypse: The Reception of the Second Book of Esdras (4 Ezra) from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999).

cal ascent to heaven through the celestial palaces surrounded by threatening angels was ever that for the Jewish mystics. It is when visionary experience informs a sense of the incompatibility of human action and divine justice that the prophet speaks, when, as Blake put it, one sees through the eye and not with it, and ordinary things become transformed in the divine light, whether of salvation or judgment. Blake is a compelling example of the prophetic vocation ready to bear witness to the Beast and Babylon in his midst. His prophetic vision owes so much to the inspiration of his prophetic forebears, not least the strange prophet who saw the divine *merkabah* by the waters of Babylon, which thereby transformed his life and his hope.