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1909.

495TH ORDINARY GENERAL MEETING.

MONDAY, APRIL 5TH, 1909.

DAVID HOWARD, ESQ., F.C.S., F.I.C. (VICE-PRESIDENT),
IN THE CHAIR.

The Minutes of the previous Meeting were read and confirmed.

Mr. E. Carus-Wilson, of High Barnet, was elected a Missionary Associate of the Institute.

The following paper was then read by the Author :—

*EZEKIEL'S VISION OF THE DIVINE GLORY.**

By C. A. CARUS-WILSON, M.A., M.Inst.E.E.

FEW parts of Old Testament literature present greater difficulty than the account given by Ezekiel of his Vision of the Divine Glory. The key to its elucidation is, I believe, to be found in recognising that the supernatural revelation given to the Hebrew prophet was based on a natural phenomenon, a rare and splendid appearance in the heavens, which became henceforth a symbol and shadow of the Heaven of heavens.

It will be interesting in the first place to notice exactly where Ezekiel was when he saw his Vision. The map of the Euphrates Valley shows the general geographical features of that district with the Tigris, and the river Khabur, a tributary of the Euphrates, on whose banks Ezekiel was stationed at the time. At a distance of 120 miles to the north-east were the ruins of Nineveh which had been destroyed seventeen years previously, and from which, according to some authorities, Ezekiel had borrowed the imagery of his Vision, the cherubim having

* The paper was illustrated by two lantern slides, from the original of the first of which the frontispiece of the present volume is reproduced.

originated, so it has been stated, in the gigantic figures of winged bulls which Ezekiel might quite possibly have seen at Nineveh. Three hundred miles to the south-east was Babylon, the seat of the great power which five years previously had captured Jerusalem from whence Ezekiel, with the other exiles, had been transported to the colony on the banks of the Khabur. Ezekiel was at the time probably thirty years of age, and being a priest he would therefore have had occasion to take his part in the Temple services before the exile.

The Vision took place in the fourth month. According to pre-exilic usage the year began with October, and the fourth month would consequently be January. It seems more probable to suppose that Ezekiel would use this system of reckoning than that he would adopt the Babylonian custom which made the year begin with April, and this probability seems to be borne out by the allusion to "a stormy wind out of the north," a statement which appears to indicate that the season was that of winter.

Coming now to the actual description of the Vision, Ezekiel tells us that he saw "a great cloud, with a fire infolding itself, and a brightness round about it." There were "four living creatures" which "sparkled like the colour of burnished brass." "In the midst of the living creatures was an appearance like burning coals of fire, like the appearance of torches." In close connection with the living creatures were two wheels, "as it were a wheel in the midst of a wheel," and these were so placed that "there was one wheel upon the earth beside the living creatures for each of the four faces thereof." The "work" of these wheels was "like upon the colour of a beryl," while their "rings" or felloes were "high and dreadful." In addition to these, "over the head of the living creature there was the likeness of a firmament, like the colour of the terrible crystal, stretched forth over their heads above," and "above the firmament that was over their heads was the likeness of a throne, as the appearance of a sapphire stone, and there was brightness round about it. As the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud in the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness round about."

The main features of the Vision seem to have been six, namely, the "living creatures," the "burning coals of fire," the "wheel in the midst of a wheel," the "firmament," the "brightness," like a rainbow, and the "throne as the appearance of a sapphire." The whole account seems to suggest that Ezekiel is describing something that was actually before him and seen with his eyes. This idea is strengthened by the way

in which the description is introduced, "as I was among the captives by the river Chebar. . . . I looked, and, behold, a stormy wind came out of the north," and, later on, by the expression, "one wheel upon the earth. . . . for each of the four faces thereof," which appears to imply that Ezekiel was actually looking at the thing he describes, and that it was as real a thing as the earth on which he was standing—in fact, that the Vision was in some sense based upon a natural object. If there be any element of truth in the suggestion, such a natural object could only be some kind of celestial phenomenon, and the question arises whether there is any known phenomenon presenting such a complication of effects as that pictured by Ezekiel?

The phenomenon of the Parhelia is rarely seen in this country because of the peculiar climatic conditions necessary for its occurrence. The atmosphere has to be charged with myriads of minute crystals of ice; being very light, these float in the air, and as the sun shines through them their intricate shapes reflect and refract its light, producing a complexity of coloured rings and bands of magnificent proportions and of unsurpassed beauty and symmetry.

Owing to its great extent, and to the fact that the conditions necessary for its appearance are influenced by very slight changes in the atmospheric conditions, the phenomenon is seldom seen in its entirety, and different observers may see different parts of it. I myself had the rare opportunity, some few years ago, of seeing a remarkably complete display of this phenomenon, and will attempt to describe what I then saw with the assistance of a painting executed by a well-known artist from descriptions given him by myself.

Looking west shortly before sunset, the sun appeared as a crimson disc behind grey clouds. It was encircled by two halos of immense proportions, the outer halo being considerably greater than a rainbow at its highest possible elevation. The colouring of these halos was that of a rich amethyst purple, and at the extreme right and left of each were masses of brilliant light tinged with yellow; these are the Parhelia, or mock suns, from which the whole phenomenon derives its name. Bands of light passed through these Parhelia in a horizontal and vertical direction, the former being portions of a circle, seldom seen entire, called the Parhelic Circle, and the latter being parts of great circles whose appearance depends upon the slow oscillating movement of the ice crystals as they sway in the air, the amount of their upward and downward extent varying with the move-

ment of the crystals. Above the inner halo appeared an arc, touching it at its summit, an expanse of white light stretching out on either side.

Above the outer halo appeared another arc brilliantly coloured with the colours of the rainbow. The position occupied by this arc was remarkable; it was not in the same vertical plane as the two halos, but in a horizontal plane, and was part of a circle, which, if complete, would encircle the zenith, the centre being therefore immediately over the head of the observer. When seen in a cloudless winter sky, the deep blue of the zenith appeared as a ball of sapphire encircled by a rainbow.

We may now enquire as to how far the details of this phenomenon are reproduced in the account given by Ezekiel. The four Parhelia are described as "four living creatures," each one having "four wings," which "sparkled like burnished brass." The sun is likened to "burning coals of fire," and its position defined as "in the midst of the living creatures." Ezekiel speaks of the two halos as "a wheel in the midst of a wheel," their colour being that of a "beryl," their proportions graphically portrayed as "high and dreadful," and their position relatively to the Parhelia and to the ground completely and accurately explained by the sentence "there was one wheel upon the earth beside the living creatures for each of the four faces thereof." The arc over the inner halo is correctly described in every particular, first as to its position, "over the head of the living creatures," then as to colour, "like the colour of the terrible crystal," that is, ice, and lastly as to its general appearance, "a firmament," that is, an expanse spread out by beating, "stretched forth over their heads above." The arc over the outer halo is accurately placed "above the firmament," and its appearance like "the appearance that is in the cloud in the day of rain"; this was the "brightness" round about a "throne, as the appearance of a sapphire stone." The dense blue of the zenith, half-encircled by the bow, appeared as a throne of sapphire. The agreement in every detail is so remarkable that one cannot avoid the conclusion that Ezekiel had the Parhelia before him at the time.

Since the appearance of the Parhelia depends upon the presence of ice crystals in the air the question may be asked whether this phenomenon could appear in the Euphrates Valley, and whether the climatic conditions admit of such a possibility? At the time of the vision Ezekiel was two hundred miles north of the southern limit of snowfall in that part of Asia. At

Mosul, which is about the same latitude, severe frosts frequently occur, and the Tigris at Nineveh is sometimes nearly frozen over. The climatic conditions, therefore, are such as to render an occurrence of the Parhelia physically possible. I was anxious, however, to ascertain whether the Parhelia had actually been seen there, and in 1905 I wrote to Dr. Hume Griffith, who was in charge of the Medical Mission at Mosul, asking him whether he had seen the Parhelia, and if not, if he would keep a look out for it, at the same time sending him a full description of the phenomenon. Dr. Griffith replied saying that he had not seen the Parhelia, but that he would watch for it. In the autumn of 1907 he was returning to England on furlough, and after crossing the desert that lies between the Tigris and the Euphrates he had encamped for the night on the banks of the river Khabur. Late that evening, by a remarkable coincidence, he saw a fine display of the Parhelia. In a subsequent letter to me Dr. Griffith described what he saw: "Your previous letter had passed from my mind, and when my wife called me out of our tent to see 'the glorious sky' I had forgotten that our tent was pitched for the night on the banks of the river Khabur. The month was November, about the first week, the evening was cold and inclined to be frosty, the sun was setting, and from it projected spokes of various hues, with an appearance of a wheel within a wheel . . . the huge wing-shaped appearance on each side of the wheel spread far up into the heavens. The whole phenomenon lasted only a few minutes as the sun sank to rest. After watching it and discussing the curious wheel-like appearance I suddenly thought of where we stood, and of your long forgotten letter, and wondered whether this was what you had asked me to look out for."

There can be no doubt that what Dr. Griffith saw was the Parhelia, though in this case the most prominent features of the phenomenon were the two halos and the tangential arcs at the sides of the outer halo which were extended upwards to a great height.

We have therefore evidence that the Parhelia has been seen on the very spot where Ezekiel saw his Vision, and that Ezekiel gives a description agreeing at every point with that of the Parhelia. These facts taken together force upon us the conviction that Ezekiel had the Parhelia before him at the time of his Vision, and that this phenomenon constituted the natural object on which the Vision was based.

In conclusion I would suggest that the Vision of Ezekiel does not lose anything of its spiritual value, that it is not in

any degree less of an inspired message, owing to the fact of its being based upon a natural phenomenon. On the contrary, it gains in impressiveness and significance, and the idea that God has chosen the most magnificent of all natural phenomena to convey to man a knowledge of His Glory and Perfection is in agreement with the truths of Revelation.