"Chariots" for *Biblical Illustrator* (Lifeway Christian Resources of the Southern Baptist Convention), 2004

"Swing Low, sweet chariot, comin' for to carry me home. Swing low, sweet chariot, comin' for to carry me home." That spiritual is familiar and a favorite to many Christians. But what do we know about Elijah's famous chariot transport? What do we know about the development and use of chariots? What part did the chariot play in Israelite history? What led to the chariot's demise?

The chariot was a two-wheeled land vehicle built of wicker or wood, and leather, initially pulled by donkeys. Primarily, the chariot was a military implement and served as a mobile firing platform. Additional chariot uses included hunting and transportation for royalty and dignitaries.

Archaeological evidence indicates that the chariot developed in Mesopotamia before 3000 BC. Archaeological evidence also supports that the Hyksos introduced chariot warfare into Syria and Egypt between 1800 and 1600 BC.[1] The development of the horse-drawn chariot permitted, for the first time, large empires, such as the Hittite and Assyrian, to denominate.

Though rarely mentioned in the New Testament,[2] chariots are commonplace in the Old Testament. Perhaps one of the most recognized chariot narratives occurred during the Exodus as the omnipotent God of the Israelites destroyed the chariots of Pharaoh in the Red Sea (Ex. 14-15). Chariots were a common means of transportation in the times of Elijah and Elisha.

Genesis 41:43 records one of the earliest biblical references to the use of the chariot. In this passage Joseph rode in the Egyptian chariot directly behind the chariot of Pharaoh, indicating Joseph's place of authority. Joseph also rode in a royal chariot to meet his father (Gen. 46:29) as well as for his father's funeral (Gen. 50:9).

The Hebrew word utilized to describe Joseph's chariot (*rekeb*) is the same word used to describe Elijah's heavenly ride (2 Kgs. 2:11). Found over one hundred and twenty times in the Old Testament, *rekeb* is the most commonly found noun which describes a horse drawn vehicle.[3] *Rekeb* describes both military as well as royal chariots.

Originally, chariots were probably made of light wickerwork, opened in the back and had a box-like shape.[4] Commonly, the front was curved, the sides straight, with the back opened. Oftentimes woven rope comprised the floor giving the rider(s) a soft and springy footing. An axel with wooden wheels of four, six, or eight spokes supported the carriage.

The chariot's physical appearance evolved across centuries of development. Eventually, the wicker work gave way to the wooden chariot. The Philistines fortified wooden chariots with plates of metal (Joshua 17:16-18). The Philistine advancement of "armor plate" made the Philistine chariot much stronger than the lighter, unfortified chariot possessed by the Israelites. Normally chariots were low slung, but Sennacherib introduced the high chariot, the wheels of which were easily a man's height.

The Egyptians revolutionized chariotry. The Egyptian chariot was probably the finest in the world in Joshua's day.[5] Previous chariots were heavy, difficult to maneuver and pulled by slow-moving donkeys. Because of the scarcity of wood along the Nile River, Egyptian chariots were normally constructed of the much lighter wicker. Rather than pulling chariots by donkeys, the Egyptians pulled their chariots with horses. Thus, made of light materials and pulled by horses, the Egyptian chariots possessed greater speed than earlier chariots. The Egyptians also improved the chariot's design. Egyptian chariots had a lower body which gave the chariot a lower center of gravity. This design provided greater stability than the often clumsy predecessor. The rider stood directly over the axel in the Egyptian version. Such design distributed the rider's weight away from the horses to the chariot and placed less stress on the horses. Under the able leadership of Egyptian designers the chariot developed into an effective military tool greatly feared by opposing forces.

Normally two individuals, a driver and a warrior, rode in military chariots. But Hittite chariots were manned by a third rider. Chariots which developed after Assyrian King Ashurbanipal (668-629 BC) carried four riders at times. Two horses pulled the chariot but occasionally a third horse can be seen on historical monuments. The third horse, not actually yoked to the chariot, was a spare.

While mountainous regions rendered the chariot useless, the chariot was a deadly weapon in flat, open terrain. Long, intimidating knives, attached to the chariot's wheels, shredded enemy soldiers as the chariot raced across the battlefield. These spinning blades ripped into pieces any soldier caught on the open plains.

Israelite use of the chariot was not common in the nation's early history. When the Israelites initiated the conquest they found it impossible to defeat the Canaanites in the open plains because of the Canaanite use of the chariot. The agrarian Israelites found themselves at a distinct disadvantage in the presence of the formidable chariot force of the Canaanites. But the military genius Joshua managed to defeat Jabin, King of Hazor and Jabin's allies in spite of Jabin's powerful chariot force: "They [Jabin and allies] came out with all their troops and a large number of horses and chariots—a huge army, as numerous as the sand on the seashore" (Joshua 11:4). Joshua launched a surprise attach at the "waters of Merom." In order to neutralize Jabin's ominous chariot force the Israelites hamstrung Jabin's horses, i.e. cut the large tendon back of the hock.[6] In the aftermath of the Joshua-led conquest, the Naphtali and Zebulun tribes defeated Sisera's nine hundred chariot forces near Mt. Tabor (Judges 4:3ff). When the Israelites were fortunate enough to defeat an enemy chariot force they either crippled the horses or lead them away from the flat ground, thus rendering the chariot ineffective.

Because early Israelite chariot usage was rare, the Israelites avoided the great royal highway along the Mediterranean Sea. Instead, they favored the hill country to the east where enemy chariots were less maneuverable and less effective.

During the times of the Prophet Samuel and King Saul the Philistines dominated the Israelites for numerous reasons, Philistine chariots being one. The chariot played a key role in the Israelite-Philistine life and death struggle.[7] This struggle eventually cost King Saul his life. Without doubt, King David's victories over the Philistines were because he introduced the chariot to the Israelite' artillery.[8] After King David defeated Hadadezer he took horses sufficient to supply one hundred chariots (II Sam. 8:4). While King David inducted the chariot into Israelite use, King Solomon greatly expanded chariot usage (I Kgs. 4:26; 9:15-19). King Solomon developed an army of chariots and elevated his army above the armies of his rivals. According to I Kings 10:26-29, Solomon's army possessed fourteen hundred chariots. But, exceeding both Kings David and Solomon, chariot usage among the Hebrews climaxed with King Ahab. According to Assyrian records King Ahab engaged the Assyrians at the battle of Qarqar (853 BC) with two thousand chariots![9]

The destruction of the Egyptian chariots at the Red Sea became a favored symbol of God's deliverance of his people (Joshua 24:6). Psalm 68:17 utilizes a powerful illustration of a chariot to describe God's magnificence. The Psalmist described God ascending His throne in the Temple: "The chariots of God are tens of thousands and thousands of thousands; the Lord has come from Sinai into his sanctuary."

With the advent of horseback riding by 1000 BC chariots were no longer the military implement preferred by soldiers and officers. Mounted cavalry replaced the chariots as the military instrument of choice. Yet long after the demise of their usefulness in war, chariots continued to be used for hunting and sport racing.

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[1] Lai Ling Elizabeth Ngan, "Chariots," *Holman Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1991), 245.

[2] Check Acts 8:26ff where Philip approached the Ethiopian eunuch as the eunuch rode in a chariot and Rev. 9:9 and 18:13 where chariots are used in prophetic imagery.

[3] William White, "βκρ," *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 847. And also Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The New Brown, Driver, and Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Lafayette, Indiana: Associated Publishers and Authors, Inc., 1981), 939.

[4] J. W. Wevers, "Chariot," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible,* vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 553.

[5] V. Gilbert Beers, "Canaanite Chariots," *The Victor Handbook of Bible* Knowledge (Wheaton: Victor Books), 141.

[6] William H. Morton, "Joshua," *Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1970), 346.

[7] John Bright, *A History of Israel,* 3rd Edition (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 185.

[8] Wevers, 554.

[9] Ngan, 245.