

EZEKIEL'S TEMPLE (PART 2)

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We continue a study of a prophetic vision of God's temple found in chapters forty through forty-eight of the Book of Ezekiel. Previously, we considered the evidence that this particular vision was not a prophecy of the Second Temple, the physical building that was constructed under the leadership of Zerubbabel the Governor and Joshua the High Priest. We also noted that the scriptures do not allow for the possibility of a God-ordained "third" physical temple in Jerusalem in the future, as Premillennialists falsely believe and teach. We now consider the abundant proof that Ezekiel's temple was figurative not literal, and would rather be spiritual in nature.

Physical and geographical issues

First of all, the dimensions of the temple compound in Ezekiel's vision would make it virtually impossible for it to be literally built. The outer walls around the temple were 500 reeds on each side (Ezek 42:15-20; 45:2). That is approximately one square mile (slightly larger than a mile on each side), an area about 20 times larger than the entire Temple Mount, and significantly larger than the entire walled city of Jerusalem (2 Kgs 14:13; 2 Chr 25:23)! Obviously, the dimensions of Ezekiel's temple would have been *far* too large to have been literally built. Secondly, the apportionment of land found in the vision would be not be possible to literally institute. Again, the instructions in the vision regarding the land are inseparable from the temple in the vision. The temple was to be located within certain designated land (Ezek 45:1-5; 48:8-12), which was to fit within the entire scheme for the division of the land (Ezek 48). The geography of the land Palestine is incompatible with a literal division of the land according to the procedure outlined in Ezekiel 48. For example, Ezekiel 48:1-29 instructs that each of the 12 tribes of Israel be given a strip of land 25,000 reeds long (Ezek 48:8), beginning with Dan in the north and ending with Judah in the south. Twenty-five thousand reeds is the approximate equivalent of 50 miles. There are a number of points in northern Israel that are not even 50 miles wide. This is not even to mention other geographical features such as mountains, valleys, rivers and deserts which tend against the method of apportionment in Ezekiel 48. And, again it should be mentioned that the temple compound itself is larger than the entire city of Jerusalem and the city portion was to be adjacent to the holy portion that contained the temple. Since the land apportionment could not be literally executed, then it follows that the temple was not intended to be literally built. Thirdly, the "tribes of Israel" as they are described in the vision were no longer physically in existence. The ten tribes of the Northern Kingdom of Israel were permanently dispersed, never to return (2 Kgs 17). God certainly knew that when He gave the instructions for the apportionment of the land in Ezekiel 48. The physical nation of Israel would never again exist like it had when Joshua had led them into Canaan and they divided the land among the tribes. This irrefutably demonstrates the figurative nature of the land division, and, along with it, the temple that is tied to that land division. Finally, the river described in Ezekiel 47:1-12 is obviously and undeniably figurative. No river flows from underneath the temple, gradually reaching an impassable depth as it flows into the Dead Sea and miraculously turns it into a fish-filled freshwater body. It is untenable that such a figurative river would emerge from beneath a literal temple. Perhaps nothing more positively illustrates that Ezekiel 40-48 is a figurative vision with a figurative temple than the river described in chapter 47.

Differences with the Law of Moses

Several changes to the Law of Moses and other irregularities are found within the vision. For example, four lambs and a ram are added to the Sabbath Day burnt offering in Ezekiel 46:4 (compare Num 28:9), and one bullock and a lamb are deleted from the new moon offering in Ezekiel 46:6 (compare Num 28:11). Also, Ezekiel 44:22 gave the priests permission to marry a widow who had previously been married to another priest, but Leviticus 21:12-14 did not permit a priest to marry *any* widow. In the vision, the priesthood is restricted to the sons of Zadok (Ezek 40:46; 43:19; 44:9-16; 48:11), a restriction not found within the Law of Moses (see Num 3). New restrictions concerning the way in which the people entered the temple are given in Ezekiel 46:1-10. Other irregularities are also found in the vision, such as the omission of the feast of

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weeks in Ezekiel 45:21-25, and the table before the Lord being called the “altar of wood” in Ezekiel 41:22, just to name a couple. These differences and irregularities do not present a doctrinal problem if they were not intended to be understood literally. Although it is difficult to explain exactly why God would have rules in a vision that differed from the actual law, the existence of those differences is clear proof that the vision is figurative. It is simply not possible that God meant for any of these different rules in Ezekiel 40-48 to be literal laws for the children of Israel. For one thing, it is not within God’s nature to contradict Himself and give the people conflicting laws (Rom 3:4; 1 Cor 14:33; Heb 6:18; 2 Tim 2:13). Also, not a single jot or tittle could pass from the Law of Moses until it was completely fulfilled, which did not happen until Jesus Christ fulfilled it (Matt 5:17-19; John 19:28-30; Col 2:14). Therefore, it must be concluded that the vision in Ezekiel 40-48 is figurative.

The princes of Israel

The “princes of Israel” that find frequent mention in the vision were not intended to literally exist. Zedekiah was the last king of Judah, and the book of Ezekiel strongly prophesies that there would be no more king of Israel until Christ (Ezek 17:11-24; 19:1-14; 21:25-27). No king would ever prosper reigning over Judah on this earth (Jer 22:28-30). Jesus Christ is the one and only king of the spiritual kingdom of Israel, his church (Isa 9:6-7; Ezek 34:23-25; 37:22-28; Dan 2:44-45; Matt 16:18-19; Luke 1:31-33; John 18:36-37; Acts 2:29-36; Eph 1:22-23; 4:5; 3:21; Col 1:18; Rev 11:15). Therefore, the information and instructions pertaining to these kings of Israel in Ezekiel 40-48 are necessarily figurative. Since these figurative kings of the vision are inseparably linked to the temple of the vision, it follows that the temple is as figurative as the kings.

The purpose of Ezekiel’s vision of the temple

At the beginning of the vision, God told Ezekiel to “declare all that thou seest to the house of Israel” (Ezek 40:4). The main purpose of the vision is given in Ezekiel 43:9-12. At that moment, 14 years after the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple (Ezek 40:1), the remnant of Israel was dwelling in captivity in Babylon with their bones dried, and their hope lost (Ezek 47:11). They were sitting down by the rivers in tears as they remembered Zion (Psa 137). A vision does not have to be literal in all its parts to accomplish God’s purpose of giving hope and encouragement to His faithful children who are living in difficult times. For example, the book of Revelation was written to Christians living in the midst of a worldwide persecution of horrible magnitude, and is filled with figurative descriptions of heaven (the “city foursquare”) and the victory of Christ and his church over Satan and all their enemies. The vision in Revelation gives a figurative representation of *real* blessings to come to faithful Christians who endure their persecutions to the end and overcome. We find something very similar in Ezekiel 40-48. God was truly going to deliver Israel from the Babylonian captivity and truly return the people to their land, and a new temple would physically be built and their religious observances truly restored. Ezekiel 40-48 uses a figurative vision to give the people hope for these real blessings to come. That hope is reflected in the new name for the city of this vision: “The Lord is there” (Ezek 48:35). God promised Israel that He would “dwell in the midst of them for ever” (Ezek 43:9). In order to receive that blessing, God commanded the captives to repent of their sins and put them far away (Ezek 43:7-9). The vision of the temple, figurative though it may be, was given for the explicit purpose of bringing about that repentance (Ezek 43:10-11). The law that God gave for the temple of Ezekiel’s vision was that everything must be holy: “*This is the law of the house; Upon the top of the mountain the whole limit thereof round about shall be most holy. Behold, this is the law of the house*” (Ezek 43:12). The vision of Ezekiel 40-48 was figurative in nature, but designed to give hope of very real blessings, and designed to bring about the true repentance of these wayward people. And, eventually, God would bring the Messiah to build a spiritual temple, which is the Lord’s church (Isa 33:20; Ezek 37:26-28; Acts 15:16; 1 Cor 3:16-17; Eph 2:20-22; Heb 8:1-2; 9:11; 1 Pet 2:4-5; Rev 21:3). The church of Christ is certainly a temple that is worthy of the marvelous description of the one in Ezekiel’s vision.