

STUDY 11

The Promise of the New Temple

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EZEKIEL 40–48

Fourteen years after the fall of Jerusalem (573 BC), Ezekiel, still in exile, was given a vision of the new temple, in the new city of Jerusalem, in the new land of Israel. This came to him a full thirteen years after the previous dated prophecy (32:1). Ezekiel was a priest, who had never been able to exercise his priestly duties in the temple at Jerusalem, since he had been taken into exile before he had been old enough to begin (see Ezek. 1:1–3¹). For how long had Ezekiel been thinking and praying about these things before the vision came?

Chapters 40–44 on the temple are linked with the vision in chapters 8–11. There we saw, in vision form, the defiled temple, the orders given for the destruction of Jerusalem, and the departure of the glory of God from the temple. Here we see the restored temple, city and land, and the Lord's return to the temple and presence among His people.

These chapters come after a prophecy of the cataclysmic battle in chapters 38–39 that, for all of its realism, has apocalyptic or eschatological dimensions. It concludes with the following undertaking:

Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: Now I will restore the fortunes of Jacob, and have mercy on the whole house of Israel; and I will be jealous for my holy name. They shall forget their shame, and all the treachery they have practiced against me, when they live securely in their land with no one to make them afraid, when I have brought them back from the peoples and gathered them from their enemies' lands, and through them have displayed my holiness in the sight of many nations. Then they shall know that I am the LORD their God because I sent them into exile among the nations, and then gathered them into their own land. I will leave none of them behind; and I will never again hide my face from them, when I pour out my spirit upon the house of Israel, says the Lord GOD (Ezek. 39:25–29).

While we, with our historical perspective after the event, may tend to refer this to the return of some of the exiles to Jerusalem from 539 BC, and the rebuilding of the temple by 516 BC, yet this too, with reference to none of them being left behind, and to the outpouring of the Spirit, should be seen as a supra-historical reality that begins

¹ Assuming that 'the thirtieth year' designates Ezekiel's own age, when he would normally have expected to take up full duties in the temple as a priest (see Num. 4:3).

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to have its fulfilment in the ‘last days’ when the Christ has come (see Joel 2:28; Acts 2:16–17). N. T. Wright tells us there were those in Israel in Jesus’ day who thought the exile was still happening, since Israel remained under foreign domination, and who still looked for it to come to an end.² Certainly we know that there were those in Jerusalem at the time of the birth of Christ who still ‘were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem’ (Luke 2:38). Thus we also see Ezekiel’s vision of the restored temple as part of this eschatological reality. Certainly the returning exiles made no attempt to implement the literal details of this vision; so it would seem that, as far as they were concerned, this was not its original intention for them. Yet it is a vision given to those who were still under the Mosaic covenant, and it is spelled out largely in those terms—but not exactly, with what appear to be arbitrary variations from it. Thus while this vision denotes the future coming of the kingdom of God,³ and has many pointers to it, it does not yet come to the full vision of ‘a new heaven and a new earth’ and ‘the holy city’, in which there is ‘no temple’, of Revelation 21–22. While it is spoken of in terms of a reconstituted temple still under the Mosaic covenant, there is a provisional feel to it. The description is almost surrealistic and dream-like. Everything is waiting and in readiness, but there are no people yet in evidence. We can see what is being signified in terms of God and His people being together in holiness, but it seems the fulfilment is yet to come. So it would appear that the reference is not just to the time of the return from exile, but points beyond that to the reality described in Revelation 21–22, and is somewhere on the way to it, with elements that appear to be not yet fully resolved or complete. Taken that way, we can take this prophecy also into our own hearts. We remember that, in that fulfilment, even the temple itself (and we are that temple) is subsumed into the wonderful reality of ‘the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb’ (Rev. 21:22), in a blaze of intimacy and glory.

As in chapters 38–39, this is vision-language, yet using terms that appear to have historical reality.⁴ There are details of the vision, such as the layout of the land in 45:1–8, 48:1–29, that are incapable of literal application, as they take no account of actual geographical features (contrast Josh. 13–19, alongside which Ezekiel’s scheme appears to be quite idealistic). The description of the water flowing from the temple (47:1–12) is obviously visionary and symbolic—especially as it increases in volume and depth as it goes out—yet again with some apparently literal and specific details (e.g. the provision for continuing salt supplies in 47:11). Perhaps in Ezekiel’s own thinking there was little distinction between the visionary and the historical—for him it was all of a piece, all the action of the one God in and beyond history. Our rationalistic and reductionist minds may have something to learn from that. The fact

² N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology*, Fortress Pr., Minneapolis, 1992, p. 141

³ See C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 9, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1976, pt 2, p. 181.

⁴ This has led some to take this vision literally, even as a prediction of an actual rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, and the reinstatement of the sacrificial system at the end of the Messianic age, still to be fulfilled (as in the *Scofield Reference Bible*). This would make nonsense of the work of the cross as the sacrifice to end all sacrifices (see Heb. 10:1–25).

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remains that no attempt was made by the returning exiles to implement the details of Ezekiel's vision. It deals, within history, with a supra-historical reality: the nature of God, and of His life amongst His people (see 48:35: 'The LORD is there'). Ezekiel writes as a prophet, not as an architect, or a lawmaker. The interest is in the symmetry of the measurements, and the perfection that symbolises, rather than in making it possible to reproduce the structure in practice. Ezekiel was a priest, with his heart set on the temple where he had never been able to exercise his ministry, and which now lay in ruins. God spoke to Ezekiel in terms that answered the deepest longings of his heart, yet which also went beyond that with a message for all God's people. We may stand at a little distance from the detail, while still trying to picture and understand it, and seek to hear what God is saying to Ezekiel and the exiles, to God's people at large, and to our own situation, as we can receive and rejoice in this promise of God.

LET THEM BE ASHAMED OF THEIR INIQUITIES

The vision is given, not to satisfy curiosity or to intrigue, but for its moral and sanctifying import. The prophet is told what to do with what he is shown:

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 (Ezek. 40:4).

He is also told why:

describe the temple to the house of Israel, and let them measure the pattern; and let them be ashamed of their iniquities. When they are ashamed of all that they have done, make known to them the plan of the temple, its arrangement, its exits and its entrances, and its whole form—all its ordinances and its entire plan and all its laws; and write it down in their sight, so that they may observe and follow the entire plan and all its ordinances. This is the law of the temple: the whole territory on the top of the mountain all around shall be most holy. This is the law of the temple (Ezek. 43:10–12).

The main reason for the vision is to bring the people to be ashamed of their iniquities, and then to be encouraged by the perfection of God's full provision for His dwelling amongst His people. This relates to the godly shame the people will have once they have been cleansed by God from all their uncleannesses and their idols, and given a new heart and spirit from God (Ezek. 36:31–32, following 36:16–30). This is brought about in this instance by a recounting of the details of the new temple, city and land. This is fitting, if the root sin of humankind is a failure to worship (as in Rom. 1:21). To us, some of these details, taken on their own, may seem less than stimulating. Yet, taken in with a humble and contrite heart that trembles at God's word (see Isa. 66:2), even these details may instil an excitement regarding the coming worship of God that matches the prophet's own, especially among those who have been inducted into the reality of the new covenant.

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THE NEW TEMPLE: EZEKIEL 40:5–42:20

The descriptions here are best followed with the aid of diagrams which attempt to reproduce what is written in visual form. We need to be mindful that it is the significance of the dimensions and layout that is important, not these things in themselves. Yet somehow, by the Spirit's inspiration, the vision has its impact simply by the relating of these things.⁵

- 40:5** The measuring reed is about three metres long; so that is the height and the thickness of the wall. However, the significance of the measurements is in the total of the number of cubits, not in their modern metric equivalent.
- 6–16 The east gate. Seven steps lead up to a passageway ten cubits wide and fifty cubits long, with three cubicles or guardrooms off each side along the passageway, and a porch at the other end. The overall width of the structure is twenty-five cubits, exactly half its length (note the symmetry of the measurements). The porch and each of the guardrooms have windows, and the doorposts of the porch are adorned with carvings of palm trees. Could these indicate that here we are entering somewhere like the garden of Eden? (See Gen. 2:8–9.)
- 17–37 The outer courtyard. The porch of the east gate leads into a large courtyard, with chambers facing into it on three sides: thirty in all, ten on each wall. The walls are each five hundred cubits long. At the centre of the north and south walls are gateways exactly the same as the east gate we have just come through. One hundred cubits in from each of these outer gateways is the wall of the inner courtyard. This is entered up eight steps through three inner gateways directly opposite the outer gateways, and built to the same design, like a mirror-image, with their porches facing towards the outer courtyard.
- 38–43 Just inside and outside the northern gateway to the inner courtyard are tables for the killing, washing and laying-out of the sacrificial animals.
- 44–47 Alongside the inner gateways, on the south and north sides of the inner courtyard, are chambers for the priests. The inner courtyard is one hundred cubits square, with an altar in the middle.
- 48–**41:26** Up ten steps on the western side of the inner court is the temple building itself. A fourteen cubit wide entrance, with pillars on each side, leads into the temple porch. From there, through a ten cubit wide doorway, we enter the nave or main room of the temple, lit by high windows. At the centre of this room is an altar-like table of unspecified use, perhaps corresponding to the table for the 'bread of the Presence' in the earlier tabernacle and temple (Exod. 25:23–30; Lev. 24:5–9; 1 Kings 6:20). Beyond that, through a six cubit wide entrance, lies the perfectly square most holy place, or 'holy of holies'. Each of these chambers is richly adorned with carvings of palm

⁵ The following summary, and much of the material for this study, is taken from a series on Ezekiel by Martin Bleby: see www.newcreation.org.au/studies/bleby/index.html.

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trees and cherubim (again an allusion to the garden of Eden? See Gen. 3:24). The overall length of the temple building is exactly one hundred cubits. Along its three sides are three storeys of side chambers or storage rooms, built against the walls of the temple building, with access by outside doors and stairways. The space behind the temple building, made up of a yard and another building of unspecified use, makes up another one hundred cubits, like the inner court in front of the temple building—fine symmetry again.

- 42:1–14** To the north and to the south of the temple building are the priests' chambers, one hundred cubits long and fifty cubits wide, three storeys high, with a corridor down the middle of each. Here the priests eat the edible portions of the sacrifices, and change their clothes as they enter and leave the holy place.
- 15–20 Ezekiel is now conducted outside the whole temple area through the outer east gateway by which he entered. The whole temple area is five hundred cubits by five hundred cubits. The wall marks 'a separation between the holy and the common'. (n.b. 'common' does not necessarily mean unclean. It is simply a neutral term.)

THE GLORY OF THE LORD

Ezekiel sees the glory of the Lord returning to the temple, in the same way He had left it:

Then he brought me to the gate, the gate facing east. And there, the glory of the God of Israel was coming from the east; the sound was like the sound of mighty waters; and the earth shone with his glory. The vision I saw was like the vision that I had seen when he came to destroy the city, and like the vision that I had seen by the river Chebar; and I fell upon my face. As the glory of the LORD entered the temple by the gate facing east, the spirit lifted me up, and brought me into the inner court; and the glory of the LORD filled the temple.

While the man was standing beside me, I heard someone speaking to me out of the temple. He said to me: Mortal, this is the place of my throne and the place for the soles of my feet, where I will reside among the people of Israel forever (Ezek. 43:1–7; see also 48:35).

This is the climax, and the significance, of the whole vision. The Lord is with His people!

Then comes the command that the perfection of God's holiness, represented here by the perfect symmetry of the new temple, is now to be matched by the perfect holiness of the people, among whom God dwells (Ezek. 43:8–12; see above). The setting forth to the people of Israel of the perfection of the temple will shame them out of their former unholiness. So the area that is 'most holy' shall now extend beyond the temple area itself! (See also Ezek. 45:1–5. Compare the vision in Zech. 14:20–21, where even the bells on the horses' harnesses are 'Holy to the LORD', and every pot in the whole city of Jerusalem is sacred.) Up to now, holiness has been a rather fragile thing, which could be easily defiled, and not easily passed on (see Hag. 2:10–14, where uncleanness is more easily communicated than holiness). But when

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Jesus came, holiness began to flow out from him in the other direction. That which before would have rendered a human being unclean and unholy, such as a person with leprosy, a woman in her 'uncleanness', or a dead body, is now cleansed and sanctified by his touch and command (see e.g. Luke 5:12–14; 8:40–56).

The altar of sacrifice (by which the people are cleansed and made holy and acceptable to God), located in the inner courtyard, is now described, and the ordinances for its consecration and use are laid down (Ezek. 43:13–27).

The outer east gateway, which the Lord has used to re-enter the temple, is now to remain shut forever. (Is this a way of saying that God will never leave again?) The prince (Messiah?), who enjoys a special relationship with God, may now sit in its porch 'to eat bread before the LORD'—a lovely homely image (Ezek. 44:1–3). This is part of the enhanced position and responsibilities belonging here to 'the prince' (see also 45:7–9, 21–25; 46:1–10; see study 2, under 'Priesthood and Kingship').

Holiness may be spreading out (see above on 43:12), but there is still a marked distinction between what is holy and what is not, and there can be no place in God's temple for what is not holy (compare Rev. 21:8, 27; 22:15). This is set out in terms of who can and who cannot enter or minister in the sanctuary, and the duties of those who are acceptable as priests are set out, largely in terms of the law of Moses (Ezek. 44:4–31). In particular, their job is still to 'teach my people the difference between the holy and the common, and show them how to distinguish between the unclean and the clean' (v. 23). This is as much a message to the priests in Ezekiel's day as it is a promise of more to come (as is Ezek. 45:9 a message to the rulers of Ezekiel's day, in the light of the righteous Messianic reign to come, prefigured in 45:7–8).

Note also: 'I am their inheritance . . . I am their possession' (44:28, RSV). What does this mean for what the New Testament says about all of God's people participating in the priesthood (Heb. 12:23; cf. Num. 3:11–13, 45; 8:14–19—1 Pet. 2:9; cf. Exod. 19:5–6; Rev. 1:6; 5:10. Also see study 2 under 'The Assembly of the Firstborn')?

THE NEW LAND

In chapters 45–48 we spread out from the new temple to the whole newly re-constituted land of Israel (in anticipation of the new Eden, even the new heavens and the new earth?), while still keeping an eye on the temple and its ordinances at the centre of it all. Remember that Ezekiel is a priest in exile who longs for nothing more than to be in the restored temple, carrying out his priestly duties. It is in this context that God addresses Ezekiel with the message of hope for all Israel (and beyond: see 47:22–23). This is still largely in terms of a restored Mosaic covenant. But the variations (e.g. 46:4–5 compared with Num. 28:9–10), the omissions (e.g. no mention of the feast of weeks, as in Deut. 16:1–17, after Ezek. 45:24), and the generally sketchy nature of the details, indicate an emblematic rather than a literal treatment. (Some commentators postulate a later reworking of Ezekiel's writings by lesser minds to explain these aspects, and engage in unprovable and ingenious speculation on that basis. We prefer to take the text at face value, and to see it as the work of a man receiving revelations from God within the limitations of his context, and speaking

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thus of things beyond his ken, as in 1 Pet. 1:10–12 and 2 Pet. 1:20–21.) Again, the returning exiles did not implement the literal details of this vision; so it would seem that, as far as they were concerned, this was not its original intention.

In the midst of this comes a moving and memorable picture of the river of God, as an image of God's ever-flowing, life-giving blessings (cf. Gen. 2:10–14; Ps. 46:4; 65:9):

Then he brought me back to the entrance of the temple; there, water was flowing from below the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east); and the water was flowing down from below the south end of the threshold of the temple, south of the altar. Then he brought me out by way of the north gate, and led me around on the outside to the outer gate that faces toward the east; and the water was coming out on the south side. Going on eastward with a cord in his hand, the man measured one thousand cubits, and then led me through the water; and it was ankle-deep. Again he measured one thousand, and led me through the water; and it was knee-deep. Again he measured one thousand, and led me through the water; and it was up to the waist. Again he measured one thousand, and it was a river that I could not cross, for the water had risen; it was deep enough to swim in, a river that could not be crossed. He said to me, 'Mortal, have you seen this?' Then he led me back along the bank of the river. As I came back, I saw on the bank of the river a great many trees on the one side and on the other. He said to me, 'This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah; and when it enters the sea, the sea of stagnant waters, the water will become fresh. Wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish, once these waters reach there. It will become fresh; and everything will live where the river goes. People will stand fishing beside the sea from En-gedi to En-eglaim; it will be a place for the spreading of nets; its fish will be of a great many kinds, like the fish of the Great Sea. But its swamps and marshes will not become fresh; they are to be left for salt. On the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing' (Ezek. 47:1–12).

Unnoticed before, the stream flows from the door of the temple building itself, past the altar, and out under the outer wall of the temple area east towards the Dead Sea. Miraculously, as it flows on it gets deeper and deeper, freshens the waters of the Salt Sea, filling them with life, and giving rise to marvellous trees on either side of the stream. While all this is obviously symbolic and visionary, nevertheless Ezekiel again pays attention to realistic detail, such as the continuing provision of salt in verse 11.

This river is found again coming into its own in Revelation 22:1–2 and 17 (cf. Isa. 55:1). We may see it also being referred to in a personal way in John 4:14, 7:37–39, and Romans 5:5.

In preparation for setting out the inheritance of the tribes of Israel, the boundaries of the land are defined (Ezek. 47:13–21). These correspond to the area promised to Abraham and his descendants, and fulfilled at the height of the reign of Solomon (Gen. 15:18; Num. 34:1–12; 1 Kings 8:65).

Foreigners also can be included in Israel's inheritance (Ezek. 47:22–23; cf. Isa. 56:3–8; John 10:16; Mark 11:17; Acts 11:17–18; Eph. 2:11–22). This matches an earlier concern in 22:7.

The distribution of the land among the tribes is now given (Ezek. 48:1–7, 23–29). Again, with little or no regard for geographical features (contrast Josh. 13–19), each tribe is allotted an equal portion of land stretching in straight lines right across from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River. This is perhaps to indicate that all receive

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an equal share in the inheritance of the new society. The central portion (see 45:1–8) is described in more detail, in its central position amongst the tribes of Israel (Ezek. 48:8–22). The remainder of the tribes are allotted their share to the south. The gates to the city are named for each of the twelve tribes of Israel (Ezek. 48:30–35). Clearly in all this the reunited Israel (as in 37:15–28) is envisaged.

The Book of the Revelation also recognises the twelve tribes in a similar scheme. In Revelation 7 they are extended to include the ‘great multitude that no man could number’, and in 21:9–14 the gates are augmented by twelve foundations, named for ‘the twelve apostles of the Lamb’. So here Ezekiel’s vision is meshed with the outcome of the ultimate plan of God for all the nations, accomplished in Christ.

‘The LORD is there’ (Ezek. 48:35) is the climax of this vision, and of the whole of Ezekiel’s prophecy. Also the climax of all history, and the heart of the purpose of God in creation, and through all the ages, as set out in Revelation 21:3 (RSV):

Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them.

‘The LORD is there’ ends the prophecy of Ezekiel: the priestly prophet who in exile discovered that God is with His people, and desires to bring them, through thick and thin, to a holy union with Himself that will be forever.