

## **Ezekiel's Vision of a New Temple<sup>1</sup>**

**Ezekiel 40-48**

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A brief summary of Appendix 3 in the book entitled,  
*Biblical Eschatology* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2018)  
by Jonathan Menn

### **The temple Ezekiel saw in his vision was unlike any other physical temple**

Ezekiel's temple was square, 500 reeds (about one mile) in size.<sup>2</sup> The size of Ezekiel's temple is approximately the same size as the boundaries of ancient Jerusalem itself during the second temple era.<sup>3</sup> Ezekiel's temple lacks essential elements from the tabernacle and Solomon's temple. There is no reference to the bronze basin, golden lampstand, table of showbread, altar of incense, veil separating the holy of holies, ark of the covenant, cherubim, anointing oil, or high priest.

### **The temple and city Ezekiel saw in the vision were not intended as plans for construction of a literal temple and city**

Several factors indicate that what Ezekiel envisioned was not a "construction plan." The "sheer impracticability of much of the vision leads one to the view that its message is in the symbolism, not in its architecture."<sup>4</sup> Those "impracticabilities" include:

The reference to the "*very high mountain*" on which the city was located (Ezek 40:2).

The measurements generally include only lengths and widths but omit heights. The absence of any reference to the bronze basin, golden lampstand, table of

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<sup>1</sup> This appendix is part of a larger section entitled "The Temple and the Earth: God's Dwelling Place with Mankind," in Menn, *Biblical Theology*.

<sup>2</sup> Ezek 42:15-20; see Ezek 40:5; see also Ezek 48:30-35 which speaks of 4500 cubits per side.

<sup>3</sup> Beale, *Temple*, 341.

<sup>4</sup> Taylor, "The Temple," 68.

showbread, altar of incense, veil separating the holy of holies, ark of the covenant, temple furniture.

The absence of any “wall around the inner court, to which its three massive gates might stand in relation.”<sup>5</sup>

“The massive size of the gatehouses verges on caricature: their dimensions (25x50 cubits) exceed those of the main hall of the Temple (20x40 cubits); their length is half that of the inner court (100 cubits)!”<sup>6</sup>

### **Certain features of Ezekiel’s vision show that it always was intended to be symbolic and heavenly, not physical, in nature**

#### **The introductory formula (Ezek 40:1-2)**

The introduction in Ezek 40:1-2 contains three elements: (1) reference to a specific date when the experience occurred; (2) a statement that “*the hand of the Lord was upon me*”; and (3) a statement that he saw “visions” The only other places in Ezekiel where that three-fold introductory formula occurs are in Ezek 1:1-3 and 8:1-3. In both of those other cases, the vision which Ezekiel saw was of a *heavenly* temple (i.e., God’s dwelling place in heaven), not an earthly one. The heavenly temple is explicitly clear in Ezek 1:1-28 where the focus is exclusively in heaven.

In Ezek 8:1-11:23 the vision is of the heavenly presence that is linked to God’s earthly presence with his people. Ezekiel saw the glory of God (8:4). However, Ezekiel then saw the abominations which were being done in the physical temple (8:5-17). Therefore, the glory of God began to leave the physical temple (9:3). The scene then shifts to the heavenly temple (10:1-22), and the glory of God completes his departure from the physical temple (10:4; 11:22-23). God’s presence is still with the faithful exiles in Babylon (11:16), who are the true earthly temple, even though the physical temple building had been destroyed by the Babylonians.

#### **The river (Ezek 47:2-12)**

In Ezekiel’s vision, the river must be symbolic and supernatural because even though no tributaries are mentioned, the water gets progressively deeper, from a trickle to a river that could not be forded (47:2-5). Unlike a natural, earthly river, it makes salt water fresh rather than *vice versa* (47:6-12).

#### **The significance of the first coming of Christ**

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<sup>5</sup> Greenberg, “Design and Themes,” 193.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Although Ezekiel wrote using language and imagery that his immediate audience could understand, in light of the coming of Christ Ezekiel's temple could not possibly represent a literal, physical building to be constructed in the future.

Throughout his vision Ezekiel describes animal sacrifices which are said to have an "atoning" purpose and effect (Ezek 43:13-27; 45:15-25). Such sacrifices could not possibly truly be atoning sacrifices, since that would reverse redemptive history and deny the efficacy and sufficiency of Christ's once-and-for-all sacrifice of himself, contrary to Heb 9:11—10:22. That also would return to the "shadows" in place of the substance and reality (see Col 2:16-17; Heb 8:1-10:22).

To take "literally" (i.e., physically) Ezekiel's portrait of Jerusalem as the center of the world's worship (Ezekiel 47-48), where non-Israelites are excluded from the temple (Ezek 44:6-9), likewise completely reverses what Christ has done. Jesus eliminated the requirement that worship be conducted at some special place (John 4:21, 23) and eliminated the distinction between Jews and Gentiles among God's people.<sup>7</sup>

To say that the sacrifices are simply "memorials" of Christ's sacrifice means that there is likewise no reason to take the temple itself "literally" (i.e., as a physical structure). To view the sacrifices referred to by Ezekiel as "memorials" also would dishonor Christ since the only memorial that Christ himself gave to "memorialize" his redemptive work was the Lord's Supper, not a return to OT sacrifices (Luke 22:14-20; 1 Cor 11:23-26).<sup>8</sup> David Holwerda concludes:

The essential truth of Ezekiel's temple has become reality apart from a building of stone. That may seem like a surprising twist in the fulfillment of prophecy, but with Stephen and the prophet Isaiah we should know that "the Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands" (Acts 7:48). God dwells in Jesus and in us (John 14:23), and the reality of Ezekiel's temple exists throughout the world. . . . Jesus did not come to turn Ezekiel's architectural blueprints into the most magnificent temple ever constructed by human hands. That the Messiah was supposed to do this was the misunderstanding of Jesus' opponents, a misunderstanding shared by his own disciples until the resurrection opened their minds. Ezekiel's temple of glory is Jesus, a truth revealed in the incarnation, proclaimed in Jesus' teaching, and made understandable by his resurrection [John 2:21-22].<sup>9</sup>

### **Jesus inaugurated the fulfillment of Ezekiel's vision of a new temple in himself and in his people (the church)**

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<sup>7</sup> 1 Cor 12:13; Gal 3:28; Eph 2:11-22; Col 3:11; Rev 5:9; 7:9.

<sup>8</sup> See Venema, *Promise*, 285-86. See also Sizer, "The Temple," 254; Sizer, *Zion's Christian Soldiers*, 119.

<sup>9</sup> Holwerda, *Jesus and Israel*, 74-75.

Ezekiel's vision showed the "glory of the Lord" filling the temple, and would dwell among his people forever.<sup>10</sup> John uses language about Jesus reminiscent of Ezekiel: "*And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.*"<sup>11</sup> Jesus said that, through the Holy Spirit, he would dwell in his people and would always be with us.<sup>12</sup> Fulfillment of that promise began on the Day of Pentecost when the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-21).

Ezekiel's vision showed a river of life-giving water flowing out from under the temple (Ezek 47:1-12). Since Jesus is God's true temple (see John 2:18-22), he is the true source of life-giving water. In John 4:10-14, he told the Samaritan woman that he is the source of eternal, "*living water.*" In John 7:37-39, Jesus said, referring to his giving the Holy Spirit, "*If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.'*" Since no OT text explicitly says "*from His innermost being will flow rivers of living water,*" it is likely that "a multiple allusion to pertinent scriptures is in mind. Those would be passages that were of prime significance for the meaning of the festival and were read at it."<sup>13</sup> Included among these was Ezek 47:1-11, the flowing of the river of living water from the temple in the kingdom of God. In other words, Jesus connects the eschatological temple of Ezekiel with himself as the new temple. Hence, the waters flow not from a physical temple in Jerusalem but from Jesus himself. The church is the channel of the life-giving water whose source is Jesus.

Ezekiel's final vision builds upon and consummates what he earlier had said in Ezek 37:26-28. Just as that passage twice said that God would "*set up a sanctuary in their midst forever,*" so Ezek 43:7-9 twice says "*I will dwell among them forever.*" In 2 Cor 6:16-7:1 Paul linked the promises of Lev 26:11-12, 2 Sam 7:14, and Ezek 37:27 and showed how fulfillment of those promises was inaugurated in the church.

**The New Jerusalem (Rev 21:1—22:5), not a physical building to be constructed on the earth in the future, is the consummation of Ezekiel's temple (Ezekiel 40-48) and is the true reality to which Ezekiel's vision pointed**

In Ezek 40:2, Ezekiel was taken to a "very high mountain" where he saw a

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<sup>10</sup> Ezek 43:1-9; see also Ezek 37:26.

<sup>11</sup> John 1:14; see also Luke 9:32; John 2:11; 2 Pet 1:16-18.

<sup>12</sup> Matt 28:20; John 14:16-17; Heb 13:5.

<sup>13</sup> Beasley-Murray, *John*, 116.

“structure like a city.” There are no “very high mountains” in or around physical Jerusalem. The fact that he saw a structure “like” a city suggests that Ezekiel is entering into “the realm of symbolic geography of heaven and earth that pertains to eschatological conditions.”<sup>14</sup> That is confirmed by Rev 21:10 which parallels Ezekiel’s language in describing the New Jerusalem. That passage says an angel “*carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.*”

In Ezekiel’s vision both the temple and the city are described as square.<sup>15</sup> The identification of Ezekiel’s city with the New Jerusalem is confirmed by Rev 21:16 which describes New Jerusalem as “laid out as a square.”

The essential element of Ezekiel’s vision is that God is present and will dwell among his people forever. The book of Ezekiel ends with the statement, “*the name of the city from that day shall be, ‘The Lord is there’*” (Ezek 48:35). That is fulfilled in the New Jerusalem of Revelation 21-22:

Ezek 43:7-9 twice says “*I will dwell among them forever.*” In the Greek OT, the root for “dwell” in Ezek 43:7 is “tabernacle.” Rev 21:3 indicates that the New Jerusalem is the consummation of all prophecy, including Ezekiel’s vision, by echoing Ezek 43:7, 9 and twice saying “*the tabernacle of God is among men*” and “*He will dwell among them.*” Also, three times Rev 21:3 says that God will be “among” his people.

Ezek 43:7 says, “*This is the place of my throne.*” Rev 22:1, 3 both state that “*the throne of God and of the Lamb*” will be in New Jerusalem.

Ezekiel’s temple and the New Jerusalem both have twelve gates in the same configuration: three on the north; three on the east; three on the south; three on the west.<sup>16</sup> Further, the apostles and the tribes of Israel are described as part of the very structure of New Jerusalem itself: the apostles are the foundation (Rev 21:14); the twelve tribes are the gates (Rev 21:12-13). “The integration of the apostles together with the tribes of Israel as part of the city-temple’s structure prophesied in Ezekiel 40-48 confirms . . . that the multiracial Christian church will be the redeemed group who, together with Christ, will fulfill Ezekiel’s prophecy of the future temple and city. This is in line with other NT passages in which the whole covenant community forms a spiritual temple where God’s presence dwells (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21-22; 1 Pet. 2:5).”<sup>17</sup>

Ezekiel’s temple is at the center of everything. In New Jerusalem, there is no physical temple building “*for the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple*” (Rev 21:22). Thus, the true temple—God and the Lamb—is now central.

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<sup>14</sup> Beale, *Temple*, 336.

<sup>15</sup> Ezek 42:15-20; 48:15-20.

<sup>16</sup> Compare Ezek 48:31-34 and Rev 21:12-13.

<sup>17</sup> Beale, *Revelation*, 1070

“The equation of God and the Lamb with the temple approaches closely the essence of the Ezekiel vision, which is God’s glorious presence itself (e.g., 48:35, ‘the name of the city’ is ‘the Lord is there’). All that Israel’s old temple pointed to, the expanding presence of God, has been fulfilled in Revelation 21:1—22:5, and such a fulfillment has been anticipated within Ezekiel 40-48 itself.”<sup>18</sup>

Ezek 47:1-12 describes a river flowing from out of the temple which is healing and life-giving. Rev 22:1-2 uses the same imagery and applies it to the New Jerusalem. The identification of the river in Ezekiel’s vision with the river in the New Jerusalem is corroborated by Ezek 47:7, 12 which says that there were trees on both banks of the river. That parallels Rev 22:2 which similarly says that the tree of life was “*on either side of the river.*” In both cases the trees are said to bear fruit (Ezek 47:12; Rev 22:2). Further, in both cases the leaves of the trees are “for healing” (Ezek 47:12; Rev 22:2).

Ezekiel’s temple would only be a reality for those who had put away their abominations and sins (Ezek 43:6-9). Echoing Ezek 43:6-9, Rev 21:8, 27 say that “*nothing unclean, and no one who practices abomination*” will be in the New Jerusalem. That shows that Ezekiel’s temple could only be referring to people who are “in Christ.” Just as Christ inaugurated his kingdom and forever forgave sins at his first coming, so the New Jerusalem forms the consummation of Christ’s kingdom, in which sins are forever eliminated.

### **Ezekiel's Temple: conclusion**

Many would see Ezekiel’s expansive vision of the Temple (chs. 40-48) as encouraging a belief that there will be an end-time Temple matching Ezekiel’s prophetic description. Yet a biblical theologian cannot approach this prophecy without noting the way in which this prophecy is understood by the New Testament writers. Ezekiel’s imagery of the river flowing from the Temple (Ezek. 47:1ff) reappears twice in the New Testament. In John 7:37-9 the ‘rivers of living water’ flow from Jesus himself; meanwhile in Revelation the ‘river of the water of life’ flows through the middle of the New Jerusalem (Rev. 22:1ff). These two writers have consciously drawn upon Ezekiel’s prophecy and applied it to Jesus and the heavenly Jerusalem. As a result, they were presumably not expecting Ezekiel’s prophecy to be fulfilled literally at some future point in a physical Temple. Instead this prophecy became a brilliant way of speaking pictorially of what God had now achieved in and through Jesus. Paradoxically, therefore, although Ezekiel’s vision had focused so much upon the Temple, it found its ultimate fulfillment in that city where there was ‘no Temple’, because ‘its Temple is the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb’ (Rev. 21:22).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Beale, *Temple*, 348.

<sup>19</sup> Walker, *Jesus*, 313.

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