

Ezekiel Chapters 40-48: An Interpretive Brief

February 4, 2018, D. Eric Williams

Introduction

Among Bible expositors, Ezekiel chapters 40-48 “form a veritable continental divide in biblical interpretation.”¹ Indeed “many commentators treat this portion of Ezekiel’s prophecy as if it were the work of a harmless eccentric”² and pass it by with little notice. The scope of the prophecy alone is intimidating and any attempt at interpretation is sure to be met with a counter point of view.

Nevertheless, “all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16³). We are remiss if we refuse to study a portion of God’s word simply because it is difficult.

The Major Interpretive Views

There are several interpretive views to consider in an attempt to understand Ezekiel chapters 40-48. Each approach has its advocates and detractors. Furthermore, each interpretive stance results in an understanding of the text that is largely incompatible with the others. It is not possible that all of them are right. Therefore, it is helpful for the student of God’s word to carefully consider each interpretive approach before digging into the text.

Memorial

To interpret Ezekiel’s vision of the temple as a Memorial or an Idealistic Remembrance of the First temple⁴ suggests “Ezekiel shared his priestly memories in order to preserve the historic heritage of the temple and its services for a new generation and to comfort them with a message that God was with them as He had been in the past.”⁵

The Memorial view proposes the prophecy was a word of encouragement to Judean exiles in Babylon. However, the multitude of differences between Ezekiel’s vision and the Mosaic legislation would have caused more anxiety than peace.⁶ It is said that if it were not for a certain scribe named Hananiah ben Hezekiah, the “book of Ezekiel would have been suppressed, since it’s words contradict those of the Torah. What did he do? He brought up 300 barrels of oil and stayed in the upper room until he had explained away everything.”⁷ It

1. James E. Smith, *The College Press Bible Study Textbook Series: Ezekiel*, (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1979), as found in, theWord Bible Study Software, version 5.0.0.1450, Costas Stergiou, 2003-2015

2. Iain M. Duguid, *The NIV Application Commentary: Ezekiel*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 478.

3. All Scripture quotations are taken from *The New King James Version Bible* unless otherwise indicated.

4. Randall Price, “Ezekiel’s Prophecy of the Temple,” *World of the Bible*, accessed February 03, 2018.

<https://worldofthebible.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Ezekiels-Prophecy-of-the-temple.pdf>, 1.

5. *Ibid.*, 2.

6. Cameron MacKay, “Zechariah in Relation to Ezekiel 40-48,” *The Evangelical Quarterly*, 40.4 (Oct.-Dec. 1968), 206.

7. *b. Shabbat* 13b as cited in Daniel I. Block, *The Book Of Ezekiel: Chapters 25-48*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 500.

would seem that if Ezekiel were attempting to provide an uplifting memorial account of Solomon's temple, he failed to do so.

Blueprint

The Blueprint or Literal Prophetic⁸ interpretation understands Ezekiel's vision as a design for "a temple which Ezekiel intended should be built when the exiles returned to Jerusalem."⁹ In other words, the vision was simply a plan for the postexilic temple.¹⁰ "In defense of this theory it must be said that as Ezekiel was confidently expecting a literal return from exile it would not be surprising for him"¹¹ to provide such information. On the other hand, if this is in fact an architect's vision we should expect more attention paid to the materials to be used and "even though many measurements are given, the ground plan leaves dozens of details to the imagination of a prospective builder."¹² Moreover, there is no indication in the relevant texts (Ezra, Nehemiah and so on) that this vision of Ezekiel had any bearing upon the construction of the second temple.¹³ The discouragement expressed by some as the foundation for the new temple was laid (Ezra 3:12) may have arisen in part because of the unattainable extravagance of Ezekiel's temple.¹⁴ Finally, nowhere in the text is Ezekiel instructed to build anything or command others to do so.

Dispensational

A Dispensationalist (literal, futurist) interpretation says that a literal temple will be built according to the specifications provided by Ezekiel and that the old covenant rituals including blood sacrifices will be reintroduced in an age of a glorious future literal Israel.¹⁵

According to the dispensational view, fulfillment of Ezekiel chapters 40-48 await end time events that will reestablish ethnic, national Israel as the true chosen people of God. Under these circumstances, a new temple will be built and blood sacrifices will be re-instituted. Some would say that a Dispensationalist interpretation "completely ...misinterprets the significance of Christ's salvation"¹⁶ and ignores Paul's understanding of the temple in the New Testament era. It reestablishes the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile and denies the power of the gospel to "make all things new"(2 Corinthians 5:17).

8. John B. Taylor and Donald G. Wiseman, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: Ezekiel: An Introduction And Commentary*, (London: Intersity Press, 1969), 251.

9. *Ibid.*, 251.

10. Price, "Ezekiel's Prophecy of the temple," 2.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Taylor, *Ezekiel: An Introduction And Commentary*, 252

13. Price, "Ezekiel's Prophecy of the temple," 3.

14. MacKay, "Zechariah In Relation To Ezekiel," 199.

15. Taylor, *Ezekiel: An Introduction And Commentary*, 252.

16. *Ibid.*, 253.

Symbolic

The Symbolic (Symbolic Christian¹⁷) view understands the vision as fulfilled “symbolically in the Christian church.”¹⁸ This interpretation “proposes that Ezekiel’s temple is symbolic of either a spiritual ideal or a spiritual reality.”¹⁹ This is the same as an ideational²⁰ interpretation. If interpreted ideationally²¹ Ezekiel’s prophecy serves to introduce “the theological reality awaiting his own people.”²² In so doing, Ezekiel “lays the foundation for the Pauline spiritualization of the temple.”²³ The Symbolic interpretation is sometimes called the Spiritual.

The Eschatological interpretation²⁴ is another sub-set of the Symbolic or Spiritual interpretation. The specific terminology (eschatological) is rejected by some because Ezekiel chapters 40-48 do not employ typical eschatological expressions such as “on that day” “in the latter days” or “after many years.”²⁵

The symbolic interpretive approach understands Ezekiel 40-48 as “the visionary recording of an entire new world, following on the creation of the new people of God in chapter 37 and the birth pangs of chapters 38-39.”²⁶ “The issue for the prophet is not physical geography but spiritual realities. As in his earlier vision, historical events are described from a theological plan, and the interpreters focus must remain on the ideational value of that which is envisioned.”²⁷ According to the symbolic view Ezekiel “presents a lofty spiritual ideal: where God is, there is Zion. Where God is, there is order and the fulfillment of all his promises.”²⁸

An Apocalyptic understanding regards these chapters not as prophecy, but as apocalyptic and as Ezekiel’s “pattern for the messianic age that was to come. It lay in the future, and yet it grew out of the present.”²⁹ This view may be understood as a variety of the Symbolic Christian interpretation. In identifying Apocalyptic literature, the interpreter,

is seldom left his own ingenuity to discover the truth. In most instances an examination of the context or a comparison with a parallel biblical passage provides

17. Taylor, *Ezekiel: An Introduction And Commentary*, 252

18. Ibid.

19. Price, “Ezekiel’s Prophecy of the Temple,” 3.

20. Block, *Ezekiel: Chapters 25-48*, 505.

21. Ideation is “The faculty or capacity of the mind for forming ideas; the exercise of this capacity; the act of the mind by which objects of sense are apprehended and retained as objects of thought” (Websters Dictionary). Thus, Ideational is of, relating to, or produced by ideation; broadly, consisting of or referring to ideas or thoughts of objects not immediately present to the senses (“Ideational,” Merriam-Webster, accessed February 03, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ideational>).

22. Block, *Ezekiel: Chapters 25-48*, 505.

23. Ibid., 506.

24. Ibid., 505.

25. Ibid., 504.

26. Duguid, *NIV Application Commentary: Ezekiel*, 479.

27. Block, *Ezekiel: Chapters 25-48*, 505.

28. Ibid., 506.

29. Taylor, *Ezekiel: An Introduction And Commentary*, 253

*the Scriptures own interpretation of the visions or the symbols employed. Apocalyptic literature then demands a careful comparison of Scripture with Scripture to arrive at a correct understanding the revelation being given.*³⁰

The primary criticism of the Symbolic view is that it seems there are no textual clues in Ezekiel 40-48 allowing for a consistent symbolic interpretation.³¹ Indeed, "the diversity in interpretation reveals that no shared interpretation is possible."³²

A Literal Or Figurative temple?

In comparing the four major interpretive views it seems Ezekiel's vision as recorded in chapters 40-48 concerns a Symbolic or figurative temple as revealed in an Apocalyptic vision. The Memorial view falls short in its noted lack of encouragement due to conflicts with the Mosaic system. The Blueprint model fails as it went unheeded by the returning exiles. The Dispensational position seems to ignore the plain words of the New Testament concerning the end of the Mosaic system of sacrifice. The Symbolic understanding of Ezekiel 40-48 recognizes the prophet's language as meaningful to the original audience yet rich with anticipation. Even those who contend that Ezekiel's temple awaits a literal fulfillment acknowledge that his prophecy of "a new temple is transcended first and foremost by the incarnation of Jesus Christ, who brings heaven to earth in a far greater way than the dwelling of a deity in an architectural structure."³³

A Figurative Temple

Indications from Ezekiel

In chapter three, the prophet is given a visionary scroll to eat. It is certainly "real" in the vision but symbolizes Ezekiel's assimilation of God's message of judgment (3:1). The scroll represented the word of Yahweh in judgment and Ezekiel truly did pronounce judgment on Judah and Jerusalem.

Eating the scroll symbolized Ezekiel being filled by the commission of God to pronounce judgment and woe. But Ezekiel did not eat a literal scroll. The fulfillment of the vision took on another form; it was a "spiritual" fulfillment as he was filled by the Spirit of God and spoke the very words of God.

In chapter eight, Ezekiel digs through the temple courtyard wall (Ezekiel 8:8). Clearly, Ezekiel did not literally dig through the wall. The visionary action of doing so symbolized the uncovering of Judah's sin and showed the Jews that nothing is hidden from Yahweh. Indeed, none of the things Ezekiel saw in his visionary visit to the temple should be understood as

30. J. Dwight Pentecost, "Daniel," *The Bible Knowledge Commentary Old Testament*, John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, eds., (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 1323.

31. Price, "Ezekiel's Prophecy of the Temple," 5.

32. Ibid., 5.

33. Gary Yates, "The Temple in the New Testament," *Tohu Vabohu*, December 5, 2009, accessed February 04, 2018, <http://garyyates.blogspot.com/2009/12/temple-in-new-testament.html>.

woodenly literal. Instead, the vision revealed the heart and practices of the people. The literal truth revealed by the vision was that the Jerusalemites were corrupt and unfaithful.

In chapter nine Ezekiel sees six men each with a “shattering weapon” in his hand (9:1-7). They are as real and physical as his later vision of the temple but are symbolic of the destruction Yahweh intended to bring upon Jerusalem. The six men with war clubs represented the slaughter of the people of Jerusalem by the Babylonians and it literally came to pass. Yes it was literal destruction that came upon the people of Jerusalem but the fulfillment of the vision took on a different physical form than the vision itself (the armies of Babylon rather than six men armed with clubs).

Also in chapter nine there is a man in linen who marks those to be spared, a symbolic assurance that God would protect a remnant (9:4). Placing a mark on the foreheads of certain Jerusalemites represented the mercy of God in sparing some from death; it came to pass. However, the visually concrete aspects of the visions were not literally fulfilled.

Certainly, some in Jerusalem were literally spared during the final Babylonian invasion but there was no literal mark placed on their foreheads. The mark was symbolically or spiritually applied and the unseen protective hand of God was realized in the midst of turmoil. Again, this is fulfillment taking a different form than what was portrayed in the vision.

In chapter thirty-seven Ezekiel sees a valley of dry bones. The bones come together, are clothed with sinew and flesh and raised to life. It is not a literal vision but symbolic of the restoration of Israel. Yes, there was a future hope for the Jewish nation. But regardless of the interpretive view employed, no one believes there was a literal valley of dry bones that has been or will be resuscitated. The fulfillment of the vision takes on a different physical form than that portrayed in the vision itself.

Based on internal evidence from the book of Ezekiel, it is clear the visions of the prophet should not be interpreted literally. Indeed, the “textual clues” are plainly evident.³⁴ In each case, the fulfillment of the vision takes on a form different than the vision itself. The visions are certainly fulfilled - but in essence, not in the literal way dispensationalists define literal. The temple vision is unquestionably fulfilled - even physically. But it is fulfilled in the form of new covenant believers and the Body of Christ, the Church.

Relevant New Testament passages

The temple vision of Ezekiel 40-48 is not concerned with the construction of a literal stone temple. Instead it points to the fulfillment of the temple in Christ and His Church.

According to the New Testament,³⁵ Jesus is the “place” where heaven and earth meet. Jesus said He and the Father are One (John. 10:30) and to see Him was to see the Father (14:9). Jesus said temple worship was coming to an end and true worshipers must

34. Contra Price, “Ezekiel's Prophecy of the Temple,” 5.

35. This paragraph draws from a previously published work; D. Eric Williams, *Apocalypse: An Explanatory Rendering Of The Revelation That Will Forever Alter Your Understanding Of The Tribulation, The Beast And The End Times* (Cottonwood, ID: CreateSpace, 2014), 86.

worship God in spirit and truth (4:23-24). Jesus is the truth (14:6) and he provides the Spirit (16:7). We are told Christ came as a High Priest "with the greater and more perfect tabernacle" (Hebrews 9:11). Jesus also declared He is greater than the temple (Matthew 12:6), hence its fulfillment. In fact, He indicated He is the true temple and when "destroyed" would be raised up in three days (John 2:19). He is the fulfillment of the temple promises given to David and Solomon: "the incarnate Christ himself is the temple which fulfills the" prophetic promise of an eternal dwelling place for God.³⁶ Like the temple, Jesus is the house of God and the gateway to heaven (Genesis 28:12, 17, John 1:51). He is the place of cleansing and forgiveness (Matthew 8:1-4, 9:2), and the place of God's name and presence (Matthew 1:23).

Those who have faith in Jesus Christ, the true temple of God, become the temple of God with Him. It is a true, literal temple, of living stones (1 Peter 2:5³⁷). It is a real, actual temple that includes redeemed Gentiles in the redefined people of God (Ephesians 2:19-22). We are the temple of God both corporately (1 Corinthians 3:16), and individually (6:19) in danger of being defiled just as the old temple was capable of being defiled (2 Corinthians 6:11-18). Paul said in Christ, we grow "into a holy temple" (Ephesians 2:21) and are a "dwelling place of God in the Spirit" replacing the old temple as a place for God's name to dwell (2:22). "This is not spiritualization, but realization. In 2 Corinthians 6:16 Paul is not merely borrowing Old Testament language (Leviticus 26:12; Exodus 29:45; Ezekiel 37:27), he is proclaiming fulfillment."³⁸ Indeed, "we are compelled

to take these passages as an indication of the strange fulfillment of the ancient Jewish hope. Yahweh has returned at last, but not as the pillar of cloud and fire, and not to dwell in Herod's Temple in Jerusalem. His powerful personal presence has come to inhabit his people, turning them individually into walking temples and corporately into a single body designed for praise, holiness and sacrifice. This is the long awaited new temple inhabited personally by the long-awaited God of Israel."³⁹

Truly, "the temple of God is the holy church-community in Jesus Christ. The body of Christ is the living temple of God and of the new humanity."⁴⁰ It is from this realized temple that the waters of life flow out to the entire world (Ezekiel 47:1-12) as the living stones obey the command of the source of that living water and go into all the world, preaching the Gospel.

36. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 4: Discipleship*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 224.

37. "Come as living stones, and let yourselves be used in building the spiritual temple, where you will serve as holy priests to offer spiritual and acceptable sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ." 1 Peter 2:5, *Good News Bible*.

38. Smith, *The College Press: Ezekiel*, theWord Bible Study Software, version 5.0.0.1450.

39. N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 1074.

40. Bonhoeffer, *Works: Vol 4*, 224.

Future Sacrifices?

Some suggest that the sacrifices of Ezekiel 40-48 will be literally accomplished in the millennial age. They suggest that animal, blood sacrifices taking place after the death and resurrection of Jesus are merely "memorial."⁴¹ This assertion misunderstands the original purpose of the sacrificial system. In truth, the old covenant sacrificial system was always a "memorial" in the sense that a memorial is anything that serves to keep in memory. A primary purpose of the old covenant sacrificial system was to remind the worshiper that one day the Christ would come as "High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation" (Hebrews 9:11). They looked forward to the day when the Messiah would come "not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood" and would enter "the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption" (Hebrews 9:12). It is critical to understand that any memorial aspect of the old covenant sacrificial system had to do with keeping in memory the coming of the Christ. It was a focus on a future hope. Once Jesus had accomplished the final sacrifice the memorial function of the Mosaic ritual ceased. In addition, there is nothing in the text that would lead the reader to think Ezekiel has "memorial" sacrifices in mind⁴² in a fashion that is acceptable to dispensational thinking. Rather than anticipate a future literal fulfillment of this section of Ezekiel, a Christ centered understanding of the text sees "Ezekiel's vision of daily, weekly, and monthly rituals" as a proclamation of "the continuing grace of a deity at peace with his people."⁴³

Animal Blood Sacrifices Have Ceased

Indications from Ezekiel

Since Ezekiel says the sacrificial system connected to his temple vision is atoning "it would be impossible to place Ezekiel's Temple in any dispensation subsequent to Calvary."⁴⁴

Moreover, to suggest that blood sacrifices offered in the millennium function in a capacity similar to the Eucharistic meal is unwarranted. The animal sacrifices of the old covenant and the new covenant communion meal are not intended to exist simultaneously. The Mosaic sacrifices were imbued with meaning given by God at their inception; they looked forward to the work of Jesus Christ. The communion meal was likewise invested with significance at its institution; it looks back on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. There is no scriptural warrant for changing the meaning of either. Thus to suggest the sacrificial system described by Ezekiel means something different (memorial of past events) than what God said it meant (current atonement) is entirely without merit. Ezekiel himself says the sacrifices in his

41. Charles H. Dyer, "Ezekiel," *The Bible Knowledge Commentary Old Testament*, John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, eds., (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 1305.

42. Duguid, *NIV Application Commentary: Ezekiel*, 521.

43. Block, *Ezekiel: Chapters 25-48*, 677.

44. Smith, *The College Press: Ezekiel*, theWord Bible Study Software, version 5.0.0.1450, underline added.

vision are for atonement,⁴⁵ the same word used in the Pentateuch to describe the sacrifices as originally given by Yahweh to Moses (Exodus 29:36, Leviticus 1:4, Numbers 6:11). Thus it is a negative indication from Ezekiel signaling that the temple vision should be interpreted symbolically (Ezekiel 43:20, 45:20).

Relevant New Testament passages

Jesus is “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). It is His shed blood that brings remission of sin (Matthew 26:28) something the blood sacrifices of the Mosaic practice could never accomplish (Hebrews 10:4). “Following the crucifixion and ascension of Jesus, the apostles applied the Old Testament language of sacrifice and expiation to Jesus’ sacrifice of himself.”⁴⁶ Thus the letter to the Hebrews clearly states that the old covenant system of sacrifice has been abrogated by the atoning work of Jesus Christ: “we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Hebrews 10:10. See also, Hebrews 7:27, 9:12, 10:14, 18, 29). There is no room for continuing animal sacrifice in the new covenant era. Indeed an attempt to maintain the Mosaic ritual in this dispensation is anathema (Galatians 1:8-9) and a return to the Mosaic law means Christ will “profit you nothing” (Galatians 5:2). A revival of the Mosaic sacrificial system would denigrate Christ and cast slander upon the cross. “The final sacrifice of Jesus Christ is made the Levitical system obsolete (see Hebrews 9:10 – 10:18). The return of the system with its sin offerings in such, would be a serious retrogression.”⁴⁷ Indeed,

We have, alas, belittled the cross, imagining it merely as a mechanism for getting us off the hook of our own petty naughtiness or as an example of some general benevolence. It is much, much more. It is the moment when the story of Israel reaches its climax; the moment when, at last, the watchmen on Jerusalem’s walls see their God coming in his kingdom; the moment when the people of God are renewed so as to be, at last, the royal priesthood who will take over the world, not with the love of power but with the power of love; the moment when the kingdom of God overcomes the kingdoms of the world. It is the moment when a great old door locked and barred since our first disobedience swings open suddenly to reveal not just the garden, opened once more to our delight, but the coming city, the garden city that God had always planned and is now inviting us to go through the door and build with him.⁴⁸

45. Hullinger admits as much but then goes on to say that “animal sacrifices during the millennium will serve primarily to remove ceremonial uncleanness and prevent defilement from promoting the Temple envisioned by Ezekiel.” In other words, they will have the same purpose as sacrifices made under the old covenant dispensation. Heresy is the word that comes to mind. Jerry M. Hullinger, “The Problem Of Animal Sacrifices In Ezekiel 40-48,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 152 (July - September 1995) 280-281.

46. Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1984), 792.

47. Robert B. Chisholm Jr., *Handbook on the Prophets*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 286.

48. N.T Wright, *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story Of The Gospels* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 239.

Conclusion

In order to do justice to Jesus Christ, Ezekiel and the unambiguous teaching of the New Testament it seems we must interpret chapter 40-48 Christocentrically.⁴⁹ Jesus Christ is the focus of Scripture. He is the all in all. He is the one in whom the fullness of deity dwells. He is the great and final sacrifice. He is the source of living water. Yes, "Jesus himself is the new temple at the heart of the new creation, against that day when the whole earth shall be filled the glory of God as the waters cover the sea."⁵⁰

49. C. Hassell Bullock, "Ezekiel, Bridge Between The Testaments," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 25.1 (March 1982), 23-31

50. N.T Wright, *How God Became King*, 239.

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