

## A FUTURE TEMPLE?

(John W. Hilber)

Some interpret Ezekiel's vision as exact design specifications for an actual temple to be built. If Ezekiel and his contemporaries understood the purpose of the vision to guide construction of a temple, there is no hint that the restoration community exerted any effort to replicate Ezekiel's design specifications. The second temple was not as glorious as the first (Ezra 3:12; Hag 2:3; Zech 4:10), and Herod's grand expansions did not approximate Ezekiel's specifications. So either this constitutes gross disobedience, or the vision was understood by Ezekiel and his contemporaries in some other way. Their expectations could have been eschatological (for the undisclosed, distant future). But as Block observes, there is a striking absence of terms throughout these chapters that are typically found in prophetic oracles with an eschatological time horizon. For example, Ezekiel uses phrases like "the day" (Ezek 7:10) or "in that day" (Ezek 30:2-3; 38:14, 18-19) to signal to readers that he has multiple future events or a distant horizon in mind. Granted, resources for such an elaborate construction project were beyond the means of the impoverished postexilic community; but one would expect some attempt to replicate features of the vision, with at least some attention to innovations. This would represent a good faith effort on the part of the post-exilic community for a "now but not yet" expression of hope. All this raises doubt that the original audience considered the physical aspects of Ezekiel's design to be relevant for actual construction. Several other lines of thought support this.

First, as noted in the commentary on Ezek 40:4, the absence of a command to actually build the temple is significant. In contrast, the intention of the vision is revealed in the applications that appear in Ezek 43:6-11; 44:5-16; and 45:9-12 (see discussion at Ezek 43:10-11).

Second, Moses' tabernacle and Solomon's temple are given specific height dimensions (Exod 26:16; 1Kgs 6:2). For Ezekiel's temple, vertical dimensions are sparse, only the outer wall (Ezek 40:5), the alcove wall (Ezek 40:12), the preparation tables (Ezek 40:42), the wooden altar in the holy place (Ezek 41:22), and possibly the gate height (Ezek 40:14). The text states that the priests rooms all have the "same length and width" (Ezek 42:11) . . . no mention of height. In the light of this contrast to other biblical temple designs, omission of vertical specifications for core structures in Ezekiel's temple is inexplicable if it were intended for actual construction. Rather, Ezekiel offers a very stylized design that focuses on geometric perfection, employing multiples of 25 and its square.

Third, literal actualization of the Edenic river might be imaginable (Ezek 47); however, the cosmic symbolism of such a life-giving source lends itself more naturally to a symbolic interpretation for Ezekiel's original audience, whose assumptions were instinctively attuned to such symbolic meanings (see comments at Ezek 47:1).

Fourth, both the design description (e.g., altar) and many of the liturgical practices described in Ezek



43:12-46:31 contradict the Mosaic prescriptions. But more difficult is a canonical reading (e.g., Heb 10:14,18) in which future sacrificial practices are no longer relevant. These are not memorial sacrifices, rather they effect atonement (see comments at Ezek 40:38-47). It is granted that Paul supported sacrifices when he sponsored the fulfillment of a vow (Acts 21:24; 24:17). However, the narrative presents Paul's behavior as a concession to his Jewish kinsmen so as not to create a stumbling block to the gospel during this transition time (Acts 21:25; cf. Acts 15:29, strangled meat). Some Christian gatherings continued in the temple, perhaps with evangelistic intention, but thanksgiving for atonement remained focused on the LORD'S Table (Acts 2:46-47). So, imagining the reestablishment of atonement sacrifices millennia after Jesus' "Once for all" sacrifice remains problematic (see further discussion at Ezek 40:38-47). This is especially [true] because, in Ezekiel's vision, there is the persistent need for sacrifice in order for people to be accepted before God (Ezek 43:27).

Fifth, perhaps even more difficult than atoning sacrifices, the strict boundaries of sacred space in Ezekiel's vision are in conflict with New Testament teaching regarding Jesus as the new temple (e.g., Mark 15:38; John 2:19-22; Heb 12:22-24) and the Holy Spirit indwelling the people of God as his temple (1 Cor 3:16-17; Eph 2:19-22). While this does not require replacement theology, where the church supersedes ethnic Israel, it recognizes that the future hope of redeemed Israel is not an inferior experience, impeded by all the physical boundaries of sacred space. God will dwell among all his people in a most perfect way—that is the message of Ezekiel's vision, described in the most optimal language that would make sense to Ezekiel's contemporaries but fulfilled in a way that would have been unimaginable to them at the time.

In the person of Jesus, God inhabits a human body for all eternity; and when he returns to earth, his residence presumably would be a physical structure. In the conceptual world of the Bible, that structure will by definition be a temple. Will Jesus' home replicate the rigid boundaries of sacred space, blocking access, along with attending sacrifices described in Ezekiel's vision? This is unlikely.