

EZEKIEL'S TEMPLE VISION¹

(Danny Hays)

We discussed portions of Ezekiel earlier in this book, but we have not yet examined his vision of the temple (Ezekiel 40-48), one of the more challenging texts to interpret in the entire Old Testament. First, let's set the context. Ezekiel prophesies in Babylon during and right after the final days of Jerusalem and the temple. One of the most central themes in Ezekiel is the presence of God. The book opens (1:1-28) and closes (48:35) with this theme. Indeed, in Ezekiel 1 the prophet sees a vision of the presence of God himself, stressing that God is completely mobile and not tied to a temple location. As we discussed above, in Ezekiel 8-11 the prophet is given a visionary tour of the temple in Jerusalem, where he witnesses unthinkable and blasphemous idolatry right in the temple. He then witnesses the departure of God from the temple! What will become of Israel without the presence of God? Following this, throughout chapters 12-32, Ezekiel focuses on pronouncing judgment on Judah and her neighbors, because of their terrible sins.

Starting in Ezekiel 33 and continuing to the end of the book, the prophet will focus on giving hope beyond the exile and the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. Uniting the final chapters is the theme of future restoration and the return of God's presence. In Ezekiel 33-36 God promises that in the future he will cleanse his people and give them new, obedient hearts.

Specifically, in Ezekiel 34 God declares that he will come like a shepherd to care for his flock and that his presence will be with them. In Ezekiel 36 God states that there will be a new way of relating to him, for in the future he will put his Spirit in his people (Ezek. 36:24-28). In Ezekiel 37 the prophet sees the Spirit of God blow over a valley of bleached bones, bringing them back to life. Once again he promises the life-giving indwelling of his Spirit (37:14). Then at the conclusion to the book (Ezek. 40-48), once again in a vision, God takes Ezekiel back to Israel where an angel-like individual leads him on a tour of a new temple, complete with Levitical priests, storage rooms, sacrifices, and altar. Highlighting Ezekiel's vision of the temple is the glorious arrival of the presence of God (43:1-5). The vision ends by providing the name of the city that holds the temple, "The LORD is there" (48:35).

Scholars are widely divided over the meaning of Ezekiel's vision, particularly in regard to the temple and the associated priests and sacrifices. One view is that God gives this vision to Ezekiel so that he can write down the specific dimensions of the temple, so as to allow future Israelites to actually construct it. Thus, God provides here the blueprints for the third temple. The dimensions differ from the second temple, so it does not seem that this "blueprint" was used to build the temple in the time of Herod. Most scholars holding this view, however, maintain that Ezekiel's vision is the design for a temple to be built in the future, during the millennial (thousand-year) reign of Christ, when Jerusalem will be the theological center of the world. Thus this view understands Ezekiel's vision as a very literal picture of what is to be built in the future. Christians with this view maintain that this temple will be built during the millennium and will play an important role in the unfolding of the biblical end times.

However, several of the details in Ezekiel's vision are problematic if interpreted literally. For example, Ezekiel 47 describes a river of water flowing out from the entrance of the temple, a river that flows all the way to the Dead Sea and gets deeper as it goes. From a hydraulic engineering point of view, obtaining this much water on top of the Temple Mount would be challenging. Of course God



¹ This taken from the highly recommended book *The Temple and the Tabernacle: A Study of God's Dwelling Places From Genesis to Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016), pp. 180-182.

can work miracles and create this water if he chooses to, but is that the point of this vision? Does the Scripture require that we interpret the water as literal water? As mentioned above, in John 7:38-39 Jesus declares, "Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them. By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive." Obviously Jesus is not talking about actual physical water flowing out of people; he is referring to the Holy Spirit. When considering the meaning of the water in Ezekiel 47, recall that in Ezekiel 36 God promises to put his Spirit within his people. So in a prophetic text about the future restoration of God's presence (Ezek. 40-48), it is at least plausible that the river of water is related to the future presence of the Spirit of God.

Perhaps even more troublesome in taking Ezekiel 40-48 literally is that one would be reestablishing the Levitical blood-sacrifice system. The New Testament is not ambiguous about this: the Levitical sacrificial system has been totally and completely abrogated and abolished by the once-and-for-all sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Christian proponents of a literal third temple argue that these sacrifices are not sin sacrifices (related to expiation or propitiation) but rather are merely celebratory, fellowship-oriented, or memorial sacrifices. Still, the sacrifice of sheep as a proper worship of God seems to conflict heavily with the theology of the New Testament. Likewise, note that nowhere in Ezekiel 40-48 does God tell Ezekiel to build this temple or to instruct others to build this temple. Similarly, earlier in Ezekiel 37 God shows Ezekiel the valley of dry bones and then uses that vision to teach him about the power of God in regard to restoration. God is not telling Ezekiel in chapter 37 to create this situation or even that these bones represent literal people who will physically be brought back to life. Thus we should not be too quick to rush to the assumption that just because Ezekiel is shown a temple, God wants someone in the future to build it.

Thus there is an alternative view of Ezekiel 40-48 that understands this vision as prophetic, but pointing figuratively and representatively to realities brought about by Jesus Christ in the New Testament and probably realized in the New Jerusalem described in Revelation 21-22, which contains numerous similarities. What Ezekiel is shown is a vision of hope for the future in which the presence of God and true worship of God are restored, events that are fulfilled by the incarnation of Christ and the final new heavens and new earth of Revelation 21-22.

