

# **EZEKIEL'S TEMPLE -- WHAT? WHEN? WHY?**

The concluding chapters of the prophetic book of Ezekiel are among the most hotly debated in all of Scripture. Many differing and conflicting interpretations have been proposed by scholars, each according to his own school of eschatological thought. Are these chapters, which describe a great temple, speaking figuratively or literally? Do they refer to a time now past, or to a future state? The opportunities for controversy are manifold, and a mere consideration of the chapters themselves, in isolation, is insufficient to provide all the answers. For instance, this temple description occurs at the end of a book heavy with symbolism, yet contains precise details and measurements suggesting a more literal approach. There are mysteries in chapters 40-48, as well -- who is the "prince" or leader involved in the temple worship?

Neither the figurative nor the literal approach to these chapters is adequate to explain every detail, unravel every mystery. However, it is not necessary for us to know all the answers in order to understand the passage properly. Despite the potential for controversy, Scripture does supply us with enough information to answer the main questions associated with the passage, which are as follows:

1. Is the temple and its worship literal, or figurative?
2. Do these things take place at a time now past, or at some point in the future?
3. If the time is future, does it involve the millennial kingdom of Christ on earth, or the heavenly state?
4. In any case, what is the purpose of the sacrifices described?

This paper will briefly consider these issues and attempt to provide some sound and scriptural answers.

## *Literal or Figurative?*

Though this temple appears in a highly symbolic book, there is much reason to believe that it is an actual, physical reality, and not a merely spiritual phenomenon. Firstly, this temple building is described in precise detail, rather than loose symbolic terms. The exact measurements of the wall (40:5), the court (40:47) and the sanctuary (41:4), as well as all the other elements of the construction, are provided for the reader. What would be the point of such an exercise, if the place does not actually exist? Furthermore, the description is intensely visual (41:6-7). Such painstaking, point-by-point consideration invites comparison, not to purely symbolic visions such as the four beasts seen by Daniel (Dan. 7) or the scarlet woman of John's apocalypse (Rev. 17), but to the Pentateuchal pattern for the Tabernacle (Ex. 25:8ff) -- an inarguably literal building. Most importantly, Ezekiel is told to describe the temple he has seen to the people of Israel, and if they are ashamed and repent, to show them the exact plans and measurements -- why? -- "so that they may be faithful to its design" (43:10-11).

If the temple is only figurative, this is a nonsensical statement. But if it is literal, all difficulty is removed. It would seem that the main reason some scholars assume Ezekiel's temple to be symbolic is that the literal view seems to present theological problems, making it more convenient to spiritualize the building and all it contains. But spiritualizing cannot answer the logical and textual objections listed above. Nor can it provide a clear interpretation of all the supposed symbols involved in the dimensions and features of the temple, only subjective speculation. On this basis a literal interpretation is preferable even though it may not supply all the answers.

## *Historical or Future?*

For reasons of architecture, topology and theology, it would appear that Ezekiel's vision of the temple

concerned the future, not any past or contemporary edifice. Architecturally, the dimensions provided in chapters 40-48 do not correspond to any of the pre- or post-exilic temples -- Solomon's, Zerubbabel's, nor even Herod's. Furthermore, the overall design is markedly different from those of the historical temples. Topologically, Ezekiel's temple features a river flowing eastward from the threshold of the temple out to the Jordan Valley (47:1ff), whereas no river flowed from, through, or even past the temples of Biblical times. Also, the surrounding geography described by Ezekiel is different from that of Israel today or at any point in the past. Great changes have taken place, consistent with the topological alterations associated with the Lord's second coming (Is. 40:4, Zech. 14:4ff.). Theologically, the mode of worship and priestly service followed in Ezekiel's temple, though it parallels that of the Mosaic economy in numerous details, has never been carried out by Israel at any time in the past. The situation described in the land is an idyllic theocracy never before experienced by the nation. Most significantly, this temple contains the glory of God (43:2-5). Jewish rabbis agree that the glory of God departed from Solomon's temple just before it was destroyed, and that neither Zerubbabel's temple nor Herod's expansion ever contained such glory before the destruction of 70 A.D. Therefore, if the glory of God will return as Ezekiel prophesied, it must be to some other, future temple.

### *Millenium or Eternity?*

Having established Ezekiel's temple as both literal and future, we are then faced with the question of precisely when this temple comes into existence. Admittedly, this is at first a difficult issue to resolve, for there are many similarities between the millennial kingdom and the eternal state, and the prophets of old did not always make a clear distinction between them. Ezekiel's writings by themselves are therefore insufficient to address the question -- but when his description of the temple is compared to the last chapters of the book of Revelation, it appears that Ezekiel's vision concerned a millennial, not eternal, state. The reasons for this are again architectural, topological and theological. Architecturally, the dimensions of Ezekiel's temple differ from those of the eternal city (Rev. 21:15-17). Topologically, the sea is described as bordering Israel in Ezekiel (47:15), but in eternity there is no longer any sea (Rev. 21:1). Theologically, Ezekiel describes a physical Jerusalem temple in great detail, but according to John, in the eternal state no such place exists: in the new Jerusalem the only temple is the triune God Himself (Rev. 21:22).

### *What About the Sacrifices?*

One may well ask, if Ezekiel's temple is indeed literal, future, and millennial in nature, what purpose the temple sacrifices (44:15) serve. Since Christ has already provided a once-for-all atoning sacrifice for sin (Heb. 7:27, 9:12,26-27), is it not blasphemy to suggest that in His earthly kingdom any blood sacrifices would be necessary? Does the presence of sacrifices therefore not point to a symbolic or historical interpretation of the passage? The answer to both questions is no. There is no reason to believe that a future sacrificial system could not be perfectly within the will of God for His people. Firstly, the emphasis in Ezekiel's temple is on holiness. By faithfully following the Lord's commandments regarding worship and sacrifice, the nation of Israel will demonstrate to the world the transforming power of God in their once-stubborn and idolatrous hearts, and their unique relationship to Him. Secondly, the sacrifices offered are symbolic, not efficacious. This was also true even of the Mosaic sacrifices (Heb. 9:9, 10:1-4) -- the only difference here is that the millenium looks back at Christ's death as a historical reality, whereas the Israelites of the Old Testament economy looked forward to a Messianic promise of cleansing and atonement in the shadowy future.

If at first the suggestion that the blood sacrifices in Ezekiel's temple serve a purely commemorative purpose seems bizarre, one may well consider the ordinance of the Lord's Supper. At this present time the church, composed of Jew and Gentile united in Christ, is in focus. Though the reality -- the suffering and death of Christ -- has already taken place, the church today still partakes of bread and wine in remembrance of His past work (1 Cor. 11:23-26). This institution was set up by the Lord Jesus Himself. However, in the millennial kingdom restored Israel, not the church, is the focus. In

keeping with the Mosaic covenant unique to Israel, animal sacrifices will remind the believing Jews of Christ's finished work. Note, however, that in the millenium there is no Day of Atonement, and numerous other distinctions serve to remind us that Christ's death forever altered God's dealings with mankind. Also, Ezekiel's temple and its unique sacrificial system come into play after Israel has recognized Jesus as the Messiah they pierced (Zech. 12:9). There can be no danger that these Jews will forget His death on their behalf.

In light of these evidences, then, there seems no reason to believe that Ezekiel's temple is any less than it seems to be from the text itself -- a literal building constructed by a truly repentant and restored nation of Israel, and in which they will worship the Lord by offering and sacrifice.

- Rebecca J. Anderson (1994)

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