

# **The Temple of Ezekiel - Ezekiel 40-48**

## **by R H Johnston**

### **Introduction**

Ezekiel's vision of the Temple and the associated reformation of Israeli society (Ezekiel 40-48) poses difficult problems of interpretation. A variety of interpretations have been suggested. For example, some people believe that this Temple and the associated reforms are yet to be fulfilled in the Messianic kingdom, while others interpret the vision allegorically of Christian worship. Neither of these interpretations is satisfactory.

This note, which reviews the material using a broad brush approach, suggests that fulfilment of the vision was always *conditional*, and that any fulfilment should have taken place at the termination of the exile Ezekiel was then experiencing. The return of the Israeli people was never wholehearted after the exile, the reconstruction of the Temple failed to follow Ezekiel's plans, and the land reformations were never carried out, with the result that the and the prophecy and any associated miracles failed because the conditions were not met. This interpretation places the material firmly within the Old Covenant context, with no expectation of a future fulfilment, except insofar as the reality which this Temple vision pre-figured will be fulfilled in the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21-22).

### **What was the purpose of the Vision?**

The prophecy which starts at Ezekiel 40 is clearly distinct from the preceding prophecies. This is indicated by the giving of the day it was received explicitly. It is therefore unrelated chronologically to the preceding chapters, some of which may relate to events which are still to take place.

The timing of the vision, and its relevance to Ezekiel's immediate hearers is the first issue to consider. Understanding a passage like this purely from our current perspective will always be wrong.

Ezekiel 40:1 tells us the vision took place on the day of the Passover (14th day of 1st month (Ezekiel 45:21)), in the 25th year of the captivity and 14th after the city was taken. Ezekiel and his contemporaries had been told to expect to return to the promised land from exile (Jeremiah 29:10; 30:3,10; 31:8; 32:44 &c.), and they needed to know what to do when they returned and were restored to their land. The date of the Passover drew Ezekiel's attention to Israel's earlier deliverance from the land of Egypt. The people needed God's plan for them when the time came to return to the promised land.

As the revelation takes place within this period of exile, Ezekiel and his contemporaries must have expected any fulfilment of the vision to follow immediately their current period of exile ended. The vision cannot have meant anything else to them, nor is it likely to have been intended to relate to anything with a longer term perspective. They had lost their land, and they looked forward daily towards receiving it again. They had failed God, God had judged them, but they were longing to be restored to it (compare Ezekiel 43:7-9).

The detailed regulations concerning the Temple and land reforms confirm the vision's application to this exile. Steps were needed to ensure that the mistakes of the immediate pre-exilic past would not be repeated. This implied a reformation of the Temple worship, a separation of the secular from the holy, and the institution of clear boundaries on the rights and powers of the king. The exile had been the result of avarice on the part of the kings, especially Manasseh who had spilled much innocent blood (2 Kings 21:16; 24:3-4), to an extent which could not be forgiven. The limitations on the land holdings of the king may suggest that much blood had been spilt as the result of forced expropriation of land by the king, a trend which Ahab started when he stole Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings 21). If the king was to have no excuse for his conduct, it would be necessary to allocate him suitable land.

Likewise, the distribution of the Levites throughout Israel had contributed to the apostasy, as they had become priests, and turned people away from God. To avoid any repetition of these problems the Levites and the Zadok priesthood were to have land allocated close to the temple. Such major land distribution reforms necessarily required a wholesale reallocation of the land across the tribes. Moreover, the plan recognised that population conditions would have changed a great deal as a result of the exile. Doubtless, as a result of the purification achieved by the exile, whole families had been wiped out, and some exiles might choose not to return. There was also the problem that after the exile, there would be a variety of foreigners in the land, in particular the people who had been imported by the Babylonians, the people who became the Samaritans. The existing tenure arrangements would not be satisfactory. Notably the foreigners who chose to stay within the borders were also to receive land along with the Israelis. These far reaching reforms were not carried out on the return from exile.

### **Is a post-crucifixion fulfilment plausible?**

Quite apart from the fact that the prophecy was to provide immediate comfort and instruction to Ezekiel's contemporaries, there are over-riding objections to any post-crucifixion fulfilment. Ezekiel's Temple is designed for the express purpose of carrying out, by the priestly sons of Zadok (Ezekiel 43:18-19), the sacrificial ritual requirements of the Old Covenant (Ezekiel 40:38-43). No other purpose is mentioned in the descriptions. Moreover foreigners are very specifically excluded

from it (Ezekiel 44:6-9). The epistle to the Hebrews was written with the express and sole purpose of showing that the Old Covenant had been entirely superseded by the New Covenant. The New Covenant is also inclusive of Gentiles. There is no need for a Temple of this sort to continue. At a practical level, following the destruction of the genealogical records by the Romans (AD 70) the requirement for priests of the Zadok line (Ezekiel 43:18-19) became impossible to confirm. We conclude that any fulfilment of this prophecy had to be complete before the crucifixion.

### **It was a Vision, to provide construction plans**

It was a vision (40:2) which was shown to Ezekiel to declare to Israel. There is no suggestion that he saw some actual structure which existed in the future. Ezekiel 40:5-42:20 provides a highly detailed description of the measurements, which were clearly intended to provide all the details essential for the construction of a Temple exactly like the one seen in the vision.

### **The appearance of the Glory of the LORD**

Ezekiel 43 begins with a distinct change in tone as the "glory of the LORD" appears, in the same form as it had twice previously appeared to Ezekiel, and enters the house by the east gate (Ezekiel 43:2-5).

Ezekiel 43:7-12 is critical to a correct interpretation of these chapters. The first part of v7, "Son of man, *this is* the place of My throne and the place of the soles of my feet, where I will dwell among the sons of Israel for ever", is capable of two interpretations. It could be a new declaration of what God is either doing at that point, or, more likely, when the new Temple is consecrated. This understanding does not fit comfortably with the rest of v7 through to the end of v9, which are highly conditional, and state that God will only dwell among them if these stringent conditions are satisfied.

Alternatively, and much more probably, verse 7 says where the new Temple is to be built, a simple declaration of location. Until this point Ezekiel only knows that he was set on a very high mountain with, to the south, a structure *like* a city (Ezekiel 40:2). While at that stage he would doubtless be *reminded* of Jerusalem, it was not necessarily Jerusalem. By the declaration of v7, Ezekiel is now made sure that the location is that place that God had previously chosen (cf. 1 Kings 8:12; 9:3). Then the rest of v7 to the end of v9 makes perfect sense. This temple site was the place God had chosen, the place was defiled by the corpses of their kings, by their abominations and God had consumed them, but if these things were removed God would return. This is a straightforward command to tell the exiles what to do on their return to Jerusalem.

Ezekiel 43:10-12. Ezekiel was to describe what he had seen to make them ashamed of their sin (43:10), and *if* they made an appropriate response, to give them all the details of the design and the associated regulations so that they could carry them out (Ezekiel 43:11). Presumably this was to be done as soon as they had the opportunity at the conclusion of the exile. The response was probably positive at that time, since we have Ezekiel's account. The requirements of Ezekiel 43:12 to make the entire area on the top of the mountain holy appear never to have been carried out.

Ezekiel 43:13-27, already considered, returns to the sacrificial details.

### **Temple regulations**

Ezekiel 44 then turns to institute new Temple regulations. The east gate is to be closed permanently because that was the route by which God had entered: the king is not to use it (Ezekiel 44:1-3). Foreigners are to be rigorously excluded (Ezekiel 44:4-9), in contrast to the previous use of foreign labour. Levites are to minister as assistants but not as priests (Ezekiel 44:10-14), in contrast to their pre-exilic practice which had led to idolatry. The sons of Zadok are to act as priests, subject to a series of tight regulations which were to show the people the difference between the holy and the common. By comparison with the other regulations, these regulations for the priests were presumably intended to stop pre-exilic abuses.

### **The new division of the land**

Ezekiel 45:1-8 envisages a completely new division of the land of Israel, as already noted. This never took place. Special areas are set aside for:

- 1) the most holy place (v 3-4);
- 2) the Levites (v5);
- 3) the city (for the whole house of Israel) (v6);
- 4) the prince (v7), with the objective of preventing the prince from oppressing the people (v8-9).

Ezekiel 45:9-12 commands the princes of Israel to reject all kinds of injustice. The rest of the chapter (45:13-25) makes the prince responsible for presenting offerings on behalf of the people, who are to give their offerings through him. Ezekiel 45:18-25 reinstates the feast of Passover. Ezekiel 46:1-15 provides regulations for the prince's offerings on Sabbaths and appointed feasts.

### **Gifts of property by the prince**

Restrictions are placed on the deposal and acquisition of property by the prince (Ezekiel 16-18). The nature of the regulations show that this prince cannot be the

Messiah - this prince has sons, and the sons are mortal. Everything here corresponds to the normal pattern of rulership, not the rule of God's righteous Messiah.

The remainder of the chapter (Ezekiel 46:17-24) returns to consider more details of the sacrificial arrangements.

### **The river flowing from under the threshold**

Ezekiel 47:1-12 is perhaps the most puzzling component of these eight chapters. The first six verses are clearly part of the vision, yet v8-12 appear intended to be realised in physical form, particularly in view of the highly specific geographical details provided in v10. If so they are clearly of a miraculous character - the water of the Dead Sea is fresh, yet adjacent to salt marshes and swamps (v11), and the trees of v12 continuously produce fruit. This has never been physically realised, but then, this Temple was never built in accord with the Ezekiel pattern, nor were the Ezekiel worship reforms ever carried out. If they had been, the miracle of the river, the Dead Sea and of the trees might have come to pass. On the other hand, it is difficult to see what divine purpose would have been achieved if such changes had come about in a physical form, so Ezekiel 47:1-12 may have been intended to symbolise fruitfulness as a result of obedience. This latter interpretation is perhaps given some support by the way John reinterprets v12 in Revelation 22:1-2. John had dismissed the need for the special temple (Revelation 21:22), and seems to use the trees by the river symbolically.

Whatever the correct interpretation here, it is clear that although Ezekiel's temple was not built, and the promised blessings did not come to pass, they will do so in the ultimate fulfilment in the New Jerusalem.

### **The borders of Israel**

The prophecy then returns to describe the post-exilic borders of Israel (Ezekiel 47:13-20), which include the pre-exilic Israel as well as Judah. This confirms Ezekiel's earlier prophecy of the one stick (Ezekiel 37:15-28), a passage which could have Messianic implications. Such an interpretation is not essential: it could simply refer to the restoration of a king in David's line over the reunited Israel. Again, however the fulfilment of all these events may well have been conditional on obedience to the earlier components of the Ezekiel 40-48 Vision.

The land is to be redivided by lot amongst the tribes (Ezekiel 47:21-23), and this division is to include distributions to aliens who have sons born in the land. This would have accommodated the post-exilic Samaritans. Chapter 48 details this division, covering the whole of the land, rather than just that in the immediate vicinity of Jerusalem, which was allocated in Ezekiel 45:1-8.

## Conclusions

Ezekiel 40-48 was provided as instructions to the exiles of Ezekiel's time concerning the rebuilding of the Temple, together with a new social contract between the princes and the people, with a wholesale repartition of the land of Israel, to include foreigners as well as Israelites.

This plan was never carried out according to the detailed instructions, though the reconstruction of the Temple under Cyrus and Darius represented a partial fulfilment. There is no biblical evidence that the Temple built after the exile followed Ezekiel's instructions. Certainly the land reforms were never carried out, and the princes in the post-exilic era do not appear to have carried out their duties as instructed. The miraculously flowing water (Ezekiel:1-12) has never had a literal fulfilment - either it was conditional on the fulfilment of Ezekiel's detailed construction, or it may have always been intended symbolically, a view to which John's use of the image in Revelation lends some support.

The displacement of the Old Covenant, with its human priesthood and animal sacrifices, by the New Covenant with its better promises, priesthood and sacrifice renders the physical Temple Ezekiel saw entirely obsolete. These prophecies are therefore now incapable of fulfilment. The reality which it symbolises will be fulfilled in the New Jerusalem described at the end of Revelation.

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These notes are not comprehensive but should stimulate personal bible study. Every effort has been made to be accurate, but the reader should test everything in accord with the example of Acts 17:11 and the command of 1 Thessalonians 5:21. Errors, or queries which are unresolved after consulting the LORD, should be referred to the author (email: rhjbibpap@rhj.org.uk) (Version dates: Ver 1: 8.12.1996. Ver 2 11.12.1996, Ver 3 2.10.1997; v4 2.9.2018)  
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