

Robert Vannoy, Major Prophets, Lecture 29—Ezekiel #5

Ezekiel 40-48 The Visionary Temple

Ezekiel 40-48 No Explicit Textual Interpretation Given

In Ezekiel 40-48, you have a description of a vision which Ezekiel receives. Something that is different here from previous visions is that Ezekiel has already had many visions, but previous to this, Ezekiel had visions that were explained to him. We looked in our last session at the vision of the dry bones, where he had this vision of dry bones coming to life and putting on flesh. But God says in Ezekiel 37:14 in the context of that vision, “I am going to raise up again the people of Israel and breathe new life into them.” So you at least have an indication of what the vision is intended to depict. Earlier in the book, he had a vision of the wickedness of Jerusalem and the things going on in Jerusalem while he himself was in Babylon, but then the Lord says, “I’m going to punish Jerusalem for the in wickedness. I’m going to destroy this city of Jerusalem.” But, when you come to chapter 40 and following, you have this vision that’s given as a unit, from 40 all the way through 48. There is, however, no explanation supplied with it as to what it means. Of course, that’s part of the reason for differences of interpretation of this section. But I think that’s reason in itself to go slow about jumping to conclusions on exactly what its meaning is. We’re going to look at some of the alternatives as we progress here.

1. The Content of Ezekiel 40-48

a. The Description of the Visionary Temple

But notice on your outline 1. under “Chapters 40-48” is: “The content of chapters 40-48.” I have three sub-points under that. Chapters 40-43 is: “The description of the visionary temple.” Chapters 44-46 is “The description of worship of the visionary temple,” and chapters 47-48 is: “The boundaries and division of the land in Ezekiel’s vision.” So I think the material divides pretty well into those three sections. There’s a great deal of material here, and there’s an awful lot of detail as you read through it.

Let's look at a. first, "Chapters 40-43." Every small feature of this visionary temple is described and measured. You see the way it begins in the first five verses: "In the twenty-fifth year of our exile, at the beginning of the year, on the tenth of the month, in the fourteenth year after the fall of the city" –so fourteen years after Jerusalem had fallen—" on that very day the hand of the LORD was upon me and he took me there." So in the visionary situation, Ezekiel is brought to Israel. "In visions of God he took me to the land of Israel and set me on a very high mountain on whose south side were some buildings that looked like a city. He took me there, and I saw a man whose appearance was like bronze; he was standing in the gateway with a linen cord and a measuring rod in his hand."

So, here's a man with a measuring instrument. "The man said to me, 'Son of man, look with your eyes and hear with your ears and pay attention to everything I am going to show you, for that is why you have been brought here. Tell the house of Israel everything you see.'"

Detailed Temple Description

What follows is this vision of this temple that is measured part by part by this man. "I saw a wall completely surrounding the temple area. The length of the measuring rod in the man's hand was six long cubits, each of which was a cubit and a handbreadth. He measured the wall; it was one measuring rod thick and one rod high." So in verse five you have this reference to a measuring reed, six cubits long. Now, a cubit's length depends on whether it's the long or the short cubit (this says a cubit and a handbreadth, which would be about 21 inches); a long cubit is about 21 inches, a short cubit 18 inches. This reed, six cubits, would be about ten and a half feet long. So apparently this wall was about ten and a half feet high and ten and a half feet wide that this man measures. But you see, as you go down further, verse six: "Then he went to the gate facing east. He climbed its steps and measured the threshold of the gate; it was one rod deep." Verse eight, "He measured the porch of the gate," and gives you the dimensions. Verse ten, the

chambers of the gate were three on this side and three on that side. And verse eleven, “He measured the breadth of the entrance of the gate.” So, you have a very detailed description.

Two Interpretations

People have gone through these details and diagramed it out so you have a picture of the structure of Ezekiel’s temple. But remember the context. Ezekiel is coming to the land of Israel. He sees in a visionary sense, in a visionary context, the temple, and he measures out all the features of the structure, inside and out. Remember, it’s not a building that was in Israel in Ezekiel’s day; it’s something seen in a vision. Now I think that suggests either that God was giving Ezekiel ideas in a symbolic form by means of this detailed vision of this temple, or it could mean that there will be at some time in the future a building of this size. Those, of course, are the two main alternative interpretations: that this is a vision of something that was to be in a literal sense some day or that this is a symbolic picture of something for the future.

When you get down to chapter 42 in this section, verses 15-20, you read [KJV], “Now when he had made an end of measuring the inner house, he brought me forth toward the gate whose prospect [area] *is* toward the east, and measured it round about. He measured the east side with the measuring reed, five hundred reeds, with the measuring reed round about. He measured the north side, five hundred reeds, with the measuring reed round about. He measured the south side, five hundred reeds, with the measuring reed. He turned about to the west side, *and* measured five hundred reeds with the measuring reed. He measured it by the four sides: it had a wall round about, five hundred *reeds* long, and five hundred broad, to make a separation between the sanctuary and the profane place.”

LXX Textual Variant – Cubit or Reed

Now, I read from the King James, but if you look at the NIV, that’s 42:15, the NIV says, “When he had finished measuring what was inside the temple area, he led me

out by the east gate and measured the area all around: He measured the east side with the measuring rod; it was five hundred cubits.” Instead of “five hundred reeds,” it says “five hundred cubits.” There’s a text note here in the NIV, that’s verse 16, it says “See Septuagint, verse 17.” In verse 17 it says “He measured by the north side, it was five hundred cubits,” and the text note says “Hebrew: rods, also in verses 18 and 19.” So you get a textual problem with the term cubit or reed, and as I’ve mentioned earlier, a reed is six cubits. So it makes an enormous difference whether you’re saying five hundred cubits or five hundred reeds which would be 3,000 cubits, or about 4500 feet.

Return of the Glory of the Lord

Then in Ezekiel 43:3: “The vision I saw was like the vision I had seen when he came to destroy the city and like the visions I had seen by the Kebar River, and I fell facedown. The glory of the LORD entered the temple through the gate facing east. Then the Spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner court, and the glory of the LORD filled the temple. While the man was standing beside me, I heard someone speaking to me from inside the temple. He said: ‘Son of man, this is the place of my throne and the place for the soles of my feet. This is where I will live among the Israelites forever. The house of Israel will never again defile my holy name--neither they nor their kings--by their prostitution and the lifeless idols of their kings at their high places. When they placed their threshold next to my threshold and their doorposts beside my doorposts, with only a wall between me and them, they defiled my holy name by their detestable practices. So I destroyed them in my anger. Now let them put away from me their prostitution and the lifeless idols of their kings, and I will live among them forever.’”

So what he sees in the vision is the return of the glory of the Lord. “The glory of the God of Israel.” He sees the return of the glory of the God of Israel to the temple. It comes through the east gate by which it had earlier departed. He has had a vision previously, when he had seen all the wickedness going on in Jerusalem, chapter 10, verse 19 and following. You read there in Ezekiel 10:18, “Then the glory of the LORD departed from over the threshold of the temple and stopped above the cherubim. While I

watched....” Verse 19, “the cherubim spread their wings and rose from the ground, and as they went, the wheels went with them. They stopped at the entrance to the east gate of the LORD's house, and the glory of the God of Israel was above them.” If you go down to 11:23, he says, “The glory of the LORD went up from within the city and stopped above the mountain east of it. The Spirit lifted me up and brought me to the exiles in Babylonia in the vision given by the Spirit of God.” Earlier he had seen a vision of the glory of the Lord leaving Jerusalem. Now he sees a vision of the glory of the Lord returning to Jerusalem, and God says that “I will live among them forever.”

Purpose of the New Temple

Ezekiel 43:10-12 says something, although it is cryptic, and I'll not settle the problem of interpretation there, but it says something about the purpose of the temple that he had seen. See, verses 10-12 of chapter 43 says, “Son of man, describe the temple to the people of Israel, that they may be ashamed of their sins. Let them consider the plan, and if they are ashamed of all they have done, make known to them the design of the temple--its arrangement, its exits and entrances--its whole design and all its regulations and laws. Write these down before them so that they may be faithful to its design and follow all its regulations. ‘This is the law of the temple: All the surrounding area on top of the mountain will be most holy. Such is the law of the temple.’”

It seems that the temple is an expression of the holiness of the Lord, and that the people are to look at the plan, and in this plan is some concept or idea of the holiness of the Lord, and they are prompted to measure the pattern. That's the way the King James translates the phrase there in the last phrase of verse 10, “measure the pattern.” The NIV says “Let them consider the plan.” It seems, that in some way, the people are to learn the way of holiness so that they may be ashamed of their iniquities, as verse 10 says, by awareness of the details of the structure and use of this visionary temple.

Now, Ezekiel 43:13 and following speak of the altar. It describes the measurements of it. I don't think we need to look at the details of that, that's down through the rest of the chapter. Questions before we go on?

Question: Was there ever a temple that looked like the one described by Ezekiel?

Answer: There was never a temple that existed, whether the original one or the rebuilding at the time of the return from exile or even with Herod's additions, it never followed this particular plan. On the other hand, there are some elements, if you go to chapter 47, I think this is all one piece, you have this river that is flowing from the altar down towards the Dead Sea that gets deeper as it goes. How do you do that? So there are some features that seem to go beyond possibility of construction.

Ezekiel 43:13-27 describe the altar, and that brings us to the end of chapter 43, which is the description of the visionary temple and its various parts. If you look in any standard commentary, you'll find diagrams, let's just say diagrams constructed from the description of the temple itself, and then of the larger temple area with the courtyards and the inner court, the outer court, the wall around it, the sanctuary itself, and the rear. They come up with diagrams like that. So it can be visualized.

b. The Description of Worship in the Visionary Temple -- Ezekiel 44-46

Let's go on to b., "The description of worship in the visionary temple." Again, I don't want to look at this in any careful detail, but just get an idea. In Ezekiel 44:1-31, you have remarks about the Levites and the priests and the Prince. Notice the first four verses: "Then the man brought me back to the outer gate of the sanctuary, the one facing east, and it was shut. The LORD said to me, 'This gate is to remain shut. It must not be opened; no one may enter through it. It is to remain shut because the LORD, the God of Israel, has entered through it.'" It says of the eastern gate. "'The prince himself is the only one who may sit inside the gateway to eat in the presence of the LORD. He is to enter by way of the portico of the gateway and go out the same way.'" Then the man brought me by way of the north gate to the front of the temple. I looked and saw the glory of the LORD filling the temple of the LORD, and I fell facedown."

Closure of the East Gate Until This Prince Will Come

See, those first four verses speak about the closure of the east gate until this prince will come. And there are other references through this section to the prince. The question is, “Who is it?” You might initially wonder, “Is that the Messiah? Is that Christ?” But, it seems clear when you read further that the prince cannot be the Messiah. If you look at 46:2, you read, “The prince is to enter from the outside through the portico of the gateway and stand by the gatepost. The priests are to sacrifice his burnt offering and his fellowship offerings.” This prince apparently doesn’t have priestly rights; “the priests will sacrifice his burnt offerings and fellowship offerings”—that’s 46:2. In 45:22 it says, “On that day, the prince is to provide a bull for the sin offering for himself and for all the people of the land.” He needs to offer a sin offering. “This is what the Sovereign LORD says: ‘If the prince makes a gift from his inheritance to one of his sons, it will also belong to his descendants; it is to be their property by inheritance.’” So the prince has sons.

Identity of the Prince Options

Now, Charles Feinberg, in his commentary, uses the temple as a literal temple that they built. He feels that the prince is a descendent of David who will represent the Messiah governmentally; not the Messiah, but a representative of the government of the Messiah. Some other commentators suggest that the prince is David himself. I think the identity of the prince is very difficult to come to a firm a conclusion on. It seems that he functions in some way as a vice-regent of the Lord in certain functions; he has certain important functions, but he is certainly to be distinguished from the Messiah.

Role of the Levites

Let’s move ahead to Ezekiel chapter 44. Verses 5-9 say no foreigners or aliens are to do menial work in the sanctuary. Verses 10-14: the Levites are to function as keepers of the charge of the house. See verse 10 and following, “The Levites who went far from

me when Israel went astray and who wandered from me after their idols must bear the consequences of their sin. They may serve in my sanctuary, having charge of the gates of the temple and serving in it; they may slaughter the burnt offerings and sacrifices for the people and stand before the people and serve them. But because they served them in the presence of their idols and made the house of Israel fall into sin, therefore I have sworn with uplifted hand that they must bear the consequences of their sin,' declares the Sovereign LORD. 'They are not to come near to serve me as priests or come near any of my holy things or my most holy offerings; they must bear the shame of their detestable practices. Yet I will put them in charge of the duties of the temple and all the work that is to be done in it.'" So the Levites, who were responsible for much of the sinful decline in Israel, are here keepers in the charge of the temple. They do menial tasks and are excluded from the higher priesthood function, which is given in verses 15-17 to priests in the line of Zadok. Verse 15, "But the priests, who are Levites and descendants of Zadok, and who faithfully carried out the duties of my sanctuary when the Israelites went astray from me, are to come near to minister before me...." Zadok had been faithful to David during Absalom's rebellion, and he had anointed Solomon king, and the descendants of Zadok's line will be the priests in this temple.

Verses 28-31 of chapter 44 is provision for the sustenance of the priests, how they will be provided for through offerings and so forth. In chapters 45-46, you have descriptions of the offerings and sacrifices and holy days that are to be observed. I won't go through the details of that, but you have a detailed description of that.

c. The Boundaries and Divisions of the Land in Ezekiel's Vision – Ezekiel 47-48

Let's go on to c., chapters 47-48: "The boundaries and divisions of the land in Ezekiel's vision." Let's begin with chapter 47, first twelve verses because this is the temple river. "The man brought me back to the entrance of the temple, and I saw water coming out from under the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east). The water was coming down from under the south side of the temple, south of the altar. He then brought me out through the north gate and led me around the outside to the

outer gate facing east, and the water was flowing from the south side. As the man went eastward with a measuring line in his hand, he measured off a thousand cubits and then led me through water that was ankle-deep. He measured off another thousand cubits and led me through water that was knee-deep. He measured off another thousand and led me through water that was up to the waist. He measured off another thousand, but now it was a river that I could not cross because the water had risen and was deep enough to swim in--a river that no one could cross. He asked me, 'Son of man, do you see this?' Then he led me back to the bank of the river. When I arrived there, I saw a great number of trees on each side of the river. He said to me, 'This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah, where it enters the Sea. When it empties into the Sea, the water there becomes fresh. Swarms of living creatures will live wherever the river flows. There will be large numbers of fish because this water flows there and makes the salt water fresh; so where the river flows everything will live. Fishermen will stand along the shore; from En Gedi to En Eglaim there will be places for spreading nets. The fish will be of many kinds--like the fish of the Great Sea. But the swamps and marshes will not become fresh; they will be left for salt. Fruit trees of all kinds will grow on both banks of the river. Their leaves will not wither, nor will their fruit fail. Every month they will bear because the water from the sanctuary flows to them. Their fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing.'"

Temple River

So you have this interesting picture of this river. The waters begin at the altar of the temple, the visionary temple, and they go from the temple. There's this man measuring the depth, and as he goes eastward, a thousand cubits (that's about fifteen hundred feet), the water comes up to his ankle. And then, fifteen hundred feet farther downstream, the water is to his knees. Another fifteen hundred feet, and it's up to his hips. Another fifteen hundred feet, it's over his head; he has to swim in it. Now what's interesting is that the growth of the river seems to be unexplainable. It begins as this small stream out of the temple. But at every quarter of a mile it gets deeper and deeper

until it's a large, deep river. It's a rather strange phenomenon. There's no suggestion of tributaries coming in; it's just that the volume seems to increase the farther it goes. So in some unexplained way, this water increases in depth the farther away it gets from the altar of the temple. Then when you read a bit further, verses 9-12, it says that there are trees on the sides of the river, and the water has a healing quality.

Raising the Question of How to Interpret Ezekiel 40-48

Of course you can ask, What is the point of all this? How are we to understand this? Is this to be taken literally or symbolically? Is this descriptive of physical change? What is going to need to take place that would enable a phenomenon like this to occur? Why all the detail about the growth and depth of the river, and the trees and the healing quality of the leaves? I think when you read this, you can't help but think of the similarity at least, though it's not identical, with Revelation 22, where John is shown a river of the water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the land. Certainly the imagery is similar. So we might ask in Ezekiel, as in Revelation, is there something that is symbolically depicted by the flow of this river? Notice in Ezekiel, it's not a complete victory that the river accomplishes. In other words, the picture here is like the one you find elsewhere in the prophets where it says that righteousness will cover the earth as waters cover the sea. This isn't universal because it says that the swamps remains and the marshes will not be totally fresh. That's verse 11. So not everything is going to be healed or made fresh.

Now, as far as interpretation, let's hold off on that until we get to the end of this and try to come to some conclusions. But subsequent to that in chapter 47, you have descriptions of the boundaries of the land for the different tribes and for the land as a whole. And it's a rather remarkable description as far as boundaries are concerned. This is taken from Alexander's commentary. That's pretty much what it'll look like according to these boundaries. You notice one thing about the boundary extended at the one end. It is going way above Damascus. I'm sure that this kind of vision in the present political climate is not helping in solving the disputes over there. So it is quite a radically

different description of boundaries than those of the original Canaan. Then it also describes provisions for the prince and for the priests and the Levites. You get boundaries for the territory of the prince, the priests' portion, the Levites, the sanctuary. But again, moving from the Jordan to the Mediterranean, the boundaries cut straight across.

So that runs all the way through chapter 48. So in these 9 chapters, 40-48, you have a picture, starting with a picture of the temple. It's all visionary. Then worship in the temple, and the kinds of sacrifices that are being brought, a gate reserved for the prince, kept closed until he comes, and then this great river that begins at the sanctuary and goes out. Finally, the vision of the land divided by tribal allotments. So that brings us to a question of interpretation: What is this all about?

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Final edit by Dr. Perry Phillips
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