

Robert Vannoy, Major Prophets, Lecture 30—Ezekiel #6

Ways and Problems of Interpreting Ezekiel 40-48

2. Suggestions Concerning the Interpretation of Ezekiel 40-48

Let's go to 2. on our outline: "Suggestions concerning the interpretation of Ezekiel chapters 40-48." We've gotten the idea of the big picture of these nine chapters. The question is: what is it all about? You have a continuous picture of a visionary city and a visionary temple and this visionary situation in which a river flows out of the temple that brings healing and food to many, but not completely, because the marshes still remain salty. Then there's a vision of the division of the land among the people. Now, I think it's clear that God is giving Ezekiel and the people of his day a picture of the future. Not necessarily a clear picture, not necessarily something easily understood, but at least something. This vision is important as something that would give encouragement and hope for the future. Remember where they are; they're in exile. Jerusalem's been destroyed. They could tend to be very despondent and despairing and yet, here's this visionary picture of something that God is going to do in the future. So, there's hope for the future.

Vannoy's Evidence for a Literal Interpretation

Now the basic question is: Is Ezekiel trying to say that in a very literal, physical sense Jerusalem is going to look like this in the future? Or, is this a symbolic picture which says in symbolic language that God is going to continue to work with his people, that he's not finished with his people? He has not failed even though Israel is going into captivity. I think in the favor of the literal view are the many exact dimensions given. There are an awful lot of details and specific references. There are exact dimensions; there are references given to duties of Levites and priests. There are sacrifices. Those kind of details seem to favor that this is something that is going to happen in a literal way in the future. If that is the case, it would seem to be a picture then of something that would take place in the

Millennium because certainly this was not something that was realized in the post-exilic return. The rebuilding of the temple after the return from exile certainly didn't measure up to the picture here in Ezekiel.

I will not qualify that at this point but come back to this later. It's not something that was really realized in the post-exilic return. Yet someone like J. Barton Payne says that this isn't a prediction but it's an injunction or instruction to the return from exile and that the return from exile just didn't live up to what they were supposed to do. Payne's view is not that this is a picture of what's going to happen in the Millennium in the literal way, but it's a picture of what should've happened in the return from exile but didn't happen. I'll come back to that later.

But if this is not a picture of a literal temple that will take place in the Millennial Period but rather a symbolic picture of things that would give Israel hope for the future, I don't think that that would disprove millennial teaching in the sense that there are other passages that speak quite clearly of a Millennial Period and Israel's return to the land. Whether or not this passage does it doesn't really necessarily affect the general biblical teaching about the Millennial Period.

I think it's also possible that you could use the analogy here of mountain ranges in the distance. What Ezekiel may be depicting here is something, that in a symbolic way, blends the future together where there may be intervals of time in between, but all sort of blended into one picture. In other words, Ezekiel may be describing something of the spiritual blessings that God is going to bring to pass whether in the Church, Millennium, or the eternal state. God is going to continue to work with his people; he is going to dwell in the midst of his people and he's going to do that in the church, he's going to do that in the Millennial Period, and he's going to do that in the eternal state. Of course, it will be in slightly different ways, but all of that is brought together perhaps in this composite, symbolic picture of God's future work with his people.

3 Ways of Interpreting Ezekiel 40-48

So it seems to me that there are three general ways of viewing this section: you could say, first, it is a literal picture that is to be fulfilled in the Millennial Period. That's one possibility. The second possibility is that it is a symbolic depiction of the truth that God is not through with his people. He has great purposes that he will yet accomplish for them in the future, and glimpses of that are seen here in symbolic language. So that is the symbolic view. The third approach would be that it's a vision of the future of God's people with certain aspects of it having a physical, literal meaning and certain aspects having a spiritual, symbolic meaning. It sort of combines the first two with certain aspects having a physical, literal meaning and certain aspects having a symbolic meaning.

1. Some Literal and Some Symbolic Composite Interpretation

Now those are the three possibilities. The first, the literal one, I think in favor of that view are the specific details. The problem with the literal view is the picture of the river. The river seems to favor the symbolic view. The river is an important feature, but it's hard to fit into a literal picture of Israel's worship. It seems to be more symbolic than a literal river. It seems to me a reasonable interpretation of the river is that it is a symbolic picture of life that comes from the altar and issues from the altar. I would say then it is not the blood of bulls and goats that prefigured the death of Christ. It is the influence that flows from the work of Christ on the cross. That influence began small; it was ankle deep, and then it spread to Rome and within a few centuries it became the religion of the empire. So its influence grew. And you see leaves for the healing of nations, perhaps the beneficial effects of the Christian teachings. Yet the marshes still remain; it's not universal. It doesn't completely change everything. But it shows the spreading influence of the gospel message.

Now if you take that kind of an approach with the river, then what about the rest of it. There you get into the problem of making an arbitrary distinction. How

do you avoid that. If you're going to take some of it as symbolic and some of it as literal, how do you decide which? I'm not sure I have final answers for that. But it seems to me that the approach that maybe has the most to be said for it is to allow for some of it to be literal and some to be symbolic. One should also allow at the same time, fulfillment, not just in one period, either the Church, the millennial or the eternal state, but to see the possibility of some blending of that. You have this sort of composite. The primary thing holding this together is that God is going to continue to work in the midst of his people.

Ezekiel 40-48 and Premillennialism

Now the question that has already been asked: sometimes it is said that a Premillennial view of Christ's return in which this temple will be rebuilt in a literal way, and sacrifices will be offered, violates the finality of the sacrifice of Christ. So then it is alleged that the Premillennial teaching cannot be correct. Let me just comment on that briefly. I would say that the idea that sacrifices will be re-established in the Millennial Period is primarily derived from this passage in Ezekiel. It is then primarily based on the conclusion that this passage in Ezekiel is literal for a picture of worship in the Millennial Period. I don't think that this is a necessary conclusion from this section of Ezekiel. I don't think it is a necessary component of the Premillennial view of Christ's return. It seems to me that the Millennium is clearly taught in Ezekiel 36 and 37, for example, that we just looked at, where Israel will return to the land, the king will rule over them and establish his sanctuary. But there's nothing said there about reinstatement of sacrificial worship. I don't think Millennial teaching rests on Ezekiel 40-48. The question is, in what way do you take Ezekiel 40-48 and how might you fit it into a Premillennial view of eschatology? So, I don't think Millennial teaching rests on these chapters and whether or not they give a literal picture of sacrificial worship in the Millennium. It may have nothing to do with whether or not a Premillennial view of the return of Christ is a correct view.

Ellison Contra Future Sacrifices

Now look at your citations page 60-61. Ellison in *Ezekiel: The man and his Message*, says, “For those who take this section seriously as divine revelation and not merely as Ezekiel’s program for the future closed in vision form, the sacrifices provide a real crux in its interpretation. Make the sacrifices symbolic, and the temple becomes symbolic too. Take the temple literally, and we have to agree that there will be animal sacrifices in the Millennium. I have no difficulty in the vision of the sacrifice in a symbolic temple, for it was the guarantee to Ezekiel that the great principles of divine redemption remain good to the end of time. But I require stronger evidence that this vision to accept--against all the weight of New Testament evidence--that the Levitical sacrifices will be re-introduced. Presumably, all who regard the temple as millennial and take the sacrifices as literally would subscribe to the statement in the Scofield Bible that doubtless these offerings will be memorials. Looking back to the cross as the offerings just as under the old covenant there were memorials looking forward to the cross. In neither case did the animal sacrifices have power to put away sin. Though I fully recognize their sincerity, I must beg them to realize that those who cannot follow with them are no despisers of the scriptures. They read Hebrews to mean: the abolition of the Aaronic priesthood under the sacrifices is final and forever. In addition, they cannot see why when the bread and wine have met the symbolic needs of nearly a thousand generations of Christians the Millennium will need more. The king has returned, and the curse on nature has been lifted. Why should the animal creations still lay down its life? The fact is that the ultra-dispensationalist is apt to so divide up the revelation of God, but has failed to see it’s completeness. Above all, he fails to realize that while human response to the divine revelation may ebb and flow, the revelation itself never turns back but always deepens.

There will be neither less knowledge nor blessing than now. Indeed, I find it hard to believe that it is meant seriously- when I am told that our present

freedom for all to worship equally, in all places, will be replaced by a position in which man's privilege to worship will depend and measure on his geographic relationship to an earthly Jerusalem. The suggestions of supersonic aircraft bringing pilgrims to Jerusalem while others are sharing their worship service by television is tragic." I don't know who made those suggestions, but undoubtedly, someone has. So Ellison takes a Premillennial view, but he's quite strongly opposed to viewing this as reinstatement of animal sacrifice.

J. B. Payne's 5 Ways to Interpret Ezekiel 40-48

J. Barton Payne, just under Ellison there, gives five proposals for interpretation. He says, "Five proposed interpretations dominate current discussions. The prophet's words were, one, a prediction for the past and they were literal. The position of literalism. It was simply a misjudgment on Ezekiel's part. Plans which he *expected* to be carried out." So the first view, the critical view, predicts for the past literal, but it was not fulfilled. That would be a critical view.

"Two is an injunction for the past, literal, but not carried out." That's different than a prediction not carried out, that's an injunction. Literal but not carried out. "An evangelical position is that, Ezekiel's command, though he refrains from stating it as a prediction, the prophet's emphasis falls upon instruction to the returnees how to build it." Payne's view is this is an instruction for how the post-exilic temple is to be built in the sixth century B.C. You see the dry bones and chapter 36 was return from exile. This is an injunction. However, the way he gets around the river problem, is he sees the injunction as being chapters 40-46, for the 6th century B.C., while chapters 47 and 48 where you have the river and the division of the land, he sees as millennial. So he would divide in the section between chapter 46 and 47. For Payne, chapters 47 and 48 are millennial. Chapters 40-46 are injunctions to those returning from exile but not fulfilled.

“The third view, a prediction of the present and figurative.” In other words, this is a prediction of what’s going on right now. It’s symbolic then of the Christian Church. He labels “the prediction of the present” as figurative and amillennial or at least it is in accordance with that position. A deliberately symbolic description of the worship of the Christian Church, though this approach amounts to simple allegorization.

“Four is a prediction, of the future, literal, placing it then in the Millennial Period. A prediction of the future, literal, held by some Premillennialists. This is associated with those who are looking for rebuilding of the temple for the Second Coming of Christ. Though the Messiah’s temple of the future, in this view is identified with the rights of literal blood atonement that characterized Ezekiel’s structure in 43:20, then Beasley-Murray seems correct when he adds this view is challenged by the New Testament. The atonement of our Lord has nullified such sacrifices forever, as we read in Hebrews 10:18.

“Fifthly, a figurative prediction of the future, the new heavens and the new earth.” A picture of the new heavens and the new earth after the final judgment. He says, this is an amillennial position, but I don’t see why that can’t equally be harmonized with a Premillennial view. I don’t think it’s necessarily amillennial, although it maybe is often held by amillennials. In fact, J. Oliver Buswell holds that view: new heavens, new earth are symbolical, and he’s Premillennial. Some see this as a prediction of the future, but still figurative. They picture the new heavens and the new earth after the final judgment to the extent that its essential truth will be embodied in the new age under forms suitable to the new Christian dispensation (Revelation 21-22:5). But then you have Revelation 21:22, maintaining the absence of any temple in the new Jerusalem. In light of the objections to the latter three of the above proposals, a past interpretation deserves preference. Ezekiel himself, moreover, stated quite clearly, “Show them the house, the house of Israel, the measure and the pattern, that they may keep all the ordinances thereof and do them” (Ezekiel 43:10-11). Over which Ellison exclaims,

“Can this possibly refer to any other time than the prophet’s own?”

Buswell’s Approach

One more quotation. Look at page 58 of your citations, from Buswell, *Systematic Theology*, volume 2. He says, “It’s difficult to segregate the two kinds of material in Ezekiel 40-48.” Now in the context of where this paragraph is taken from in his book, the two kinds of material are description and admonition. “It is difficult to segregate the two kinds of material in Ezekiel 40-48. Chapter 40 is clearly part of the division of perfection; chapter 41:7-11 is quite definitely an exhortation addressed to Ezekiel’s contemporaries.” So you see, chapter 40 would be the description and chapter 41, admonition, or exhortation. “The prince of 41-42 brings an offering for himself and for all the people, but it’s not the Messiah. For this would contradict Hebrews 7: 27-28 and the prince is rebuked in chapters 41-47 and elsewhere in this section of Ezekiel’s prophecy. I should therefore very tentatively suggest that the following portions of Ezekiel 40-48 predict the conditions of the new heaven and the new earth.” Then he lists the sections. “Similarly, I suggest the following portions are addressed directly to Ezekiel’s contemporaries. As I have said above, this classification of material is very tentative. There are difficulties connected with it. I should make it clear that my suggestion that the eschatological argument in Ezekiel 40-48 has to do with the new heavens and the new earth is by no means essential to the Premillennial view. It is simply a suggestion which I think is acceptable. I believe that the suggestion is harmonious with all the data found in the scriptures.

Levite Problem

Whether eschatological predictions of Ezekiel 40-48 are to be fulfilled in the Millennium, as the majority of Premillennial Bible teachers hold, or in the new heavens and the new earth, as I have suggested, in either case, Ezekiel’s prediction of the future as the establishment of a greatly magnified and glorified Levitical

system of sacrifices is seen to be a problem by many Bible students. I would suggest two possible solutions to the problem, and either one of these would seem perfectly consistent with all the data at present available. One: the Levitical form of worship was instituted by the Lord as a form to be observed forever. This is indicated emphatically and repeated frequently. Yet, the New Testament writers, inspired by the Holy Spirit, have no difficulty in teaching that the ritual law's fulfilled in Christ. This is the main theme of the Epistle of Hebrews. When we accept the blood of Christ as our atonement for sin and observe the Lord's Supper in genuine faith, we are keeping the Passover as God intended it to be kept in our day. 1 Corinthians 5:7: Christ as our Passover, it seems to me, is quite consistent with understanding Ezekiel prophesying the new heavens and the new earth, but prophesying at the time when the appropriate form of worship was the Levitical ritual, and he's given his vision in terms of that ritual. It is highly magnified and glorified. It would seem to me quite consistent to understand that just as the Passover and sin offering are fulfilled in the atonement of Christ so is Ezekiel's predictions of the glory of the temple with all of its ordinances to be fulfilled in the new heavens and the new earth in terms of the immediate presence of Christ and in the perfect felicity of the community of Christ with the redeemed. In the new Jerusalem John saw no temple, not because there was none, but because, as he says, the Lord God Almighty and the lamb are the temple.

“Two, they are at odds, on the other hand, with the confidence of the Premillennial Bible teachers who insist that the forms of worship described by Ezekiel's vision must be literally fulfilled either in the Millennium or in the new heavens and the new earth. Premillennialists generally explain that the reestablishment of the Levitical ritual after the completion of the atonement of Christ on the cross at Calvary would no more contradict the fact that the atonement is completed than does our present celebration of the Lord's supper. Those who hold to a literal reestablishment of the sacrificial system described in Ezekiel generally agree that the significance can only be a memorial and could not

possibly have the significances of the sacrifices that pointed forward to the coming of Christ. As for myself, I am inclined to the former of these two interpretations, but I see nothing inconsistent in the later.”

I think I would share sentiments with Buswell to the extent that it seems to me that it's more likely that this sacrificial element here is symbolical rather than to be taken literally as reinstatement of sacrifices. But I wouldn't be dogmatic on it. Buswell says, “I am inclined to the former, but I see nothing inconsistent in the later.” If sacrifices are to be reinstated certainly in the sense of a memorial, they take nothing away from the efficacy of the sacrifice of Christ. It's a possibility, but Ellison says that revelation moves forward, it doesn't turn back [e.g., to Old Testament forms], and it seems to me that that is consistent with the rest of Scripture. It's a difficult question.

Although Payne sees some sections there in which he lists as addressed to Ezekiel's contemporaries, I would say, the majority of dispensational Premillennialists would be for a literal prediction, a future Millennial Period and the reinstatement of sacrifices as memorial. I'd think any composite picture of the future will contain elements of the present period and this includes the Millennial Period, and the new heavens and new earth. It would seem, however, that if you are going to re-institute that function of the Levites and then of the Zadokite line of priests that there would have to be some basis for that in Scripture. I don't know if there is anything to prohibit the rebuilding of the temple now because I don't think that the prince can be equated with the Messiah. So, where is the Messiah in a functional role as described there? You read anecdotal reports about some almost underground movements in Israel laying plans to rebuild the temple, but I don't know how much substance there is to a lot of that; but it wouldn't surprise me if there are such people and they would base a lot of that on in this section of Ezekiel.

River Problem

I think the river is a big problem to a literal position, and you see what Payne does with that. He pushes chapters 47 and 48 into the Millennial Period and takes the 40-46, where you have the temple and the rituals, officers and functionaries, as post-exilic. You could push the river part of the vision forward, perhaps. But to me, this vision seems like one continuous picture. So, it's hard to know. Is that legitimate? It does go in a symbolic direction with the possibility of blending the periods of history and of God's future work. For sure, I think it's difficult to interpret this vision.

I've heard some stories about people trying to enter the East Gate, but there is in chapter 44 that reference to the East Gate being closed until the prince comes. Today in Jerusalem the East Gate, called the Golden Gate is still shut. Now the NIV Study Bible note there says, it is sealed shut as a result of a later, but possibly belated tradition. Thing is, you know, you can read this statement here in chapter 44 and just make the equation that the present gate is what is being described here, but remember that wall was built in the Middle Ages sometime and this is a visionary temple. It may be that the two really don't have anything to do with each another. Although, the fact that that East Gate is sealed, I'm not sure when it was sealed exactly and what the reason for it was, but it may be related to this text here in some way. I think you have to be careful about connecting that with what is said here. Obviously it is a different role from the present time.

Well that concludes our discussion this semester of the major prophets.

This is the concluding lecture 30 of Dr. Robert Vannoy's course on the Major Prophets.

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Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt
Final edit by Dr. Perry Phillips
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