

Dr. Leslie Allen, Ezekiel, Lecture 21, Visionary Tour of the New Temple, Ezekiel 40:1-42:20

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This is Dr. Leslie Allen in his teaching on the book of Ezekiel. This is session 21, Part 7, Visionary Tour of the New Temple. Ezekiel 40:1-42:20.

We come now to the last part of the book of Ezekiel, which extends from chapters 40 through 48. The first section I want to study today is from 40, verse 1, through 42, verse 20. What we have here is a visionary tour of the new temple.

This is the temple vision. It gives a detailed description of the new temple. Let's first look at the overall structure of this section.

There are five main parts. The first is an introduction in chapter 40 and verses 1 through 5. We are introduced to the vision and we have a mention of the perimeter wall. Then the second part runs from 46 through 37.

These are the three gatehouses mentioned here. Gatehouses to the outer court of the temple, three gatehouses to the outer court of the temple, and then three to the inner court. And this is rounded off, in fact, in verse 47, this particular section.

But in between, we have a supplementary description of the rooms near the gatehouses: 40, 48 through, 38 through 46. Then, the third section is in 40, 48 through 41, 4, and it describes the temple building itself. This is set at the beginning of this vision narrative, which is the briefest part.

There's a solemn reticence about it that conveys awe and wonder. There is, in fact, a supplement to this part, but we have to wait for it. We have to wait until 41, the second half of verse 15 through verse 26.

And this describes the woodwork in the temple. But before that, the fourth section, the fourth part, in 41:5 through 15a, tells us about the buildings that adjoin the temple and describes them. That description is supplemented in 42:1 through 14, with mention of two more buildings at the back of, behind the temple.

Then, lastly, the vision draws to a conclusion in 42:15 to 20, with further description of the perimeter wall. The vision of the new temple will, in fact, continue into chapter 44, and the whole is a counterpart and contrast to what we read earlier in the book in chapters 8 through 11 in the first half of the book. There, God took Ezekiel in a trance to the old temple, still standing then, and showed him around.

That vision was a negative experience, revealing the pagan practices being carried on in the temple area. This vision is a positive counterpart. It reflects the standpoint of salvation rather than of judgment.

It represents a new start. Here, God takes Ezekiel in a trance to a very high mountain and shows him a brand new temple. An angel, an angelic guide, takes him around the temple precincts.

Look at verse 3 of chapter 40. When he brought me there, a man whose appearance shone like bronze was there. He had a linen cord and a measuring reed in his hand, and he was standing in the gateway.

He's carrying a papyrus measuring rod to take shorter measurements because his task is to measure each particular part of the temple area and report to Ezekiel how large it is. He also has a tape for longer measurements, and he's going to use both extensively throughout this tour. This vision presents a massive architectural detail.

But at the very beginning, in verse 2, he brought me in visions of God to the land of Israel and set me down on a very high mountain that was a structure like a city to the south. And here is this great structure, this building which looks so big, this building area, that it looks like a city. We have a date at the very beginning in verse 1, and in this seventh and last part of the book, it's like a number of the earlier parts in having a special date.

In fact, it represents April 573 BC. It's the latest date in time apart from that out-of-order reference to 571 that we had back in 29 and verse 17. And here in verse 1, it says, after the city was struck down, and there's a, in the chronology, there's this poignant reference to the destruction of the city back in 587, and in itself that hints at a hopeful reversal and paves the way for it.

We also have mentioned in verse 1 of the hand of the Lord that pressure upon Ezekiel's head was a warning that God was going to tell him something special, and in this case, involving a vision as in chapters 1 and 3 and 8 and 37. Ezekiel is taken to this high mountain and shows this big architectural structure that looks like a city, with a perimeter wall and gatehouses. He's shown the wall in verse 5, and we're going to return to more details about the wall at the end of the vision, so that's a sort of frame for this whole section.

We're giving him information about the basic measuring unit. It was six long cubits, and we can work out that a long cubit would be about 20.6 inches long. So, we can work out what each of the measurements is in modern terms. And in describing the height of the wall, it was just over 10 feet high.

This was the measurement from the outside where Ezekiel is, but later on, we're going to be told that the ground inside was three feet higher than on the other side of the wall, and so from the inside, it was about seven feet tall this perimeter wall. And so here we have this first section, this introduction, verses 1 through 5. The second part of the tour is longer, covered in verses 40, chapter 40, verses 6 through to 37. And there's an introduction now to these massive gatehouses inset in the perimeter wall, three of them, on the east, north, and south sides of the wall, respectively.

These gave access to the outer court of the temple. Three more gatehouses led to the inner court. There were no gatehouses on the west side for either court.

Ezekiel is shown the gatehouse on the east side of the perimeter wall. All the gatehouses had the same features, except for one of them we shall come to eventually, and so the description in verses 6 through 16 serves for the rest as well. And where these external gatehouses are concerned, leading to the outer court, there were seven steps up to the gatehouse, up to the higher ground of the outer court, though we're not told that detail until later in verse 22 with respect to the north gatehouse.

The gatehouses, as I say, were massive structures. Their internal measurements were 86 feet by 43 feet, in terms of yards, 28 yards by 14 yards, each gatehouse enormous. And that was their internal measurements, not their external ones.

The actual gate was presumably at the outer end. A corridor ran through the gatehouse with rooms on either side, separated from the corridor by a barrier of some kind. Each of the rooms had windows, and these gatehouses, in fact, correspond to the typical pre-exilic city gatehouses that were excavated in Palestine, with the same design.

In verses 17 through 19, Ezekiel is given a short walking tour of the outer court. He's shown a total of 30 rooms along the inside of the perimeter wall, probably eight each along the east, north, and south sides and six on the west side. And then he's shown the north gatehouse in verses 20 through 23, and then the south one in verses 24 through 27.

They're just the same as the other one we had described in detail. Then he's taken across the outer court to the south gatehouse, leading into the inner court, and that gatehouse is measured as scrupulously as the others in verses 28 through 31. This inner gatehouse has eight steps leading up to it, and so we're getting higher and higher, and that inner court is higher than the outer court, which was higher than the ground outside the temple area.

Next, the angel escorts the prophet across to the right, to the inner gatehouse on the east side, and then across to his left to the inner north gatehouse, all this in verses 32 through 37. The angel's measuring work will be concluded in verse 47, where he measures the inner court, the area between the inner gates, and the actual temple building. There is also mention of an altar that stood in the middle of the inner court between the east gate and the temple.

This altar for sacrifice is going to be just mentioned in passing because it's going to be given its own description later on in chapter 43 and verses 13 to 17 before the dedication of this altar. In between verses 37 and 47 comes some supplementary information relating to the gatehouses around the inner court. I call it supplementary because it abandons the full touring and measuring styles of the main sections and just gives a flat listing and specifications as a description.

It was probably added later. Verses 38 to 43 give extra information just about the north gatehouse. It was different from the other gatehouses because at the top of the steps was a separate room in the vestibule. and this room was where sacrificial animals for the burned offering were to be washed after they'd been slaughtered, and the vestibule itself was where the slaughtering of the animals was to take place, and the carcasses were to be placed on four tables in the vestibule before being taken across to the altar.

There were also four more tables in a landing just outside the vestibule where the instruments were necessary that the priests had to use. Verses 44 through 36 mention two rooms on either side of the inner east gatehouse extending along the east side of the inner court and large enough to adjoin the north and south gatehouses. In verse 44, I'll say in passing that the New RSV mentions chambers for the singers, which does represent the Hebrew text, but the NIV rightly opts for the reading, a very similar looking reading in the Hebrew, and has two chambers, and in the context that is what it must mean, two chambers, no mention of the singers supposed to be here.

These rooms, we're told, are meant for the use of priests. The one on the south side for the priests who did the slaughtering and also carried out general temple duties, which is what we shall read is also their duty in 44 verse 11, but here they're just called the priests who have charge of the temple, and the room on the north side of the inner east gate was reserved for the priests who did the actual sacrificing at the altar, and these are called Zadokite priests, a special line within the tribe of Levi. In 44:10, the other priests were called Levites rather than priests.

40:48 through 41:4 stands at the heart of the vision here because it's devoted to the temple building itself that stands at the heart of this temple area. It was very much like Solomon's temple, as it is described in 1 Kings 6-7, and was about the same size, just slightly larger. It had three rooms, a porch in front, a covered porch, and then

two rooms beyond, a nave and another room at the back, which is called in 41:4 the most holy place or the holy of holies, and there were evidently two freestanding columns on either side of the front end of the porch corresponding to the pillars which are named Joachim and Boaz in Solomon's temple according to 1 Kings 7. The angel takes Ezekiel into the nave, and Ezekiel can go there as a priest, but he isn't allowed into the Holy of Holies and the angel goes by himself to do the measuring of the Holy of Holies, and he finds it just 34 feet square.

The fourth section in 41:5-15a first in verses 5-8, gives information about three annex buildings that closely adjoin the temple on three sides, the north, west, and south, but they were built separately from the temple itself. There was a gap between these annexes and the temple building, and there were just wooden beams between them. These three annexes were each three stories high, but they weren't so high as the temple building itself. They had an outside stairway, and each contained 30 rooms.

Solomon's temple according to 1 Kings 6:5-6 had similar annexes. Verses 9-11 go on to mention open yards that lay on the north and south sides of this temple complex made up of the temple and its annexes. Beyond the yards on the north and south lay other rooms called, in verse 10, the chambers of the court.

Verses 12-15a describe another open yard on the west side behind the temple and beyond that another building, and it's never explained what that building is for, and perhaps it was just there to protect the holy of holies which was in front of it at the back of the temple itself. We have a surprise in verses 41:15b through 26 because we get more information about the inside of the temple and the details of its woodwork, and this is actually supplementary to 40:48 through 41:4. Again, it falls outside the touring and measuring styles of the rest of the vision.

It's strange that it was placed here. Why wasn't it placed after 41:4? It may indicate that it was placed here as the very last stage in the vision. This supplement mentions the paneling all around the temple inside and its windows set high above the top of the annexes outside, so we're given details about the woodwork.

The wooden paneling was decorated with carved reliefs. There were figures of cherubim or sphinxes and designs of palm trees in an alternating pattern all around the walls, just as there was in Solomon's temple, according to 1 Kings 6. The palm trees represent the tree of life, and the cherubim stands for God's heavenly attendance. They had two faces, each looking sideways, and this is a two-dimensional representation of four faces, such as the cherubim had in Ezekiel 10:14. They're all seeing.

They can look in every direction, protecting God's holiness from intrusion. These are the designs for this wooden paneling. Verses 21b and 22 mention a wooden piece of furniture in the nave.

It's initially called an altar, but the angel who speaks here calls it a table. It's the table for the showbread or for the bread of the presence like the one that stood in Solomon's temple according to 1 Kings 7:48. And I'll just read that reference. It's referred to in a much briefer way here but in 7:48 it mentions the golden table.

The wooden table was covered in gold, in Solomon's case. The golden table for the bread of the presence, which in older versions is the showbread. And this, of course, corresponds to what we read in the description of the sanctuary in the wilderness.

We have a very similar description, and we're told in Leviticus 24 and verses 5 through 9, especially in verse 8, that once a week on the Sabbath, loaves of bread were put on this table as an offering for God. And then Exodus 25:23 to 40 gives more details about it as an item in the wilderness tabernacle. It may be called an altar here, as well as a table, to discourage any idea that God actually ate those loaves.

They were sacrificial; they were an offering. 42:1 through 14 is actually a supplement to 41:5 through 15a, and it carries on from there with extra information about buildings close to the temple. It starts with the tour continuing in 42:1 but doesn't mention the angel actually measuring.

The angel does speak in verses 13 to 14 but we get comparatively little information compared with the other parts about measuring and touring. 41:12 had mentioned a building directly behind the temple on its west side, separated by a yard. Ezekiel was never taken there, an area so close to the holy of holies, but now he's taken out of the inner court through the north inner gate into the outer court and led west to look at another building on the north side of that building directly behind the temple.

It had three stories of rooms and an outside stairway, and we're told about a similar building on the south side of that central building. In verses 13 through 14, the angel tells the prophet what these two buildings, with their separate rooms, were meant for. They were meant mainly for the priest's eating arrangements.

Most of the offerings, animals, and vegetables brought to the temple were passed on to the food supply and, in verses, most of the ES. So, these two buildings provided a storage area for this food presented as a gift to God and then passed on to the priests; we have storage areas in this building and also eating places, and the same for the other building. They also contained vestries or changing rooms for the priests.

The priest evidently wore special clothing when officiating in the inner court, and they had to change into regular clothes when they went into the outer court, which was accessible to the people and was less holy than the inner court. 42, 15 through 20 are the fifth and final section of this part of the vision. This section forms the conclusion of the description of the whole temple area.

There's a return to the perimeter wall of chapter 40 in verse 5. Ezekiel is taken outside through the outer eastern gate and the whole wall is measured on its four sides. Each side proves to be nearly 560 feet long or 286 yards and the whole temple area is a square and so that means that the whole area was 17 acres in extent. 17 acres represented this temple area from the standpoint of the perimeter wall.

In closing, we are told the purpose of the wall is to make a separation between the holy and the common, and holiness is here understood in spatial terms. The whole temple area is regarded as a holy place dedicated to God and the wall sets apart the temple area as a special place. It sets it apart from the common area outside, and within the temple area, there were gradations of holiness.

The room at the far end of the temple itself was called by the angel the most holy place or the holy of holies in 41:4, and the height of the temple area gradually rose. The temple area, first of all, was set on a very high mountain. We were told at the beginning of this visionary account in 42, and then the outer gate houses rose by seven steps from that outer area, and then the inner gate houses rose by another eight steps, and in fact, the temple building rose by 10 steps and so the whole structure was like a three-tier wedding cake rising up in ever greater holiness.

The temple area was a grand embodiment of God's holiness and a material expression of his holiness. In Solomon's temple, the people were allowed in both the outer and inner courts, but here, they evidently had to stay in the outer court, and only the priests could go into the inner court. Moreover, even Ezekiel, though a priest, was not allowed inside the most holy room.

The furthest that the priests could go was in the nave of the temple, and in these different ways, the temple is celebrated as a monument to God's holiness. It's portrayed as a magnificent symbol of God's holiness. We might ask what the purpose is of the vision within the book, and if we glance back to 37 in verse 26, God had said, I will set my sanctuary among them, and those closing verses were intended as a sort of introduction to the topics of the vision in 40 to 48, and so the vision of the temple is intended to flesh out that divine promise, I will set my sanctuary among them.

In Hebrew the word sanctuary is literally a holy place and so the accent on holiness in the vision is appropriate. The vision continues beyond chapter 42 and indeed it must. In the judgment counterpart to this vision, in chapters 8 through 11, the temple had

been shown to be defiled by pagan worship, and so God's glory had dramatically abandoned the temple and the city to their fate, to be destroyed.

Now, we read of this architectural reversal, but it's not complete. The temple stands empty, ready for use but so brand new it has not yet been put to use. Something vital is missing, not just priests and people and worship and offerings, but God's glorious presence, so next time, we will find that essential ingredient supplied so that the temple can be put into operation.

In this vision so far, we Christian readers have been told more than we ever wanted to know about the new temple as a material realization of the theological concept of God's holiness, and we wonder what we are to make of this lengthy account as Christians, especially as when we come to the end of our Bibles in Revelation 21-22 we find the text pointedly tells us that there was to be no temple in the new Jerusalem and so this whole account in 40-42 will need to be addressed at a later point from a New Testament standpoint. For now, we need to think about the message in its Old Testament setting. First, this vision would have been a beacon of hope for Ezekiel, a priest prophet but a priest without a temple.

A priest without a temple is like a bird without a nest, and the angelic tour guide brought a message to Ezekiel in chapter 40 in verse 4, mortal, look closely and listen attentively and set your mind to all that I shall show you. So, it was first of all a message to Ezekiel himself, but then beyond that, it was also a message to the exiles because verse 4 goes on to say for you were brought here in order it might show it to you, and then it says declare all that you see to the house of Israel. The vision so far as Ezekiel told it must have been music in the ears of the exiles.

The exiles remembered the old temple, a sad memory of an area ransacked and burnt to the ground. It had been their spiritual home, a means of grace because a means of access to God in worship, and the Psalms preserve older memories of the delight of pilgrims as they attended festival services and brought their offerings to the temple. Psalm 84 has something to say about this in verses 1, 2, and 4. How lovely is your dwelling place O Lord of hosts, my soul longs indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord, my heart and flesh sing for joy, happy are those who live in your house ever singing your praise.

And then Psalm 43 is speaking in a very similar vein. 43 verses 3 and 4. Oh, send out your light and your truth, let them lead me, let them bring me to your holy hill into your dwelling, then I will go to the altar of God to guard my exceeding joy, and I will praise you with the harp, oh God my God. And then lastly, a little earlier in 42 and verse 4. I remember these things: how I went with the throng and led them in procession to the house of God with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude-keeping festival.

And so, these are all the happier memories that preceded the destruction of that first temple. So the exiles would have relished all these details like every note in the musical score of a favorite piece of music in the case of a musician. They would have drunk in every detail of this intricate account.

This is what it would mean for God to set his sanctuary among them once more. The exiles would have appreciated those massive gatehouses because the gatehouses in the first temple had an important role, and presumably, they have the same one here, though we're not told, especially the outer gatehouses leading to the outer court. They were the line of demarcation between the holy ground and common ground.

But they had a particular point because they were a security checkpoint whereby pilgrims were cross-examined, and it was ensured that they had a good status before they were allowed to worship in the temple itself. And so those guards there had an important point, and we'll be reading about them later. But Psalm 24 asks this question: who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? Who shall stand in his holy place? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully.

These would be the ones that the temple guards would allow in through the gatehouses into the outer court. And this reminds us of a similar prescription in the book of Revelation, chapter 21 and verse 27. There's no new temple there but there is a new Jerusalem and what does it say about that new Jerusalem? Nothing unclean shall enter it nor anyone that practices abomination or falsehood but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

And so, there's this security check going into that new city as there was in the case of the pilgrims going into the temple long before. Next time we will be studying chapters 43 through 46.

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