

## **A Rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem? A Look at Ezekiel's Vision in Chapters 40-48<sup>1</sup>**

In light of periodic calls to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple (Time to Rebuild the Temple?), the matter of whether or not this will come to pass is part and parcel of the on-going debate about events associated with the end times and the return of Jesus Christ. The very possibility of rebuilding the Jerusalem Temple raises a number of serious theological questions which ought to be addressed, especially in light of the dispensational expectation of a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem at the dawn of the supposed seven-year tribulation period, which then functions as a center of worship during the millennial age.

As for the possibility of the temple actually being rebuilt, I am one who says “never say never” about future world events. I have no idea what will happen over the long run in Jerusalem and Israel. That said, I do not think such a thing is even remotely likely, given the current tensions in Jerusalem over control and access to the Temple Mount, much less the long-term political circumstances of doing so. Should Israel develop the religious and political will to occupy the Temple Mount (something unforeseeable at this point in time) and eventually take the steps necessary to demolish the Al-Aqsa Mosque (which is the third holiest site in Islam), the Jewish state would face the wrath of the entire Islamic world as well as that of much of the secular West. Since dispensationalists often connect the rebuilding of the temple to the geo-political tensions necessary to foster the appearance of the Antichrist, who, they claim, will make a peace treaty with Israel before betraying the nation leading to a final end-times catastrophe, such upheaval is not beyond the realm of possibility. Dispensationalists expect the Jerusalem Temple to be rebuilt and fervently hope for it.

As far the possibility of a rebuilt temple is concerned, the most important question is not geo-political, but theological. “What does a rebuilt temple mean to the larger drama of redemptive history?” “Why is it such a serious theological mistake to believe such a thing?”

Essential to a proper understanding of any future temple in Jerusalem is the prophecy found in Ezekiel 40-48, wherein we find the prophet’s vision of a new and still future temple. G. K. Beale’s important and stellar book on this topic should be read by anyone who has questions about Ezekiel's vision. See G. K. Beale, [The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God](#) (Downer’s Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

As Beale points out, there are four main interpretations of Ezekiel’s prophecy and how it is fulfilled in the New Testament. Dispensationalists believe that this vision is a prophecy of an earthly temple to be built within Israel during the millennial age [1]. They base this interpretation upon their literal hermeneutic, which they say demands that a prophecy such as this one be interpreted literally, unless there is good reason to believe the prophecy should be interpreted figuratively. They reach this conclusion only by skipping over the profound echoes from Ezekiel’s prophecy found in Revelation 21. According to dispensationalists, what the New Testament seems to say about this temple cannot be applied in this case because such would mean that the fulfillment of Ezekiel’s prophecy would not be “literal.” Furthermore, this

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<sup>1</sup> From the Riddleblog publication, A Rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem

expectation for the temple also seems to require a return to memorial animal sacrifices, an act occurring after Jesus' completion of the work of redemption which approaches blasphemy.

Unlike dispensationalists, advocates of the other main interpretations all agree that the context demands a non-literal interpretation. I agree, if by non-literal interpretation you mean a real, but future eschatological fulfillment. Some see this an ideal temple never intended to be built upon the earth, a view which, in my estimation, is the weakest interpretation. Others see this as a vision of the ideal temple yet future, which still falls short of what Ezekiel describes. I am of the opinion that this is a picture of a real heavenly temple in the latter days which will be established on the earth in a non-structural way.[2] In other words, Ezekiel is giving us a picture of the new earth in prophetic images with which his readers were familiar.[3] This is a picture of the new earth as the dwelling of God. Ezekiel foresees it in earthly terms (complete with all the temple utensils), while John describes its fulfilled version (in eschatological terms).

Based upon a number of factors (described below), Ezekiel's prophecy points to a non-structural end-times temple.

First, the prophecy cannot be interpreted literally and still make any sense. When God places the prophet on a very high mountain (40:1-2) he sees something like a city (obviously Jerusalem). Yet, there is no such high mountain near Jerusalem from which the prophet could have had such a vantage point. But this literal high mountain is required by the dispensational view and its "literal" hermeneutic. Where is it? Given the nature of Ezekiel's prophecy, this language should alert us to the fact that what follows is given the symbolic geography of the prophet. Some have responded that given the massive topological changes to Palestine and Jerusalem supposedly associated with the beginning of the millennial kingdom (i.e., Isaiah 26:15; 33:17; Jeremiah 31:38-40; Ezekiel 48:30-35; Joel 3:18; Obadiah 17-21; Zechariah 4:7; 14:1-10; Micah 4:1-2; 7:14), the vision of Jerusalem from a high mountain might indeed be literal. But all of these passages speak of the promised renewal associated with the messianic age in material terms, but which point beyond mere earthly prosperity to the spiritual prosperity of being found "in Christ" in whom our inheritance is ultimately realized.

The symbolic nature of Ezekiel's prophecy is confirmed in Revelation 21:10, where John is carried away "in the Spirit" to a high mountain from which he sees the Holy City coming down out of heaven. Obviously, the visions are related to each other as type-antitype (earthly language, eschatological fulfillment). What Ezekiel foresaw as future, John sees as a reality. Yet, the reality seen by John far exceeds anything in Ezekiel's vision. As Beale points out, there are a significant number of other instances in this prophecy which make the literal interpretation very unlikely, if not impossible. Rather, the Ezekiel's vision speaks of a heavenly structure which descends in the midst of God's people, and not to an earthly structure built by human hands.[4]

Second, there are a number of features within the prophecy which refer to something much greater than a localized temple in Jerusalem during the millennium. In verse 40:2, Ezekiel sees a structure "like a city" (the temple), while in the final verse of the prophecy (48:35) he says that the cities' name is "the Lord is there." Here we have the expansion of the localized temple into

an area the size of the entire city of Jerusalem. This expansion of God's temple is a consistent theme throughout Ezekiel.[5] There are allusions to Eden throughout the prophecy (47:1-12). The city is depicted as a perfect square and the reference to the river is obviously symbolic, since it is deep enough that it can only be crossed by swimming (47:5).

Third, it is obvious that Revelation 21 interprets Ezekiel's vision in its consummated fulfillment. In other words, John is given a vision of the same temple which Ezekiel saw, but now from the vantage point of Christ's death and resurrection and the dawn of the new creation--something which would have made no sense whatsoever to Ezekiel or his hearers. As Beale points out, the new heavens and earth are now the Holy of Holies, as well as the new Jerusalem, and the new Eden.[6] On the last day, all of creation becomes the temple of God. The temple has been expanded (extended) from a building, to a heavenly city, to all of creation.

Finally, the most egregious theological error of those who see a rebuilt temple as an essential feature of biblical eschatology, is that it ignores our Lord's own teaching about the temple, namely that he is indeed the true temple, and that the temple in Jerusalem pointed to the heavenly temple spoken of by Ezekiel and John (see Jesus Christ the True Temple).

I conclude that Ezekiel's vision is one not of an earthly temple (although the prophet uses earthly language his readers could readily understand), but of an eschatological temple, depicted in its consummated form and unspeakable glory by John in Revelation 21-22.

Thus, any call to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple to serve as a center of worship in a millennial kingdom, is ultimately a claim that Jesus Christ's finished work is to be commemorated by the very same types and shadows that his once for all death for sin fulfilled and forever set aside.

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[1] Horner, Future Israel, 71, 165-166; Pentecost, Things to Come, 393; Walvoord, Major Bible Prophecies, 169.

[2] Beale, The Temple and the Church's Mission, 335.

[3] Hoekema, The Bible and Future, 205.

[4] Beale, The Temple and the Church's Mission, pp. 336-340.

[5] Beale, The Temple and the Church's Mission, pp. 340-345.

[6] Beale, The Temple and the Church's Mission, pp. 346-345.