

EZEKIEL 40–48 — A FANTASTIC VISION¹

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ABSTRACT: Christians reading Ezekiel 40–48 may well struggle to understand the City/Temple described in this vision. Is it literal? If so, when will it be built? How does it relate to the church, which is God’s Temple according to the New Testament? How does it relate to Revelation 21–22? How does Ezekiel’s Temple fit into the Bible’s plot structure and narrative storyline? This research employs a literary approach and typology to answer those questions. The rationale of these methodologies is they combine the realistic features of the vision, rooting the vision in history, while the “symbolic” aspects point forward to a heightened, eschatological fulfillment.

KEYWORDS: Ezekiel, Temple, Literary Structure, Vision, Typology, Apocalyptic Genre.

Introduction

Reading and understanding the Bible may not be so straightforward for readers with a *modern* and *western* background in culture and language. First, the biblical texts in origin are *ancient* and *eastern*: they come from a different culture and a different time. The character of Hebrew literature is *repetitive* and looks at topics *recursively* from different angles and perspectives. Second, the *key* to determining the author’s intended meaning is to understand how the *genre* or *kind of literature* communicates the meaning.

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A newspaper has different kinds of writing: front page news, business, real estate, theatre, classified ads, editorials, comics, stocks & bonds, obituaries, etc. Similarly, the Bible contains many different kinds of writing: genealogies, historical narrative, drama, proverbs, laments, psalms, parables, parodies, prophecies, apocalyptic visions, etc. Each genre has *different rules* for grasping the communication. The modern church has been hindered by debating whether correct interpretation should be literal or spiritual. This research, nevertheless, offers to read and understand Ezekiel 40–48 according to its genre: apocalyptic visions.

Analysis of City/Temple in Ezekiel 40–48

Date formulas hold the key to the literary structure of Ezekiel (1:1, 8:1, 20:1, 24:1, 26:1, 29:1, 29:17, 30:20, 31:1, 32:1, 32:17, 33:21, 40:1). Thus, the date formula in 40:1 marks chaps. 40–48 as the final section. The date given is significant. First, the date is the twenty-fifth year of the exile. Since Ezekiel was exiled in 597 this date would be April 28, 573 BC. Chronologically, this is not the final vision: 29:17 is later. But it is the climactic vision in *literary* terms. Second, the number 25 and multiples thereof are common in the following vision of the City/Temple. Thirdly, the number 25 is half-way to the Jubilee (cf. 46:17). Literary factors point to a meaning beyond just a date.

Three features in the introduction, 40:1–4, characterise this kind of literature. First, note the expression “the hand of the Lord (Yahweh) was upon me.” This phrase is found precisely seven times in Ezekiel (1:3; 3:14; 3:22; 8:01; 33:22; 37:1; 40:1). The first three instances mark the beginning and ending of the first vision in 1–3. The fourth occurrence marks the beginning of the second vision in 8–11. The fifth occurrence marks the end of Ezekiel’s muteness and the fulfillment of all his prophecies concerning the fall of Jerusalem. The sixth instance is at the beginning of the vision of the dry bones. Lastly, the seventh occurrence is at the beginning of the final vision of the restored City/Temple in 40 – 48. All are key points in the plot structure of Ezekiel.

The second feature is the movement of Ezekiel by the Spirit of God.

03:12	“the Spirit lifted me up”
03:14	“the Spirit lifted me up and took me away”
08:03	“the Spirit lifted me between earth and heaven ... and ... he took me”
11:01	“then the Spirit lifted me up and brought me”
11:24	“the Spirit lifted me up and brought me to the exiles in Babylonia in the vision given by the Spirit of God”

- 37:01 “he brought me out by the Spirit of Yahweh and set me in
... a valley”
- 43:05 “he took me to the land of Israel and set me on a very high
mountain”

In 40:1 the text says, “and he brought me there” (i.e., by the Spirit). This, in combination with the instance in 43:5 shows that 40–48 belongs in genre to the same visions we have in 1–3, 8–11, and 37.

Third, 40:2 states, “he brought me in *visions of God* to the land of Israel.” With abstract nouns the plural in Hebrew often refers to a characteristic or condition (Van der Merwe, Naudé, and Kroeze 2017: § 7) ʾִזְוִי, ʾִזְוִי, ʾִזְוִי)). Moreover, in Ezekiel, *ʾēlōhīm* is an appellative or common noun and not a name or proper noun (Zimmerli 1983, 557-558). So the phrase is best translated “a divine vision.” As Grumbles explains, “one better understands the genitive not in terms of content (“I saw God”), but in terms of genre (“I saw a divine vision”) (Grumbles 2021: 57).

The expression “in visions of God” is found elsewhere only in 1:1 and 8:3. We must, therefore, interpret the vision in 40–48 consistently with the visions in 1–3 and 8–11. These are prophetic visions. In a dream or vision (at night) the prophet is shown something which addresses all of his senses, experienced primarily in terms of sound and sight. Colourful images, metaphors and symbols characterise the divine communication. We can interpret by asking three questions: (1) what is described by the prophet? (2) what is the historical / physical reality referred to in the vision? and (3) how do the images / metaphors / symbols in the vision communicate? In American newspapers, an editorial cartoon may portray a donkey and an elephant. These beasts represent the democratic and republican parties respectively (just as the beasts in Daniel 7 or Revelation 13 represent political powers). But *the way they are portrayed* is the means used by the cartoonist to shape our perspective.

In 1–3 and 8–11 Ezekiel is given a vision of the throne of God. He sees a bright cloud called the glory of God. This same cloud appeared in Exodus 40:34-35 upon completion of the Tent of Worship and in 1 Kings 8:11 upon completion of Solomon’s Temple. Now, however, the cloud is in motion. What does this mean? Well, the prophets have announced that because of Israel’s covenant disloyalty, God will exile them. The cloud is in motion because God will no longer dwell among his people, as Jeremiah indicated in his Temple Sermon (7–10). In Ezek 8–11 the cloud moves to the Eastern Gate. God is already departing. But at the end of the Book of Ezekiel, “Yahweh is THERE!” This is the plot in miniature.

Alongside major prophetic visions, the book of Ezekiel also contains many symbolic dramatic acts.

4:1-3	Drama of Brick and Frying-Pan
4:4-8	Drama of Lying on His Side for 390 / 40 Days and Nights
4:9-17	Drama of Diet During the Siege of Jerusalem
5:1-4	Drama of Shaving His Hair
12:1-16	Drama of Exile's Baggage
12:17-20	Drama of Anxious Eating
15:1-8	Allegory of Useless Vine
16:1-63	Allegory of Young Woman and Her Sisters
17:1-24	Allegory of Two Eagles and a Vine
19:1-9	Allegory of Lioness and Her Cubs (Styled as a Lament)
19:10-14	Allegory of Vine (Styled as a Lament)
20:45-49	Parable of the Southern Forest
23:1-49	Allegory of Two Adulterous Sisters (Oholah and Oholibah)
24:1-6	Parable of the Cooking Pot
24:15-27	Death of Ezekiel's Wife as a Symbolic Act
31:1-18	Allegory of Assyria as a Cedar in Lebanon
34:1-31	Parable of Shepherds and Sheep

In Chapter 37, resurrection is a *metaphor* or *symbol* for return from exile and restoration of the people of God. Thus, large portions of the book of Ezekiel contain either symbolic visions, symbolic acts, or allegories and parables. (A parable is an extended simile; an allegory is an extended metaphor. These terms are not used with precision in this essay.) Only the books of Daniel, Zechariah and Revelation are like this and only the authors of these books are given angelic guides to interpret their apocalyptic visions.

Many scholars, both Jewish and Christian, have compared the details of Ezekiel's vision to the Torah. However, there are clear differences. Moses is giving the people covenantal regulations to direct and guide life in covenant relationship with Yahweh. Ezekiel is describing a prophetic vision. Torah and Prophetic Vision are not the same. A prophetic vision does not provide commands or covenantal stipulations. It paints a picture of a people restored in relationship to God and imagines what a purified system of worship might look like. In Exodus, Moses is commanded to "make" the tabernacle or tent (Exod 25:8) but Ezekiel is commanded to "declare" (preach) all that he sees (Ezek 40:4, 43:10). Moses must make something not yet in existence; Ezekiel describes something as already built. Moreover, the differences between Ezekiel and Moses reveal the theological thrust.

Ezekiel's vision is not a blueprint for building a future temple in Jerusalem. Note the use of the terms 'length', 'width', and 'height' in the Old Testament. Careful ex-

amination of all instances show that 80% of all references occur in three texts: (1) the building of the Tabernacle (Exod 25-40), (2) the building of the Temple (1 Kgs 6-7) and (3) Ezekiel’s vision of the Temple. Observe, however, that the accounts of building the Tabernacle and Temple contain instances of length, width, and height whereas the description in Ezekiel contains length and width, but **no height** (cf. 40:5, 14; 41:8). The one instance of the word height (40:5 קִוְיָהּ) emphasises the wall preventing access to holy space.

Thus, the vision is two dimensional because unlike the Tabernacle in Exodus and the Temple in Kings, Ezekiel’s Temple is not a blueprint for a real building. It is best explained as a symbolic portrayal of the restoration of God dwelling in the midst of his people as king and of a renewed covenant relationship. This comports with Jesus identifying himself as the true Temple (John 2:19). And Paul (1 Cor 3:16) and Peter (1 Peter 2:4-5) understand the church, those who are joined to Christ, to constitute the final Temple.

The interpretation of John in Revelation is likewise instructive. There are many allusions to Ezekiel 40–48 in Rev 21-22 and almost none elsewhere in the New Testament. John is showing us that Ezekiel’s vision is about the New Creation. In fact, the vision of John completes, fulfills, and interprets Ezekiel’s vision.

Ezekiel	Revelation
40:2	21:10
40:3, 5	21:15
47:1	22:1
47:12	22:2, 14, 19
48:16-17	21:16-17
48:30-35	21:12-13

Note the following parallels:

Revelation 21:1 – 22:5	Ezekiel 40 – 48
God “Tenting” (21:3)	43:7
God Dwelling with Humanity (21:3)	48:35 Yahweh is There
Prophetic Commission Formula (21:10)	40:1-2 and 43:5
The Glory of God (21:11)	43:2ff.
12 Gates at Compass Points (21:12-13)	48:31-34 (42:15-19)
Measuring the Temple-City (21:15)	40:3-5 (throughout 40 – 48)
City lies Four-Square (21:16)	45:1-5
measured by length and width	(40:5; 41:21; 48:8-13)
Illuminated by Glory of God (21:23)	43:2, 5 (Isaiah 60:19)
Nothing Unclean Will Be There (21:27)	43:12
Living water flowing from Temple (22:1)	47:1-9 (Gen 2:10; Zech 14:8)
Tree-Fruit & Leaves for Healing (21:2)	47:12

Also, the Final Battle in Revelation 20:7-15 makes a clear allusion to Gog and Magog, showing us that the millennium would have to fit into Ezekiel 38–39 before the vision of the New Creation in 40–48.

Many aspects of the vision in Ezekiel are fantastic or idealised. In other words, the City/Temple is “larger than life.” In 40:2 what he sees is like the construction of a city. In grandeur, layout, and size it gives the impression of being a city, hence, the term City/Temple. In 40:3 Ezekiel is met by an angelic guide who has a cord of linen and a measuring-rod in his hand. The rod is a reed or bulrush cut from the bank of a river and used as a measuring stick. In 40:5 we are informed that the length of the reed/rod is six long cubits each defined as a cubit and a handbreadth. A cubit is measured from the elbow to the finger-tips. According to the Siloam Inscription, Hezekiah’s tunnel was 1200 cubits, so a cubit would be approximately 17.6 inches or 45 cm. (Marvin A. Powell, “Weights and Measures,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (1992: VI: 897-908) exposes assumptions common in commentaries on Ezekiel as highly tenuous.) Barrois mentions a hypothesis of Weissbach who showed that paving-stones of Nebuchadnezzar were 50 cm = 1 cubit and the bricks were $\frac{2}{3}$ of a cubit (Barrois 1931: 185-213, esp. 194-195). This matches Old Babylonian as well as later statements by Herodotus (1:178) that the Babylonian cubit was 3 fingers longer. It seems, then, that Ezekiel is using units of measurement for an audience familiar with life in Babylon. Fired clay bricks of Nebuchadnezzar II in the British Museum are $\frac{2}{3}$ cubit long and measure 32.5 cm (https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1825-0503-26). And the measuring-rod is about 10 feet long.

Normally in Ezekiel 40–48 when length is in cubits, the unit is mentioned, but if no unit is mentioned, one can and should assume rods.

In 42:15-20, the area exterior to the temple is measured. Contrary to most translations, the word cubit does not occur in the Hebrew Text. Normally measurements without units in Ezek 40-48 are in reeds/rods. The text of the ESV is given for illustration. Then the text is modified to match the Hebrew Text:

Ezekiel 42:15-20 (ESV)

¹⁵Now when he had finished measuring the interior of the temple area, he led me out by the gate that faced east, and measured the temple area all around. ¹⁶He measured the east side with the measuring reed, 500 **cubits** by the measuring reed all around. ¹⁷He measured the north side, 500 **cubits** by the measuring reed all around. ¹⁸He measured the south side, 500 **cubits** by the measuring reed. ¹⁹Then he turned to the west side and measured, 500 **cubits** by the measuring reed. ²⁰He measured it on

the four sides. It had a wall around it, 500 **cubits** long and 500 **cubits** broad, to make a separation between the holy and the common.

Ezekiel 42:15-20 (Hebrew Text [MT])

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The translation in the ESV is based on adding up the width of the gates and the length of the walls in between. This results in a perimeter of 500 cubits for the temple. The translators assume the Hebrew Masoretic Text is in error so the word “reeds” is changed to the word “cubits” even though the text specifies “by the measuring rod.” Furthermore, the Latin Vulgate, the Syriac Peshitta and the Aramaic Targum all support the Hebrew Masoretic Text. Likewise, the word “reeds” is omitted in the Septuagint, but the text still states “five hundred by the measuring rod.” Thus, the length is clearly not in cubits since the measuring rod is six long cubits. So, no textual witness supports our modern translations.

As a result, the measurements given in the Hebrew text create a vast area of sacred space around the temple. This is suitable for a portrayal of holiness but not for a blueprint.

Similarly, a Central Allotment in the Land is consecrated to the Lord (47:13-23; 48:1-29). This area is designated as 25,000 by 25,000 and the correct units are rods, not cubits. Despite our modern translations, the word cubit does not appear in the Hebrew Text in 48:9-20. Again, the ESV is provided as a standard translation followed by a modification of the translation to match what we have in the Hebrew Text.

Ezekiel 48:9-20 (ESV)

⁸“Adjoining the territory of Judah, from the east side to the west, shall be the portion which you shall set apart, 25,000 **cubits** in breadth, and in length equal to one of the tribal portions, from the east side to the west, with the sanctuary in the midst of it. ⁹The portion that you shall set apart for the LORD shall be 25,000 **cubits** in length,

and 20,000 in breadth. ¹⁰These shall be the allotments of the holy portion: the priests shall have an allotment measuring 25,000 **cubits** on the northern side, 10,000 **cubits** in breadth on the western side, 10,000 in breadth on the eastern side, and 25,000 in length on the southern side, with the sanctuary of the LORD in the midst of it. ¹¹This shall be for the consecrated priests, the sons of Zadok, who kept my charge, who did not go astray when the people of Israel went astray, as the Levites did. ¹²And it shall belong to them as a special portion from the holy portion of the land, a most holy place, adjoining the territory of the Levites. ¹³And alongside the territory of the priests, the Levites shall have an allotment 25,000 **cubits** in length and 10,000 in breadth. The whole length shall be 25,000 **cubits** and the breadth 20,000. ¹⁴They shall not sell or exchange any of it. They shall not alienate this choice portion of the land, for it is holy to the LORD.

¹⁵“The remainder, 5,000 **cubits** in breadth and 25,000 in length, shall be for common use for the city, for dwellings and for open country. In the midst of it shall be the city, ¹⁶and these shall be its measurements: the north side 4,500 **cubits**, the south side 4,500, the east side 4,500, and the west side 4,500. ¹⁷And the city shall have open land: on the north 250 **cubits**, on the south 250, on the east 250, and on the west 250. ¹⁸The remainder of the length alongside the holy portion shall be 10,000 **cubits** to the east, and 10,000 to the west, and it shall be alongside the holy portion. Its produce shall be food for the workers of the city. ¹⁹And the workers of the city, from all the tribes of Israel, shall till it. ²⁰The whole portion that you shall set apart shall be 25,000 **cubits** square, that is, the holy portion together with the property of the city.

Ezekiel 48:9-20 (Hebrew Text [MT])

⁸“Adjoining the territory of Judah, from the east side to the west, shall be the portion which you shall set apart, 25,000 in breadth, and in length equal to one of the tribal portions, from the east side to the west, with the sanctuary in the midst of it. ⁹The portion that you shall set apart for the LORD shall be 25,000 in length, and 20,000 in breadth. ¹⁰These shall be the allotments of the holy portion: the priests shall have an allotment measuring 25,000 on the northern side, 10,000 in breadth on the western side, 10,000 in breadth on the eastern side, and 25,000 in length on the southern side, with the sanctuary of the LORD in the midst of it. ¹¹This shall be for the consecrated priests, the sons of Zadok, who kept my charge, who did not go astray when the people of Israel went astray, as the Levites did. ¹²And it shall belong to them as a special portion from the holy portion of the land, a most holy place, adjoining the territory of the Levites. ¹³And alongside the territory of the priests, the

Levites shall have an allotment 25,000 in length and 10,000 in breadth. The whole length shall be 25,000 and the breadth 20,000. ¹⁴They shall not sell or exchange any of it. They shall not alienate this choice portion of the land, for it is holy to the LORD.

¹⁵“The remainder, 5,000 in breadth and 25,000 in length, shall be for common use for the city, for dwellings and for open country. In the midst of it shall be the city, ¹⁶and these shall be its measurements: the north side 4,500, the south side 4,500, the east side 4,500, and the west side 4,500. ¹⁷And the city shall have open land: on the north 250, on the south 250, on the east 250, and on the west 250. ¹⁸The remainder of the length alongside the holy portion shall be 10,000 to the east, and 10,000 to the west, and it shall be alongside the holy portion. Its produce shall be food for the workers of the city. ¹⁹And the workers of the city, from all the tribes of Israel, shall till it. ²⁰The whole portion that you shall set apart shall be 25,000 square, that is, the holy portion together with the property of the city.

For Ezek 45 and 48, with the exception of 45:2, the unit of measurement is not explicitly stated in either the Hebrew Text or Septuagint. When we account for 42:16-20 where the house is within a square 500 by 500 rods and when we consider the specific statement in 45:2 of a 50-cubit open space surrounding the holy place, the implied unit for chapters 45 and 48 would be the rod rather than the cubit (Naylor 2011: 732). The Septuagint has in 48:9 20,000 for width instead of 10,000 and also in 48:13. This appears to be an assimilation to the context. All other witnesses (Syriac, Targum, Vulgate) support the Masoretic Hebrew Text.

As a result, we have an area devoted to the worship of the Lord of about 47 by 47 miles. This would not even fit into the current space of the state of Israel. Rather the vision presents an idealised Israel with an idealised centre of worship.

Ezek 43:10-12 confirms this. This brief passage is central to the purpose of the text and must be cited in full. The following translation corresponds better to the Hebrew Text:

¹⁰“As for you, son of man, expound to the house of Israel the temple, that they may be ashamed of their iniquities and may measure the proportion. ¹¹And if they are ashamed of all that they have done, make known to them the design of the temple, its layout, its exits and its entrances, and all its design and all its statutes and all its design and all its instructions, and write it down in their sight, so that they may observe all its design and all its statutes and carry them out. ¹²This is the instruction

of the temple: the whole territory on the top of the mountain all around shall be most holy. Pay attention: this is the instruction of the temple.

According to the ESV v. 10 is as follow: “As for you, son of man, describe to the house of Israel the temple, that they may be ashamed of their iniquities; and they shall measure the plan.” This is not precisely what we have in the Hebrew Text which reads instead: “As for you, son of man, describe to the house of Israel the temple, that they may be ashamed of their iniquities; and they shall measure the proportion.” Some Hebrew manuscripts, the Greek revisors Theodotion and Symmachus along with the Syriac read תבנית (‘pattern’) whereas MT, Latin Vulgate and Targum read תכנית (‘proportion’). This is a case of an easier more common word for a more unusual one. Yet ‘proportion’ does fit the context well. Ezekiel’s message is a lesson in sacred space for God’s people. Verse 12 says that “this is the law of the temple” or better “instruction about the temple.” Does this refer to the legislation that follows in 43:13, to the preceding vision, or to the immediate context? Grumbles demonstrates that it best suits the immediate context: the instruction on the temple is for the people to measure its proportion (Grumbles 2021: 81-84). The Hebrew Text (MT) in 43:11 “states that the people should observe the ‘form’ or ‘layout’ of the temple, not its laws” (Grumbles 2021: 79). Verses 10-12 immediately follow a statement in vv. 7-8 about how Israel defiled the Temple. This contrasts with the emphasis on holiness presented through the Temple plan and the laws connected to it. In verse 12 we read: “the whole territory on the top of the mountain all around shall be most holy.” This is further suggested in 44:23, in the instructions for the priests: “they shall teach my people the difference between the holy and the common, and show them how to distinguish between the unclean and the clean.” All of these purpose statements emphasize a design or plan for holiness instead of defilement, not a command to engage in a building project.

Although interpretation by omission can be dangerous, what is omitted in Ezekiel’s description is noteworthy. Much space is devoted to describing the enormous gates around the exterior and also the interior court while no mention is made of the Table of Showbread, the Bronze Basin, the Golden Lampstand, and the Ark of the Covenant. Decorations in the temple are also minimal. It seems that *access* to the divine presence is of crucial significance.

There is also a unique feature, an enigmatic structure on the west side of the temple (41:12, 15; *binyān* in Hebrew). The building Zimmerli says, “fulfills no genuine useful function, but has been constructed on theological grounds, as an element for blocking off the western side” (Zimmerli 1983: 380). This is believed to be the location of the palace of Solomon in the First Temple. In Ezekiel’s vision it seems to

prevent residence of a human king anywhere close to the Holy of Holies. Yahweh alone is king. Finally, when the glory of God returns to the temple in 43:5 it fills the entire temple and not just the Holy of Holies. This is consistent with Isaiah 60 and Revelation 21 in that the entire new creation is the temple.

The division of the land is also idealised. There is no possession in the trans-Jordan as in the book of Joshua. The country is divided from north to south into twelve equal regions on an east-west axis in complete disregard of natural geographical features. Unlike the historical Israel, Judah is assigned a region north of the Sacred Allotment with Benjamin and Simeon to the south. This division of the land seems to emphasise the east-west axis of the temple. The land is portrayed in idealised terms.

We also have a river in Ezekiel 47:1-12. It begins by gurgling from south of the altar. In 1000 cubits (approximately 1640 feet or 500 meters), the water is ankle-deep. After another 1000 cubits it is knee-deep. After another 1000 cubits it is waist-deep and one has to swim after a further 1000 cubits. Thus, a river begins from the temple and grows in depth and volume (apparently without tributaries) unlike any river on earth today. And the water heals the Dead Sea! Ezekiel has borrowed mythical features common in Babylon and in the ancient Near East: a dual river bringing fertility and fruit-trees providing healing (Bodi: 2015:22-37). (In Ezekiel 47:9 the word for “river” in the Hebrew Text is dual, meaning two rivers. Zechariah 14:8 understands one branch flowing to the Dead Sea and one branch flowing to the Mediterranean Sea.) John 7:38, depending on Ezekiel 47, also has “rivers” in the plural. They portray the future as a new creation—far better than Eden. Indeed, Revelation 21:1 – 22:5 interprets Ezekiel 40–48 as a picture of the new creation rather than of the so-called millennium.

Finally, how are we to understand the sacrifices? Some Christians believe these will be offered in the millennium as memorials. There is nothing in the text of Ezekiel, however, that indicates the sacrifices function as a memorial of an event in the past. In fact, the opposite is indicated by the patterns of communication in the book of Ezekiel.

Note that Ezekiel speaks of priests only in the plural and never of a high priest offering sacrifices. Three sacrifices are specified by Ezekiel: (1) grain offerings; (2) sin offerings; and (3) guilt or reparation offerings. He is describing and emphasizing the need for pure worship. But Hebrews 10:18 says, “Where there is forgiveness of these [sins and lawless deeds] there is no longer any offering for sin.” It would be wrong to return to the weak and beggarly elements by offering animal sacrifices. Ezekiel employs the models and patterns of the past to symbolise and typify the purity of future worship. Similarly, after a detailed analysis of Ezekiel’s sacrificial system, Drew Grumbles argues for a theological reading that underscores Yahweh’s holiness and the need for purity to approach Yahweh. “Such a picture,” he says, fits

with John's presentation in Rev 21:27 that the unclean will not enter the new city" (Grumbles 2021: 219).

This final vision of Ezekiel shares a common principle of interpretation with earlier visions recorded in the book. In those visions past events are recalled in order to sketch future happenings.

For example, in chapter 4 the coming judgements to fall upon Israel and Judah are portrayed in terms of the years spent by Israel in Egypt and in the wilderness. Ezekiel is commanded to lie on one side for 390 days for the punishment of Israel and on the other side for 40 days for the punishment of Judah. When we add 390 and 40 the result is 430. This is precisely the number of years Israel was enslaved in Egypt. So, the Exodus could be viewed as a model or pattern of future salvation. And before the new deliverance or salvation there will also be a long period of suffering like the sojourn in Egypt.

But no literal repetition of the events surrounding the Exodus is expected. Egypt, which made itself out as some sort of quasi-god in its dealings with Israel, must experience the forty-year sufferings of Israel in the desert and a scattering among the peoples (29:1-16). Afterwards, God will regather the Egyptians (Naylor 2011: 611-612).

In short, Ezekiel saw history as supplying shadow outlines and anticipations for the future (Naylor 2011: 611-612). In the same way, the typology of the Old Testament is the key to the New Testament. For example, Christ is both the lion and the lamb.

The same is true of the new city-temple that Ezekiel saw, yet with a vital qualification. His description incorporates modifications of the past ritual which demonstrate that the splendour of the new situation will far exceed the forms prescribed by Moses. This principle becomes an essential help when we try to grapple with Ezekiel 40-48.

According to the authors of the New Testament these prophecies are fulfilled by the gifts, hymns of praise, prayers, and songs of thanksgiving of Christians (whether Jew or Gentile) engaged in the worship of the church (Rom. 12:1; Phil. 2:17; 4:18; Heb. 13:15-16; 1 Pet. 2:5). We can consider examples of the language of sacrifice used by Paul.

Philippians 2:17

Ἀλλ' εἰ καὶ σπένδομαι ἐπὶ τῇ θυσίᾳ καὶ λειτουργίᾳ τῆς πίστεως ὑμῶν, χαίρω καὶ συγχαίρω πᾶσιν ὑμῖν·

Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. (ESV)

As Paul addresses the believers in Philippi, believers from gentile nations, he describes their faith as a “sacrifice” and his ministry is the drink offering attached to that sacrifice.

Philippians 4:18

ἀπέχω δὲ πάντα καὶ περισσεύω· πεπλήρωμαι δεξάμενος παρὰ Ἐπαφροδίτου τὰ παρ’ ὑμῶν, ὁσμὴν εὐωδίας, θυσίαν δεκτὴν, εὐάρεστον τῷ θεῷ.

I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. (ESV)

Paul here speaks of the financial support from the believers in Philippi and the verse is full of language from the sacrificial system: “fragrant smell,” “acceptable sacrifice,” and “well-pleasing to God.”

Conclusion

Christians in the western world are not well served by engaging in debates over whether to interpret texts literally or symbolically. This is a false dilemma. Instead of *literal* interpretation, we must adopt a *literary* approach that appreciates the genre employed by the author for communicating truth. The vision in Ezekiel 40 – 48 belongs to the apocalyptic genre and has more in common with editorial cartoons than prose accounts of news on the front page of a newspaper.

Like many authors of the Old Testament, Ezekiel also employs typology: events, institutions, people who are models or patterns of future events, institutions, people. The aspect of typology in Ezekiel 40–48 is explained and treated well by Drew Grumbles. He concludes

Those arguing for a physical construction view do not adequately account for symbolic aspects of the vision. On the other end of the spectrum, those who argue for a symbolic view present a good deal of important evidence, but do not account for all the details in the vision, such as those that present a very realistic situation. Beale’s view also has much to commend it, but he unnecessarily flattens out Ezekiel’s vision and inadequately addresses the features of realism. Thus, the thesis of the work is that typology appropriately combines the realistic features of the vision, rooting the vision in history, while the “symbolic” aspects point forward to a heightened, eschatological fulfillment (Grumbles 2021: 235).

Typology best explains how both the realistic and the symbolic elements combine to communicate a message of the future restoration of God's people and his eternal presence dwelling in their midst.

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