

Ezekiel 40: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Ezekiel chapter 40. And he was standing in the gateway.

And the man said to me, Son of man, look with your eyes and hear with your ears, and set your heart upon all that I shall show you, for you were brought here in order that I might show it to you. Declare all that you see to the house of Israel.

And behold, there was a wall all around the outside of the temple area, and the length of the measuring reed in the man's hand was six long cubits, each being a cubit and a hand breadth in length.

So he measured the thickness of the wall, one reed, and the height, one reed. Then he went into the gateway facing east, going up its steps, and measured the threshold of the gate, one reed deep, and the side rooms, one reed long and one reed broad, and the space between the side rooms, five cubits, and the threshold of the gate by the vestibule of the gate at the inner end, one reed.

Then he measured the vestibule of the gateway on the inside, one reed. Then he measured the vestibule of the gateway, eight cubits, and its jams, two cubits, and the vestibule of the gate was at the inner end, and there were three side rooms on either side of the east gate.

[1 : 3 8] The three were of the same side, and the jams on either side were of the same size. Then he measured the width of the opening of the gateway, ten cubits, and the length of the gateway, thirteen cubits.

There was a barrier before the side rooms, one cubit on either side, and the side rooms were six cubits on either side. Then he measured the gate from the ceiling of the one side room to the ceiling of the other, a breadth of twenty-five cubits.

The openings faced each other. He measured also the vestibule, sixty cubits, and around the vestibule of the gateway was the court. From the front of the gate at the entrance to the front of the inner vestibule of the gate was fifty cubits, and the gateway had windows all around, narrowing inwards toward the side rooms and toward their jams, and likewise the vestibule had windows all around inside, and on the jams were palm trees.

Then he brought me into the outer court, and behold there were chambers and a pavement all around the court. Thirty chambers faced the pavement, and the pavement ran along the side of the gates, corresponding to the length of the gates.

This was the lower pavement. Then he measured the distance from the inner front of the lower gate to the outer front of the inner gate, a hundred cubits on the east side and on the north side. As for the gate that faced toward the north, belonging to the outer court, he measured its length and its breadth.

[2 : 5 8] Its side rooms, three on either side, and its jams and its vestibules, were of the same size as those of the first gate. Its length was fifty cubits, and its breadth twenty-five cubits.

And its windows, its vestibule, and its palm trees, were of the same size as those of the gate that faced toward the east. And by seven steps people would go up to it, and find its vestibule before them.

And opposite the gate on the north, as on the east, was a gate to the inner court. And he measured from gate to gate a hundred cubits. And he led me toward the south, and behold there was a gate on the south.

And he measured its jams and its vestibule. They had the same size as the others. Both it and its vestibule had windows all around, like the windows of the others. Its length was fifty cubits, and its breadth twenty-five cubits.

And there were seven steps leading up to it, and its vestibule was before them. And it had palm trees on its jams, one on either side. And there was a gate on the south of the inner court. And he measured from gate to gate toward the south, a hundred cubits.

[4 : 00] Then he brought me to the inner court through the south gate, and he measured the south gate. It was of the same size as the others. Its side rooms, its jams, and its vestibule were of the same size as the others.

And both it and its vestibule had windows all around. Its length was fifty cubits, and its breadth twenty-five cubits. And there were vestibules all around, twenty-five cubits long and five cubits broad.

Its vestibule faced the outer court, and palm trees were on its jams, and its stairway had eight steps. Then he brought me to the inner court on the east side, and he measured the gate.

It was of the same size as the others. Its side rooms, its jams, and its vestibule were of the same size as the others. And both it and its vestibule had windows all around. Its length was fifty cubits, and its breadth twenty-five cubits.

Its vestibule faced the outer court, and it had palm trees on its jams on either side, and its stairway had eight steps. Then he brought me to the north gate, and he measured it. It had the same size as the others.

[5 : 02] Its side rooms, its jams, and its vestibule were of the same size as the others, and it had windows all around. Its length was fifty cubits, and its breadth twenty-five cubits. Its vestibule faced the outer court, and it had palm trees on its jams, on either side, and its stairway had eight steps.

There was a chamber with its door in the vestibule of the gate, where the burnt offering was to be washed, and in the vestibule of the gate were two tables on either side, on which the burnt offering, and the sin offering, and the guilt offering were to be slaughtered.

And off to the side, on the outside, as one goes up to the entrance of the north gate, were two tables, and off to the other side of the vestibule of the gate were two tables. Four tables were on either side of the gate, eight tables on which to slaughter.

And there were four tables of hewn stone for the burnt offering, a cubit and a half long, and a cubit and a half broad, and one cubit high, on which the instruments were to be laid, with which the burnt offerings and the sacrifices were slaughtered, and hooks, a hand-breadth long, were fastened all around within, and on the tables the flesh of the offering was to be laid.

On the outside of the inner gateway there were two chambers in the inner court, one at the side of the north gate facing south, the other at the side of the south gate facing north. And he said to me, This chamber that faces south is for the priests who have charge of the temple, and the chamber that faces north is for the priests who have charge of the altar.

[6 : 27] These are the sons of Zadok, who alone among the sons of Levi may come near to the Lord to minister to him. And he measured the court, a hundred cubits long, and a hundred cubits broad, a square, and the altar was in front of the temple.

Then he brought me to the vestibule of the temple, and measured the jams of the vestibule, five cubits on either side, and the breadth of the gate was fourteen cubits, and the side walls of the gate were three cubits on either side.

The length of the vestibule was twenty cubits, and the breadth twelve cubits, and people would go up to it by ten steps, and there were pillars beside the jams, one on either side.

Ezekiel chapter 40 is a long, challenging, yet remarkable passage concerning the design of a new temple. It's a vision packed with specific measurements. It suggests the possible presence of insights for the attentive hearer or reader, while perplexing many, a popular line of futurist interpretation has regarded Ezekiel's visionary temple as a third temple yet to be built in Jerusalem.

However, read in the context of the book as a whole, I believe that we should take a different approach to interpretation. In getting to grips with this prophecy, we should begin by getting our bearings.

[7 : 43] In the vision of chapters 8 to 11, the Lord abandoned the temple in Jerusalem for the abominations performed by the people. The throne chariot of that vision and of the vision of chapter 1 seem to have similarities with the temple, suggesting an association between the divine throne chariot and the architectural edifice of the temple.

Ezekiel chapter 40 is part of a series of prophecies of restoration of the people, of their return to the land, reunification as a single people and under a single Davidic king.

In the chapters that follow, a vision of a restored Israel will be presented in detail. This is what Israel should and could be. Many Christians take this vision to refer to the age of the church.

However, it seems to be dealing more specifically with realities pertaining to an old covenant time. There is a continuing sacrificial system, priesthood, tribal apportioning of the land and Jerusalem temple.

The prophecy also focuses upon realities within the boundaries of the land of Israel. In the book of Revelation, several elements of Ezekiel's prophecy of restoration are recalled in John's vision of the new Jerusalem.

[8 : 50] Yet there are several clear contrasts between Ezekiel's vision and John's vision, which challenges the suggestion that the primary referent of Ezekiel's vision is in the age of the church.

This does not mean, of course, that Ezekiel's vision should not be regarded as anticipating and prefiguring elements of the age of the church. It definitely does this. But as a prophecy, it is especially concerned with its own age.

Daniel Bloch observes, for instance, the absence of eschatological language in this vision, things like on that day or in the latter days. Clearly, a physical version of Ezekiel's temple as he literally describes it was never built.

Indeed, it is not clear that such a building could even be built. Like the New Jerusalem as described in Revelation, we shouldn't regard Ezekiel's temple as a literal building, but as a symbolic building.

The dimensions of the New Jerusalem in Revelation chapter 21 are extreme. It's a cube of about 1,380 miles or 2,200 kilometers in its height, length, and width.

[9 : 54] Understood this way, the vision is bizarre. The meaning of the dimensions becomes more apparent when we consider the form in which the measurements are given to us in the text itself as 12,000 stadia with a wall of 144 cubits.

These numbers, 12 by 10 by 10 by 10 and 12 by 12 clearly have symbolic significance, connecting the edifice with the perfected Israel and people of God.

The fact that it is a cube connects it also with the cube of the Holy of Holies. Ezekiel chapter 43 verses 10 to 11 gives the hearer of this book a sense of the purpose of the extended description of the temple and its measurements.

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. And if they are ashamed of all that they have done, make known to them the design of the temple, its arrangement, its exits, and its entrances, that is, its whole design.

And make known to them as well all its statutes and its whole design and all its laws and write it down in their sight so that they may observe all its laws and all its statutes and carry them out.

[11 : 07] A crucial thing to notice is that no instruction is ever given to build this temple. Rather, Ezekiel is guided through an existing visionary structure and told to measure it.

The dimensions of the tabernacle and the Solomon temple, their contents and their rituals, were given in some detail because they were symbolic buildings, buildings designed to communicate something of the truth.

As buildings, they represented many different things. They stood for the cosmos, for the people as a whole, and for the individual Israelite. The meaning of these buildings was to be understood in part through seeing their physical form and the performance of practices ordained within them.

However, much of their meaning would also have been revealed textually. Only a very small handful of people in a generation would see inside the inmost part of the temple.

But every Israelite should have a sense of what was within it, from the instructions delivered to Moses for its construction recorded in the book of Exodus. Likewise, hardly anyone would have measured the actual edifice, but the exact measurements were given in the instructions delivered to Moses.

[12 : 13] People would have reflected upon the tabernacle and temple, not merely as physical constructions, but also as textually represented. Ezekiel's temple never became a physical construction, and it never will, but it is an exceptionally elaborate and developed literary representation of a symbolic building, of a perfected Israel, of Israel as it could be.

As a symbolic building, its meaning is rich and multifaceted, but it likely requires close and sustained communal meditation and reflection to start to discern it.

In particular, the Lord declares that close consideration of the temple design would lead Israel to be ashamed of their iniquities and spur them to obedience. As we too consider Ezekiel's temple, we need to puzzle over how it would accomplish this end.

The chapter begins by dating the vision, in the 25th year, the 10th day, and the 14th year after the city was struck down. As a book, Ezekiel has an unusual number of dates in it, and these dates are often recorded with a surprising degree of specificity, which raises the possibility that something more might be going on.

Back in chapter 1 verses 1 to 2, the dating of Ezekiel's first prophecy was recorded as follows. In the 30th year, in the 4th month, on the 5th day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the Kibar Canal, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God.

[13 : 37] On the 5th day of the month, it was the 5th year of the exile of King Jehoiakim. That dating is surprising. We're never informed as to what the 30th year is dated from, and the 5th day of the month is repeated in the reference.

When we see such anomalies in the text, it's usually a good sign to look closer. Examining the text more closely, James Bajan argues that the repetition of the 5th day of the month makes more sense when we appreciate Ezekiel's numerological preoccupations with the Jubilee.

The Jubilee occurred after 49 years, in the 50th year. Ezekiel's prophecy makes a lot of use of Jubilee-related numbers, 25, half a Jubilee, 49, and 50.

And nowhere in the book of Ezekiel is more use made of these numbers than in chapter 40. Adding together the numbers in chapter 1 verses 1 to 2, we get 30 plus 4 plus 5 plus 5 plus 5, which makes 49.

This is curious, especially when we consider the awkwardness of the repetition that makes this sum work. However, it might easily be chalked up to randomness. The claim, however, that it is random is weakened by chapter 40 verse 1, where we have three numbers, 25, 10, and 14, which again total to 49.

[14 : 55] 25 is also half a Jubilee, an auspicious number in this chapter, often repeated. The picture is filled out by some further details that an observant hero might notice.

First, the 25th year of the exile is 20 years after the vision of chapter 1. That vision was dated in the 30th year, so we are now in the 50th year.

This lends plausibility to the claim that the numbering was that of the Jubilee year itself. Second, the events occur at the turn of the year, seemingly the same time that the downfall of Jerusalem was described as occurring in 2 Chronicles chapter 36 verse 10.

Yet the turn of the year is here connected with the 10th of the month. Some have connected this detail with Exodus chapter 12 verses 1 to 3, where on the newly appointed first month on the 10th day, the children of Israel had to take a lamb for the Passover.

However, there is another possibility. As Bajan argues, the 10th was the first of a special sort of year, the Jubilee year. In Leviticus chapter 25 verses 8 to 10, the law of the Jubilee is recorded for us.

[16 : 02] You shall count seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the time of the seven weeks of years shall give you 49 years. Then you shall sound the loud trumpet on the 10th day of the 7th month.

On the Day of Atonement, you shall sound the trumpet throughout all your land, and you shall consecrate the 50th year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a Jubilee for you, when each of you shall return to his property, and each of you shall return to his clan.

The 10th of the month on the turn of the 50th year, by the dating of chapter 1 verse 1, might well be the Day of the Jubilee. The numerous allusions to Jubilee in the numbers of this passage and those that follow only give further weight to this theory.

Ezekiel is taken to a very high mountain in the land of Israel in his vision. While the temple is presumably in Jerusalem, there is no really high mountain there. Rather, the mountain should be understood as the symbolic cosmic mountain upon which he sees the structure of the visionary temple like a city.

When he is brought to the mountain, he sees a man with an appearance like bronze, with a linen cord and a measuring reed, who would guide him through the edifice as the figure in chapter 8 and give him its measurements using the cord and the reed to do so.

[17 : 19] When reading these chapters of Ezekiel and reflecting upon their symbolic numbers, it is important to bear in mind that it is sacred space that is usually measured. The measurements are significant in their details, but the fact that we have measurements at all is an indication that we are dealing with locations that are marked out from common realms.

The extensive measurement of the temple's city and land in this and the chapters that follow serve to indicate the spread of holy status beyond the immediate realm of the temple itself.

The measurements begin with the first part of the temple complex that Ezekiel encounters, the surrounding wall. The wall is measured with the measuring reed that the man has. We are told the length of the measuring reed itself, six cubits, which would be about ten and a half feet, and more curiously, the cubits in question were long cubits.

Bloch notes that the regular cubit was six spans or handbreadths, whereas this one would have been the equivalent of seven. As Stephen Cook notes, this closely corresponds with the length of the Egyptian royal cubit.

Interesting though that fact is, given the jubilee themes that pervade this chapter, we should probably recognise a symbolism in the unit of measurement itself, a six-span measurement lengthened to the equivalent length as a seven-span measurement, although it's important for later measurements to bear in mind that the handbreadths or spans were also lengthened in terms of it.

[18 : 45] This might remind us of the order of the week, made up of six regular days and one holy day of the Sabbath. By distinguishing the measurement being employed from the regular measurement, the hearer is made to think of the connection with the Sabbath more generally.

This is a sort of sabbatical measurement, each measurement standing, as it were, for a week, crowned with its Sabbath. The temple is oriented towards the east, which of course is where we get the word oriented from.

The east gate would be the most natural place to begin a tour of the temple. The gate is approached with steps. Later we are informed that there are seven of these steps in the corresponding gates on other sides, so we should presume that there are seven here.

The steps in different parts of the temple invite us to think of a movement into the temple as an ascent up, something that was always symbolically the case. As you move into the holier parts of the tabernacle or temple, you are symbolically ascending to the presence of God.

Within the gate there are three side rooms, each with a one reed or six cubits square floor plan, presumably to serve as guard rooms. Each were separated by five cubits.

[19 : 55] Past these side rooms was the vestibule, a larger room that was the final room one would pass through before one left the gate. Perhaps we are to see some significance in the fact that the gate had seven chambers, six side rooms of equal proportions, a reed or six cubits square, presumably devoted to the labour of guarding, and a larger antechamber, which would be the last of the rooms that you would pass through.

This might be a visual representation of the Sabbath. The gate was 25 cubits in width, and from the front entrance to the exit, 50 cubits in length.

If we tot up all of the measurements of the specific parts that are described, the 50 cubits measurement can be confirmed. The entrance of the gate was tall, 13 cubits, and the gate itself was 60 cubits high.

The gateway was decorated with palm trees. Next came the outer court, surrounded by 30 chambers and a pavement. The inner court was set back from the interior of the outer court by 100 cubits on each of three sides.

The northern gate is described as pretty much identical to the eastern gate by which Ezekiel first entered, although we are also told that it was opposite a gate to the inner court and that it had seven steps, again a sabbatical number.

[21 : 11] We shall presume the eastern gate also had this number of steps. The southern gate, described next, is the same as the northern gate. Next, moving up from the southern gate to the outer court, Ezekiel and the man enter the inner court by its southern gate, which has the same dimensions and features, save for the fact that its stairway has eight steps.

Perhaps there is some significance in seven steps plus one, much as the jubilee is seven sevens plus one as the 50th year. The east and the north of the inner court also have gates with the same features as the southern gate that Ezekiel described.

We should note that six gates have been described. The seventh gate is the gate to the sanctuary itself. In verses 38 to 43, the measurement of the temple complex is briefly suspended for a description of facilities for the preparation of sacrifices.

Here the key number is four, a number connected with the altar with its four sides and four horns. As Leslie Allen observes, the locations for the preparation of the sacrifices distinguish between the relative holiness of the sin and guilt offerings and the burnt offerings and peace offerings.

In verses 44 to 46, Ezekiel records the chambers for priests, one located at the north facing south and the other at the south gate facing north.

[22 : 31] These are for the priestly guardians of the temple and the altar respectively. The priestly guards guard the realm of God's holiness represented by the temple and the people represented by the altar.

Those performing these roles must not only be Levites but must be Zadokites. The chapter ends with measurements of the inner court which is a hundred cubits long and broad, a square.

We should probably recall the fact that the Holy of Holies or Most Holy Place, the inner sanctuary, was a square and the Holy Place was a rectangle with a two to one length to breadth ratio.

The tabernacle was set in a courtyard with a two to one length to breadth ratio. To understand the significance of the dimensions of different temples and sanctuaries in scripture it's important to compare and contrast their respective measurements and proportions.

Note that Ezekiel's temple gates have a two to one length to breadth ratio while its courts are more sacred squares. This is an amplification of the holiness of the place.

[23 : 31] The final seventh gate is into the temple itself which will lead to the throne room of the Lord, the great final square. There are ten steps leading up to this.

As Bajan observes, to enter the temple you would ascend twenty-five steps, seven for a gate to the outer court, eight for a gate to the inner court and ten to the temple itself.

The theme of ascent to God's holy presence continues. A question to consider. What are some of the other sacred structures that are measured in scripture?

Can you think of lessons we can learn by comparing and contrasting the measurements of some of these other structures?■■■■■■■■■