

Ezekiel 8: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Ezekiel chapter 8. In the sixth year, in the sixth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I sat in my house with the elders of Judah sitting before me, the hand of the Lord God fell upon me there. Then I looked, and behold, a form that had the appearance of a man. Below what appeared to be his waist was fire, and above his waist was something like the appearance of brightness, like gleaming metal. He put out the form of a hand, and took me by a lock of my head, and the Spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven, and brought me in visions of God to Jerusalem, to the entrance of the gateway of the inner court that faces north, where was the seat of the image of jealousy, which provokes to jealousy. And behold, the glory of the God of Israel was there, like the vision that I saw in the valley. Then he said to me, Son of man, lift up your eyes now toward the north. So I lifted up my eyes toward the north, and behold, north of the altar gate, in the entrance, was this image of jealousy. And he said to me, Son of man, do you see what they are doing, the great abominations that the house of Israel are committing here, to drive me far from my sanctuary?

But you will see still greater abominations. And he brought me to the entrance of the court, and when I looked, behold, there was a hole in the wall. Then he said to me, Son of man, dig in the wall. So I dug in the wall, and behold, there was an entrance. And he said to me, Go in and see the vile abominations that they are committing here. So I went in and saw, and there engraved on the wall all around was every form of creeping things, and loathsome beasts, and all the idols of the house of Israel. And before them stood seventy men of the elders of the house of Israel, with Jeazaniah the son of Shaphan standing among them. Each had his censer in his hand, and the smoke of the cloud of incense went up. Then he said to me, Son of man, have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel are doing in the dark, each in his room of pictures? For they say, The Lord does not see us, the Lord has forsaken the land. He said also to me, You will see still greater abominations that they commit. Then he brought me to the entrance of the north gate of the house of the Lord, and behold, there sat women weeping for Tamas. Then he said to me, Have you seen this, O son of man?

You will see still greater abominations than these. And he brought me into the inner court of the house of the Lord. And behold, at the entrance of the temple of the Lord, between the porch and the altar, were about twenty-five men, with their backs to the temple of the Lord, and their faces toward the east, worshipping the sun toward the east. Then he said to me, Have you seen this, O son of man?

Is it too light a thing for the house of Judah to commit the abominations that they commit here, that they should fill the land with violence, and provoke me still further to anger? Behold, they put the branch to their nose. Therefore I will act in wrath. My eye will not spare, nor will I have pity. And though they cry in my ears with a loud voice, I will not hear them.

Ezekiel chapter 8 opens the account of a new vision, which runs up to the end of chapter 11. Within it, Ezekiel is brought to Jerusalem in a vision where he sees abominations being performed in the temple by leaders of the people, and the departure of the glory of the Lord, abandoning his temple in the city of Jerusalem, sealing its doom. The beginning of the account of this vision will raise immediate questions for any who are paying closer attention. The date of the vision is in the sixth year, we must presume, of the exile of Jehoiakim, the sixth month, and the fifth day of the month. If the chronology of the events of the book to this point has not been rearranged, we have no reason to suppose that it has, and Ezekiel performed the 430-day sign of chapter 4 immediately after receiving it. The events of these chapters belong to the period during which Ezekiel was still performing that sign. This suggests that Ezekiel's performance of the sign was not continuous, but that it was likely a daily performance for a few hours. Ezekiel was in his house at this point, and the elders of the Judahite exiles were with him, presumably hoping to hear some word from the Lord for them. Ezekiel had been struck dumb for a period of time in chapter 3 verse 26, likely only speaking when the Lord directly released him to do so. However, the elders of the people seem to assume that he will be able to communicate the word of the Lord to them, and it is likely that this vision was a response to the elders seeking of a word from the Lord of him. While the elders of

[4 : 45] Judah are with him, the hand of the Lord fell upon him. He was suddenly overtaken by a visionary experience. The description of the figure in verse 2 is reminiscent of the figure in the theophanic vision of chapter 1 verses 26 to 27. And above the expanse over their heads there was the likeness of a throne, in appearance like sapphire, and seated upon the likeness of a throne was a likeness with a human appearance. And upward from what had the appearance of his waist I saw as it were gleaming metal, like the appearance of fire enclosed all around. And downward from what had the appearance of his waist I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and there was brightness around him.

Ezekiel is snatched up on a visionary journey in which he is brought to Jerusalem. His body, we must assume, remains in the room of his house in the land of the Chaldeans, but his consciousness is brought to Jerusalem. Outside of the book of Ezekiel, one of the closest analogies to this might be in the description of the temptations of Christ in the Gospels, where the devil takes Jesus to Jerusalem and sets him on a pinnacle of the temple. Indeed, the account of the temptations of Christ and Luke might even be a demonic parody of the visions of Ezekiel, moving from the wilderness to the high mountain to the extremity of the temple. The figure puts out the form of a hand. Marsha Greenberg argues that the description here implies that it was not a human hand, but something resembling it that should nonetheless be distinguished from it. Ezekiel is seized by what is widely understood to be a tuft of his hair. Should we presume that this is an expression of anger on the Lord's part?

It may be. The word understood to refer to a tuft of his hair here is only elsewhere used in scripture in reference to the tassels on the borders of the Israelite garments in Numbers chapter 15.

Ezekiel is lifted up by the Spirit in ways that might remind the hearer of the Spirit's animating work in the original vision. Ezekiel is transported to the entrance of the gateway of the inner court of the temple facing north. He will later move through the temple precincts in four stages.

Noting the existence of various attempts to find some rationale for the order of these movements, Joseph Blenkinsop suggests that there is no particular significance to be discovered in the sequence, but that they should rather be regarded as discrete images of idolatry within the precincts.

[7 : 08] I haven't encountered a compelling reason for the sequence, so I think it's not unlikely that he is correct. However, there is a more detailed itinerary through the visionary temple later in the book, which does seem to have more of a rationale for it. Perhaps someone has or will come up with a persuasive one for the itinerary here. In the first location, Ezekiel sees the seat of the image of jealousy, which provokes to jealousy, or perhaps the lustful image that provokes to lust, as Blenkinsop would have it. It is likely that this refers to the syncretistic worship of the Canaanite fertility goddess, Asherah. From archaeological findings, it seems that some Israelites treated Asherah as the Lord's consort, not merely serving a false god, but grossly perverting the Lord's self-revelation and sexualising him in the process. The establishment of an image of Asherah in the temple itself was one of the greatest abominations of King Manasseh, which we read of in 2 Kings chapter 21 verse 7.

And the carved image of Asherah that he had made, he set in the house of which the Lord said to David and to Solomon his son, This image, later removed and destroyed in Josiah's reforms, may have been replaced at a later point.

The worship of Asherah had been taken up in Israel early on in the kingdom era, and persisted even among the Egyptian exiles of Jeremiah's day, as we see in Jeremiah chapter 44. There it seems that the cult of Asherah was peculiarly popular among Israelite women.

Daniel Bloch is dubious about claims that there was an actual image of Asherah in the temple at this time, arguing that we lack evidence for this. He suggests that this is more likely a visionary appearance, something that gives a sense of the spiritual state of the people and their hearts.

The glory of the Lord is present there also, highlighting, as Bloch notes, the spiritual treachery of what is occurring. An alien abomination is established in the Lord's own house.

[9 : 10] Ezekiel is led through four different scenes, each recounted in a similar manner. Ezekiel is transported to some new location that we are told about, he beholds something which he then describes, he is instructed by the one leading him, presumably the Lord, to observe the abomination there, and recognise how it incites the Lord's wrath.

And then in the first three of the scenes, he is told that he will witness yet greater abominations in the final statement. Ezekiel is here being made a witness to the great breaches of covenant that Israel has committed, recognising the provocation of Israel's sins, and the justification of the Lord's abandonment of his sanctuary, and devastation of the people.

The first of the scenes is the image of jealousy or lust. The Lord warns Ezekiel that it gets worse, there are much greater abominations yet to witness. The second scene, in verses 7-13, begins with an instruction for Ezekiel to dig into a hole in the wall, perhaps associated with the sign of Ezekiel chapter 12, where Ezekiel is instructed to dig through the wall, presumably of his house, to leave as an exile.

Perhaps the manner of entry into this chamber is an indication of the covert and illicit character of what's taking place in this darkened realm. Ezekiel is engaged in a clandestine activity, eavesdropping on a secretive ritual in a room filled with idolatrous images, like an Egyptian burial chamber.

The air is thick with incense, and he catches the 70 elders of Israel in the act of offering to their idols. Ezekiel recognises one of the figures, Jeazaniah, the son of Shaphan.

[10 : 47] Presumably Ezekiel knew him from before his deportation, while the other sons of Shaphan, members of one of the great families of Jerusalem at the time, were supportive of Jeremiah, Jeazaniah is clearly not.

What he is doing in the darkness is perhaps a sickening realisation for Ezekiel that even people in the administration who might have seemed faithful are evil and unfaithful. The rot is pervasive.

Each of the 70 elders is offering to his own images, thinking that the Lord has forsaken the land and doesn't see what they are doing. Again, we need not assume that Ezekiel was witnessing an actual concrete event.

Rather, the Lord seems to be granting him a window into the idolatrous hearts and worship of the priestly leaders, who probably have their own private idolatrous shrines in their homes. The third scene is at the entrance of the north gate, where women are sitting, weeping for Tamas.

Although Bloch observes that Tamas here might refer to a particular form of pagan lament rather than to the god Tamas himself, Many think that Tamas was a Mesopotamian dying and rising god, yet another piece of evidence of the extreme syncretism of the Judahites.

[11 : 56] The final of the four scenes is in the inner court before the entrance of the house of the Lord, where about 25 men are facing east and worshipping the sun, in the very site where the Lord's worship was most concentrated.

The identity of the 25 men is not clear. In chapter 11 verse 1, we see 25 men again, now at the entrance of the east gateway facing east, presumably the same people.

The Spirit lifted me up and brought me to the east gate of the house of the Lord, which faces east. And behold, at the entrance of the gateway there were 25 men, and I saw among them Jeazaniah the son of Azah and Pelletiah the son of Benaiah, princes of the people.

Peter Lighthouse suggests that the 25 men in chapter 8 might be the high priest and the heads of the 24 priestly houses. Worship of the sun, moon and stars was another form of idolatry that had gained popularity during the reign of Manasseh, who had built altars for the hosts of heaven during his reign, as we see in 2 Kings chapter 21 verse 5.

Having witnessed the deep treachery of the people and the way that they are provoking the Lord to wrath, Ezekiel and those who hear him should be able to understand why the Lord is acting towards Jerusalem as he is.

[13 : 10] A question to consider. In eavesdropping upon what the leaders of the people are doing in their secret places, Ezekiel is made privy to some of what the Lord himself sees when he inspects his people.

What are some other examples of Scripture's reminders of the fact that the Lord sees all that we do, even in those places where no other person can see us?