

Ezekiel 43: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Ezekiel chapter 43 And he said to me, And their doorposts beside my doorposts, with only a wall between me and them.

They have defiled my holy name by their abominations that they have committed, so I have consumed them in my anger. Now let them put away their whoring, and the dead bodies of their kings far from me, and I will dwell in their midst forever.

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.

This is the law of the temple. The whole territory on the top of the mountain all around shall be most holy. Behold, this is the law of the temple. These are the measurements of the altar by cubits, the cubit being a cubit and a handbreadth.

Its base shall be one cubit high and one cubit broad, with a rim of one span around its edge. And this shall be the height of the altar, from the base on the ground to the lower ledge, two cubits, with a breadth of one cubit, and from the smaller ledge to the larger ledge, four cubits, with a breadth of one cubit, and the altar hearth, four cubits, and from the altar hearth projecting upward, four horns.

[2 : 29] The altar hearth shall be square, twelve cubits long by twelve broad. The ledge also shall be square, fourteen cubits long by fourteen broad, with a rim around it half a cubit broad, and its base one cubit all around.

The steps of the altar shall face east. And he said to me, Son of man, thus says the Lord God, these are the ordinances for the altar. On the day when it is erected for offering, burnt offerings upon it, and for throwing blood against it, you shall give to the Levitical priests of the family of Zadok, who draw near to me to minister to me, declares the Lord God, a bull from the herd for a sin offering.

And you shall take some of its blood and put it on the four horns of the altar, and on the four corners of the ledge, and upon the rim all around. Thus you shall purify the altar and make atonement for it.

You shall also take the bull of the sin offering, and it shall be burned in the appointed place belonging to the temple, outside the sacred area. And on the second day you shall offer a male goat without blemish for a sin offering, and the altar shall be purified, as it was purified with the bull.

When you have finished purifying it, you shall offer a bull from the herd without blemish, and a ram from the flock without blemish. You shall present them before the Lord, and the priest shall sprinkle salt on them, and offer them up as a burnt offering to the Lord.

[3 : 47] For seven days you shall provide daily a male goat for a sin offering. Also a bull from the herd and a ram from the flock without blemish shall be provided. Seven days shall they make atonement for the altar and cleanse it, and so consecrate it.

And when they have completed these days, then from the eighth day onward the priest shall offer on the altar your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, and I will accept you, declares the Lord God.

The book of Ezekiel concludes with a lengthy and highly detailed vision of the temple and the land. Although the vision refers to actual historical realities, it does so in a symbolic fashion.

No such temple or organization of the land and its people would ever be established in a concrete form. Rather, Ezekiel's vision uses dense symbolism to articulate changes in Israel's covenant situation following their restoration to the land.

Chapter 43 continues this visionary account, reversing events of the vision of chapters 8 to 11. In that earlier vision, the Lord had departed from his temple on account of the abominations committed within it.

[4 : 51] Departing from the east gate, the glory of the Lord went up from the city toward the Mount of Olives. Now Ezekiel sees the glory of the Lord returning to the temple from the east. The appearance of the Lord's glory here as much as it was in the first vision of Ezekiel by the Kibbar Canal, with which the book opens, and the vision in chapters 8 to 11, with the destruction of the city.

In some texts, verse 3 literally speaks of the vision that Ezekiel saw when he, Ezekiel that is, came to destroy the city. If this textual version is correct, Ezekiel's active participation in that earlier vision is accentuated.

Once again, seeing the majestic glory of the Lord, Ezekiel falls upon his face. In Exodus chapter 40 verse 34 and 1 Kings chapter 8 verses 10 to 11, the filling of the tabernacle and the temple with the glory of the Lord, with a manifestation of the Lord's taking up residence within them.

Here Ezekiel is brought into the inner court of the visionary temple, and the Lord's glory fills the building. Having re-established his residence in the temple in the midst of his people, the Lord addresses Ezekiel from his new throne room, declaring his intention to dwell in the midst of the people forever.

The Lord speaks of the dishonor brought to his name by the people in the past, and their unfaithfulness in going after other gods, the way that they had provoked his wrath by their flagrant idolatry, constructing pagan shrines, adjoining and even within his own temple.

[6 : 20] However, as they put such unfaithfulness behind them, the Lord would dwell in their midst once more and not depart from them. The vision of the returning of the Lord to inhabit the temple and the vision of the temple itself present Israel with a compelling vision of the way that things could be, of the purpose that the Lord has for them, and the future to which he is calling them.

Ezekiel is charged to describe the details of his vision of the temple to the house of Israel. It's entirely possible that this would entail the drawing of a detailed image of what he witnessed in his vision, or perhaps even the creation of a scale model, in addition to writing down the detailed account of the vision itself, which we have recorded for us in this book.

The intention of this is to cause the house of Israel to be ashamed of their iniquities. This would be achieved in part as the people appreciated the immense grace bestowed upon them, and how utterly undeserving they were of it.

However, the fine details of the vision really matter for achieving this intended effect. Ezekiel is given a comprehensive list of features of his vision that he must communicate to the people.

It would be, as they reflected upon the vision in all of its elements and details, that they would be able to recognize the full magnitude of what it meant. It's an architectural representation of the Lord's exalted holiness in the midst of a sanctified and glorified people.

[7 : 42] This is what the Lord would have them to be. The visual character of the prophecy powerfully complements the oral elements of Ezekiel's prophecies of restoration. It's one thing to hear about the Lord's intention to restore his people.

It's quite another to have a symbolic portrayal of what that restoration will look like. Along with recounting and recording the vision for them, Ezekiel must charge them to live in terms of this image of the ideal.

The entire area around the temple complex is declared to be most holy. One of the features of Ezekiel's temple, city, and land visions is an elevation and extension of holiness.

Holy space is generally ordered largely concentrically, with realms of decreasing holiness going out from a central location. In Ezekiel's temple, holiness extends much farther, and holy realms become more holy.

The realm that is here described to be most holy is that earlier described in chapter 42, verses 15 to 20. Now 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.

[8 : 49] He measured the east side with the measuring reed, 500 cubits by the measuring reed all around. He measured the north side, 500 cubits by the measuring reed all around.

He measured the south side, 500 cubits by the measuring reed. Then he turned to the west side and measured 500 cubits by the measuring reed. He 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. Already in this account of the measuring of the area, the hero should have a sense of its holiness.

Holy places are measured. Furthermore, the measurements of the realm are those of a square, like the holy of holies. The measurements are 50 by 10 on each side, numerologically significant numbers, once again connected with the jubilee themes that pervade Ezekiel's temple.

In verses 13 to 17, we move to the description of the altar in the inner courtyard, in front of the temple proper. The altar is measured in cubits, as in chapter 40 verse 5, we're informed that it is being measured using the long cubit, six hand breaths plus one, corresponding to the week with its Sabbath.

[10 : 02] The altar has a base, one cubit off the ground, a lower ledge, two cubits up from the base, and a larger upper ledge, four cubits up from the lower ledge.

Each ledge is double the height of the preceding one. Each ledge is set back one cubit from the ledge or base beneath it. We should note the absence of vertical measurements in much of the rest of the recorded details of the temple.

The significance of a multi-level base for the altar suggests a symbolic mountain, as blood is applied to the horns, sides, and base of the altar differently, according to the specific sacrifice being performed, and as the altar, coupled with the golden altar of incense, seems to represent the ordering of the nation.

This multi-level altar and base might suggest an elaboration and glorification of the structure of the people themselves. Seen from above, the altar is also squares within squares, and it is also at the very centre of a series of much, much larger squares within squares, the inner courtyard, the outer courtyard, and the larger bounded area of the temple, 500 cubits on all sides.

The altar could perhaps be viewed not only as the centre of, but also as a miniature symbolic model of this larger set of squares. The whole altar upon its base is 20 cubits by 20 cubits, the same as the measurements of Solomon's altar given to us in 2 Chronicles 4, verse 1, although there the cubits being used to measure are different.

- [11 : 31] The hearer is left to figure out this detail for themselves, though. It is not recorded for us in this place. 20 cubits by 20 cubits is also the same as the measurements given for the most holy place of the temple, recorded in chapter 41, verse 4.

The base and the upper ledge are surrounded by rims or lips. These rims would presumably make it easier to prevent blood from running into areas beyond the altar. They would also be important for the performance of rites requiring the placing of blood around the sides of the altar or around its base, which we see in verse 20.

The altar itself on the upper ledge is a further 4 cubits high, likely making the altar 10 cubits up from its base. However, commentators differ in how they visualise the details of the altar.

While Stephen Cook, for instance, sees the altar as being 10 cubits tall in total, Daniel Block sees it as only 6 cubits tall. The altar proper is 12 cubits long by 12 cubits broad, measurements that clearly recall Israel as a nation.

The altar represents the people and the land, and the numbers associated with it, especially 4 and 12, underline this fact. The altar was topped with 4 horns, one at each corner.

- [12 : 44] If one were to draw a diagram of Ezekiel's temple as described, it would also seem that the altar is bang in the centre. The altar is where the whole people and land are lifted up to the Lord in offering.

Some commentators compare the altar to a sort of ziggurat, and the whole structure of Ezekiel's temple has that sort of character to it. One ascends by stairs to each higher level.

Priests here ascend to the altar on steps, which face towards the east. This detail might surprise us as steps up to an altar were explicitly forbidden in Exodus chapter 20 verse 26, and you shall not go up by steps to my altar, that your nakedness be not exposed on it.

Stephen Cook suggests that the explanation for this might be found in the fact that the priests serving in Ezekiel's temple were described as having linen undergarments in chapter 44 verse 18, making the original restriction unnecessary.

This does, however, invite the question of why those serving in the original temple didn't simply wear undergarments, rather than having restrictions upon the permitted design of the altar.

- [13 : 49] The service of the altar was exclusive to Zedekites. Ezekiel is appointed a role to perform in a sort of visionary dedication ceremony for the altar and the worship of the temple more generally.

On the first day, the blood of a bull for the sin or purification offering was used to purify the altar, and the bull would be burnt outside of the sacred area. On the second day, a male goat would be presented as a sin offering.

Then a bull and a ram without blemish would be offered as burnt offerings. This was then to be repeated for six more days, making seven in total. From the eighth day, the altar could be used for general sacrifices.

In some respects, Ezekiel's role here might invite comparison with that performed by Moses in the consecration of the tabernacle as the prophetic director of the process. The cleansing of the altar is a symbolic cleansing of the land and the people, preparing them for communion with the Lord, who has returned to his house.

A question to consider. Very little of the furniture associated with the original tabernacle or the temple is described within Ezekiel's visionary temple. However, the altar is described in considerable detail.

[15 : 01] Do you have any thoughts on why this might be the case?