

Israel: Past, Present, and Future #14

Ezekiel 40:1-5

February 11, 2024

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A theological system that takes God's New Covenant people back to a temple, an altar, a priesthood, and sacrifices of the Old Covenant is a system which detracts from the perfection, completion, and sufficiency of Christ's atonement. It's a system that takes Christ's Church back to its infancy (Galatians 4), to a church just learning its ABCs, to a "church under age" (*Westminster Confession of Faith* 19:3).

I submit that Scripture does not give us a future expectation of a rebuilt temple (with a restored Levitical priesthood and sacrificial system) in which Jews or Gentiles will worship the Lord with His blessing/approval. Though there is a scriptural expectation for a future conversion of Israel to Christ and for the Christian nation of Israel to dwell in peace and safety in the land promised by God to Abraham and his posterity as an "everlasting possession", nevertheless, I submit there is no biblical expectation of a future rebuilt temple having God's blessing.

Today, we will consider two passages used to support a rebuilt temple and the re-institution of the Levitical priesthood and sacrificial system: (1) Ezekiel 40-48; (2) Ezekiel 37:26-28.

I. Ezekiel 40-48.

A. Ezekiel received his inspired visions as revelation from God while in Babylonian captivity. There were actually three different deportations of Jews to Babylon—605 B.C. (Daniel and his three friends); 597 B.C. (Ezekiel); and 586 B.C. (destruction of the temple/Jerusalem).

1. The Book of Ezekiel is filled with prophetic visions that consist of many symbols (such as four living creatures each having four faces, a wheel within a wheel, a book that is eaten, symbolic years, marks upon the forehead, a valley of dry bones that come to life, a river of life that proceeds from the temple, just to name a few of the symbols).

2. We must allow Scripture to interpret the meaning of symbols in prophetic passages of the Bible (Scripture is the alone infallible rule of the interpretation of Scripture—literal interpretation).

B. As we consider the vision of the city/temple in Ezekiel 40-48, I would draw your attention to close parallels that it has with the vision of the city given to the Apostle John in Revelation 21-22.

1. In both of these visions, they are taken to a high mountain upon which the city of Jerusalem in Ezekiel is built (Ezekiel 40:2) and upon which the city of the New Jerusalem is built (Revelation 21:10).

2. The Holy Spirit clearly states that the New Jerusalem is not a literal city, but rather signifies the glorified Church of Jesus Christ (Revelation 21:9-10). Thus, all that is prophesied in Revelation 21-22 is not to be interpreted literally, but rather figuratively, as representing various truths that relate to Christ's glorified Church.

3. There is a river of life that flows from the throne of God with trees that bring healing along the sides of it (Revelation 22:1-2), so there is a river of life that flows from temple and trees that bring healing along the sides of it (Ezekiel 47:1,12). We could go on with other similarities between the symbols used concerning the city in Revelation 21-22 and the city in Ezekiel 40-48.

4. Just as Old Covenant worship is used symbolically in the Book of Revelation to speak of New Covenant truths and realities (e.g. there is a temple in Revelation 7:15 and Revelation 11:1, an altar in Revelation 8:3 and Revelation 11:1, and the ark of the covenant in Revelation 11:19), so there is a temple, altar, and Old Covenant worship used in Ezekiel 40-48 to represent New Covenant truths and realities.

5. Just as various symbols are used in Revelation 21-22 to represent the glorified Church of Christ, so the same or similar symbols are used in Ezekiel 40-48 to represent the earthly Church of Christ. John's vision is helpful in interpreting Ezekiel's vision.

6. But not only are there similarities between the holy city in Ezekiel's vision (Ezekiel 40-48) and the holy city in John's vision (Revelation 21-22), but also important dissimilarities/differences.

1. The New Jerusalem in Revelation 21-22 is forever rid of all effects of the curse of sin (Revelation 21:4; Revelation 22:3), whereas the city of Ezekiel 40-48 yet suffers under the curse of sin—there are sin offerings offered in the temple (Ezekiel 46:20) and priests will teach God's people the difference between what is holy and profane and between what is clean and unclean (Ezekiel 44:23).

2. There's a temple in the city of Ezekiel's vision (Ezekiel 40-48), but no temple in the city of John's vision (Revelation 21:22).

3. Thus, in Ezekiel's vision and in John's vision there is represented in symbolic language the beauty and glory of the Church of Jesus Christ, which Christ has purchased unto Himself. However, the vision in Ezekiel is that of the earthly Church in which there is yet sin, whereas the vision in Revelation is that of the glorified Church in which there is no sin. Both visions describe Christ's Church in different ages.

C. The most important reason why a future rebuilt temple (of which God approves) is not what is depicted in Ezekiel 40-48 is because it would contradict what is revealed in the New Testament.

1. The New Covenant Church of Jesus Christ is God's new temple in which Ezekiel's temple is realized (1 Corinthians 3:16-17; Ephesians 2:21). This temple of living stones in the New Covenant has replaced the temple of stone of the Old Covenant (1 Peter 2:5).

2. There will be no reinstated Levitical priesthood because Christ is our High Priest (Hebrew 4:14), and He has given to His New Covenant Church a holy priesthood (1 Peter 2:5). The Old Covenant order of Levi has been superseded/replaced by the New Covenant order of Melchizedek in Christ (Hebrews 7:11-12,17-18). If there is no reinstated priesthood—there is no rebuilt temple—both are necessarily connected.

3. There will be no reinstated sacrifice for sin because Christ's sacrifice is final and once and for all (Hebrews 7:26-27). The only acceptable sacrifices that we can offer now in this age to the Lord are thanksgiving offerings of our lives as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1) and our praise in worship (Hebrew 13:15). If there are no reinstated sacrifices, then there will be no altar upon which to offer sacrifices. If there will be no altar, then there will be no priesthood to offer sacrifices upon an altar. If there is no priesthood to offer sacrifices upon an altar, then there will be no rebuilt temple in which a priesthood will offer sacrifices upon an altar; for this would undo the finished work of Christ.

4. When Israel as a nation is converted to Christ, she will be united into the New Covenant Church in which the temple, priesthood, sacrifices, and ceremonies of the Old Covenant have been all nailed to the cross of Jesus Christ (Colossians 2:14).

5. Remember, the Book of Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians to make clear to them that Jesus, the Messiah, in the New Covenant has put away the Old Covenant and all its outward administration of the temple, priesthood, and sacrifices. Thus, Ezekiel's city and temple must be symbolic (like that of John's city) and must point us to the spiritual realities and to the beauty of the earthly Church of Jesus Christ (composed of both Jews and Gentiles).

II. Ezekiel 37:26-28.

A. We looked last Lord's Day at Ezekiel 37:21-25 and saw that during the Messianic age (between the first and second comings of Christ) Israel would be converted to Jesus, the Messiah (the Greater David) and that the Lord would restore Israel to the land given to Jacob forever (Ezekiel 37:25). But the prophecy also

states that during the same Messianic age the Lord would set His sanctuary in the land of Israel “forever”. The same Hebrew word (*olam*) is used for both the promise of the land and the temple. If the promise of the land is forever, is not the promise of a temple (sanctuary) likewise forever?

B. Consider these reasons why there is a distinction between the promise of the land forever and the promise of the temple forever.

1. There is a distinction between Israel as a nation and Israel as a church.

a. The promise of the land is realized in Israel as a nation. The promise of the temple is realized in Israel as a church.

b. There are no statements in the New Testament that God will forever bring to an end Israel as a nation—to the contrary, “all Israel [as a nation] will be saved” (Romans 11:26—the same nation that has rejected Christ will be converted to Christ in the future). To that same converted nation God will restore the land promised to Jacob “forever”.

c. However, Israel as the Old Covenant Church will come to an end and will be realized in the New Covenant Church (both Gentile nations and Israel will be grafted into the same olive tree—the same New Covenant Church, Romans 11).

d. Thus, the promise of the land forever to Israel as a converted nation will yet be realized, but the promise of the sanctuary (temple) to Israel as a church has been and will be realized in the New Covenant Church (which is the temple of God as we have already seen).

e. The promise of the land will be fully realized in the New Heaven and New Earth, and the promise of the temple will be fully realized in the New Jerusalem (glorified church) that comes down from heaven. That is how both the land and the temple are given forever.

2. Just as the sanctuary (temple) is prophesied to be established in the land forever (*olam*), so the Old Covenant priesthood was likewise promised to be established forever (*olam*—Exodus 40:15). And yet the Levitical priesthood was ended and realized in Christ’s priesthood of Melchizedek (Hebrews 7:11-12,17-18). Israel as a nation is not ended (therefore the promise of her land continues), but Israel as a church is ended (therefore the promise of her temple ends and is realized in the New Covenant Church).

3. When God dwells with His people in blessed communion, He is said to be a sanctuary (temple) among them (Ezekiel 11:16), even when the temple was destroyed. When Jesus came in His first coming, He “tabernacled” among His people (John 1:14). Jesus became our temple, so that when we are in Him, we become His temple in the earth.

4. Finally, we see the New Testament interprets Ezekiel 37:27 for us in 2 Corinthians 6:16 and ultimately in Revelation 20:1-3 (where there is no temple of stone, but there is Christ and His glorified church).

C. Application

1. We are complete in Christ—He is our sanctuary, our High Priest, and our final sacrifice for sin—in Him all of the ceremonies of the Old Testament are realized. In the Church of Rome (Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, etc.) the priesthood, sacrifice of the Mass, and in the ceremonies of holy water, incense, and the altar, they take us back to the Old Covenant. The holy days of the Old Testament celebrated by Messianic Judaism and Hebrew Roots Movement takes us back to the Old Covenant. Even when Protestant Churches speak of worshipping in the sanctuary or coming to the altar, there are hints of the Old Covenant which we should avoid.

2. On the one hand, we must flee legalism in being accepted and righteous before God on the basis of our law-keeping (justification by works of the law). But on the other hand, we must flee a libertinism in casting off God’s moral commandments for our sanctification and growth in Christ. We are finished with the ceremonial law of the Old Covenant, but we are not finished with the moral law (as

summarized in the Ten Commandments—Matthew 5:17). God’s moral law is holy, just, good, and spiritual (Romans 7:12,14). God’s moral law reveals to us the beauty of His righteousness and reveals to us our sin (1 John 3:4). That is why it is ignored/despised by the world and professing Christians. However, the Lord defines love by inward/outward obedience to His commandment (1 John 5:3; John 14:15). We can say we believe in and love Jesus, but it is our inward and outward obedience that reveals our love. Loving obedience to God’s moral commandments is NOT legalism or returning to the Old Covenant—it growth and conformity to the image of Christ who perfectly kept the law of God. If legalism is keeping God’s moral law, Jesus was the greatest legalist that ever lived. Let us walk in His steps.

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