

## Ezekiel's Temple

*Mark Alvis*

One of the ongoing discussions among evangelical Christians is the glorious temple described in Ezekiel 40-47. Growing up in dispensational circles, I was taught that this temple will be erected sometime in the future and will function during a thousand year reign of Christ at Jerusalem. Premillennialists believe this will be a literal stone temple because of the precise measurements laid out in Ezekiel's vision. Without doubt Ezekiel's vision was intended by God to draw the thinking of the Jews back to Solomon's temple. That temple had been destroyed by the Babylonians because of Israel's ongoing disobedience to God. The glory of Israel (God's temple) had been laid to ruin in the dust of Jerusalem. However, as so often occurs in the Old Testament Scriptures, God was comforting His people with a promise of the blessings He will pour out in the future. Some of these blessings were going to begin in Ezekiel's day. Notice God's promise in Ezekiel 39:25-29 (which sets the stage for chapters 40 and following),

"Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will now bring Jacob back from captivity and will have compassion on all the people of Israel, and I will be zealous for my holy name. They will forget their shame and all the unfaithfulness they showed toward me when they lived in safety in their land with no one to make them afraid (God had been faithful to His covenant promises to Israel. He did not deserve the unfaithfulness Israel gave Him in return). When I have brought them back from the nations (the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities) and have gathered them from the countries of their enemies, I will show myself holy through them in the sight of many nations. Then they will know that I am the LORD their God, for though I sent them into exile among the nations, I will gather them to their own land, not leaving any behind (the decree of Cyrus allowed any Jew who WANTED to return to the land of Israel the freedom to do so - II Chronicles 36:23; Ezra 1:3. All the Jews whose hearts were moved by God did move back - Ezra 1:5). I will no longer hide my face from them, for I will pour out my Spirit on the house of Israel, declares the Sovereign LORD."

The decree of Cyrus is usually dated about 539 B.C. The primary purpose of the decree was to rebuild the temple at Jerusalem. This was accomplished over a period of about 24 years. The completion of the temple came in the midst of revival under the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah. Was this rebuilt temple the fulfillment of Ezekiel's vision? It was only a partial fulfillment. There was a "now and not yet" aspect of Ezekiel prophecy. We see this very clearly from the promise of God given through Haggai at the time of the second temple's completion:

"Who of you is left who saw this house (the rebuilt temple at Jerusalem) in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it seem to you like nothing? (The Jews who returned from exile were not able to put the amount of gold and silver into the rebuilt temple that Solomon had put into the original temple. However, according to Unger's Bible Dictionary, this rebuilt temple was about 33% larger than Solomon's original temple) . . . This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land (what does God mean by that? The explanation follows). I will shake all nations, and the desired (the wealth) of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,' says the LORD Almighty. 'The glory of this house will be greater than the glory of the former house,' says the LORD Almighty. 'And in this place I will grant peace,' declares the LORD Almighty" (Haggai 2:3-9).

What is the "now and not yet" aspect of God's promise through Haggai? The shaking among the nations began shortly after Haggai spoke. The Persians, the political power of Haggai's day, attacked the Greek city states and were soundly defeated. A shake up in world power was coming. From history we know that the Greek Empire and then the Roman Empire emerged as new world powers. Did the wealth of the nations truly pour into the rebuilt temple? Yes, in at least three ways. One way God accomplished this was to leave Jews in all the nations. These pockets of Jews gathered much wealth among the nations and would yearly make pilgrimages back to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices and pay temple taxes. Another way God fulfilled His promise was by raising up Herod the Great, who took wealth plundered from the nations by Rome, and poured it into Zerubbabel's temple. Again Unger writes,

"The temple as it existed after the captivity was not such as would satisfy a man as vain and fond of display as Herod the Great; and he accordingly undertook the task of rebuilding it on a grander scale. Although the reconstruction was practically equivalent to an entire rebuilding . . . Herod himself said . . . that it was only intended to be regarded as an enlarging and further beautifying of that of Zerubbabel."

We have already learned that Zerubbabel's temple was larger than Solomon's temple. We now learn that Herod's temple was larger yet. Was there a blueprint that influenced Herod's remodeling of the temple? Unger says, "There can be little doubt but that the arrangements of Herod's temple were in a great measure influenced by the description here given (see Ezek. 41:1-43:17)." In other words, Herod used some of the measurements given in Ezekiel's vision when he remodeled Zerubbabel's temple. This was done in partial fulfillment of both Haggai's and Ezekiel's prophecies. The greater fulfillment however, comes another way.

What is the greater fulfillment? The end of both prophecies provide the answer. Haggai's prophecy closes with these words, "And in this place (the rebuilt temple of Zerubbabel) I will grant peace," declares the LORD Almighty." It was in this temple (being remodeled by Herod) that Jesus Christ taught the way of salvation; and it was in this temple that the New Testament Church (the temple of God on earth today - I Corinthians 3:16-17; Ephesians 2:19-22; I Peter 2:4-5) had its beginning - Acts 2:46. The gospel message, empowered by the Holy Spirit, is the only power on earth that can truly grant peace; and it is the only power that can make life come out of death. Let me repeat: the greatest glory of Zerubbabel's temple was the glory that Christ brought into it through His teaching and by having the New Testament Church emerge from it. I believe this is the ultimate meaning of Ezekiel 47,

"The man (angel) brought me (Ezekiel) back to the entrance of the temple, and I saw water coming out from under the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east). The water was coming down from under the south side of the temple, south of the altar . . . As the man went eastward with a measuring line in his hand, he measured off a thousand cubits and then led me through water that was ankle-deep. He measured off another thousand cubits and led me through water that was knee-deep. He measured off another thousand and led me through water that was up to the waist. He measured off another thousand, but now it was a river that I could not cross, because the water had risen and was deep enough to swim in - a river that no one could cross . . . Then he led me back to the bank of the river. When I arrived there, I saw a great number of trees on each side of the river. He said to me, "This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah (Jordan Valley), where it enters the Sea (Dead Sea). When it enters the Sea, the water becomes fresh. Swarms of living creatures will live wherever the river flows. Fishermen will stand along the shore . . . ."

Are we to understand this in a literal sense? Is God excitedly revealing to Ezekiel that He is one day going to make a great fishing spot out of the Dead Sea? Surely the meaning is much greater than that. There are times in Scripture when tangible, earthy things speak of spiritual blessings and realities. For example, fresh water is used to speak of life and the blessings of salvation (Psalm 46:4; Isaiah 35:6-7; John 4:10-14). The salty sea at times speaks of unbelieving mankind (Isaiah 57:20; Daniel 7:2-3; Revelation 21:1). So too, our Lord Jesus gives us insight into how to properly understand Ezekiel's temple and the water flowing from it when He identifies Himself as the true temple of God (Matthew 12:6); and offers the woman at the well living water which springs up into eternal life (John 4:14). Because the Church is the Body of Christ and the temple of God on earth today, Ezekiel's temple provides a beautiful picture of the life-giving water of the gospel going out from the Church and causing spiritually dead people (represented by the Dead Sea) to live. The process of making disciples of the nations will go on for a long time with increasing results (this is the meaning of the water becoming a river that no man can cross - see also Isaiah 9:6-7). All of this is tied to God's promise, ". . . for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea." (Isaiah 11:9).

Believers, living in the New Covenant age, have been privileged to see the fulfillment of much of Ezekiel and Haggai's prophecies. Even greater fulfillment will result as the good news of the gospel continues to flow out of God's new temple (Isaiah 2:1-4; Romans 16:25-27). The ultimate blessings of God however, await Christ's coming at the end of the age (I Corinthians 15:20-26).

Are we guilty of spiritualizing the Bible away when we speak in terms such as this? Let me answer by asking the following questions: Has this explanation ignored the biblical context of Ezekiel's temple? Has this interpretation distracted or taken away from Christ's glory and power? On the contrary, this interpretation takes seriously the fact that the Old Testament is all about the person and work of Christ (Luke 24:27; John 5:46) - which is all about saving people. To read Ezekiel's prophecy of a new temple and see: (1) only a stone temple being rebuilt at Jerusalem with renewed animal sacrifices (Ezekiel 40:38-43); and (2) only literal water flowing into the Dead Sea so that fish can live there - is an interpretation that conflicts with New Testament revelation (Hebrews 8-10) and greatly cheapens these

wonderful promises.

To all my premillennial friends (and they are my brothers and sisters in Christ) I leave this closing truth about biblical interpretation from the pen of Paul,

"For it is written in the Law of Moses: "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain" (Deuteronomy 25:4). Is it about oxen that God is concerned? Surely he says this for us (preachers of the gospel), doesn't he? Yes, this was written for us . . . ."

Paul's point is this: God's primary concern in giving that Old Testament law was not for oxen; it was a principle to be used in paying PEOPLE a fair wage for their labors. God is NOT that interested in water purification. God IS interested in saving people. Jesus has called us to be fishers of men. Only when we see these spiritual realities, can we gain the true meaning and joy of Ezekiel's temple.