

October 19

Scriptures: Read Ezekiel 40, 41 & 42

Key Verse: "...behold, there was a man whose appearance was like... bronze. He had a line of flax and a measuring rod in his hand..." (Ezekiel 40:3)

Overview

Now that the restoration had been prophesied, Ezekiel's vision from chapter 40 to the end of the book deals with the ideal organization of the religious life in the restored and regenerated community of God. Since Ezekiel was a priest, the Temple, its service, and worship had been foremost in his life up until the time he went into exile. The temple had also been the centre of the people's religious life. Now, however, the Temple had laid in ruins for fourteen years and the people were without hope. To those who would believe, Ezekiel's prophecies would have given encouragement, hope, and comfort by the knowledge that there would be another even greater and more glorious Temple and that the sacrificial system would be restored, for at that time, before the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the "shadow" and type were still necessary for their atonement of sin (Col. 2:17). They were to know that God's Kingdom was not finished.

Many different interpretations have been given for this last section of Ezekiel which has even given rise to debate. It was obviously not fulfilled in history, for it was nothing like the rebuilt temple after the return from The Exile. Some believe that the temple Ezekiel envisioned is literal and that it will be built in this age or in the Millennial age by the Messiah. Others have suggested that it will be in heaven, yet in the Apostle John's vision of heaven he specifically says that there was no temple (Rev. 21:22). However, if the temple is understood as symbolically representing the Church of Jesus Christ, then this view is quite possible. It is always best to interpret the biblical passages literally, unless it is a clear symbol within the context, or unless it is shown as a clear symbol in other biblical passages.

One of the main objections to taking everything literally in Ezekiel 40 through 48 is that the atonement of Jesus Christ abolished the Old Testament sacrifices forever (Heb. 9:10-15; 10:11-14, 18), and believers in the New Covenant are not to revert to the old system (Gal. 3:23-25; 4:3-9; 5:1). Yet again, we understand from the New Testament that it is no longer a specific tribe or family that are priests, but all believers are priests and have direct access to God through the blood of Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 2:9). True worship is not in rituals performed in a Temple building but in spirit and in truth (John 4:21-24).

How then should we interpret this last section of Ezekiel? Admittedly, this is a puzzling question. Upon closer examination, some of the language in this last section of the book cannot refer to a literal material temple, and a figurative or symbolic interpretation seems most probable. For example, in 43:7 Ezekiel heard the Lord speaking from the Temple saying that He would dwell there forever. A material building on this present earth could never last forever. If the temple is only to be interpreted symbolically, some might question, "Why then did Ezekiel give so many details, such as the many measurements?" As in Ezekiel's other visions, he gives concern to the smallest details, more than any other biblical writer. The many specific details would have given to the despondent exiles a feeling of assurance and certainty of fulfillment.

There are many similarities between this last section of Ezekiel and Revelation 21 and 22, wherein John describes heaven (the “new heaven” and the “new earth”). The difference is that John omits all Hebraisms, since he is writing to a different audience — the Gentile Church — and at that time there had been a fuller revelation of God. Ezekiel, however, is writing many centuries earlier to Jews who understood worship to God as relating only to the temple and its sacrifices. They could not fathom a Kingdom of God without these things; therefore, the Lord speaks to them with terms they would understand.

Like Ezekiel, the Apostle John was given a vision from a high mountain top (40:2; Rev. 21:10). These two prophets, as well as Zechariah, saw a man with the tools used to take measurements (40:3; Rev. 21:15; Zech. 2:1). Ezekiel, however, describes that man as having an appearance like bronze. He spoke to Ezekiel in the same way that God Himself had previously spoken to him (40:4). On the tour of the temple, Ezekiel had to wait in the court and only the man with the appearance of bronze entered into the Most Holy Place (“inner temple”, 42:15), for only the high priest was permitted to enter it. That man must have been none other than the preincarnate Lord Jesus, our great High Priest. With his architect tools in hand, the city and temple were surely of His designing. Jesus said to His followers: “I go to prepare a place for you” (John 14:2-3). What a wonderful and most beautiful place it must be!

In his description of the temple, Ezekiel surprisingly says very little about its furniture, and some of the furniture he does not mention at all, such as the candlestick and the most sacred and important piece of furniture — the Ark of the Covenant, upon which was the Mercy Seat. Ezekiel may well be looking to the future when these symbolic types will have been long forgotten, since the Lord Jesus Himself, their “substance” (Col. 2:17), will be personally present (cf. Jer. 3:16-17). As to the question of the temple itself, the prophet Zechariah and the New Testament shed some light. Zechariah prophesied that the Messiah (“Branch”) “shall build the temple of the Lord” (Zech. 6:12-13). The Apostle Paul teaches that Jesus Christ is “the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a habitation of God in the Spirit” (Eph. 2:20-22). The Church of the Lord Jesus, of which He is the designer and builder, is then clearly symbolized as a Temple in the Bible, which may well be represented by the intricate temple described by Ezekiel. Unlike a corruptible material temple, the spiritual Church is incorruptible and indestructible, and it will last forever, for it is based upon the incorruptible Lord Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 1:18-21).

Prayer

Father God, we thank You for the promise of Jesus who said, “I go to prepare a place for you, that where I am, there you may be also.” How wonderful it is to know we will be with You for eternity!