

THE ORGANIZATION OF THE COMMUNITY

Ezekiel 40—48

The final chapters of the book are in striking contrast to the previous section. The people had returned to the land and enjoyed a peaceful existence (Ezek. 36—37), only to be savagely attacked by the massed forces of evil; divine intervention resulted in the final victory (Ezek. 38—39). The prophetic oracles of doom on Israel's pagan neighbors had been fulfilled. Now the priestly influence in Ezekiel comes to the forefront: joyfully he describes the resulting new day. The secure community is to be organized around the Temple and God's presence. The rebuilding of the Temple will allow Yahweh's glory to return to the redeemed people; however, to insure the holiness of the place, divine instructions are given for the Temple, worship, land and city. The organization of the community must also follow God's Law and organizational plan.

Undoubtedly Ezekiel expected his plans to be executed; however, to interpret these either as symbolic descriptions of Christian worship or as detailed descriptions of the "end times" creates serious difficulties. The plans were not for normal times (cf. ch. 47). In fact, Revelation 21:9—22:5 interprets them in the context of God's Kingdom following Satan's final defeat.¹ Ezekiel's visions were received in the context of his day, his age and his culture. The revealed truth goes far beyond any limiting factors and will find its ultimate fulfillment in the victorious new age following the Lord's return. In the exposition, we will seek to understand the original forms and principles; however, the final chapter will be written according to God's will and timetable.

The minute architectural worship details for the modern reader seem strange and are tedious reading; nevertheless, for Ezekiel's audience, they were exciting words of hope and encouragement. In order to better understand the chapters, the information that follows will be helpful. The *outer wall* of the temple complex contained three gates (east, north and south). The *outer court*, within the wall, contained a wall with three gates (east, north and south). In front of the *Temple* proper, there was an *inner court*. The *Temple* proper was divided into three sections: the vestibule (Heb., *ulam*); the nave, the holy place (Heb., *hekal*); and the inner room, holy of holies (Heb., *deir*). The *measurements* were taken in "cubits" (the long cubit equals 20.7 inches; the short cubit equals 17.5 inches; and "reeds," or one rod, equals 6 cubits, or in long cubits, approximately 10 feet and 4 inches). Equal measurements emphasize holiness (cf. the city walls were square; the temple area was square; the altar was square). The thickness of the wall in part emphasizes the separation of the secular and the sacred (cf. 42:20).² The temple area was built in a zigurat fashion, or on terraces. There were seven

The last section deals with the _____
of the _____.

(organization, community)

The _____ influence of Ezekiel is seen in chapters 40-48.

(priestly)

The new community is organized around the _____ and _____.

(Temple, God's presence)

What will allow God's glory to return to the redeemed community? _____

(the rebuilding of the Temple)

Divine instructions are given to insure _____

(the holiness of the city)

For Ezekiel's audience, the architectural details were not tedious items but were words of _____ and _____.

(hope, encouragement)

The outer wall of the Temple contained _____ gates.

(three)

In front of the Temple was an _____.

(inner court)

Measurements are made in _____.

(cubits)

Equal measurements signify _____.

(holiness)

Name three items that were square in structure.

(Temple, city walls, altar)

steps up to the outer gates (40:22,26); the inner gates had eight steps, and there were ten steps going up into the Temple itself. The altar was also depicted as having three tiers, each smaller than the other. The temple area was surrounded by a wall reported to be 500 "reefs" square (42:15-20), and again 500 "cubits" square (45:2). The general tendency is to follow the latter account. The Septuagint interprets cubits for 42:16.

THE TEMPLE AREA

The Outer Walls and Gates (40:2-16, 24-43)

The central ideal of the temple vision is holiness. The abomination of the former Jerusalem Temple made it impossible for Yahweh to dwell there (ch. 8); the new Temple must be a holy place.

The outside wall was over ten feet thick (v. 5), and the massive east gate was secured by three guard rooms (v. 10). Evidently the east gate was the model for the other two found on the north (v. 20) and south (v. 24) sides of the temple complex. To the rear of the gates and facing the outer court were rooms called vestibules. The south and north gates had "seven steps going up" to them (v. 26).

The Outer Court (40:17-27; 46:21-24)

Along the walls of the outer court (north, east and south) was the lower pavement with thirty rooms (ten along each wall) to be used by the people during festivals (40:17-19). In the four corners there were kitchens for those who ministered at the Temple and prepared (boiled) the sacrifices of the people (46:21-24). In back of the Temple, corresponding to the west-wall, outer-court area, was a mysterious building (41:12, 90 x 70 cubits) probably used for storage.

The Inner Court (40:23, 27-49; 42:1-14)

The raised inner court was surrounded by a wall with three large gates that resembled those of the outer wall.

The priest chambers

On the north and south side were two three-story buildings (100 x 50 cubits). These were "holy chambers" for the priest. The north area was designated for the singers and the priest in charge of the Temple, i.e., the Levites who had been disobedient (40:44,45). The south chambers

Indicate the number of steps up to the following:

1. The outer gate: _____
2. The inner gates: _____
3. The Temple: _____

(seven, eight, ten)

The altar contained _____ tiers.

(three)

The temple vision emphasizes _____.

(holiness)

The outside wall was over _____ feet in thickness.

(ten)

The gates were secured by _____ guard rooms.

(three)

Who occupied the holy chambers in the north area?

(Compare your answer with the text)

were for those in charge of the altar (40:46, the Zadokites). The priests ate and changed in this holy area (42:13,14): holy garments could not be worn in the outer court for fear of communicating holiness to the people.

The north gate

The inner section, or vestibule, of the north gate was different (40:38-43): it was used to slaughter, wash and prepare the sacrifices for cultic use. There were four tables in the vestibule and four outside in the outer court. In addition, there were four tables of hewn stone where the slaughtering instruments were kept.

The Temple Structure (40:47—41:46)

The temple court was a perfect square with the altar in front of the building (40:47). The Temple faced east. To the north and south were two porches. The Temple was 100 cubits long (approximately 125 feet). Ten steps led up to the vestibule.

The vestibule

The vestibule (*ulam*) was 20 x 12 cubits (40:49, RSV, following the Septuagint); the entrance was 14 cubits wide (40:48, RSV).

The nave

The nave (*hekal*), Holy Place, measured 40 x 20 cubits. The entrance was 10 cubits wide (41:2, RSV).

The inner room

The inner room (*debir*), holy of holies, measured 20 x 20 cubits and its entrance was 6 cubits wide (41:3,4 RSV). The entrances were progressively narrower indicating the degree of sanctity.

Decoration

The interior of the Temple was paneled, and the three sections had recessed windows. The walls were decorated with carved likenesses of cherubim and palm trees. The nave and the sanctuary (inner room) had double doors with two swinging leaves each (41:23,24).

Outside chambers

The temple wall measured 6 cubits thick (41:5, RSV). On the north, south and west sides were a series of three-story side chambers (thirty per story, 41:6, RSV). There were offset supports around the temple wall to support the weight of these rooms. Although no use is given for these, they probably housed temple paraphernalia and gifts.

Who occupied the south chambers? _____

(Compare your answer with the text)

Name two functions of the priest's chambers.

1. _____

2. _____

(place for the priest to eat, place to change clothing)

Where was the altar located? _____

(Compare your answer with the text)

The Temple faced _____.

(east)

On the north and south were _____.

(porches)

Temple furniture

In front of the entrance to the most holy place was an "altar of wood" (41:22) called "the table that is before the Lord" (22b). This probably corresponds to the table of the Presence (cf. Ex. 25:23-30; Lev. 24:5-9).

The Altar (43:13-27)

The structure (43:13-17)

The altar was built in three ascending stages (cf. a ziggurat) or steps. The base was 16 cubits square and 1 cubit high; the second area was 14 cubits square and 4 cubits high; the top was 12 cubits square and 4 cubits high. The top area was decorated with four horns at each corner: each horn was 1 cubit high. The overall height was 10 cubits (including the horns) or about 12 feet 6 inches. A series of steps led to the top. The increased height and smaller sizes of the three levels again symbolizes the increasing holiness of each area.³

Purification (43:18-27)

Detailed instructions were given for the Zadokite priests to "make atonement for the altar and purify it" (v. 26). Following this procedure, God would accept the offerings and the people (v. 27).

WORSHIP AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION

The Glory of Yahweh Returns (43:1-12)

Once the plan for the new Temple is completed with all of its holiness, the prophet is led to the east gate of the outer wall. There he sees the splendour of Yahweh return the way He had departed (Ezek. 10:19ff.; 11:23), and "the glory of the Lord filled the house" (v. 5). God speaks to him "from the house, while a man was standing beside" him (v. 6), promising to "dwell among the sons of Israel forever" (v. 7). However, the past shame of burying the kings next to the sanctuary must not be repeated (v. 7b). No longer would the palace be adjacent to the Temple (v. 8; cf. 1 Kings 7). Yahweh had returned to dwell with His people (cf. 1 Kings 8:27; Rev. 21:3). The presence of Yahweh implies a religious community ruled by Yahweh, a true theocracy. There would be no need for prophets: God rules through His servant, the priest. There would be no need for a king: the "civil authority" would be a prince, and his function would be to provide the offering needed for the worship services. The priest would teach the Law and judge the people. For Ezekiel then, the ordinances of the Temple were fundamental and must express the idea of holiness.

The table that was "before the Lord" probably corresponds to the _____ of the _____ of the Tabernacle.

(table, Presence)

The altar was built in _____ stages.

(three)

The top of the altar was decorated with _____.

(four horns)

Following _____ by the _____ priests, God would accept the offerings and the _____.

(purification, Zadokite, people)

Yahweh returned to the new Temple through the _____ gate.

(east)

What promise did God make in 43:7? _____

(Compare your answer with the text)

The new community, ruled by _____, would be a true _____.

(Yahweh, theocracy)

Since God would rule through His servants, the _____, there would be no need for _____ or _____.

(priests, prophets, kings)

The civil authority would be a _____.

(prince)

The Ordinances (44:1-31)

The closed east gate (44:1-3)

No one shall enter by it. When the prophet was brought to the Temple it was through the north gate (v. 4). The prince could sit in the gate "to eat bread before the Lord . . ." (v. 3).

Temple personnel 44:6-31)

Description of foreigners (vv. 6-9). In old Israel foreign slaves were assigned menial temple tasks (cf. Josh. 9:23; Num. 31:30,47; 2 Kings 11:4-8). In the new Temple their presence would be considered an offense to Yahweh.

The unfaithful Levites (vv. 10-14). These shall be "ministers" (v.11) in "charge of the house, of all its service, and of all that shall be done in it" (v. 14).

The Zadokite priest (vv. 15-31). These are to be the legitimate priests of the sanctuary to minister to the Lord (cf. 1 Kings 2:26,27,35; Abiathar and his family were relieved of the priestly functions and Zadok was made principal priest).

Obligations and duties of the temple personnel (vv. 15-27).

The maintenance of the temple personnel (vv. 28-31).

Sacred days, feasts and festivals (45:18—46:15)

The sacred periods mentioned were sabbath, new moon, passover and unleavened bread, and the year of Jubilee or liberty.

Sacrifices

The general plan of the Law of Moses is followed; however, a major difference is seen in that the people do not bring their sacrifices directly to the Temple, but bring them to the prince who is responsible for keeping the Temple supplied with the necessary sacrifices (45:16,17). The innovation is seemingly related to keeping the Temple holy, i.e., uncontaminated. How true that sin is still a part of the new community! (See the contrast in Rev. 21—22.)

Participation in worship

Both the prince and people can approach the inner gate to observe the priest as they engage in the worship experience. Their participation is in observation; they cannot enter the inner court.

Distinctive Characteristics of Ezekiel (40—48)

1. Sin was still in the community; sin offerings were continued.
2. The sacred area or district was a radical change

The prophet entered the Temple through the

_____ .
north gate)

How could the prince use the east gate? _____

(Compare your answer with the text)

Is the following statement true or false?

Sin was still a part of the new community. _____

(true)

The _____ and _____ could observe the _____ as they engaged in worship.

(prince, people, priests)

from David's Jerusalem and Solomon's Temple.

3. There was a heightened consciousness of the holiness of God (cf. the closed gate, 44:2; the two courts, 40:17-28; the clothing of the priest, 42:14; the priest's allotments next to the sacred area; the ascending steps; the narrowing entrance in the Temple).

4. There was no mention of a high priest.

5. The name of the city is "Yahweh is There" (48:35) and not "New Jerusalem."

6. There was a simplification of the ritual found in the Pentateuch (cf. only morning sacrifice); fewer holy days; no furniture in the Temple—there was no need for symbols for Yahweh was there; the prince is the civil ruler and is not exalted: he is the people's representative before God.

7. There was a return to a pure theocracy.

8. The Temple was not adjacent to the dwelling of the civil ruler (Solomon's Temple was in effect a private chapel for the monarch as well as the centre of Israelite worship).

9. Ezekiel's Temple had no place for the ark with its mercy seat.

10. Ezekiel did not mention a Day of Atonement.

THE ORGANIZATION OF THE LAND

The Sacred Area (45:1-7; 48:8-20)

A central portion of the land belonged to Yahweh, a territory of 25,000 by 10,000 cubits (the Septuagint has 25,000 by 20,000 and is probably correct). The allotment was concluded in 47:13ff.

The Levite zone

To the north an area of 25,000 by 10,000 cubits was assigned to the Levites who minister in the Temple. As such the priests had no inheritance for the Lord Himself was their inheritance. They were supported by the offerings of the people.

The Zadokite zone

To the south an equal area was designated for the priests who attend the altar.

The temple area

Within the Zadokite zone a square of 500 cubits was designated for the temple complex. Around this area was an open space 50 cubits deep.

UNDERLINE the correct answers.

The name of the city is New Jerusalem, Yahweh is there.

Ezekiel's Temple had, did not have a place for the Ark.

In comparison with the Pentateuch, ritual was simplified, amplified.

The government was a monarch under the Davidic prince, a theocracy under the authority of the priest.

(Yahweh is there, did not have, simplified, a theocracy under the authority of the priest)

A central portion of the land belongs to _____
(Yahweh)

The City of Jerusalem

South of the sacred area and adjoining it a section 25,000 by 5,000 cubits of common land was reserved for the city. The city itself was to occupy 4,500 cubits square and was surrounded by a 250 cubit-deep open space (48:16,17). The totals of the sacred area and the city made a perfect square of 25,000 cubits, i.e., approximately eight square miles. There would be three gates on each side of the city, twelve in all. (Cf. Ezek. 48:30-34; Rev. 21:14 for the New Jerusalem.)

The Prince's Allocation (45:7,8; 48:21,22)

East and west of the above square, stretching to the Jordan and Mediterranean respectively, was the prince's territory. The prince was warned not to oppress the people as the former Davidic rulers had done (45:7,8). The people were to give offerings to the prince (45:16), and it was his responsibility to provide the offering for the feasts (45:17).

Tribal Allocations (47:13—48:7,23-29)

North of the sacred area (48:1-7)

Each tribe was given equal territory without regard for geographic terrain. From north to south the order is Dan, Asher, Naphtali, Manasseh, Ephraim, Reuben, and Judah. (Note Judah's position in the North; Manasseh and Ephraim each receive one of Joseph's double portion.)

South of the sacred area (48:23-29)

The southern tribes are Benjamin, Simeon, Issachar, Zebulun and Gad. Levi was given an inheritance within the sacred area. The Transjordan tribes were given allocations in Palestine proper. Judah and Benjamin were given places of importance adjacent to the sacred zone.

THE DIVINE PRESENCE Ezekiel 47:1-12; 48:35

Ezekiel is brought back to the door of the Temple and sees a stream flowing from under the threshold toward the east (47:1; cf. Rev. 22:1-5) bringing life wherever it goes.

The Source of the River of Life (47:1,2)

A divine source

Contrary to the major cities of antiquity, Jerusalem

The new city was _____ of the sacred area and _____ it.

(south, adjoined)

There were _____ gates to the city, _____ on each side.

(twelve, three)

North and south of the sacred area, each tribe was given _____ territory.

(equal)

_____ and _____ were given places of importance adjacent to the sacred zone.

(Judah, Benjamin)

From the door of the _____ Ezekiel saw a _____ flowing from under the threshold.

(Temple, stream)

The stream flowed toward the _____ bringing _____ wherever it went.

(east, life)

was not built on a river. However, the day would come when God's river of life would originate from His Temple, flowing by His altar as an atonement for sin. God is the author of the living water; however, the New Testament shows how it passes through the atoning blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.

An insignificant beginning (47:2)

The prophet is brought the long way around (cf. the sealed east gate) into the Temple to see that there the stream was only a trickle (cf. Isa. 53:2, "a root out of parched" (i.e., dry) "ground . . ."; Matt. 13:31,32). The small beginning would have impressive results as it flows through the barren Judean desert down to the Dead Sea (cf. the work of Christ in the lives of those who surrender to His will).

The Rapid Increase of the River of Life (47:2-5)

The trickle soon becomes a flood. Normally, a trickle would soon be absorbed by dry and thirsty land such as the Arabah. The increase of most rivers is through their tributaries; however, the River of Life has no tributaries. The increase was due to its source and divine nature. God is the source and replenishing supply (cf. how Christianity grows from person to person). From the trickle it becomes a deep river (v. 5).

The Efficacy of the River of Life (47:6-12)

The river flows into the arid Judean region and transforms the area. What is its effect?

Fertility (v. 7)

Trees line its bank.

Life (vv. 8-10)

The Dead Sea becomes fresh and supports abundant life (where the River of Life flows there is life . . . even for dead churches!).

Fruitfulness (vv. 11,12)

Ezekiel, the practical prophet, knows that salt would still be needed: there would be some salt left (v. 11). As God changes the arid soil, He still preserves that which is good—even from the past. However, the healing waters cause the trees to bear "every month . . . their fruit will be for food and their leaves for healing" (v. 12). With God nothing is impossible!

UNDERLINE the correct answers.

Jerusalem was, was not built on a river.

To see the stream of water the prophet was brought through the east gate, a long way around.

(was not, a long way around)

Is the following statement true or false?

The beginning stream produced an insignificant amount of water. _____

(true)

The stream flowed through the _____ down to the _____.

(barren Judean desert, Dead Sea)

In a practical expression, there would be some _____ left; God preserved that which was _____ from the past.

(salt, good)

The waters of life caused the trees _____

(Compare your answer with the text)

The Eternal Nature of the River and City

The "leaves will not wither, and their fruit will not fail" (Ezek. 47:12) for God is the source. The river represents the eternal Kingdom of God. It will be victorious now and will ultimately win the final battle against evil. Ezekiel fittingly declares the name of the city to be "The Lord is there" (*Yahweh Shammah*). In the Apocalypse of John, repeatedly the glory of God's presence is declared to be in the Holy City: "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He shall dwell among them . . ." (Rev. 21:3,7, 22,23; 22:3-5). "And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20b); "Come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20b).

There is an _____ invested
in the _____ and _____.

(eternal nature, river, city)

The river represents the _____
_____ of _____.

(eternal Kingdom, God)

The name of the city is _____.

(Yahweh is there, Yahweh Shammah)

Endnotes

¹In the light of the context here and total New Testament interpretation, the theory that looks for a rebuilding of the Temple at Christ's return and an exact fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophecies in the Kingdom of Christ is questionable. For example, note the following: Jesus' sacrifice on the cross replaced forever the sacrificial system (cf. Heb. 10:18); also, the heirs of the Kingdom, New Israel, are no longer the Jewish nation but the Church (Matt. 21:33-45; Gal. 6:14-16; 1 Pet. 2:4-10). God does not have two plans of salvation, one for the Jew and another for the Gentiles, nor has He projected a "double fulfillment" with respect to Jerusalem, i.e., one physical and the other heavenly. Cf. G. R. Beasley-Murray, "Ezekiel," *The New Bible Commentary: Revised*, ed. by D. Guthrie *et al.* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), pp. 683-84.

²Cf. Herbert G. May, "Ezekiel," *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VI, ed. by Nolan B. Harmon *et al.* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1956), p. 285.
³The relationship of the design has obvious parallels with Mesopotamian structures; e.g., the ziggurat or "mountain peak" and temple towers adorned with "horns." Cf. William Foxwell Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1946), pp. 150-52.

Home Study Exercise

Basic activity (*Levels 1, 2, and 3*). Read the study guide and answer the following questions:

1. What is the importance of the Law and divine organizational plan for the new city?

2. When does Revelation include the advent of New Jerusalem?

3. What are the problems inherent in interpreting Ezekiel 40—48?

4. Name the three sections of the Temple (include the Hebrew terms).

5. Define the term "ziggurat."

6. What was the significance of the thickness of the walls?

7. How many kitchens were included? What functions were they to perform?

8. What was the probable use of the building built along the west wall outer court?

9. Where were the priests' chambers located?

10. Why could the holy garments of the priests not be worn in the outer court?

11. How did the vestibule of the north gate differ from the other two?

12. Indicate the significance of the progressively narrower entrances of the Temple.

13. What past shame of the old Temple would not be repeated in the new Temple?

14. Where was the king's palace located in relation to the old Temple? What relation will the palace have to the new Temple?

15. Indicate the function of the prince in the new community.

16. What two basic functions could the priest perform in the new community?

17. What was the ordinance concerning the east gate?

18. Compare the function of foreigners in the old and new Temples.

19. Name the four sacred periods mentioned by Ezekiel (days and seasons).

20. Describe worship in the new Temple.

21. List ten distinctive characteristics of the new community.

22. Explain the inheritance provisions made for the Levites and Zadokites.

23. What area was assigned to the prince?

24. What was the warning given to the prince?

25. Describe the progress of the River of Life as it flowed eastward.

26. What were three effects of the River of Life on its environment?

Supplementary activity (*Levels 2 and 3*).

1. Contrast the place of sin in Ezekiel's "city" and its place in the New Jerusalem of Revelation 21—22.
2. Compare worship as projected by Ezekiel in his city and that of New Jerusalem in John's Apocalypse.
3. How does Ezekiel's vision of God's glory leaving and returning to the Temple relate to the sign of the divine Presence? (Cf. Ex. 3:12; 34:15,16; Isa. 7:14; Matt. 1:23; 28:20.) How does this relate to John 14:15, 21-24?

Advanced activity (*Level 3*).

1. Read an article on the Temple in a Bible encyclopedia or dictionary and relate this to Ezekiel's Temple.
2. Read an article on Israel's theocracy and discuss the priestly influence in Ezekiel's projection of a theocratic government for restored Israel.
3. Why did the theocracy fail in early Israel?
4. What was Ezekiel's evaluation of the kingship?
5. Why was there no need for prophets or monarchy?
6. How did Ezekiel bring the Davidic covenant under the authority of the Sinaitic covenant?
7. Although Moses was considered a prophet, what type of government did he give Israel? Why had law and ritual superseded prophecy?

Optional Supplementary Reading

Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, pages 268-315.

Seminar Discussion

1. Discuss the influence of Ezekiel found in Revelation.
2. What is the influence of the general outline of Ezekiel 36—48?
3. How similar are the apocalyptic styles?
4. Under what conditions did both writings originate?
5. What theological presuppositions are common to both?
6. How does the New Jerusalem of John transcend the city of Ezekiel?
7. How does the advent of Jesus and the establishment of His Kingdom effect the difference?
8. Discuss the way eschatological hope encourages faith in a difficult present. Is this an escape mechanism or a dynamic for creative faith?