

Ezekiel's Temple: Premillennial Achilles' Heel?

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This is the outline I used for a presentation at a Conference in 2005.

Let me begin this short study with a quotation from two former DTS graduates who have since abandoned and then rounded on dispensationalism:

The passage most commonly mentioned that presents great difficulty to dispensational literalism is Ezekiel's temple vision (Ezekiel 40-48). The dispensationalists are looking for a reinstatement of bloody animal sacrifices in a millennial temple built in accordance with the description found in this passage. Dispensationalists are careful to qualify that these sacrifices are merely memorials of Christ's death and will be the millennial equivalent of the Lord's Supper. The problem with this is that Ezekiel's vision refers to these sacrifices literally making atonement (Ezekiel 45:15, 17, 20; Hebrew: "kaphar," to atone). Of course, a dispensationalist can go to the book of Hebrews to prove that animal sacrifices in the Old Testament never literally atoned for sin (Hebrews 10:4). When the Reformed theologian, however, goes to Hebrews to prove that animal sacrifices were rescinded forever [no memorial sacrifice] by Christ's once for all offering (Hebrews 10:10-18), then that is "theological interpretation" and "reading the New Testament back into the Old Testament" – two practices which dispensationalists routinely criticize.¹

This is a representative criticism of dispensational writers from people who now find themselves on the other side of the theological fence.

In an Open Letter to be found at their website, the faculty and friends of Knox Theological Seminary made their views known when they stated among other things that:

C.P. 4: The death of Jesus forever fulfilled and eternally ended the sacrifices of the Jewish temple. All who would worship God, whether Jew or Gentile, must now come to him in spirit and truth through Jesus Christ alone. The worship of God is no longer identified with any specific earthly sanctuary. He receives worship only through Jesus Christ, the eternal and heavenly Temple.

Reformed writers like to hone in on this passage since the insistence of dispensationalists that it be taken literally is viewed as, to use Anthony

¹ Curtis I. Crenshaw & Grover E. Gunn, III, *Dispensationalism Today, Yesterday and Tomorrow*, (Memphis: Footstool Publications, 1989), 221. Emphasis added.

Hoekema's word, an "absurdity."²

On top of this many commentators dismiss the idea of a literal temple by pointing to the numerous problems with taking such a line. For example, Daniel Block mentions the lack of eschatological terminology such as "on that day," "in the latter days," etc.³ Block notices that the furnishings in the Sanctuary are absent (501), the New Moon Offerings are different (501). "The apportionment of the land of Israel among the tribes to a large extent disregards topographic and historical realities." (501-502). What is more there is no command to build the structure (510), and besides, there is the omission of vertical measurements to consider (510-511). If that partial list weren't enough, he thinks that the contrasts between the Mosaic rituals and those of Ezekiel, "challenge the fundamental prophetic law of noncontradiction [since] true prophecy must agree with Mosaic revelation (Deut. 18:15-18)." (500). It is for these reasons he is of the opinion that, "to unlock its meaning one needs to employ several different hermeneutical keys." (494).⁴

There are also other important differences:

- Structural Difference – Larger than Solomon's Temple; E. & W. rooms for the priests
- Topographical Difference – Highest mountain; river from Temple
- Institutional Difference – No High-Priest Named*; Zadokite line
- Cultic Difference – No Pentecost, Yom Kippur

Too, some writers claim that Ezekiel's language in these chapters is 'apocalyptic'⁵, or contain "elements...that stand close to 'apocalyptic.'"⁶ Finally, adding fuel to the fire, some dispensationalists have even spiritualized Ezekiel's Temple. In fact, the person who devotes more paper than any other to arguing against literalism is the dispensationalist teacher Sidlow Baxter.⁷

2 Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 204. He believes that the vision pictures the new earth, "in terms of the religious symbolism with which Ezekiel and his readers were familiar." – *ibid*, 205.

Of course, what they were familiar with was a literal temple, they were not at all familiar with a figurative one.

3 Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 25-48*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), NICOT, 504.

4 Charles Feinberg referred to this practice as "hermeneutical alchemy."

5 E.G. Ralph H. Alexander, *Ezekiel*, EBC, ed. Frank E. Gaebelain, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 6:946.

6 J. Gordon McConville, *A Guide to the Prophets*, (Downers Grove: IVP, 2002), Exploring the Old Testament, Volume Four, 102. N.B. In line with modern scholarship McConville later identifies only Daniel and Revelation as being apocalypses. *Ibid*, 114.

So, what with all the divergences and contrasts, together with the vacillation of some prominent dispensationalists, where does this leave us?

Distilling the Dispensational Position

Let me just spell out what it is those of us who hold to literal interpretation of the last nine chapters of Ezekiel are saying we believe:

- We believe that in the Millennium an enormous temple placed upon a holy portion some eight miles square⁸ will be erected on what will become the highest mountain in the world, which will be located at Jerusalem.
- We believe that a full sacrificial system of Jewish priests and bloody sacrifices will be maintained at this Millennial Temple.

These two beliefs, being based on the application of Grammatico-Historical hermeneutics, require two things if they are to be true:

- Massive topographical changes in the Land
- A reasonable way of harmonizing these sacrifices with the once-for-all atonement at the Cross, together with a fitting rationale for the necessity of continued temple sacrifices in the Millennium.

THEOLOGICAL FALLOUT

There are many OT prophetic texts, which, if taken literally would not necessarily force big changes to ones approach to the interpretation of the OT, let alone the entire Bible, but Ezekiel 40-48 is too large to be treated as an isolated passage. If it can be satisfactorily explained from a dispensational perspective it would demand a complete overhaul of most OT theologies. This seems clear once it is seen that the structure of Ezekiel reaches its crescendo in the theme of the returning Shekinah to the Temple in 43:1-7. This return is linked with the abandonment of Solomon's Temple by the Shekinah in chapter 11. This reveals that there is a narrative-theological arc extending from chapters 8 and 11 over to chapter 43.

This arc from a literal temple to what is often taken to be a spiritual temple at the end of the book appears to be hermeneutically imbalanced and forced on the prophet's words by external considerations. But if this arc and other things can be adequately accounted for by dispensational premillennialism then *the theological fallout is immense*, for it would demand similar treatment of supporting texts and their contexts within the prophetic literature. The knock-on effects would persist until the entire theology of the prophetic corpus of the OT was transformed by the theological necessity emanating from a literal interpretation of the last 9 chapters of Ezekiel. Therefore, these chapters ought

7 J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore The Book*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981) six volumes in one, 4:31-35.

8 Charles Lee Feinberg, *The Prophecy of Ezekiel*, (Chicago: Moody, 1970), 263.

to be seen as perhaps a major testing ground for hermeneutical principles, particularly by dispensationalists.

Let me summarize the ramifications of the product of G-H interpretative principles as applied to the final chapters of Ezekiel:

Clearly if a ministering temple priesthood, a king on an earthly Davidic throne, a resettlement of the tribes of Israel in peace and esteem, this means that the Biblical Covenants come to the fore as theological sign-posts. Further, there is no place for the extra-biblical covenants of redemption, works and grace since these are only required when the theological focus switches from a broad kingdom-theocratic-redemptive purpose contemplating Israel, the nations, and the original purposes of creation of both heaven and earth, to a narrow soteriological purpose centering solely in the Church.

SOME PROPOSED SOLUTIONS: DISPENSATIONALISTS

1. Peters, Sidlow Baxter – figurative
2. A.C. Gaebelain, Alexander, Tan⁹ – memorial (“picture lessons”)
3. Ironside – symbolic presentation of pure worship.
- 4a. Whitcomb, Rooker, – pedagogical & disciplinary (temporal ceremonial efficacy)
- 4b. Tan, Hullinger – similar to above, with the addition of ‘Requirement’ since God will dwell with His people.

Many amillennialists charge dispensationalists with deserting their G-H hermeneutics by accepting the ‘Symbolic’ view (i.e. Position **3.** above). Hoekema doesn’t mince words:

If the sacrifices are not to be taken literally, why should we take the temple literally? It would seem that the dispensational principle of literal interpretation of the Old Testament prophecy is here abandoned, and that a crucial foundation stone for the entire dispensational system has here been set aside!¹⁰

This criticism has also been aimed at those who take the ‘Memorial’ view. In this case the argument appears to be strengthened by the fact that the Hebrew word *kaphar* in most cultic settings means, “making atonement.”¹¹ The prophet

9 Tan also allows for what he calls “theocratic adjustments” similar to Hullinger. See Paul Lee Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy*, (Dallas: Bible Communications, Inc, 1993), 294-298.

10 Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 204.

11 This is the meaning given by the Harris, Archer, Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, and by Koehler-Baumgartner, *Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. K-B specifically reference Ezekiel 45:15, 17; 43:20, 26; 45:20 in the Piel.

employs the Piel (intensive) as if to make this point clear. This should not be seen as a problem:

The OT sacrifice could simultaneously provide atonement for forgiveness (Heb. 9:13) while foreshadowing Christ's sacrifice, which would be the ultimate ground for the payment of sin and the removal of guilt.¹²

In other words, it is Christ's sacrifice that stands behind the OT sacrifices and lends them efficacy.

ANOTHER ALTERNATIVE?

It must be emphasized that just as it was *never* "possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins" (Heb. 10:4, 10-11, 14), neither will it be the case in the future. We admit that a full and complete explication of the Millennial sacrifices is perhaps not possible from this historical vantage point. But the difficulty of reconciling the data does not give us a permit to ignore or allegorize the O.T. testimony.

Another thing to keep in mind is that, according to Ryrie, while the object of faith remains constant, the *content* of faith alters with the progress of revelation.¹³ The question arises, then, "what will the content of faith entail in the millennial dispensation?"

The Bible predicts that a literal Temple and sacrificial system will be in existence during the Millennial Kingdom (Ezek. 40-48; Jer. 33; Isa. 2:2-4; 60:13; Hag. 2:9; Zech. 14:16-21). What the full purposes of the Temple will be cannot be stated with exactitude, but there is no contradiction in Christ offering a once-for-all sacrifice for sins and the reinstatement of Millennial Sacrifices. Just as the O.T. sacrifices did not expiate sin, but pointed away from themselves to the Great Sacrifice of Christ, so the Millennial sacrifices will not expiate sin, but *may function as the way for sinners in the Millennium (cf. Isa. 65:20) to express acceptance and faith in the finished work of Christ. In other words, they may act as the way of access to the blood of Christ.*¹⁴

Perhaps the sacrifices (or some of them) will represent the content of faith required by God from those who believe in Christ for salvation in the Millennial dispensation? One must recall that every person in the kingdom will know that Christ has died for the sins of the world. It will take no more faith to believe that fact than to believe the earth is round. Perhaps, then, the sacrifices reveal true

¹² Mark F. Rooker, "Evidence From Ezekiel" in Donald K. Campbell & Jeffrey L. Townsend, eds., *A Case For Premillennialism*, (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 132.

¹³ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, (Chicago: Moody, 1995), Revised edition, 115, 121.

¹⁴ The High Priest in the Millennial Kingdom will be Jesus Himself as the Melchisedekian High Priest. His function as "the Mediator of the New Covenant" (Heb. 12:24) will surely not end at the fulfillment of the New Covenant at the beginning of the Kingdom age.

faith? We cannot tell for sure.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion then I would call your attention to these summary points;

- We should not minimize the difficulties of reconciling a literal acceptance of Ezekiel 40-48.
- We should not desert our hermeneutic in order to glaze over the problems.
- Having addressed the issues as far as possible we should realize that we now have a powerful explanatory tool – a test case for prophetic interpretation, and, therefore an apologetic for dispensationalism, not just in terms of the Book of Ezekiel, but also in terms of the whole biblical revelation.
- We should continue to work out our dispensational theology in conversation with such difficult passages lest we oversimplify the task God has given us as students of His Word.
- Ezekiel's Temple vision is not, as O. T. Allis once asserted the Achilles' heel of dispensationalism. In fact, it can function as a major justification for the importance and relevance of dispensational theology.