Ezekiel’s Temple Vision—
What Might Have Been If Israel Was Ashamed
But Ezra, Malachi and Haggai Tell Us
They Greatly Sinned

“Son of man, describe the temple to the people of Israel, that they may be ashamed of their sins. Let them consider its perfection, and if they are ashamed of all they have done, make known to them the design of the temple—its arrangement, its exits and entrances—its whole design and all its regulations and laws.” Ezekiel 43: 10-11 (NIV)
Ezekiel was born around the year 622 BC and began his ministry at the age of 30, or about 592 BC. Ezekiel was 50 years old when he had his final vision. On the basis of dates given in the Book of Ezekiel, Ezekiel's span of prophecies can be calculated to have occurred over the course of about 22 years. The last dated words of Ezekiel date to April 570 BC.

The book of Ezekiel closes (chapters 40-48) with a vision of a temple and its associated priestly rituals and a promise of an expanded geographic Israel—IF Israel follows God’s commands, repents and are ashamed of their actions. In Ezekiel chapter 40, the prophet is transported in vision from his home among the exiles in Babylon to Israel, where a divine messenger holding a measuring rod appears to him. The messenger gives Ezekiel a tour of the temple, measuring the various walls, gates, and courts. The glory of the Lord, which was seen departing from the temple in an earlier vision in chapter 10, is seen returning to inhabit the temple (43:1–4). In Ezekiel chapters 47 and 48 the boundaries of a greatly expanded Israel are given. Is this a prophecy, a command, or a “what if?” It is a “what if?” Ezekiel 43: 10-11 makes clear this is conditional. A temple may be built, but Jesus is the true temple.

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Later Ezekiel chapters describe various sacrificial rituals performed by priests. Special attention is given to the role of one who is referred to as “the prince.” The prince cannot be Jesus since the prince gives a sin offering for himself (Ezekiel 45:22), has biological sons (Ezekiel 46:18), and dies to leave an inheritance to his sons (Ezekiel 46:16). Near the end, an ever larger river is seen flowing out of the temple from under the threshold. The book closes with portions of the land assigned to various tribes.

Biblical scholars acknowledge that the temple vision, which occupies the last nine chapters of Ezekiel, presents special challenges in its interpretation. Many prophecy experts have even described it as “the most difficult passages in the Old Testament.”

As with the descriptions in Exodus of the tabernacle and its furnishings, many readers will find this section of Ezekiel tedious, due to its many arcane details, but this is not the greatest difficulty presented by these chapters. By far, the greater difficulty has to do with identifying the time and manner of the fulfillment of the vision.

Is It Solomon’s Temple? When Ezekiel saw the vision (about 573 BC), there was no temple standing in Jerusalem. Solomon’s temple, which had previously stood there, had been destroyed 13 years earlier by Nebuchadnezzar, when he conquered Jerusalem and deported the citizens to Babylon. This means that Ezekiel was not seeing Solomon’s temple, or any temple that was actually standing at the time. What temple, then, was he shown? What were the “conditions” for a new temple to be like this?

Is It Zerubbabel’s Temple? Perhaps the answer that first comes to mind would be that this was the temple that came to be built, under the leadership of Zerubbabel, on the return of the Jews from Babylon to Jerusalem. However, this solution seems to be ruled out by the fact that Zerubbabel’s temple ended up being much smaller, and less elaborate, than the one Ezekiel describes. If Ezekiel was prophesying that the temple built by the returning exiles would fit this description, the prophecy failed to come true. This option does not commend itself to those who accept the inspiration of Scripture. Other interpretations, therefore, have been offered by dispensational scholars.

Is It the Church? Some Christian commentators have understood the content of these chapters as an apocalyptic vision, which is best interpreted spiritually. They point out that the church, in the New Testament, is often referred to as God’s “temple” or habitation. Each Christian is a “living stone” (1 Pet. 2:5), built, along with others, “upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets” (Eph. 2:20) into a “temple of God” (1 Cor. 3:16). On this view, the features of temple worship—priests, altars, sacrifices, blood rituals—would be seen as pertaining to spiritual, rather than literal, realities, and applied to our worship of God in the present time. In particular, the description of the river, in chapter 47, would seem to support a nonliteral interpretation. If this is the correct view, we would be required either to see many of the tedious details as being either superfluous or as corresponding to spiritual ideas that would be very difficult to identify with confidence.

Is It the Millennial Temple? Another view of this vision, commonly held among dispensationalists, is that Ezekiel’s temple will be established after the second coming of Christ and will serve as the worship center for all people during the “millennium.” On this view, the one described as “the prince” is often identified as Christ Himself, ruling over the millennial kingdom. But the prince cannot be Christ, for reasons as outlined above.
Choosing an Interpretive Hermeneutical Strategy. In choosing among these options, we are compelled to decide between differing hermeneutical priorities. One of the chief hermeneutical principles recommended by dispensationalist scholars is that of maintaining a consistently literal interpretation. Literal interpretation must also be placed in context of the passages around the Scripture.

This would mean that “spiritualizing” the text must be seen as a departure from the most faithful handling of Scripture. Therefore, dispensationalists argue for a literal, physical building to be established in fulfillment of Ezekiel’s vision. Since the temple erected after Ezekiel’s time did not fit Ezekiel’s description, they believe that there must be another temple in the future that will do so more admirably. But we must also take the condition literally!!

**Scripture Best Interprets Scripture--Use the New Testament to Understand the Old Testament Prophecy**

The best interpretation of Scripture is Scripture. Since Jesus himself gave direct interpretation of Old Testament prophecy to the Apostles, their New Testament writings are the best source to help us understand Old Testament prophecy. Why would someone say that and still try to prove a point from it using Old Testament verses? It’s as if they’re reading the New Testament through the lens of the Old.

We should read the Old Testament through the lens of the New Testament.

The most obvious problem presented here is that the book of Hebrews (e.g., 10:1–18) speaks of the death of Christ on the cross as a termination of the efficacy of bloody animal sacrifices, such as those Israel offered in the temple. If Ezekiel’s vision applies to a future time, why do we again find the offering of animal sacrifices?

The dispensationalist answer is that the millennial sacrifices will not be intended to atone for sins. The blood of Christ precludes any need for that. Just as the Old Testament sacrifices anticipated the death of Christ as a future event, it is suggested the future millennial sacrifices will commemorate the death of Christ as a past event.

The text of Ezekiel, however, seems to preclude this, since the various offerings in the temple are said to “make atonement for the house of Israel” (45:17). Thus, the sacrifices are presented as an atonement for sin, not as a memorial. Christ Himself recommended the use of wine and bread to commemorate His death (1 Cor. 11:24–26). Why would God replace this with animal sacrifices in which God never found any particular pleasure (Ps. 40:6; 51:16; Heb. 10:6)?

Further, Ezekiel says that “the prince” will offer a sin offering “for himself and for all the people” (45:22). If the prince is required to offer sacrifices for his own sins, this would militate against any theory that identifies him with Christ, who never sinned.
Other objections to the idea that Ezekiel’s vision describes a worship economy to be established in the future would include the following:

- The vision presents a centralized worship in a specified geographical place. In the Old Testament, people were expected to approach the tabernacle, or (later) the temple, for this purpose (Deut. 12:5, 11). Jesus, however, announced to the Samaritan woman that the time of centralized worship was soon to end and to be replaced with spiritual worship, which does not depend on being in any particular place (John 4:21–24; cf. Acts 7:48–50).

- In Ezekiel’s vision, the Levites and Aaronic priesthood are seen in their former places of service. According to the New Testament, there has been a change of the priesthood (Heb. 7:12). The Jewish priesthood has been replaced by a different priesthood (1 Pet. 2:5) and a non-Aaronic high priest (Jesus). This modification will not be reversed, for Christ is said to be “a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek” (Ps. 110:4; Heb. 7:17, 21).

**Literal Interpretation?** While the difficulties of the dispensational interpretation seem insurmountable, its only strength lies in its hermeneutic of literal interpretation. There is another hermeneutic principle, however, that overrides literalism—namely, the superior revelation given in Christ.

Hebrews 1:1–3 affirms that, while God spoke to Israel through various prophets in the past, the revelation that has come through Christ is more comprehensive because He is no mere prophet, but “the brightness of [God’s] glory and the express image of His person.” The New Testament is not a mere appendix added to the writings of the Old Testament prophets. It is a revelation of the new order in Jesus Christ, in whom all previous revelation finds its fulfillment, and through whom all previous revelation must be understood.

Christ opened the understanding of His disciples so that they “might understand the [Old Testament] scriptures” (Luke 24:45). This being the case, it would be foolish for us to seek a meaning of the prophets contrary to that which Christ and the apostles taught. It is their witness that provides the strongest objections to any literalistic interpretation of Ezekiel 40–48. In Christ’s new order (which, unlike the old order, is permanent), the temple, priesthood, and sacrifices are likewise spiritual (1 Pet. 2:5).

**Making Sense of the Vision.** How then are we to understand the temple vision? If we look at it literally—the first literal passage to understand is the “condition” expressed in Ezekiel 43: 10-12.

First, one might reasonably literally refer to the vision as that which "might have been," had the Jewish exiles in Babylon exhibited true repentance. This is documented by Ezra, Malachi and Haggai. There is a strong indication that the realization of this vision in Israel’s future was contingent on the people being sufficiently ashamed, or repentant, of their past sins:

“Son of man, describe the temple to the house of Israel, that they may be ashamed of their iniquities; and let them measure the pattern. "And if they are ashamed of all that they have done, make known to them the design of the temple" (Ezekiel 43:10–11).
Ezekiel 43: 6-12 (NIV)

While the man was standing beside me, I heard someone speaking to me from inside the temple. He said: “Son of man, this is the place of my throne and the place for the soles of my feet. This is where I will live among the Israelites forever. The people of Israel will never again defile my holy name—neither they nor their kings—by their prostitution and the funeral offerings[b] for their kings at their death.[c] When they placed their threshold next to my threshold and their doorposts beside my doorposts, with only a wall between me and them, they defiled my holy name by their detestable practices. So I destroyed them in my anger. Now let them put away from me their prostitution and the funeral offerings for their kings, and I will live among them forever.

“Son of man, describe the temple to the people of Israel, that they may be ashamed of their sins. Let them consider its perfection, and if they are ashamed of all they have done, make known to them the design of the temple—its arrangement, its exits and entrances—its whole design and all its regulations[d] and laws. Write these down before them so that they may be faithful to its design and follow all its regulations

(b) Ezekiel 43:7 Or the memorial monuments; also in verse 9

(c) Ezekiel 43:7 Or their high places

(d) Ezekiel 43:11 Some Hebrew manuscripts and Septuagint; most Hebrew manuscripts regulations and its whole design

The response of the Jews to their opportunity to return and to rebuild their temple was sinful. They were not ashamed and did not repent. Only a small remnant opted even to return to Jerusalem, while the rest were content to remain in Babylon. Many of the ones who came back quickly sinned as Ezra, Malachi and Haggai recorded. As a result, the temple they built proved to be inferior to the one that Ezekiel described had they followed God's commands.

We first learn that the people were not ashamed from the prophet Haggai. (Haggai began his ministry about 16 years after the return of the Jews to Judah from exile around 520 BC.)

Haggai 1: 2-11 (NIV)

This is what the Lord Almighty says: “These people say, ‘The time has not yet come to rebuild the Lord’s house.’” Then the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai: “Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?”

Now this is what the Lord Almighty says: “Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much, but harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it.”
This is what the Lord Almighty says: “Give careful thought to your ways. Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build my house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored,” says the Lord. “You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?” declares the Lord Almighty. “Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with your own house.

Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops. I called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain, the new wine, the olive oil and everything else the ground produces, on people and livestock, and on all the labor of your hands.”

We also learn from the prophet Malachi that the people were not ashamed. (Malachi was written around the year 500 BC--also after the return from exile).

**Malachi 2: 1-9 (NIV)**

“And now, you priests, this warning is for you. If you do not listen, and if you do not resolve to honor my name,” says the Lord Almighty, “I will send a curse on you, and I will curse your blessings. Yes, I have already cursed them, because you have not resolved to honor me.

“Because of you I will rebuke your descendants; I will smear on your faces the dung from your festival sacrifices, and you will be carried off with it. And you will know that I have sent you this warning so that my covenant with Levi may continue,” says the Lord Almighty.

“My covenant was with him, a covenant of life and peace, and I gave them to him; this called for reverence and he revered me and stood in awe of my name. 6 True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and turned many from sin.

“For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, because he is the messenger of the Lord Almighty and people seek instruction from his mouth. But you have turned from the way and by your teaching have caused many to stumble; you have violated the covenant with Levi,” says the Lord Almighty.

“So I have caused you to be despised and humiliated before all the people, because you have not followed my ways but have shown partiality in matters of the law.”
Ezra (writing after Malachi and Haggai) makes clear the people have greatly sinned after coming from exile. (Ezra came to Jerusalem "in the seventh year of Artaxerxes the King". The text does not specify whether the king in the passage refers to Artaxerxes I (465-424 BCE) or to Artaxerxes II (404-359 BCE). Most scholars hold that Ezra lived during the rule of Artaxerxes I.)

Ezra 9: 1-15 (NIV)

After these things had been done, the leaders came to me and said, “The people of Israel, including the priests and the Levites, have not kept themselves separate from the neighboring peoples with their detestable practices, like those of the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites. They have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, and have mingled the holy race with the peoples around them. And the leaders and officials have led the way in this unfaithfulness.”

When I heard this, I tore my tunic and cloak, pulled hair from my head and beard and sat down appalled. Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel gathered around me because of this unfaithfulness of the exiles. And I sat there appalled until the evening sacrifice.

Then, at the evening sacrifice, I rose from my self-abasement, with my tunic and cloak torn, and fell on my knees with my hands spread out to the Lord my God and prayed:

“I am too ashamed and disgraced, my God, to lift up my face to you, because our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens. From the days of our ancestors until now, our guilt has been great. Because of our sins, we and our kings and our priests have been subjected to the sword and captivity, to pillage and humiliation at the hand of foreign kings, as it is today.”

“But now, for a brief moment, the Lord our God has been gracious in leaving us a remnant and giving us a firm place in his sanctuary, and so our God gives light to our eyes and a little relief in our bondage. Though we are slaves, our God has not forsaken us in our bondage. He has shown us kindness in the sight of the kings of Persia: He has granted us new life to rebuild the house of our God and repair its ruins, and he has given us a wall of protection in Judah and Jerusalem.”

“But now, our God, what can we say after this? For we have forsaken the commands you gave through your servants the prophets when you said: ‘The land you are entering to possess is a land polluted by the corruption of its peoples. By their detestable practices they have filled it with their impurity from one end to the other. Therefore, do not give your daughters in marriage to their sons or take their daughters for your sons. Do not seek a treaty of friendship with them at any time, that you may be strong and eat the good things of the land and leave it to your children as an everlasting inheritance.’”
“What has happened to us is a result of our evil deeds and our great guilt, and yet, our God, you have punished us less than our sins deserved and have given us a remnant like this. Shall we then break your commands again and intermarry with the peoples who commit such detestable practices?”

“Would you not be angry enough with us to destroy us, leaving us no remnant or survivor? Lord, the God of Israel, you are righteous! We are left this day as a remnant. Here we are before you in our guilt, though because of it not one of us can stand in your presence.”

Ezra, Haggai and Malachi make clear that the Jews did not meet the conditions to have such a temple as Ezekiel’s, the pattern preserved in these chapters stands as a description of an intended order, which, had it materialized, would have testified, as the tabernacle once did, as a type and shadow of “heavenly things” (Heb. 8:5)—the new order in Jesus Christ. This, we may assume, was the long-term purpose served by the vision.

Though some features of the vision were probably intended symbolically from the start (e.g., the seemingly miraculous, ever-deepening river), it is probable that the beautiful temple, its rituals, the presence of God, and the promised expansion of Israel’s territory would have been literally instituted, as here described, if Israel met God’s conditions.

Whether or not the temple had ever actually been rebuilt, the new revelation in Christ encourages us to see its pattern as having been fulfilled in Jesus Christ Himself, who is the final atoning sacrifice and the eternal high priest of God’s people.

**What Type of Temple Will Be Built?**

Some type of end times temple will be built—but without the promises of Ezekiel. It will be in vain. Paul in Second Thessalonians makes clear some type of temple will be standing when the Man of Lawlessness (Satan) enters it during the last days proclaiming himself to be God. Only after this event does Christ return.

**2nd Thessalonians 2: 3-4 (NIV)**

“Don’t let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day [meaning Christ’s return] will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God’s temple, proclaiming himself to be God.”

**The Two Islamic Abominations Must Be Removed First**

It is likely after Ezekiel’s coming war (Ezekiel 38-39) with the Islamic countries, Israel will remove the Islamic abominations from the Temple Mount—the Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa Mosque. Israel will then be able to build a temple, but not to the grand scale of Ezekiel’s since they were not
ashamed. Only a remnant will understand that they are not saved by temple sacrificial rituals, but only by the blood of Christ—the Son of God.

Daniel was taken captive in 605 BC as part of the Babylonian captivity of Israel. Daniel finished his work around the year 530 BC, shortly after the capture of Babylon by Cyrus of Persia in 539 BC. In the book of Daniel (Daniel 11:36-45 and 7:23-25) he sees a future king who treats the Holy People very badly. This King defeats three kings, and changes the set times and laws.

This king has many battlefield conquests and also invades the Holy Land. Today many people think this king is still in the future (perhaps the “Antichrist”), but almost certainly Daniel was writing about the second Muslim caliph after Mohammad named Umar. Daniel wrote this 1,200 years before Umar.

Every point Daniel uses about this King accurately describes the life, conquests and unique death of the Islamic caliph Umar. After Mohammad died in 632, his successor was Abu Bakr. When Abu Bakr died in 634, Umar took his place. Umar was the Islamic caliph from 634 to 644 and was responsible for most Islamic victories in the Middle East. Umar matches all the of Daniel prophecies.

**Umar Ordered Two Abominations Set Up on God's Holy Mountain**

![Dome of the Rock in Outer Court](image1) ![Al-Aqsa Mosque on the Wing](image2)

Umar entered Jerusalem. Later, as Umar toured the Church of the Sepulchre, Sophronius (the Patriarch of Jerusalem), whispered in Greek to one of his Christian subordinates, “Surely this is the abomination of desolation standing in the holy place spoken of by Daniel the Prophet.” Sophronius would later write that the Muslim invaders were “unwitting chastisement of the weak and wavering Christian community” which had fallen astray from the faith; the loss of the city to Muslim infidels was in the Patriarch’s view divine judgment on God’s own people. They had become negligent in their faith and therefore God had sent the Muslim heathen to punish them.
Historically Christians had built churches throughout the Holy Land. Yet Christians refused to build anything on the Holy Temple site. Umar immediately saw this as an opportunity. Umar confiscated the empty Temple Mount lot (the Beautiful Holy Mountain) and ordered two abominations set up, the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque. They were completed after Umar’s death.

**Jesus Is the True Temple and the Living River of Water**

**John 2: 18-22 (NIV)**

The Jews then responded to him, “What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?”

Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.”

They replied, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?” But the temple he had spoken of was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.

**Hebrews 1: 8-9 (NIV)**

But about the Son he says, “Your throne, O God, will last forever and ever; a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy.”

**Hebrews 7: 17-22 (NIV)**

For it is declared: “You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.” The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God.

And it was not without an oath! Others became priests without any oath, but he became a priest with an oath when God said to him: “The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: ‘You are a priest forever.’” Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantor of a better covenant.

**John 4: 9-14 (NIV)**

The Samaritan woman said to him, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”
“Sir,” the woman said, “you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?”

Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

Matthew 12: 6-8 (NIV)

“I tell you that something greater than the temple is here. If you had known what these words mean, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”

Luke 17:20-25 (NIV)

Once, on being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, “The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is in your midst.”

Then he said to his disciples, “The time is coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, but you will not see it. People will tell you, ‘There he is!’ or ‘Here he is!’ Do not go running off after them. For the Son of Man in his day will be like the lightning, which flashes and lights up the sky from one end to the other. But first he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation.”