

Ezekiel and Eschatology

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Introduction

I have been asked to address the topic of eschatology and Ezekiel. As I have worked on this assignment, I have come to recognize what a formidable task it truly is. Much of the issue depends on how we define *eschatology*. Much of it depends on how we interpret some of the things revealed in the book. Broadly speaking, eschatology is defined as, “the part of theology concerned with death, judgment, and the final destiny of the soul and of humankind” (*New Oxford American Dictionary*). Does the book of Ezekiel deal with end-times language? Does it reveal principles that address “death, judgment, and the final destiny of the soul”? Certainly. Yet, does it deal with things that are actually discussing what will happen at the end of the world? That is the question.

A Playground for Speculation

One doesn't have to look far into what is written on Ezekiel to recognize that for many it has become a playground for speculation. This is not a new development. In Judaism an entire school of mystical philosophy began to develop well before the time of Christ drawn largely from the opening visions of Ezekiel.¹ Applying the Hebrew word *merkabah* (מְרֻכָבָה), meaning “chariot” to the creatures Ezekiel saw,² fantasy and speculation led to the development of a body of texts known as Hekhalot literature. These works imagined fanciful ascents into heaven. This so-called Merkabah Mysticism, figured prominently in a type of Jewish Gnosticism that ultimately grew in the Middle Ages into the speculations of Jewish Kabbalistic philosophy. It is little wonder that Jerome claimed, “The beginning and ending” of Ezekiel “are wrapped in such obscurity that among the Hebrews... these parts are not read before [one is] thirty years [old]” (*Epistle to Paulinus* 8, Pope).

In more recent times, most of us are familiar with the use premillennialists have made of this book. Particularly, the temple visions of the last chapters have figured into their false concepts that the temple described there must one day be literally built (with sacrifices and all) before Jesus returns to establish His physical kingdom from a restored Israel sitting on His throne in Jerusalem.

Most of us have always thought that the first airplane to achieve flight was the Kitty Hawk, operated by Orville and Wilbur Wright in 1903. What we may not have known was that a year earlier, in 1902, Burrell Cannon, a Baptist preacher and sawmill operator claimed to have flown a craft 160 feet, 10 feet off the ground. Cannon claimed that the ship, known as Ezekiel's Airship, was inspired by studying the vision described in the opening chapter of Ezekiel. A full-size replica can still be viewed at the Northeast Texas Rural Heritage Center and Museum in Pittsburg, Texas.

Perhaps the most sensational examples of these speculations flourish in our own time. So-called “Ancient Alien” theorists see Ezekiel's visions of “living creatures” within the book, not as chariots, but alien spaceships. David J. Halperin, Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, who has authored scholarly texts on Ezekiel and been published in a number of

¹ A text found within the Dead Sea Scrolls, known as *4QSongs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* (MasShirShabb, 4Q400, 4Q401, 4Q402, 4Q403, 4Q404, 4Q405, 4Q406, 4Q407, 11Q17) reflects this early mystical approach to Ezekiel's vision. Especially the portion preserved in 4Q405 speaks of blessing the “the image of the throne-chariot (which is) above the vault of the cherubs” (Frgs. 20 col. ii - 21 - 22). Paul likely rebukes this type of mysticism in condemning, “worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen” (Col. 2:18).

² Ironically, although Merkabah (or Throne-Chariot) Mysticism is built on the interpretation that the “four-living creatures” with wheels within wheels are a type of *merkabah* (i.e. chariot), the Hebrew word *merkabah* is not used in Ezekiel.

peer-reviewed religious journals, is also the host of a blog and website named for his book, *Journal of a UFO Investigator* (New York: Viking Press, 2011).

While our study may present some ideas that are different than we may have heard before, I will try my best to avoid veering into this playground of speculation, and sincerely seek simply to explore what Ezekiel reveals to us about eschatological issues.

I. Impact of the Opening Vision

The first vision revealed to Ezekiel introduces some features that will appear throughout the book. How we understand this initial vision has an impact on the eschatological significance of these repeating elements.

A. The Four Living Creatures

The book begins with a vision, Ezekiel later summarizes as “the glory of the LORD... like the glory which I saw by the River Chebar” (Ezek. 3:23). A significant element of this vision is what Ezekiel calls “four living creatures” (Ezek. 1:5). Like many other elements within the book, this immediately reminds us of John’s words in the book of Revelation. He also sees “four living creatures” (Rev. 4:6, 8; 5:6, 4, 14; 6:1, 6; 7:11; 14:3; 15:7; 19:4). In John’s vision, they surround the throne of God (Rev. 4:6), praise the worthiness of the Lamb with the twenty-four elders (Rev. 5:8-9), rejoice at the fall of Babylon (Rev. 19:1-4), and are said to *have* bowls filled with the “prayers of the saints” (Rev. 5:8).

Not only are these creatures identified in the same way, but they share other similarities. Ezekiel writes, “As for the likeness of their faces, each had the face of a man; each of the four had the face of a lion on the right side, each of the four had the face of an ox on the left side, and each of the four had the face of an eagle” (Ezek. 1:10). John writes, “The first living creature was like a lion, the second living creature like a calf, the third living creature had a face like a man, and the fourth living creature was like a flying eagle” (Rev. 4:7). The likeness of a lion, calf (or ox), man, and eagle are shared, but unlike the vision shown to John, the four creatures Ezekiel sees have “four faces” with these likenesses (Ezek. 1:6). That raises several questions: (1) Are these visions of the same creatures? (2) Are these literal characteristics of these creatures, or are they figurative ways of describing what these creatures represent? (3) If they are figurative, what are they intended to represent?

In Revelation they surround the throne in heaven, with the twenty-four elders (who clearly represent the tribes and the apostles). Near the end of Ezekiel, as he receives a vision of the temple, the Lord declares, “Son of man, this is the place of My throne and the place of the soles of My feet, where I will dwell in the midst of the children of Israel forever” (Ezek. 43:7). The writer of Hebrews declared that the arrangement of the tabernacle (and the temple after it) were a “copy and shadow of the heavenly things” (Heb. 8:5). Do we see anything in the arrangement of the tabernacle in the wilderness that might relate to these “living creatures”?

The tabernacle was surrounded by the tribes who encamped around it. The Lord commanded:

And the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: “Everyone of the children of Israel shall camp by his own standard, beside the emblems of his father’s house; they shall camp some distance from the tabernacle of meeting” (Num. 2:1-2).

The arrangement of people around the tabernacle was to be according to their tribe. On the east side were Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun (Num. 2:3-9). On the south side were Reuben, Simeon, and Gad (Num. 2:10-17). On the west side were Ephraim, Manassah, and Benjamin (Num. 2:18-24). On the north side were Dan, Asher, and Naphtali (Num. 2:25-31). The Levites formed a circle “in the middle of the camps” (Num. 2:17). The Lord commanded:

...the Levites shall camp around the tabernacle of the Testimony, that there may be no wrath on the congregation of the children of Israel; and the Levites shall keep charge of the tabernacle of the Testimony (Num. 1:53).

In many ways the camp of the Levites is very similar to the position held by the “twenty-four elders” in the throne scene of Revelation. They serve to guide and direct the people in their service to God.

The Standards of the Tribes of Israel

Notice what is said about the encampment of the other tribes—each tribe was to “camp by his own standard, beside the emblems of his father’s house” (Num. 2:2). What were these standards? We are not told. They appear to have been flags or banners that identified each tribe’s camp on sight. Do we know what was on these standards? Not with any certainty, but there are some biblical clues and claims found in Jewish Rabbinical tradition. Genesis ends with Jacob’s prophecy regarding the fate of each of his children (Gen. 49:1-33). In this prophecy we see Judah described “as a lion” (Gen. 49:9).

The Bamidbar (or Numbers) Rabbah (ca. AD 1200) commenting on Numbers 2:2, claimed that the color of the standards corresponded to the colors of the precious stones on Aaron’s breastplate. It claimed that the following figures were on each standard: Rueben – a mandrake (cf. Gen. 30:14-16); Simeon – Shechem (the man or city, cf. Gen. 33:18; 34:1-30); Levi – the Urim and Thummim (cf. Exod. 28:30); Judah – a lion (cf. Gen. 49:9); Issachar – the sun and the moon; Zebulun – a ship (cf. Gen. 49:13); Dan – a serpent (cf. Gen. 49:17); Gad – a camp (cf. Gen. 49:19); Naphtali – a deer (cf. Gen. 49:21); Asher – an olive-tree (cf. Gen. 49:22); Ephraim – an ox; Manasseh – a unicorn (from a word likely referring to a gazelle, antelope, or even a rhinoceros; and Benjamin – a wolf (Gen. 49:27).

When the book of Numbers describes the movement of the tribes it speaks of the three tribes on each side following the first tribe, mentioning only one standard. It lists the eastern tribes first, following Judah (Num. 10:14), then the southern tribes following Reuben (Num. 10:18), the western tribes following Ephraim (Num. 10:22), and the northern tribes following Dan (Num. 10:25). Some have described the standards that led these groups as *super-standards*, calling the four groups of three tribes together. What were these standards?

Both the Jerusalem (or Pseudo-Jonathan) Targum (ca. AD 700s) and the Babylonian (or Onkelos) Targum (ca. AD 200s) in their commentary on Numbers 2:2 only describe four standards. The Jerusalem Targum claims that each standard bore the names of three tribes on each side on them. It claims Judah’s standard bore the figure of a “young lion,” and Ephraim the figure of a “young man.” We note, that differs from the Numbers Rabbah mentioned above, which said the tribal flag of Ephraim was an ox. The Jerusalem Targum makes some interesting claims about the other two *super-standards*. Concerning Reuben, it reads:

...upon it shall be set forth the figure of a stag. Some would have thought there should have been upon it the figure of a young ox; but Moses the prophet altered it, that the sin of the [golden] calf might not be remembered against them.

We may remember that the tribal standard of Reuben was said to be a mandrake (in memory of him giving mandrakes to his mother, which she bartered with Rachel – Gen. 30:14-16), but why does it say it “should have been a young ox.” It is unclear. What is clear is that Jewish tradition at one point associated an ox with the tribe of Reuben.

Concerning Dan, the Jerusalem Targum claims, “upon it shall also be set forth the figure of a basilisk serpent.” Basilisk is a term used in the LXX for a “cobra” (91:13) or a “viper” (Isa. 59:5). That echoes Jacob’s prophecy (Gen. 49:17), as well as the claim of the Numbers Rabbah. However, at least since the 16th century, a Latin commentary on Ezekiel written by Juan Bautista Villalpando preserves a tradition that Ahiezer (the chief of Dan – Num. 2:25) changed the figure to the image of an eagle eating a serpent (*De postrema Ezechielis prophetæ visione*, 467). That is interesting in light of the Jerusalem Targum’s claim that it was a “basilisk serpent.” In the LXX this word was used of snakes generally, but as time went on, a “basilisk” came to be considered a mythical flying dragon or snake. Is it possible that the image of an eagle eating a snake became confused with a flying snake? What is clear is that a tradition existed that associated the image of an eagle was on the fourth *super-standard*.

Identity of the Living Creatures: Human, Non-Human, or Both?

So, if this is correct, it would mean that four figures would have been visible on the standards raised on four sides of the Israelite camp: a lion, an ox, a man, and an eagle. Is it possible that the visions in Ezekiel and Revelation are intended as figurative ways of picturing those who worship God surrounding His throne? In Revelation chapter five, John writes:

Now when He had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each having a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song, saying: “You are worthy to take the scroll, And to open its seals; For You were slain, And have redeemed us to God by Your blood Out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, And have made us kings and priests to our God; And we shall reign on the earth (Rev. 5:8-10).

Verse nine has an important textual issue. The overwhelming majority of manuscripts (including Codex Sinaiticus [Ⲛ]), and most ancient translations) put it “redeemed us” or “redeemed us to God.” Yet, on the basis of the reading adopted by the UBS/Nestle Aland critical text—a reading based upon evidence Bruce Metzger himself acknowledged was “slight” (i.e. Codex Alexandrinus [A] and the Ethiopic version)³—most newer translations render this simply redeemed “unto God” (ASV) or “for God” (RSV, NASB, NIV, ESV). What difference does it make? It tells us something about how to identify these “living creatures.” Scripture reveals nothing to us about Christ redeeming any other created beings (Heb. 2:5-10), but He has redeemed human beings.

Does this interpretation mesh with what we see in Ezekiel? There are some challenges to this interpretation. First, the “living creatures” of the first chapter are equated with “cherubim” in chapter ten, which says—“And the cherubim were lifted up. This was the living creature I saw by the River Chebar” (Ezek. 10:15). Second, although Ezekiel says these were the same creatures he saw by the Chebar, the appearance of their faces is slightly different. Instead of an ox, one is said to be “the face of a cherub” (Ezek. 10:14).⁴ The Babylonian Talmud claimed that Resh Lakish taught, “Ezekiel entreated concerning it and changed it into a cherub. He said before Him: Lord of the universe, shall an accuser become an advocate!” (*Chagigah* 13b).⁵ As we saw in the Jerusalem Targum, they believed that the image of an ox served as a reminder of Israel’s sin with the gold calf.

So, does that mean we should reject any interpretation of the “living creatures” as including human beings worshipping God? Perhaps, but we should note that in the book of Ezekiel itself the term “cherub” is used of the king of Tyre (Ezek. 28:11-16). Throughout both Old and New Testaments there are times that words for angelic beings are also applied to human beings (e.g. 1 Sam. 11:1-4; Luke 8:18-24). Later in Ezekiel, the cherubim on the walls of the temple were said to have only two faces: that of a man and a lion (41:18-19). In Revelation the “living creatures” had only one face (Rev. 4:7). Are these descriptions of the anatomy of different species of angelic beings or figurative and spiritual ways of describing those (human or angelic) surrounding God in worship?

³ Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, Stuttgart: United Bible Society, 1971, 736. There is also a little papyrus fragment (P¹¹⁵) from the 3rd century that has a few words that Philip Comfort argues support this reading, but it has so few words it is inconclusive (Philip W. Comfort, *New Testament Text and Translation Commentary*, Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2008, 825. Interestingly enough, the recently published *Greek New Testament*, produced at Tyndale House, Cambridge. Wheaton: Crossway, 2017, restores the fuller reading—“redeemed us to God.”

⁴ We should note that the two primary witnesses to the text of Ezekiel in the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek Old Testament produced before the time of Christ, are divided on the presence of Ezekiel 10:14. Codex Vaticanus (A) omits the verse, but Codex Alexandrinus (B) has it. The Hebrew Masoretic Text (MT) and the Dead Sea Scroll fragment Q4Ezek^a (frag. 1) attest to its presence in the text.

⁵ This tractate understands the living creatures to be a class of angelic beings high above the earth—at a distance that would take 500-1000 years to travel—above which is the presence of God (*Chagigah* 13a).

Let's notice some further characteristics of the "living creatures" in Ezekiel. They are seen as "a whirlwind...coming out of the north" (Ezek. 1:4). Remember, the vision is by the Chebar (believed to be near the Euphrates not far from Babylon). North would be how anyone coming from Israel would come to them. They are said to have "the likeness of a man" (Ezek. 1:5), even though they are also said to have four faces and four wings (Ezek. 1:6). "The hands of a man were under their wings" (Ezek. 1:8). "Their appearance *was* like burning coals of fire, like the appearance of torches going back and forth among the living creatures" (Ezek. 1:13). They are radiant in appearance—a quality often ascribed to spiritual beings generally (cf. 2 Kings 6:17).

"A Wheel in the Middle of a Wheel"

At this point, Ezekiel begins the descriptions of the wheels. We should note that in spite of the mountain of speculation that has grown up interpreting this as a *merkebah* "chariot" (or "throne-chariot"), the Hebrew word *merkebah* is never used in Ezekiel! The prophet sees, "a wheel...on the earth beside each living creature" (Ezek. 1:15). We notice it sits "on the earth." The Babylonian Talmud described this as having, "one wheel at the bottom hard by the living creatures" (*Chagigah* 13b). They are further described as having, "a wheel in the middle of a wheel" (Ezek. 1:17).

So-called "Ancient Alien" theorists in our day see in this a description of an extra-terrestrial spaceship. In 1974 Josef Blumrich, a NASA engineer, wrote a book entitled *The Spaceships of Ezekiel* (New York: Bantam Books, 1974) suggesting that these visions were actually alien visitations. The same year, influenced by the descriptions of Ezekiel, Blumrich patented a wheel that could move in multiple directions known as the "Omnidirectional wheel" (US patent 3789947). Is that what Ezekiel saw—alien or advanced technology? No.

Notice some things about the "wheels." Yes they move "toward any one of four directions" (Ezek. 1:17), but they are "full of eyes, all around the four of them" (Ezek. 1:18). When the creatures move, the "wheels went beside them" or "hard by them" (Ezek. 1:19, JPS), but he also tells us twice, "the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels" (Ezek. 1:20, 21). These wheels are described as animate. This is not inanimate technology. Ezekiel is not misinterpreting engines and mechanical propulsion. He is describing something living, yet calling it "wheels."

When they move it is said to be "a tumult like the noise of an army" (Ezek. 1:24). Is that a clue that this is not talking about a science fiction type creature, but the company of God's faithful hosts spiritually personified as a living creature? If so, these aren't literal "wheels" but a way of describing the company of God's worshippers encircling the throne of God. What is the "wheel in the middle of a wheel"? Remember the arrangement of the Levites? They encircled the tabernacle in the middle of the other tribes, which encircled them.

Ezekiel sees a firmament above the creatures (Ezek. 1:22) and above it was "the likeness of a throne" (Ezek. 1:26), which Ezekiel explains was, "the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD" (Ezek. 1:28). Throughout the book, the "living creatures" move with God's glory as it is manifested in different places.

The Spiritual Hosts of God

Does Scripture ever describe God's people in similar terms? Speaking to living Christians, the Hebrew writer declares:

...You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel (Heb. 12:22-24).

Living Christians are said to be part of a "general assembly" and "innumerable company of angels" together with the "spirits of just men made perfect." Yes, the Scriptures speak of all the dead this side of

judgment as residing in the realm of Hades or Sheol (Luke 16:19-31; Rev. 20:13-14), but if the Hebrew writer envisions living saints as already a part of the spiritual assembly of God's people, why would it surprise us if the same are pictured in the visions of Ezekiel and John?

Historically, among Jews and Christians most have interpreted the "living creatures" as simply a class of angelic beings, and their identification in Ezekiel with cherubim could certainly justify this. However, that is not the only way these visions have been interpreted. Irenaeus (ca. 125-202) was the first to interpret them as figures representing the four gospels (*Against Heresies* 3.11.8). This speculative allegorical view was later adopted and expanded by later writers and within Catholicism. It came to be featured prominently in Western religious art (see figure 1).⁶ While interpreting them in correlation to the standards of the Israelite camp is not an interpretation original to me, I acknowledge that it has not been a majority view. Martin Luther, however, came very near to this conclusion, writing, "This vision in the first part of Ezekiel... is nothing else, as I understand it... than a revelation of the kingdom of Christ in faith, here on earth, in all four quarters of the whole world..." (*A New Preface to the Book of Ezekiel*). I would not limit it by saying "here on earth," but his view reflects a recognition of the figurative nature of these visions that I appreciate.



Figure 1: This wooden box from the early 13th century which is in the Musée de Cluny in Cologne is overlaid with carved ivory portraying Christ surrounded by the "four living creatures"—The man (Matthew), the eagle (John), the lion (Mark), and the ox (Luke). It reflects the allegorical interpretation still common in Catholicism.

So, if the "living creatures" figuratively and spiritually represent God's worshippers, what does their use in Ezekiel and Revelation teach us? Whether we understand them to be angelic non-human cherubim or a spiritual representation of God's people one thing is clear—even when God's glory departs from Jerusalem, His faithful worshippers maintain their service to Him. What a comfort this would be to exiles who will learn before the book ends that Jerusalem had fallen, and the temple was destroyed. What a comfort it would be to those in John's day who faced persecution from Rome, and had also seen the temple in Jerusalem destroyed once again. God's glory remained and His hosts worshipped Him wherever they were transplanted.

Some may question this interpretation, and choose to see the "living creatures" as non-human angelic beings. That has certainly been the most common interpretation, but if my suggestion is correct it influences how we see their appearance throughout the book. God's people are given promises of judgment on the ungodly. They are given a vision of a future of hope, peace, and restoration following their transplanted status. This influences how we interpret what is, in fact eschatological and what has already been fulfilled.

B. Three Key Scenes

Let's notice three key scenes in the book in which the "living creatures" with the "glory of the LORD" are seen. Each of these portray three different conditions.

⁶ Marsyas 18:37, 6 March 2006 (UTC), CC BY 2.5, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=616980>.

Scene One: The first comes in the opening vision. Ezekiel is “among the captives by the River Chebar” (1:1), yet he is shown the “glory of the LORD” (1:28). In this scene the throne, with the “living creatures” is independent of the temple—seven years before its destruction (1:2; cf. 33:21). Ezekiel is then sent to prophesy (2:1-10), and commanded to eat the scroll of God’s revelation (3:1-27), during which time the “living creatures” and the “glory of the LORD” take him to Tel Abib by the River Chebar (3:13-14). At this point, he identifies the “glory of the LORD” as the same which he saw at the beginning (3:23). In many ways this is just an extension of the first scene, portraying God’s glory independent of the temple.

Scene Two: The next scene is much different. It comes six years before the destruction of the temple (8:1; cf. 32:21). Ezekiel is taken to see the abominations in Jerusalem (8:1-18), and shown six men who slay those in the city not marked on the forehead (9:1-11). He later describes this as “when I came to destroy the city” (43:3), but this does not seem to be literal. He spiritually observes what would happen when Babylon literally destroyed the city. In this frightening scene, Ezekiel three times mentions that what he saw were the same manifestations he did at the beginning. He writes, “And the cherubim were lifted up. This was the living creature I saw by the River Chebar” (10:15). It is interesting that here he speaks in the singular—“the living creature,” as he does when he mentions it again—“This is the living creature I saw under the God of Israel by the River Chebar, and I knew they were cherubim” (10:20). Notice, he says “living creature” (singular), but “they were cherubim.” Specific identity is treated collectively. Nonetheless, this is the same manifestation. He says a third time, “And the likeness of their faces was the same as the faces which I had seen by the River Chebar, their appearance and their persons” (10:22). But, notice the condition of this scene—“Then the glory of the LORD departed from the threshold of the temple and stood over the cherubim” (10:18). The temple has not yet been destroyed, but Ezekiel sees God’s glory *riding* on the hosts of His cherubim leaving the temple.

Let’s notice some things in the context of this scene. When describing the “living creatures” Ezekiel writes, “And their whole body, with their back, their hands, their wings, and the wheels that the four had, were full of eyes all around. As for the wheels, they were called in my hearing, ‘Wheel’” (10:12-13). In this vision the prophet doesn’t just describe the wheels with eyes, but says body, back, hands, wings, and wheels “were full of eyes all around.” This is the same thing said of the “living creatures” in Revelation as well (Rev. 4:6). That is a ghastly image, if it is literal. What if it is figurative? It is the “general assembly” and “innumerable company of angels”—“the spirits of just men made perfect” (cf. Heb. 12:22-24) in the company of God regardless of the wickedness of Jerusalem and the Lord’s departure from the temple.

Consider this odd passage, “they were called in my hearing, ‘Wheel’” (10:13). What does this mean? The word “wheel” in Hebrew is *galgal* (גַּלְגַּל), but we should remember that until several centuries after the New Testament, Hebrew was written without vowels. Modern Hebrew often still does that. Another word for “wheel” (or “rolling”) would have been spelled exactly the same way when this was first written. We say it Gilgal (גִּלְגַּל). What was Gilgal? It is where Israel first camped when they crossed the Jordan (Josh. 4:19), where the twelve stones were set up (Josh. 4:20), where God “rolled away the reproach of Egypt” (Josh. 5:9), where they kept their first Passover (Josh. 5:10), where Samuel made a circuit as a judge (1 Sam. 7:16), and where Saul was set up as king (1 Sam. 11:15) when Samuel called to the people, “Come, let us go to Gilgal and renew the kingdom there” (1 Sam. 11:14). Imagine if we translated this literally—“Come, let us go to Wheel and renew the kingdom there.” Could this have any correlation to the words of Ezekiel? Could these “living creatures” that represent the camp of God’s people be named after the memory of their first camp, and the camp where they *renewed* the kingdom? As the “glory of the LORD” departs the temple is this an appeal to recall a past renewal that must happen once more in their exile. After this scene of the glory departing the temple, God tells Ezekiel, “Although I have cast them far off among the Gentiles, and although I have scattered them among the countries, yet I shall be a little sanctuary for them in the countries where they have gone” (11:16). Yes, the “glory of the

LORD” had departed from the temple in Jerusalem, but God is not limited by geography (or even the unfaithfulness of His people). Wherever His faithful are taken He is to them “a little sanctuary.”

So the cherubim lifted up their wings, with the wheels beside them, and the glory of the God of Israel was high above them. And the glory of the LORD went up from the midst of the city and stood on the mountain, which is on the east side of the city. Then the Spirit took me up and brought me in a vision by the Spirit of God into Chaldea, to those in captivity. And the vision that I had seen went up from me. So I spoke to those in captivity of all the things the LORD had shown me (11:22-25).

Scene Three: Finally, the prophet sees the “living creatures” and the glory of the LORD” in one final scene. In the glorious image of a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem, Ezekiel records:

And behold, the glory of the God of Israel came from the way of the east. His voice was like the sound of many waters; and the earth shone with His glory. It was like the appearance of the vision which I saw—like the vision which I saw when I came to destroy the city. The visions were like the vision which I saw by the River Chebar; and I fell on my face. And the glory of the LORD came into the temple by way of the gate which faces toward the east. The Spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner court; and behold, the glory of the LORD filled the temple. Then I heard Him speaking to me from the temple, while a man stood beside me” (43:2-6).

He tells us “The visions were like the vision which I saw by the River Chebar,” but the condition is much different. Fourteen years after the temple had been destroyed (40:1; cf. 32:21), in a hopeless and helpless time, the prophet is given a picture of a time when God’s glory is not confined to the “little sanctuary” among His scattered people, but in a glorious restored temple. God’s glory is said to come “from the east,” the direction one would return from Babylon. The “living creatures” who accompany the Lord’s glory in all conditions at all times serve as a picture of the true spiritual condition of those faithful to God.

II. Eschatological Elements within Ezekiel

With the opening visions of Ezekiel as an introduction, and the “living creatures” accompanying the “glory of the LORD” as recurring figures, throughout the book we find numerous passages with eschatological implications.

A. Ezekiel 7:2—“The End Has Come”

Following the opening visions given to Ezekiel, he is called to illustrate the siege and destruction of Jerusalem in various ways (4:1-6:14). After this, the Lord declares, “And you, son of man, thus says the Lord GOD to the land of Israel: ‘An end! The end has come upon the four corners of the land’ (7:2). This is restated a few verses later, “An end has come, the end has come; it has dawned for you; behold, it has come!” (7:6). Obviously, this is eschatological language, but to what end is the Lord referring?

The context makes it clear that the “end” that is under consideration is not the end of time, but the fall of Judah and Jerusalem to Babylon. The Lord tells Ezekiel:

...the land is filled with crimes of blood, and the city is full of violence. Therefore I will bring the worst of the Gentiles, and they will possess their houses; I will cause the pomp of the strong to cease, and their holy places shall be defiled. Destruction comes; they will seek peace, but there shall be none (7:23-25).

This illustrates a fact that runs throughout Scripture—when the Holy Spirit speaks of “the end” it does not always refer to the end of time. The context must be considered to determine the application.

Brother Kevin Kay, in some material he shared with me, lists seven different events identified as “the end” in Scripture. Consider his list (which I have modified slightly):

- Israel in 722 BC (Amos 8:1-3, 10)
- Nineveh in 612 BC (Nah. 1:8-9)
- Jerusalem in 586 BC (Ezek. 7:1-9; Hab. 2:2-3)
- Babylon in 539 BC (Dan. 5:26)
- Jewish persecution in 165/164 BC (Dan. 8:17, 19)

- Kings of the North and South (Dan. 11:27, 35, 40; 12:4, 8-9, 13)
- Jerusalem in AD 70 (Dan. 9:26)

Preterist Rejection of an End of Time

Sadly, this fact has led some to argue that Scripture does not teach an end of time or destruction of this present universe. An oft repeated statement made by preterists to defend their position is—“the Christian age has no end.” Their argument is drawn from promises regarding the kingdom, that it, “shall stand forever” (Dan. 2:44). This assumes that the conditions of the kingdom once established cannot continue on into a changed new and heavenly existence. The assertion also fails to explain how Paul could speak of showing the “riches of His grace” in the “ages [plural] to come” (Eph. 2:7). Their argument is that the Christian age came after AD 70 and “has no end.” Yet, like the Hebrew writer, Paul said of the accounts in the Old Testament, “Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come” (1 Cor. 10:11). Here, not only is “ages” plural, but also “ends.” How can they explain multiple “ends of the ages” if their limited concept of the “Christian age” has no end? This preterist argument doesn’t work.

“The End of the Age”

Much of their argument is focused on interpreting the phrase “end of the age” in Matthew 24:3 as a reference to the end of the Jewish age (as they argue it) in AD 70, rather than as a reference to the end of time. Many brethren who are not preterists have adopted this conclusion, but I contend that this fails to take into account how the phrase is used throughout the entire book of Matthew.

The phrase “end of the age” translates the phrase *tēs sunteleias tou aiōnos* (τῆς συντελείας τοῦ αἰῶνος). Most modern translations have rejected the KJV rendering “end of the world,” because the Greek word *aiōn* (αἰών) carries a basic conceptual idea of time. Thayer defines it, “(1) for ever, an unbroken age, perpetuity of time, eternity; (2) the worlds, universe; (3) period of time, age.” We should note from Thayer’s second definition that it can refer to the *world*, as is reflected at times in Scripture. The Hebrew writer tells us God through Christ, “made the worlds (*aiōn*)” (Heb. 1:2) and the “worlds (*aiōn*) were framed by the word of God” (Heb. 11:3). Even so, I agree that “age” is the preferable sense in the phrase *tēs sunteleias tou aiōnos*.

This phrase is used six times in Scripture and five of them are in Matthew. This helps us see the scope of its use in the book. Three instances are found in parables in chapter 13. In the Parable of the Wheat and Tares, as Jesus offered the explanation He declared, “The enemy who sowed them is the devil, the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels. Therefore as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age” (Matt. 13:39-40). In the Parable of the Dragnet, He offers a similar explanation, “So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come forth, separate the wicked from among the just, and cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 13:49-50). In all three of these examples we see it as a time that involves angels, separation of the just from the wicked, and the assignment of punishment. The preterist tries to identify this with AD 70, but it must be acknowledged that if so any separation of the just and the wicked could only be seen in spiritual terms. Sin, wickedness, and evil still continue to function. That hardly seems like it would fit Jesus’ description of separating “the wicked from among the just.”

The final example in Matthew poses the greatest challenge to the preterist position. At the close of the Great Commission, Jesus promised, “lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). If the “end of the age” is the end of the Jewish Age, how can we understand this promise? The world continued after AD 70. Preterists argue that Christ dwells with His people in the church, applying the promise of Revelation 21:3 to the age of Christ. Yet, was Jesus only promising to be with His people until the end of the Jewish Age? No. He was promising to be with them “always.” Now, the preterist might respond by arguing, “if this means the end of the universe, would that mean He won’t be with Christians after that?” The difference has to do with the view we take of Christ living with His people. If “age to come” means end of the world, the Christian is promised a literal, rather than a spiritual presence of God

with His people. If the preterist view is correct, the problem remains the same—how can they hope for His continued presence with them? How is it any different from His dwelling with us now in the church?

The final example is equally challenging to the preterist position. The Hebrew writer speaks of Christ's sacrifice of Himself, "now, once at the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself" (Heb. 9:26). We should note that the Hebrew writer says Christ's sacrifice came "at the end of the ages," so, within the first century, before AD 70 the Holy Spirit described the time of Jesus' death as coming at "the end of the ages." Unlike the phrases in Matthew, this is in the plural. If Jesus died in the Jewish Age, and (as preterists argue) the age of Christ began at AD 70, what "ages" are being described here? Just as God described the fall of Jerusalem in Ezekiel as "the end," there are many ages that have come to an end. But, this foreshadows the fact that one day, all things in this present universe will come to an end (2 Pet. 3:1-13).

We can also, learn the sense of "the end of the age" by looking at some texts that speak of the "age to come." As Jesus speaks of those who sacrifice to serve Him, He contrasts, "this present time" with the "age to come" (Luke 18:30). In Mark's account He promises they shall, "receive a hundredfold now in this time—houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions—and in the age to come, eternal life" (Mark 10:30). Preterists argue that after AD 70 Christians now have eternal life, but notice the contrast here infers that the "persecutions" in "this time" (which they would identify as the Jewish Age) do not carry over into the "age to come." Have persecutions truly ended? No.

The End of Time in the Old Testament

It is often falsely asserted that the Old Testament never taught that this present universe would end. That is a question to which we could devote considerable time. Yet, for the purposes of this study, let's notice only a few passages. After the flood, God declared, "While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, winter and summer, and day and night shall not cease" (Gen. 8:22). Most English translations render this text with dynamic equivalency rather than literal wording. The Hebrew uses the adverb *ad* (אד) meaning "as long as," before the words "all the days" (YLT, DBY). God literally promises "as long as all the days of the earth" seasons and day and night will not cease. To refer to something with the qualifier "while" or "as long as" necessarily implies that there will be a time when the earth will not remain (or literally) when "all the days" of earth will be completed. This sets the stage for things that will be further revealed as time goes on. I believe that has to play a role in how we must interpret the wording in Daniel 12:13—"the end of the days." If the implication has been made as early as Genesis 8:22 that "all the days of the earth" are a limited number, Daniel can properly understand "the end of the days" to point to that time. While this differs from "the end" of Ezekiel 7:2, which is not pointing to the end of "all the days," that doesn't mean we should reject the clear teaching of Scripture that there will be an "end of the age" in its final and ultimate sense (as it relates to this universe).

B. Ezekiel 32—Those Who Go Down to the Pit

It is commonly asserted that the Old Testament is silent regarding the afterlife. Modern reformed Jews often lean on this in their uncertainty (or denial of life after death). While I would agree that there is much less revealed in the Old Testament than in the New, evidence for it runs throughout its pages. A clear example of this is found in Ezekiel chapter 32. After pronouncing judgment on Ammon, Moab, and Edom (25:1-17), Tyre and Sidon (26:1-27:36; 28:1-26), and Egypt (29:1-31:18), in the twelfth year of Jehoiachin's captivity (32:1), the prophet is commanded to pronounce a lament of judgment on Pharaoh (32:2). This lamentation calls Pharaoh to consider his future contact with "those who go down to the pit" (32:18). While this is certainly poetic language, it offers some profound facts about the after-life. Referring to Pharaoh, Ezekiel is told, "The strong among the mighty shall speak to him out of the midst of Sheol" (32:21a, ASV). Although some might take this to mean that the dead *speak* to him through their example—they were powerful, but now lie in shame—this apparently refers to what Pharaoh and his multitudes will see and hear *after death*. The Lord promises him, "I will lay your flesh on the mountains, and fill the valleys with your carcass" (32:5, NKJV).

Pharaoh is then told who will be in Sheol. These include, Assyria (32:22-23), Elam (32:24-25), Meshach and Tubal (32:26-28), Edom (32:29), and the Sidonians (32:30). Although these, like Pharaoh “caused terror in the land of the living” (32:25; cf. 32:24, 26, 27, 32), when Pharaoh is said to *see* them “bear their shame with those who go down to the Pit” (32:24, 25, 30). Ezekiel is told, “Pharaoh will see them and be comforted over all his multitude”—that is consoled to see they have died as his multitudes have died—“Pharaoh and all his army, slain by the sword” (32:31). This clearly shatters any picture of the life of man ending upon death. If Pharaoh ceases to exist upon death there is no way he could “see” those listed here. If these sinful souls pass out of existence they do not “bear their shame,” and could not “speak to him out of the midst of Sheol” (ASV).

C. Ezekiel 34:13; 37:21-22; 36:25-28; 39:25-29—The Preterist Doctrine of “the Gathering”

Numerous times in Scripture Ezekiel is told about a re-gathering of the Israelites following their exile. A fundamental teaching espoused by preterists is the argument that passages in the Old Testament that speak of God gathering Israel back together with the Gentiles under the Messiah should be harmonized with the wording in the Olivet Discourse promising, “And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other” (Matt. 24:31). The conclusion is then drawn that this is not talking about final judgment, but God’s coming in judgment upon Jerusalem in AD 70. It is asserted that this was when the promised *gathering* took place—not at the cross. Oddly enough, some advocates of this view even apply this to Hebrews 10:25, arguing that it is not talking about faithfulness in gathering (or assembling) in the local church, but anticipation of this AD 70 *gathering*.

Preterists often exercise a major flaw in their approach to scriptural interpretation. They choose a definition within a particular passage of Scripture. Often, little attention is given to the context or background of the passage. Then, their definition is applied throughout any other passages of Scripture that use the same wording. Certainly, it is important to harmonize Scripture with Scripture, but if our initial definition is flawed, we will carry this flawed definition with us to all other Scriptures we encounter. This flawed approach is seen in their flawed doctrine of an AD 70 *gathering*. Just because a gathering is referred to in one passage doesn’t mean it automatically applies to all other texts that mention a gathering.

A number of preterist sources offer lists of Old Testament passages describing *gatherings*. Don Preston has written a series of seven articles entitled, “The Re-Gathering of Israel.”⁷ A preterist author named Tina Rae Collins has published an entire book entitled *The Gathering in the Last Days* advocating this view.⁸ Among the passages Collins offers to defend her position are two from Ezekiel. Let’s consider these texts.

The first is Ezekiel 34:13, which reads, “And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them to their own land; I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, in the valleys and in all the inhabited places of the country” (Ezek. 34:13). This clearly has Messianic overtones, but when was it accomplished? As the gospel was being preached (before AD 70), Paul wrote:

⁷ <http://donkpreston.com/articles/>.

⁸ In the introduction to her book, Collins doesn’t tell much about her religious background, but extends personal thanks to Arthur Ogden, whom she says started her on “this journey” and “patiently listened to my questions,” and Sam Dawson whom she says “nudged me over a hump that was holding me back.” She also thanks Dawson for proofreading her manuscript. Arthur Ogden’s book, *The Avenging of the Apostles and Prophets: Commentary on Revelation*, has been widely read among our brethren. Although he did not accept full-preterism, it is interesting that she says he *started* her in this direction. Sam Dawson, used to preach among non-institutional brethren and is now a full-preterist. Realized eschatology is often a progressive path that begins with accepting a few faulty premises. When these are adopted certain logical consequences follow.

Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:18-20).

If God, in Christ at the cross and in the gospel of Jesus Christ had already reconciled "the world to Himself," and the apostles as His ambassadors could already make the appeal "be reconciled to God," this *gathering* foretold by the prophets had already occurred.

The second passage Collins cites reads:

Thus says the Lord GOD: "Surely I will take the children of Israel from among the nations, wherever they have gone, and will gather them from every side and bring them into their own land; and I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king over them all; they shall no longer be two nations, nor shall they ever be divided into two kingdoms again" (Ezek. 37:21-22).

This text comes in a prophecy the Lord revealed to Ezekiel of two sticks—one representing Judah and the other representing Ephraim (the son of Joseph), often used to refer to the northern kingdom of Israel (Ezek. 37:16). The Lord promises a reunion of the two kingdoms (37:17-20). This foreshadows a reunion under the Messiah. Ezekiel is told, "David My servant shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd; they shall also walk in My judgments and observe My statutes, and do them" (Ezek. 37:24). This would not be David reincarnated, but Jesus, a descendent of David, who would reign on David's throne. Before Mary's conception, the angel announced to her, "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David" (Luke 1:32).

Ezekiel's prophecy helps us determine some things about when this *gathering* would happen. Ezekiel is told, "I will make them one nation" and "one king shall be king over them all." When did the Messiah have a "nation" and when did Jesus reign as "king over them all"? Peter told Christians (before AD 70), "But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9). Ezekiel was told these reunited peoples would be "one nation," yet Peter says it was already *gathered* before AD 70. Before His ascension, Jesus proclaimed that He had "all authority" both "in heaven and on earth" (Matt. 28:18). We have used this for years to show premillennialists that Jesus already reigns over His kingdom. The preterist must see the same thing. Jesus was already the "one king" reigning over the promised "one nation" that was gathered of both Jews and Gentiles through the gospel long before AD 70.

Other Gathering Passages in Ezekiel

This concept of *gathering* arises frequently in Ezekiel echoing the same sense. Following Ezekiel's vision of the glory of the LORD departing the temple, Ezekiel is told:

Therefore say, "Thus says the Lord GOD: 'Although I have cast them far off among the Gentiles, and although I have scattered them among the countries, yet I shall be a little sanctuary for them in the countries where they have gone.'" Therefore say, "Thus says the Lord GOD: 'I will gather you from the peoples, assemble you from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel'" (11:16-17).

In the prophecy to the mountains of Israel, God promised to "sanctify My great name" so that "the nations shall know that I am the LORD" (36:23). He then declared, "For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land" (36:24). This is further explained by offering additional elements of this promise that directly correspond to things fulfilled in the gospel. He promises:

Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk

in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. Then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; you shall be My people, and I will be your God (36:25-28).

This parallels Jeremiah's prophecy of a new covenant with "the house of Israel and with the house of Judah" (Jer. 31:31) and Joel's prophecy of an outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the "last days" (Joel 2:28, as quoted in Acts 2:17). God promised, "I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people" (Jer. 31:33)—the same promise here in Ezekiel. When did He put His Spirit within His people to do His laws—as Joel and Ezekiel prophesied? Peter confirmed its fulfillment in Acts 2:16. When was the new covenant in place? The Hebrew writer said that Jesus was already the "Mediator of the new covenant" (Heb. 12:24). This shows us the gathering promised in 36:24 was accomplished in the gospel—not something that awaited fulfillment in AD 70.

Finally, at the close of the prophecy against Gog and Magog (which we shall discuss below), the Lord speaks of bringing back "the captives of Jacob" and "the whole house of Israel" (39:25), but again speaks of it as when He "shall have poured out My Spirit on the house of Israel" (39:29). If this pouring out of the Spirit was fulfilled in the gospel—if the definition of being a Jew was changed to mean those who are of faith and a circumcised heart (Rom. 2:28-29; Gal. 3:7), defining them as "the Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16) since, "they are not all Israel who are of Israel" (Rom. 9:6)—it tells us that the time when the Lord brings "back from the peoples" and has "gathered them out of their enemies' lands" and is "hallowed in them in the sight of many nations" (Ezek. 39:27) is accomplished in the gospel, not the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. It may also help us understand how to interpret the prophecy against Gog and Magog in general (as we shall see).

D. Ezekiel 34:23—"One flock and One Shepherd"

One of the most clearly Messianic prophecies in the book comes immediately after Ezekiel learns that Jerusalem has fallen, in the twelfth year of their captivity (33:21). Ezekiel is told to prophesy against the "shepherds of Israel" (34:1). After rebuking the Jewish leaders, as we briefly noticed above, Ezekiel is told:

As a shepherd seeks out his flock on the day he is among his scattered sheep, so will I seek out My sheep and deliver them from all the places where they were scattered on a cloudy and dark day. And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them to their own land; I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, in the valleys and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them in good pasture, and their fold shall be on the high mountains of Israel. There they shall lie down in a good fold and feed in rich pasture on the mountains of Israel (34:12-14).

This picture of a shepherd seeking out his lost and scattered sheep immediately calls to mind Jesus' parable of the shepherd leaving his ninety-nine sheep to seek out his lost lamb to bring it back into the fold (Luke 15:4-7; Matt. 18:12-14). When Jesus sent out the Twelve, they were not yet to go to the Gentiles, but only to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 10:6). Unlike the wicked shepherds Ezekiel is called to rebuke, Jesus would be the "good shepherd" who "gives His life for the sheep" (John 10:11).

As the Lord speaks further to Ezekiel, He declares, "O My flock, thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats" (34:17)—a striking similarity to Jesus' own promise of His role in final judgment. He declared:

When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats (Matt. 25:31-32).

The Lord goes on to promise Ezekiel, "I will establish one shepherd over them, and he shall feed them—My servant David. He shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and My servant David a prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken" (34:23-24). Much of how we interpret the eschatological significance of various prophecies within Ezekiel hinges upon when we consider this

prophecy to have been fulfilled. If it is fulfilled in Jesus, this and the kingdom over which He rules is not awaiting an end times establishment. If it is not, with modern Conservative and Orthodox Jews one must believe it is still to come, and is therefore to be an eschatological event.

Premillennialists face a dilemma—if Jesus is the “one shepherd” and the “David” who reigns as “prince among them” how can they treat this prophecy as eschatological? That is to place oneself, with modern Jews, in a position of denying Jesus’ present shepherding of His people. Hal Lindsey, in his book, *The Late Great Planet Earth* argued, “The real issue between the amillennial and the Premillennial viewpoints is whether prophecy should be interpreted literally or allegorically” (165). That may be true in many instances, but I would ask—is Christ now *literally* the “good Shepherd”? Yes. If so, He now reigns as “David a prince among” His people.

E. Ezekiel 37:1-14—The Valley of Dry Bones

Following Ezekiel’s prophecy to the “mountains of Israel” (36:1-38), Ezekiel is taken “in the Spirit of the LORD” to a valley filled with dry bones (37:1). The Lord asks Ezekiel, “can these bones live” (37:3). Ezekiel is commanded:

...Prophecy to these bones, and say to them, “O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: ‘Surely I will cause breath to enter into you, and you shall live. I will put sinews on you and bring flesh upon you, cover you with skin and put breath in you; and you shall live. Then you shall know that I am the LORD’” (37:4-6).

Ezekiel obeys (37:7-9) and the bones “lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great army” (37:10). This is a spiritual vision much like Ezekiel’s vision of the slaughter of the inhabitants of Jerusalem (9:1-11). He is told, “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel” (37:11a). Like the “sour grapes” proverb (18:2), the Lord quotes the attitude of the people as they are in captivity—“Our bones are dry, our hope is lost, and we ourselves are cut off!” (37:11b). Like other prophecies in the book offered to illustrate spiritual conditions this remarkable vision is offered to bring hope to the captives. The Lord explains:

Therefore prophecy and say to them, “Thus says the Lord GOD: ‘Behold, O My people, I will open your graves and cause you to come up from your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel. Then you shall know that I am the LORD, when I have opened your graves, O My people, and brought you up from your graves. I will put My Spirit in you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken it and performed it,’ says the LORD” (37:12-14).

Jesus would declare, “the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation” (John 5:28-29). Is this the same resurrection shown to Ezekiel? No. Remember the attitude that motivated this vision—the captives felt like hopeless dry bones. Yet, the Lord promised them new life. They were not literally dry bones, nor literally in “graves,” but they were displaced from their land. This is foretelling the return from exile that would be fulfilled in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah.

This is further reinforced by the vision of two sticks reunited (discussed above) that immediately follows this vision (37:15-28). This vision moves beyond simply the return from exile to discuss the Messianic age. It promises a reunion of Judah and Ephraim, i.e. Israel (37:19), but associates this with the time when “one king shall be king over them all; they shall no longer be two nations” (37:22). The Lord uses the same language we saw in the prophecy to the shepherds of Israel—“David My servant shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd” (37:24; cf. 34:23-24). This was fulfilled in the coming of Jesus and the establishment of His church, so the resurrection of the dry bones vision that precedes this vision is not talking about “resurrection at the last day” (John 11:24), but the spiritual resurrection after the Babylonian exile that would set the stage for the coming of Christ’s kingdom.

F. Ezekiel 38-39—Prophecy against Gog and Magog

Premillennialists have long argued that Ezekiel's reference to "Gog, the prince of Rosh" (38:3) foretells a future Russian invasion of Israel. Like the prophecies against other nations the Lord gives a prophetic condemnation to Gog and Magog (38:1-39:29), but it is important for us to recognize how this text relates to historical events and how it came to be used in the New Testament and Jewish literature after the New Testament. The warning addresses, "Gog, of the land of Magog, the prince of Rosh, Meshech, and Tubal," (38:2). Speaking to Gog, the text foretells:

...you will come from your place out of the far north, you and many peoples with you, all of them riding on horses, a great company and a mighty army. You will come up against My people Israel like a cloud, to cover the land. It will be in the latter days that I will bring you against My land, so that the nations may know Me, when I am hallowed in you, O Gog, before their eyes (38:15-16).

We first must ask whom the Lord is addressing? Magog, Meshech, and Tubal are all sons of Japheth listed in Genesis 10:2. Josephus claimed, "Magog founded those that from him were named Magogites, but who are by the Greeks called Scythians" (*Antiquities of the Jews* 1.6). This identification is still widely accepted among scholars. Rosh is handled in different ways in various translations because the Hebrew word *rosh* (רֹשׁ) means "head" or "chief." So while some will render this "prince of Rosh" (ASV, NASB, NKJV, YLT, GLT) others translate it "chief prince of Meshech" (KJV, RSV, NIV, ESV, HCSB). Either way there is no basis for equating this with Russia. Nevertheless, this continues to be taught. Edwin Yamauchi, who has written extensively on the subject, bemoaning the fact that this identification, which he calls "untenable," continues, writes:

It is a reflection on evangelical scholarship when some of its spokesmen continue to adhere to the groundless identification of *rôš* as Russia, and the association of Meshech with Moscow and of Tubal with Tobolsk, when we have had cuneiform texts and discussions of them that provided the true clarification of these names since the end of the 19th century ("Meshech, Tubal, and Company: A Review Article," 243, 245).

It is unclear exactly when this prophecy was given to Ezekiel. The last time indicator was mentioned when word came to the prophet of Jerusalem's fall (33:21). That would put this around 586 BC. Some forty years earlier history records that Scythians had swept into Palestine intent on marching into Egypt. In his *Histories*, Herodotus records that in pursuit of the Cimmerians, the Scythians had moved into Asia Minor taking control away from the Medes for twenty-eight years (4.1), becoming "masters of all Asia" (1.104). Around 630 BC they swept through Palestine towards Egypt as far as Ashkelon, stopped only by gifts sent to them from the Pharaoh. During this invasion they looted and plundered as they went (1.105).

Earlier in Ezekiel these peoples were mentioned in the prophecy against Tyre. Tubal and Meshech, together with Javan, another son of Japheth (Gen. 10:2), were said to have traded with Tyre, bartering "human lives and vessels of bronze for your merchandise" (27:13). In the prophecy to Pharaoh, as he was told of those he would see in Sheol, he is told, "There are Meshech and Tubal and all their multitudes, with all their graves around it, all of them uncircumcised, slain by the sword, though they caused their terror in the land of the living" (32:26). This "terror in the land of the living" undoubtedly hearkens back to the invasion recorded by Herodotus.

"The Latter Years"

Ezekiel's prophecy of an invasion by Gog does not refer to this incident, but when was it to occur? The prophet is told, "After many days you will be visited. In the latter years you will come into the land of those brought back from the sword and gathered from many people on the mountains of Israel, which had long been desolate; they were brought out of the nations, and now all of them dwell safely" (38:8). Remember, this is revealed at a time when the Israelites are scattered to many nations and the land is "desolate." The term "latter" is translated from the Hebrew word *'acharith* (אַחֲרַיִת) defined to mean, "after part, end; (a) end, issue, event; (b) latter time (prophetic for future time); (c) posterity; (d) last, hindermost" (BDB). The KJV translates it "end" thirty-one times, "latter" twelve times, "last" seven

times, and “posterity,” “reward,” “hindermost,” “uttermost parts,” “at the length,” “remnant,” or “residue” in the other instances of its sixty-one uses in the Old Testament.

We might assume that the use of this word automatically points to the end of time, but as we noticed above with the phrase “the end,” the specific application of a word’s meaning is influenced (if not determined) by its context. Perhaps the best way to conceptualize the meaning of *’acharith* is to take it in the sense of *after-times*—always taking into consideration what is being considered as preceding it and approaching an end. For example, the return of the Babylonian exiles will be said to happen “in the latter (*’acharith*) days” (Jer. 49:39). The same word is used of the return of Moabite captives (Jer. 48:47). This was not the end of time, but later than when Jeremiah wrote, and after the captivity. It can refer simply to the outcome of something. Isaiah wrote, “Let them bring forth and show us what will happen; let them show the former things, what they were, that we may consider them, and know the latter end (*’acharith*—“outcome” NASB) of them; or declare to us things to come” (Isa. 41:22). It will be used of the last portion of nations under Babylon’s control (Jer. 50:12), of someone’s “posterity”—i.e. those who come *after* them (Amos 4:2), and of the last portion of people slain in battle (Ezek. 23:25; Amos 9:1). While it can point to the ultimate *latter time* (e.g. “Declaring the end (*’acharith*) from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done,” Isa. 46:10), its conceptual sense is just *the things that come after*.

When this invasion is said to occur, the Lord uses eschatological language, declaring, “there shall be a great earthquake in the land of Israel,” (38:19). The fish, birds, and “all creeping things that creep on the earth, and all men who are on the face of the earth shall shake at My presence. The mountains shall be thrown down, the steep places shall fall, and every wall shall fall to the ground” (38:20). The slain multitudes of Gog are said to fill a valley called “Hamon Gog” (39:11), and it will take seven months for the Israelites to bury all of them (39:12), and their bodies will also become a feast for “every sort of bird and to every beast of the field” (39:17-22). We should note, however, that similar wording was used before this of Pharaoh. Ezekiel records:

Thus says the Lord GOD: “I will therefore spread My net over you with a company of many people, and they will draw you up in My net. Then I will leave you on the land; I will cast you out on the open fields, and cause to settle on you all the birds of the heavens. And with you I will fill the beasts of the whole earth. I will lay your flesh on the mountains, and fill the valleys with your carcass. I will also water the land with the flow of your blood, even to the mountains; and the riverbeds will be full of you. When I put out your light, I will cover the heavens, and make its stars dark; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give her light. All the bright lights of the heavens I will make dark over you, and bring darkness upon your land,” Says the Lord GOD (32:3-8).

The Lord is using the language of judgment. His enemies will not succeed, but will be called to account for their sin. Whether it is Egypt or Gog, none will escape. While the literal end will come, the Lord frequently uses judgment language that foreshadows it even in describing acts of judgment that do not literally involve these types of cosmic events.

Gog and Magog in Jewish Thought

While it is now generally accepted that the prophecy against Gog and Magog was motivated by the frightening march of the Scythians into Palestine in 630 BC,⁹ it is interesting to see how the predictive allusions to a future invasion came to be used in Jewish literature. While “Gog and Magog” are frequently used in reference to opponents of the Messiah in the latter days, it seems to stand as a metaphor for opponents of God generally rather than a literal and specific reference to a resurgence of the Scythians in the last days. This becomes clear in the fact that it is no longer referred to as “Gog, of the land of Magog” (38:2), but simply “Gog and Magog.”

⁹ See Yamauchi, Edwin M. “The Scythians: invading hordes from the Russian steppes.” *Biblical Archaeologist* 46.2 (Spring 1983): 90-99.

For example, in one document from the Dead Sea Scrolls we see “Magog” used as a generic term for enemies of the Messiah. 4Q161 (4QpIsa^a), a Peshet (or interpretation) of the book of Isaiah, commenting on Isaiah 11:1-5, and the phrase “a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse” (NASB) reads:

...shoot] of David which will sprout in the fi[nal day s]ince with the breath of his lips he will execute] his [ene]my and God will support him with [the spirit of c]ourage [... thro]ne of glory, h[oly] crown and multi-colour[ed] vestments [...] in his hand. He will rule over all the pe[ople]s and Magog [...] his sword will judge [al]l the peoples (Frgs. 8-19 [Column III] lines 18-21).

Just before this, in commenting on Isaiah 10:34-35, it explains, “«And Lebanon, with its gran[deur], [will fall]. They are the commanders of the] Kittim...” (*Ibid.*, lines 7-8). Kittim is the term used repeatedly in the scrolls to refer to Rome and its armies. This likely suggests that “Magog” was not referring specifically to Scythians, but to opponents of Israel generally.

This is echoed in the Babylonian Talmud. Although compiled after the New Testament, it preserves many rabbinical teachings before and concurrent with it. At least three tractates speak of the “war of Gog and Magog” in the same way. Commenting on the meaning of Psalm 115:1, one claims, “Rabbi Johanan... said: [Psa. 115:1] ‘Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us’ refers to the servitude to [foreign] powers. Others state, Rabbi Johanan said: [Psa. 115:1] ‘Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us’ refers to the war of Gog and Magog” (*Pesachim* 118a). In two tractates, the messianic declarations of Psalm 2 are said to apply to the Gog-Magog war. One claims, “...when the battle of Gog-Magog will come about they will be asked, ‘For what purpose have you come?’ and they will reply: [Psa. 2:2] ‘Against God and His Messiah’ as it is said, [Psa. 2:1] Why are the nations in an uproar, and why do the peoples mutter in vain...” (*Abodah Zarah* 3b). The second declares:

Rabbi Johanan further said in the name of Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai: A bad son in a man’s house is worse than the war of Gog and Magog. For it is said: [Psa. 3:1] A Psalm of David, when he fled from Absalom his son, and it is written after that: Lord, how many are mine adversaries become! Many are they that rise up against me. But in regard to the war of Gog and Magog it is written: [Psa. 2:1] Why are the nations in an uproar? And why do the peoples mutter in vain... (*Berachoth* 7b).

It is likely that John’s use of “Gog and Magog” in Revelation reflects this same usage. Describing Satan’s brief release at the end of his 1000 years of bondage, John writes:

Now when the thousand years have expired, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations which are in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together to battle, whose number is as the sand of the sea. They went up on the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city. And fire came down from God out of heaven and devoured them. (Rev. 20:7-9).

This is not predicting a literal Scythian (or Russian) invasion of Israel, nor was Ezekiel. It is describing God’s judgment upon any who exalt themselves against God, and His anointed Christ. Dan King, in his commentary on Revelation writes:

...In the Rabbinical writings Gog and Magog had... come to be identified with the future enemies of the Messiah. Likewise, it seems that John also uses these symbols to picture the last fierce enemies of God and Christ, and of their people, the Church. According to Ezekiel, God uses sword (38:21), fire (39:6), and burning sulfur (38:22) to execute judgment against Gog and Magog. John also employs these same instruments of divine judgment in his vision to describe their downfall...(324).

G. Ezekiel and Revelation.

We have noticed throughout our study the many similarities that exist between the book of Ezekiel and the book of Revelation. I wish to draw once again from the material mentioned above that brother Kevin Kay shared with me in which he charts these numerous similarities. For example, Ezekiel starts with a declaration that he looked as “the heavens were opened” (1:1). John says, “I saw heaven opened” (Rev. 19:11). Both see “four living creatures” with similar features (1:5, 10; Rev. 4:6-7). Above the “living creatures” (beneath the throne), Ezekiel sees a firmament “like the color of an awesome crystal”

(1:22), while John sees before the throne “a sea of glass, like crystal” (Rev. 4:6). For Ezekiel the sound of the “living creatures” was “like the noise of many waters” (1:24), while for John this is the sound of the voice of the Son of Man (Rev. 1:13, 15). To Ezekiel, the sight of the throne was “the appearance of a rainbow in a cloud on a rainy day” (1:28), while John saw “a rainbow around the throne, in appearance like an emerald” (Rev. 4:3). Ezekiel sees one scroll (2:9), while John sees seven (Rev. 6:1). Both eat a scroll that tastes like “honey” (3:1-3), but for John it becomes “bitter” in his stomach (Rev. 10:10). Both describe the marking (or sealing) on the “forehead” of God’s people for protection (9:4; Rev. 7:3). Both feature coals and fire that is before God being cast upon the city or the earth (10:2; Rev. 8:5). In Ezekiel judgment upon Jerusalem involves “sword and famine and wild beasts and pestilence” (14:21), while in John it comes on one fourth of the earth by “sword, with hunger, with death, and by the beasts” (Rev. 6:8). Ezekiel is told music will cease in Tyre (26:13), while John is told it will cease in Babylon [i.e. Rome] (Rev. 18:22). The sea traders are also said to mourn for both of these cities (27:28-30; Rev. 18:17-19). Both describe their authors being taken places “in the Spirit of the LORD” (37:1; cf. Rev. 17:3; 21:10). Both feature a type of spiritual resurrection. For Ezekiel it is the dry bones—representing Israel (37:10), for John it is the two witnesses—representing the Law and the Prophets (Rev. 11:11). Both promise a time when God’s tabernacle—“shall be with them; indeed I will be their God, and they shall be My people” (37:27; cf. Rev. 21:3). Both speak of Gog and Magog (38:2-3; Rev. 20:8). Both are shown Jerusalem from a “high mountain” (40:2; Rev. 21:10). Both make use of a “measuring rod” to measure things within the temple visions (40:3; Rev. 11:1). Ezekiel is shown a glorious temple from which water flows for healing (47:1, 12). In Revelation it flows from the throne and the Lamb and is called the “water of life” (Rev. 22:1-2). Ezekiel’s temple has twelve gates bearing the names of the twelve tribes (48:31-34) as does the New Jerusalem shown to John (Rev. 21:12-13). Like the Israelite camp in the wilderness in both there are three on each side (although Ezekiel puts them in a different arrangement than the encampment in the wilderness).

Interpreting the Similarities

Clearly, it is more than coincidence that these two books share so many similarities, but how may we account for this relationship between the two books? The critic of faith would charge that John creatively borrowed from the work of Ezekiel and crafted his own vision of the last days following the dictates of his own imagination. While there is no doubt that John’s Jewish upbringing would have made him familiar with this important book of prophecy, we must reject this naturalistic explanation of these similarities. John, like Ezekiel was moved by the Holy Spirit to write what he did (2 Pet. 1:21). This fact alone could account for much of the resemblance. The same God who inspired one book equally inspired the other. It is also possible, however, that the fact that Ezekiel would have been so well known to John established a type of *prophetic vocabulary* (so to speak) that influenced the way he chose to express what the Spirit led him to write. This is only to be expected. When one sees similar things that he has heard others describe, it is only to be expected that he will describe them in similar ways.

It is important to recognize, however, that similarities in wording, motifs, and imagery do not necessarily constitute synonymous subjects, interpretations, or purpose. Simply because Ezekiel prophesied against Jerusalem, doesn’t demand that we understand the book of Revelation as a prophecy against Jerusalem. Just because Ezekiel’s temple bears similarities with John’s New Jerusalem, doesn’t demand that we conclude the two represent the same thing—as we shall see below.

III. Concluding Temple Visions

Having taken us from the years of warning before the fall of Jerusalem, through the ominous reality of Israel’s sinfulness and the destruction of the temple, the book of Ezekiel ends with a vision of a glorious rebuilt temple that spans the last eight chapters of the book. There are many eschatological issues that hinge on how we interpret these final visions.

A. Challenges in Interpreting the Temple Visions of Ezekiel 40-48

Perhaps one of the most challenging things about the study of Ezekiel is how to interpret the temple visions at the end of the book. Is it a reconstructed Mosaic temple? It certainly pictures a return to the land (39:27-28) and a restoration of worship (43:22, 23, 27; 45:13). However, it also portrays acts of worship that were different from what the Law of Moses taught. For example, Mosaic Law commanded that on Passover, “you shall present an offering made by fire as a burnt offering to the LORD: two young bulls, one ram, and seven lambs in their first year.... also one goat as a sin offering, to make atonement for you” (Num. 28:19, 22). In Ezekiel, the Lord commands, “On the seven days of the feast he shall prepare a burnt offering to the LORD, seven bulls and seven rams without blemish, daily for seven days, and a kid of the goats daily for a sin offering” (45:23). Concerning grain offerings made with daily sacrifices, Mosaic Law required, “one-tenth of an ephah of fine flour as a grain offering mixed with one-fourth of a hin of pressed oil” (Num. 28:5), while in Ezekiel the Lord requires, “a sixth of an ephah, and a third of a hin of oil” (46:14).¹⁰ Plumptre observes correctly, “There is no trace in the after history of Israel of any attempt to carry Ezekiel’s ideal into execution. No reference is made to it by the Prophets Haggai and Zechariah, who were the chief teachers of the people at the time of the rebuilding of the temple” (422-423).

So, is it a premillennial Messianic temple? The dispensationalist sees Ezekiel’s temple visions as a literal blueprint for a temple that must be rebuilt before the Messiah can return to establish His kingdom. But, they struggle with how to explain the continuation of animal sacrifices.¹¹ Is it a figure representing the church? Martin Luther drew this conclusion. He wrote, “this building of Ezekiel is not to be understood to mean a physical building, but like the chariot, so the building at the end is nothing else than the kingdom of Christ, the Holy Church, or Christendom, here on earth until the last day” (*A New Preface to the Book of Ezekiel*). Yet, once again, if this is a figure of the spiritual kingdom that exists in the church, why are there sacrifices, priests, and holy days? If this represents life under the Messiah, why are Gentiles prohibited from entering (44:9)? Preterist Steve Gregg recognizes:

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.... 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 (“Making Sense of Ezekiel’s Temple Vision”).

If these interpretations do not fit, is the vision a figure for eternal life in heaven? Some of the same problems arise if we interpret the vision in terms of a future description of eternal life, in a heavenly condition with God, after resurrection, final judgment, and the destruction of this universe. Why are there still burnt offerings (40:42), including sin and trespass offerings (44:29)? In the heavenly Jerusalem nothing shall enter that causes an abomination (Rev. 21:27). Why are the Levites and sons of Zadok still serving (40:46). The New Jerusalem of Revelation has no temple (Rev. 21:22). In the heavenly temple portrayed in Revelation prior to final judgment, while it does refer to an “altar” (Rev. 6:9; 8:3, 5; 9:13; 11:1; 14:18; 16:7), it is associated with incense and prayers (Rev. 8:3). Nothing is mentioned about sacrifices (Rev. 11-16)—other than that of Christ, the Lamb.

B. The Temple Vision Analyzed

¹⁰ Reuven Chaim Klein, in his article, “Reconciling the Sacrifices of Ezekiel with the Torah,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 43.4 (Oct - Dec 2015): 211-222, explores numerous examples such as these along with the efforts Jewish commentators have made to explain this.

¹¹ Jerry M. Hullinger has devoted considerable attention to this dilemma in the following articles: “The Problem of Animal Sacrifices in Ezekiel 40-48” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (July-September 1995) 279-89; “The Divine Presence, Uncleanness, and Ezekiel’s Millennial Sacrifices” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 163 (October-December 2006): 405-22; “The Function of the Millennial Sacrifices in Ezekiel’s Temple, Part 1” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 167 (January-March 2010): 40-57; “The Function of the Millennial Sacrifices in Ezekiel’s Temple, Part 2” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 167 (April-June 2010): 166-79.

To sort through these problems and determine the appropriate interpretation, let's carefully analyze the vision, considering its context, timing, and clues that may help us reach some conclusions. First, we should note when this vision is given to Ezekiel. It begins, "In the twenty-fifth year of our captivity, at the beginning of the year, on the tenth day of the month, in the fourteenth year after the city was captured, on the very same day the hand of the LORD was upon me; and He took me there." (40:1). This is thirteen years after Jerusalem had been taken and the temple had been destroyed. The faithful Jews in exile had to face the fact that the temple—the place where their worship was to be directed—no longer existed. Ezekiel's visions began when the temple still stood. Twenty years earlier, he was called to tell the people this would happen before it actually did (1:2; 4:1-17). Nineteen years earlier, he was given a vision of the glory of the Lord departing from the temple (10:18; cf. 8:1). Thirteen years earlier, word had come from one who escaped Jerusalem, reporting, "The city has been captured!" (33:21). 2 Kings describes this, saying, "they burned the house of God, broke down the wall of Jerusalem, burned all its palaces with fire, and destroyed all its precious possessions" (2 Chron. 36:19; cf. 2 Kings 25:19). How helpless, and hopeless this must have felt!

In the midst of this dark time, Ezekiel is carried away in the spirit from his exile to the land of Israel and shown a glorious scene—not of ruins and rubble, but "something like the structure of a city" (40:2). He is not told, like Daniel to conceal what he sees (Dan. 12:4). He is told, "Declare to the house of Israel everything you see" (40:4). Then he is shown a beautiful vision of a temple—not as it was, but far more glorious. Unlike the temple filled with abominations, from which the glory of the Lord departed (10:18), the glory of the Lord returns to this temple. Ezekiel writes:

And behold, the glory of the God of Israel came from the way of the east. His voice was like the sound of many waters; and the earth shone with His glory. It was like the appearance of the vision which I saw—like the vision which I saw when I came to destroy the city. The visions were like the vision which I saw by the River Chebar; and I fell on my face. And the glory of the LORD came into the temple by way of the gate which faces toward the east. The Spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner court; and behold, the glory of the LORD filled the temple (43:2-5).

What a revelation! What was lost could be restored. What was in ruins could again be filled with the glory of the Lord.

Did this glory wait for the coming of the Messiah? We saw earlier the promise of a time when the Lord would, "establish one shepherd over them, and He shall feed them—My servant David" (34:23), promising, "And I, the LORD, will be their God, and My servant David a Prince among them" (34:24). This clearly points to Jesus, the Son of David, but does that "Prince" reign over the temple shown to Ezekiel? No.

Princes in the Temple Visions

Princes are mentioned frequently in the temple visions, but "David" is never mentioned. What is said about these "princes"? The prince is granted the right to "eat bread before the Lord" (44:3). He is assigned a dwelling place beside the "holy district" (45:7; 48:21). Instruction is given to him where and how to enter the temple (46:2, 8, 10). He is allowed to give some of his property "to his sons" (46:17), and forbidden from taking the property of others to give it to his sons (46:18). He is assigned an allotment of land between the land allotted to Judah and Benjamin (48:22).

The people of the land were to make offering "for the prince in Israel" (45:16), but specific instructions are given regarding the offerings the prince was to make (45:17; 46:4, 12, 16). It is unclear if this is speaking of him making the sacrifices himself, or through the priests. This led some Jews to conclude the term "prince" here refers to the High Priest. The medieval Jewish commentator Rashi (ca. 1040-1105), commenting on Ezekiel 45:7, wrote, "I say that this 'prince' as well as every [mention of]

‘the prince’ in this section means the High Priest; but I heard in the name of Rabbi Menahem that it means the king.”¹²

The vision doesn’t only speak of “the prince” in the singular. After commanding an allotment for him by the holy district, the Lord commands:

The land shall be his possession in Israel; and My princes shall no more oppress My people, but they shall give the rest of the land to the house of Israel, according to their tribes. Thus says the Lord GOD: “Enough, O princes of Israel! Remove violence and plundering, execute justice and righteousness, and stop dispossessing My people,” says the Lord GOD (45:8-9).

Would Jesus be charged to “remove violence and plundering”? Would He be told to “stop dispossessing” God’s people? No. Would He be included in a promise that the sinful oppression “princes” once carried out would be “no more”? This is speaking of human princes, charging them to practice proper behavior. It echoes the rebuke offered earlier in the book (see 19:1-14). This becomes even clearer in an instruction given regarding sacrifice. The Lord commands, “the prince shall prepare for himself and for all the people of the land a bull for a sin offering” (45:22). Jesus was without sin (Heb. 4:15). He makes offering for the people (Heb. 9:24), but He does so “by the sacrifice of Himself.” (Heb. 9:26)—He does not need to “prepare for Himself” (as in Ezekiel’s vision) “a sin offering.”

C. Ezekiel and Isaiah’s Visions Compared

We might compare Ezekiel’s temple vision with some elements of Isaiah’s vision of “new heavens and a new earth” (Isa. 65-66). The Lord declares, “For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former shall not be remembered or come to mind” (Isa. 65:17). Then after describing conditions in this new existence He concludes, “For as the new heavens and the new earth which I will make shall remain before Me,” says the LORD, “So shall your descendants and your name remain” (Isa. 66:22). How are we to understand this? We might be inclined to see this as a reference to final judgment (cf. 2 Pet. 3:1-13), but there are elements within the prophecy that affirm the continuation of conditions in this life, as well as conditions under Mosaic law.

For example, in this “new earth” eating of “swine’s flesh” is still forbidden (66:17), worship from “Sabbath to Sabbath” continues (66:23), and there are “Levites” (66:21). In Christ all foods are clean (1 Tim. 4:4), the Sabbath is no longer binding (Col. 2:16), and all believers are priests (1 Pet. 2:9). In the new earth of Isaiah there is death (Isa. 65:20). In the new earth of the New Testament there is no death (Rev. 21:4). In the new earth of Isaiah there is a temple (Isa. 66:6). In the new earth of Revelation there is no temple (Rev. 21:22). These differences make it clear that the new heavens and earth of Isaiah cannot be wholly equated with New Testament descriptions that are called the *new heaven* and *new earth*.

Isaiah is likely using a figurative description of some type of restoration of Israel following a judgment from the Lord. The imagery of the wolf feeding alongside the lamb, and the lion eating straw are common figures for peace and safety (66:25; cf. 11:6). This has led full-preterists to argue that there will never be a destruction of the present heavens and earth. We must recognize, however, that there is nothing in the wording of the text that would preclude seeing an element of prophetic foreshortening (i.e. comparing a present event with a future literal event). In Isaiah 65:17, the Lord uses the Hebrew qal perfect verb form, expressing simple completed action, “I create new heavens and a new earth,” leaving the time when this creation occurs unspecified. In Isaiah 66:22, although it is usually translated as a future, “I will make,” the Lord actually uses a Hebrew qal participle there, which also expresses simple completed action—“I make” (GLT) or “I am making” (YLT). In other words, Isaiah’s vision does not describe the church or heaven, but foreshadows some elements that will be true of both. In this respect it

¹² Klein takes Rashi’s reference to “the king” to refer to the Messiah and cites statements in the Babylonian Talmud that apply Ezekiel’s instructions to the prince to a Messianic future age (*Baba Batra* 122a) (222).

is similar to Ezekiel's temple vision—it may not describe the church or heaven, but foreshadows elements that will also be true of both.

The River Flowing from the Temple

One element of the temple vision that leads many to conclude that it must refer to the Messianic Age is the river Ezekiel sees flowing from the temple (47:1-12). It begins as a shallow flow only to “the ankles” (47:3), then swells up to the knees and waist (47:4), until it grows into a river one must swim to cross (47:5). The river flows to the east (down toward the Dead Sea) where it heals the waters, making them capable of sustaining fish like the “Great Sea,” i.e. the Mediterranean (47:8-10). On its banks are said to be “all kinds of trees” whose “fruit will be for food” and “leaves for medicine” (47:12). This is obviously similar to John's vision in Revelation, where he writes:

And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each tree yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations (Rev. 22:1-2).

In John's vision the water flows “from the throne,” but we should remember that as Ezekiel's vision is further explained the Lord tells him, “this is the place of My throne” (43:7). Yet, unlike John's vision where there is “no more curse” (Rev. 22:3), in Ezekiel's vision not all things are healed. Ezekiel writes, “But its swamps and marshes will not be healed; they will be given over to salt” (47:11).

What Might Have Been

In 1993, the musical group Little Texas, released a song entitled *What Might Have Been*, that urges two former lovers who have moved on not to think about “what might have been.” When my brother Curtis and I were talking about how to interpret the temple vision of Ezekiel, one thought he suggested reflected the same idea. Is it possible that Ezekiel is not talking about conditions of eternal life with God, the spiritual Messianic temple, or a premillennial temple (as dispensationalists conceive it), but an idealized picture of what might have been? Gregg echoes this thought, in suggesting:

...one might reasonably refer to the vision as that which “might have been,” had the Jewish exiles in Babylon exhibited a more thorough repentance than they did. There is an 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... (“Making Sense of Ezekiel's Temple Vision”).

He goes on to quote a portion of Ezekiel's instructions to show the vision to the Jews in exile. The prophet is told:

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 and its arrangement, its exits and its entrances, its entire design and all its ordinances, all its forms and all its laws. Write it down in their sight, so that they may keep its whole design and all its ordinances, and perform them (43:10-11).

We must note the conditional elements of this instruction. Ezekiel is to describe the design, “that they may be ashamed of their iniquities.” This revelation is intended to produce shame, however, the extent to which he is to “make known to them the design” also depends on “if they are ashamed of all that they have done.” The temple of Ezekiel offers to the Jews in exile (and afterwards) a possible picture of what their life after the exile could have been like.

Objections Answered

If this is a correct interpretation, why do the offerings differ from Mosaic ordinances? As noted above, many of the differences reflect an augmentation, rather than a reduction—i.e. seven versus two, etc. This may have been symbolic of the completeness of their restoration, an indication of affluence they

could one day enjoy, or even a Divine change of the Law. At any rate, the presence of animal sacrifices precludes interpreting this as Messianic or heavenly (Heb. 9:11-14; 10:1-6).

If this is correct, how do we explain the river flowing from the temple? Certainly, when the gospel went forth from Jerusalem after Christ's ascension a fountain was "opened for the house of David and for the inhabitants of Jerusalem, for sin and for uncleanness" (Zech. 13:1). This differs from Ezekiel's vision, in that in the next chapter it is described as "living waters" that "flow from Jerusalem, half of them toward the eastern sea and half of them toward the western sea" (Zech. 14:8)—Ezekiel's river flows only to the eastern sea. In Zechariah's fountain, the prophecy of Micah was fulfilled that declared, "Many nations shall come and say, 'Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, To the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, And we shall walk in His paths.' For out of Zion the law shall go forth, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem" (Micah 4:2). Yet, even before the Messiah would come, Jeremiah was told the Jews had forsaken "the fountain of living waters"—identified as the Lord (Jer. 2:13; 17:13). A return to faithfulness to Him would bring them back to this source of life and healing. While Ezekiel's vision does not picture the ultimate healing river of John's heavenly vision, nor even the fountains of Zechariah, it promises God's word flowing forth from His faithful people. The flow of living water that could offering healing to all nations, would begin through the trickle of faithfulness that began well before Christ came.

Conclusion

The book of Ezekiel is a wondrous series of diverse visions that span the beginnings of the Babylonian exile, up to the fall of Jerusalem, and well into years of captivity that followed. Its visions of the "glory of the LORD" surrounded by "living creatures" that worship Him in truth regardless of where they may be offered hope, purpose, and a picture of a brighter future to His people who desperately needed it. Although it has become a raucous playground of speculation to those who wish to find in it panoramic stairways to angelic ascents into heaven, or alien spaceships and flying machines, at its heart we see the mind of God speaking to rebellious or hurting people in figures intended to move them to obedience and comfort. The wise student will avoid the hyper-literalistic extremes of dispensationalism as well as the dismissive, and disjointed fog of hyper-preterism. While it clearly contains many elements that are eschatological in nature, much of it focuses on the near future that would come to those in exile, or the somewhat more remote coming of Christ and His establishment of the church. It does not foreshadow a future Russian invasion of Israel, nor a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem prior to the establishment of an earthly Messianic kingdom. It offers promises of condemnation to God's enemies and the assurance of God's deliverance to those faithful to Him. This message is a declaration of encouragement and truth as important today as it was when it was first revealed to Ezekiel.

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