

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_expositor-series-1.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php)

EZEKIEL : AN IDEAL BIOGRAPHY.

THE last nine chapters of Ezekiel occupy an absolutely unique position in the history of prophetic, or indeed of any, form of literature. We can understand the instructions given in Exodus xxv.-xxix., xxxv.-xxxix. for they were given, if we recognize them as authentic, for a work that was on the point of execution, or described the actual workmanship of such men as Bezaleel and Aholiab. The description of the Temple built by Solomon, in 1 Kings vi. vii., in like manner, gives, with not more than necessary details of numbers and measurement, what every dweller in Jerusalem had actually seen. There was in each case an objective basis of reality.

With the closing section of Ezekiel's prophecies, however, the case stands quite otherwise. He is far away from the Holy City and has no prospect of returning to it. However strong might be his faith in the restoration of his people at the end of their seventy years' captivity, he could not hope to live to witness it. What he plans is (*primâ facie*, at least) for another to build, for another generation than his own to worship in. We have no intimation even of his having children of whom he might cherish the hope that they would be ministering priests in the Temple which he thus elaborately planned. His position was in a manner analogous to that of the great Lawgiver when he had his vision from the top of Pisgah, and looked out upon the promised land, with this difference, that in the one case the eye gazed upon the actual mountains and plains and valleys that lay before it, while in the other what met the Prophet's inward eye lay entirely in the cloudland of speculation.

Another partial analogue may be found, perhaps, in the work that occupied the closing years of the life of David. Those years were spent not only in the collection of the

materials which were to be used in building the Temple which he himself was not allowed to build, but in designing elaborate plans for it. "He gave to Solomon his son the patterns of the porch, and of the houses thereof, and of the treasuries thereof . . . of the place of the mercy-seat, and the pattern of all that he had in mind of the courts of the house of the Lord, and of all the chambers round about," and so on through many details (1 Chron. xxviii. 11, 12). The Psalmist recognized that he had as full an inspiration for that work as for his psalms and prophecies. The Lord, who had filled Bezaleel "with the spirit of God in wisdom, in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship" (Exod. xxxv. 31), had made David "understand in writing by his hand upon him, even all the works of this pattern" (1 Chron. xxviii. 19). But there again, though the architect was not himself to execute the work which he had planned, the execution was not far off. The dying king could give his last charge for its completion to the young heir in whose wisdom and largeness of heart he could see the promise of the energy that would make the Temple of Jehovah exceeding magnificent, a praise and glory in the earth.

The position of Ezekiel was therefore, as I have said, absolutely unique. In the closing years of his life he deliberately sits down to give what we might almost call, not a plan only, but a minutely detailed specification, for the structure of the new Temple which was to take the place of that which was then lying desolate and in ruins. The fact that he did so was, to say the least, an evidence of intense faith. He believed in the restoration of his people to their own land and to the Holy City. As Joseph had given commandment concerning his bones (Gen. l. 25; Heb. xi. 22) when, in all human measurements of probability, they seemed destined to sojourn for centuries on

the Goshen border-land of Egypt, so *he* looked forward to the time when the exiles in the land of the Chaldæans should be gathered once again in the city of their fathers. And the character of the instructions which he gives is also an evidence of the intense vividness of the Prophet's imagination. A poet, writing in the consciousness of his art, would have contented himself with depicting the result, and exhibiting, in a few vivid touches, the glories of the Temple, of what was to him, though in another sense than that which the words convey to us, the New Jerusalem. But the mind of Ezekiel was cast after the pattern of that of Dante. He paints what he sees, and his mental vision is that of one accustomed to order and precision. With the clear memory of the past which often accompanies the closing years of life, perhaps also with the help of the architectural details given in Exodus, and in the records of which we find epitomes in our present Books of Kings and Chronicles, he gives the measurements of length, depth, and height, the relative position of courts and porticoes and gateways, so that they might serve when the time came, as a manual of instructions.

But the measurements are not, it may be noted, identical with those which we find, and which, we may assume, Ezekiel had before him, in the earlier records. While in some instances, as *e.g.* in that of the Holy of Holies, we have the same dimensions as in that of the Temple of Solomon, the space round the Temple of 3,000 cubits square is altogether peculiar to Ezekiel, and could have found no place under the physical conditions presented by the surface of Mount Moriah (Ezek. xlii 15-20). There was nothing in the earlier structure analogous to the "posts" or columns ninety feet in height, of Chapter xl. 14. There is no mention in Ezekiel's Temple of the table of shewbread which was so conspicuous in that of Solomon. The Temple itself is to be built on "a very high mountain"

as with a surface specially prepared for it (Ezek. xl. 2). And when we pass from the structural arrangements to the surroundings of the Temple we find fresh elements of unlikeness. The small stream of Siloam, or one flowing from some neighbouring source, expands into a deep river, and carries with it a quickening and a healing power, transforming the regions through which it flows into the likeness of the Paradise of God (Ezek. xlvii. 1-12). The priests instead of being scattered in their cities as under the old régime, over the whole extent of the country, have a district assigned to them, which, with the royal demesne, extends from the Jordan to the Mediterranean; another portion parallel with theirs is given to the Levites (Ezek. xlv. 1-8; xlviii. 13, 14). The Temple stands in the centre of the priests' portion, and the city and its suburbs lie altogether outside it to the south (Ezek. xlviii. 8). The same independence marks other features in the Prophet's plan of the ritual of the Temple of the future. The priests who are to minister in it are confined to the sons of Zadok, the descendants of Ithamar being altogether passed over (Ezek. xl. 46; xlv. 15). The Feast of Pentecost, the Feast of Trumpets, and the Day of Atonement have no place in his cycle of holy seasons. The Feast of Tabernacles, though the day is still appointed to be kept holy, is no longer called by that name (Ezek. xlv. 25). The Feast of Unleavened Bread is to be kept not for seven days only, but for seven whole weeks (Ezek. xlv. 21, but interpreters differ). The Sabbath burnt-offering and the new moon sacrifices differ in details, into which I need not enter here, from those prescribed in the Mosaic Law (Ezek. xlvi. 1-7; Num. xxviii. 9; xxviii. 11-15).

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. There is no record of its having been in the thoughts of Zerubbabel, the Prince of Judah, and Joshua, the high priest, as they set about that work. No description of the second Temple or its ritual, in Josephus or the Rabbinic writings, at all tallies with what we find in these chapters. If we are to look at it as, in intention, a deliberate prophecy of what was literally to be hereafter, it is, at all events, a prophecy which as yet has had no historical fulfilment? Can we suppose it possible that such an historical fulfilment yet awaits it in the future? Is it conceivable, with the teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews present to our minds, that the future history of Israel should include not only the conversion of the Jews as a people, and their restoration to their own land, but the revival of the sacrifices and other ordinances which had seen their appointed work brought to its close in the sacrifice of Christ, and were now among "the things decaying and waxing old, and ready to vanish away" (Heb. viii. 13)? Are the sons of Zadok, according to the flesh, to take their place, as such, in that ministry of the Church of Christ which is based on the assumption that the sacrificing functions of the priesthood, as offering for sins, have been fulfilled once for all, and that their other functions have descended to the whole body of Christian people, laity and clergy, as the common inheritance of an universal priesthood? Are we to look forward to a physical change in the conformation of Palestine, to the conversion of the Dead Sea into a freshwater lake, with new surroundings of groves of fruit-bearing trees?

The answer to these questions must be given, if I am not mistaken, in the negative. We may not, for the sake of maintaining a literal interpretation of a portion of the Old Testament, run counter to the whole drift and tenor of the New. And some confirmation at least of that negative reply is found in that portion of the New Testament which

presents the nearest analogue to this vision of Ezekiel. The Seer of the Apocalypse also saw a vision of a New Jerusalem. The imagery in which he describes it, the gates of pearl, the city of gold, the walls of jasper, have become the treasure-house of hymn-writers and preachers. Have those who have so used them, as symbols of the unseen, each symbol, doubtless, having its own special significance, ever dreamt of a literal interpretation? Have they thought of a city in the form of a perfect cube, the length, breadth, and height of it being equal (Rev. xxi. 16), as descending from the skies and occupying a position in Palestine? Have they (I speak, of course, of wise and thoughtful interpreters, whose names are held in honour as masters of Israel) literalised the glowing picture of the river of the water of life, and the tree of life, with its twelve manner of fruits and its leaves for the healing of the nations? (Rev. xxii. 1-3)? In that instance, the Seer of the Apocalypse reproduces, in part, the imagery of his predecessor. But there are points in which the two visions stand in such marked contrast as to be absolutely incompatible. In Ezekiel, the Temple, with its courts, porticoes, gateways, is the centre of the whole ideal. In St. John there is no Temple "for the Lord God Almighty, and the Lamb are the temple of it" (Rev. xxi. 22). In Ezekiel that which seems to him characteristic of the holiness of the Temple and all its precincts is, that no stranger, un-circumcised in heart or in flesh, should enter into the sanctuary (Ezek. xlv. 9). In St. John the glory of the city in which there is no temple is, that "all the *nations* of them that are saved shall walk in the light of it" (Rev. xxi. 24).

If we are thus led to abandon all thought of a literal visible fulfilment in the past or in the future, how are we to deal with the problem presented by the chapters now before us? Shall we, starting from the objective side of dogma, deal with them as being, not indeed a prophecy in the sense

of prediction—that solution we have already eliminated—but a manual of prophetic and therefore inspired symbolism, each part of which we are bound to interpret, finding, if we can, a key to the cypher-writing which we meet with, and dealing with measurements of courts and gates, and rules for sacrifices and festivals, as having each of them a distinct individual meaning, and yet combining into a complete and harmonious whole? Shall we assume that the Prophet himself was conscious that he was writing what could never be realized in a concrete form, that he was but the amanuensis of a Divine Teacher who took this way of instructing him, and through him the ages to come, in truths which could not otherwise be adequately expressed? It will scarcely, I think, surprise those who have followed me in these studies on Ezekiel, or in what I have written elsewhere on Isaiah and Jeremiah, to learn that it seems to me better that we should not start with that *à priori* assumption, and that we should endeavour, as far as in us lies, to deal with this book (for the Chapters xl.-xlviii. clearly form a distinct work) in its relation to the life of the Prophet, as the outcome of his hopes, his imaginations, his memories of the past, his anticipations of the future. So studied, the book seems to me to possess a profound interest, as representing the thoughts that occupied the closing years of Ezekiel's prophetic work. He is still an exile on the banks of Chebar, has still his visions and revelations of the Lord. But the character of his work is altered. He is no longer feeding his soul, as at first, on "lamentations and mourning and woe" (Ezek. ii. 10), nor taking up his parable against the rebellious house, "whether they will hear, or whether they will forbear" (Ezek. ii. 7). There has come to him a calmer and serener day. His faith in the longsuffering of Jehovah and in the restoration of his people to their own land is inextinguishable, and he is able to form for himself an ideal picture of what



that restoration should accomplish. We need not wonder that the picture did not transcend the horizon of his environment, that its outward form was determined by the traditions he had inherited from earlier prophets, and by his own personal experience. That, we might well say, is the inevitable condition of all ideal polities, from the *Republic* of Plato to the *de Monarchiâ* of Dante.

How far Ezekiel contemplated the realization of his ideal as possible in the near or far-off distance, we have no express data for determining. It belongs to the character of the prophetic idealist that he draws his picture with a firm hand, and in distinct outline, and with vivid colours. It is not natural for him to say "This is only an ideal, only a castle in the air. You are not to imagine that I ever expect to see it a reality:" and yet all the while his thoughts about it may be those of a poet and not of a dreamer, contenting himself with presenting his ideal to the minds of men, and so, if it may be, exciting them to take some steps towards embodying it in outward and concrete shape, if not in the very shape in which he himself conceived it, yet in some other in which the same thoughts should be clothed in varying forms according to "the diversities of country, times, and men's manners." And often, as in the case of Dante, whose character and work present, as we have seen, many features analogous to those of the Hebrew prophets, the mind of such a poet-seer of the ideal, or of the future, will take delight in clothing the thoughts of his heart in symbols not at first easy to be understood. He will write, as it were, in cypher, for the few and not for the many. Numbers, measurements, geometrical forms, structural arrangements, liturgical rites, will all have for him a mysterious significance and be, as it were, sacraments of higher things. If that be the case with men who are more or less sharers in the prophetic type of character, much more was it likely to be so with

one like Ezekiel, of whom men said, even when he was in the full exercise of his prophetic mission "Ah, Lord God, doth he not speak parables?" whose every utterance is permeated with the figures of a strange and difficult symbolism.

Within the limits of this paper, with which I conclude this series of studies, I cannot hope to deal at all adequately with the ideal polity of which I have been writing. It is obvious that the method of interpretation which I have suggested deals with it primarily rather as throwing light upon the prophet's mind and character than as a direct Divine revelation. It may be disappointing not to find in it a prediction of which we may look for the fulfilment, a direct, though symbolic, proclamation of spiritual truths. But if there be that element of loss, there is also an element of gain. We learn to know the prophet better as a man. We trace more clearly the *genesis* of the thoughts of which his "ecclesiastical polity" was the outcome. I do not doubt that every part of his scheme had for him a distinct and special significance. Those who have studied Bähr's *Symbolik* know how pervading a symbolism attached to numbers, such as 3, or 5, or 7, or 10, to figures such as the square or the cube, to architectural arrangements as connected with the cardinal points of the compass. I will endeavour, though I am compelled to refrain from any complete treatment of the subject, to give, at least, a representative example of the method thus suggested.

I take for this purpose the "vision of the holy waters" in Chapter xlvii. The germ of that vision may have been found in the older prophecy of Joel (iii. 18), that a fountain should come forth from the house of the Lord and water the valley of Shittim, perhaps in some memories of the waters of Shiloah or the brook Kedron, perhaps also in Isaiah's words speaking of the presence of the glorious Lord "as a place of broad rivers and of streams" (Isa. xxxiii. 21). As a priest

he must have known the water-channels, and the drains which were connected with the supply and the exit of water for ablutions, and the like. What he now sees is of quite another character. He is led outside the Temple by the North gate, and round the North Eastern corner, and he sees, what he had not seen before, a rippling stream flowing from the Holy Place across the inner court, and then out at the threshold of the Temple. It lay in the nature of the case, that that would suggest to his mind the purifying vivifying influences of the faith in the Eternal of which the Holy Place was the appointed symbol. In the historical past upon which he looked back those influences had been meagre and ineffectual. They had scarcely quenched the thirst of any but the actual worshippers in the Temple. But now he sees a strange and marvellous expansion. His angelic companion measures a thousand cubits—symbol in its completeness of a divinely appointed æon, and the waters are up to the ankles; another thousand, and they reach to the knees; and yet another, and they meet the loins; and then, last of all, it is “a river that could not be passed over, even waters to swim in.” Could any symbol represent with greater beauty, the developments in successive periods, of the truth of which Judaism was the starting point, and Christendom, in its various stages, the completion? Has not our knowledge of Divine truth been widening and deepening evermore? As purpose after purpose, method after method, in the working of Divine wisdom and power have shewn themselves, have not men seen that there was now, at last, a stream that made glad the city of their God?

And the Prophet saw that it continued its course eastwards to the *Arabah*, the Ghor, or deep valley of the Jordan, where it flows into the Dead Sea. Ezekiel must have remembered that scene in all its dreary and desolate barrenness; the barren shore, with its salt scurf and

malarious marshes, the salt lake into which no fishers cast their net, the product of the judgment which fell upon the guiltiest cities of the plain, of which, we may remember, Ezekiel had foretold the restoration. Could anything answer more completely than *that* to the old decaying world, the world lying in wickedness, barren and putrescent, incapable of producing any true life, upon which the spiritual influences first of a purified Judaism and then of the Christian faith were hereafter to operate? The waters of the salt sea were to be healed; the old dead world was to receive a new quickening, freshening element of life, and there those who were to be "fishers of men" should cast in their nets, and should take their great draught of fishes. And by the waters, on the shores that were before desolate, there should be "all trees for meat, whose leaf should not fade." A priest who remembered his Psalter could hardly fail to see in that picture the symbolic representation of the saints of God, the righteous who were as trees planted by the water-side and whose leaf should not wither (Ps. i. 3). They, and their good works, the fruits of the faith which was fed by the stream that flowed from the Temple of Jehovah, were to be the sources of spiritual food to the nations of the world. Their very "leaves," their indirect influences, their scattered thoughts and feelings, should be "for medicine," for the healing of the nations. The old sick world, sick unto death, with its idolatries, and shams, and lies, and foulness, was to find in the lives, acts, words of those who belonged to the true Israel of God, the knowledge of salvation, or, if we may use Wiclif's rendering of those words, the true "science of health" (Luke i. 77), the means of healing.

There was, however, in the Prophet's vision of what seemed an universal restoration, a partial and sad exception. The "miry places and the marishes thereof shall not be healed; they shall be given to salt" (Ezek. xlvii. 11). Did not that feature in the picture, which otherwise seemed to

represent the very Paradise of God, answer to that which meets the gaze of those whose vision of the "wider hope" seems clearest and strongest? There are some natures, and the words are terribly true for nations and Churches as well as for individual souls, of whom it seems to hold good that they resist all means of healing. They are "given to salt," left to the evil which they have chosen, to the diseases which they have made inveterate. The leprous taint of selfishness still cleaves to them. No fair flower, no wholesome fruits can spring out of that evil and barren soil. These "waste places" are the outward tokens of that law of continuity which in the corresponding vision of the river of the water of life in the Apocalypse, found expression, not in any symbolic imagery, but in the direct law of retribution: "He that is unjust, let him be unjust still; and he that is filthy, let him be filthy still" (Rev. xxii. 11).

E. H. PLUMPTRE.

---

### *THE BOOK OF ISAIAH.—CHAPTERS XL.-LXVI.*

#### VII.—THE WORK OF THE SERVANT OF THE LORD.

IN Chapter xl. the Prophet presented one side of his conception of Jehovah, God of Israel, for the comfort of his people, his transcendence and uniqueness, or, as he named it, his Holiness. In the next Chapter, descending from this elevation into the arena of history and events, he represents Jehovah as the First and the Last, the Originator of all great movements among the nations and Himself the end of them—his glory shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together. The contrast suggested by the first side of his conception of Jehovah was the ridiculousness of the idols