

# A Brief Overview of Ezekiel's Plan and Its Meaning

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*Diagrams of everything summarized below are in Parts 1 and 2 of the author's "Christian midrash" articles on the **Free Articles** page. The reader is invited to look at them after reading this overview, or along with it as needed.*

Ezekiel's Temple is **square** in overall shape, with **three outer gates**, one each on the north, east, and south sides (there is no western gate.) The square temple is crossed by **two perpendicular axes** or circulation spines like the major crossing avenues of a city. In its square form and two cross axes, Ezekiel's Temple differs from both the earlier desert Tabernacle and First (or Solomon's) Temple, neither being square, or having equally spaced gates connected by perpendicular circulation axes.

The **North-South Axis** connects the north and south outer gates, passing along its way through a square central **inner court**. (Between the inner court and the outside walls is an **outer court** surround-ing the inner one on its north, east, and south sides, but it figures less prominently in this overview than the inner one.) The **East-West Axis** runs from the east outer gate through the same inner court, but does not continue on to the temple's western outside wall. Instead, it terminates at the temple's **inner sanctuary**, which fronts on the west side of the inner court (occupying the place where the E-W Axis would be if it continued on through.) The sanctuary contains the **Holy Place** and **Holy of Holies** much as in the First Temple, except that Ezekiel says little about their contents or purpose.

The **East-West Axis** structures the things in Ezekiel's text relating to God's sovereign acts *on behalf of His people* that they could never do for themselves. It corresponds to the first half of the Bible's covenant promise formula, "**I will be their God.**" On the other hand, the **North-South Axis** has things relating to the Spirit-enabled response of God's people, things He *does in them* to make them a people for His Name, corresponding to the second half of the covenant formula, "**They shall be My people.**"

The temple's **square, four-horned altar of burnt offering**, a microcosm of the over-all Temple and the whole fourfold Creation, is at the center of the inner court, where the two axes cross. It is **on both axes** because everything God asks His people to sacrifice as offerings to Him (on the N-S Axis of response) is ultimately *provided by* Him (on the sovereign E-W Axis).

With those things in mind, what follows is a summary of some of the principal **biblical events** symbolized in Ezekiel's vision, first in the original prophetic context of the Tanakh (the Christian "Old Testament") and then as seen through the clearer lens of the New Testament.

**The Approach of God's Glory on the E-W Axis.** A temple intended as a meeting place between God and man is worthless if it lacks God's Presence in it. Ezekiel records in his chapter 43 that the manifestation of God's Divine Presence or Glory---which he reported seeing, with fear and trembling, in his chapter 1---comes to the east outer gate of his visionary temple from the east. He sees the *earth light up* with the arrival of the Presence, and hears a sound like that of many waters, or "*of the camp of the angels on high*," as the Targum (the ancient Aramaic translation) says. The Targum calls such theophanies, or visions of God, manifestations of the "Word" (Aramaic: *Memra*) of God.

**New Testament perspective.** Jesus comes to His Temple from the east, in the Day-spring on high, the star followed by the Magi westward to Bethlehem, and in the *earth lighting up* around the shepherds as they hear the *angels proclaim*, "*Glory to God in the highest*." Jesus the pre-existing Word (Greek: *Logos*) of God---whom Ezekiel saw as a Divine manifestation---thus comes to the Temple of His earthly kingdom through the putting on of a body of mortal flesh.

**God's Glory filling the Temple on the E-W Axis.** The Divine Presence enters through the east outer gate, which is then closed forever, since this temple is now the eternal place of God's "throne"---and then proceeds into the inner court, filling the temple. All this is on the E-W Axis, reflecting God's sovereign mercy in coming to His sinful people, who had abandoned by their disobedience all claim to His abiding with them.

**New Testament perspective.** In a time of deep spiritual darkness, Mary brings baby Jesus to the gate of Nicanor at the west end of the Court of the Women (of *Herod's Temple*), and Simeon sees the prophesied "*light*" for the gentiles and "*glory*" of Israel enter His temple. Not an Aaronic priest, Jesus can go no further westward, but thirty years later, as a priest of the eternal order of Melchizedek---to whom Aaron paid homage in Abraham's loins---Jesus descends from the Mount of Olives on the east, enters *Ezekiel's* inner court and ascends westward its central altar as an atonement for the sins of His people---past, present, and future. In His resurrection He goes yet further west into

into Ezekiel's Holy of Holies (as a type of God's true Temple in heaven) to offer His blood there to His Father, establishing peace between man and God.

**God "Dwelling" with Man on the N-S Axis.** God comes to His Temple "to  *dwell*  in the  *midst*  of His people Israel forever" (Ezek. 43:7). The North-South Axis, reflecting God's work  *in,*  and  *among*  His people to make them His own, is the route that His worshipers take, either coming in at the north gate and proceeding around through the outer court---bending eastward to bypass the priestly inner court---to exit at the south gate, or  *vice versa,*  entering at the south, skirting the inner court, and exiting at the north. The outward  *covenant sign of circumcision*  gives them admission through the gates to participate in this worship procession.

**New Testament perspective.** On the N-S Axis, Jesus is first taken south to Egypt to identify Him with Israel as "God's Son." Jesus had come in the flesh "to  *dwell*  among us" (John 1:14), and in His three-year public ministry of "dwelling" with man, Jesus makes many north-south trips between Jerusalem and Galilee, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, calming storms, teaching in His Sermon on the Mount the spiritual essence of the Torah, and symbolically gathering the "lost sheep" of Israel---fulfilling Ezekiel's "sign-act" of joining the two sticks of Ephraim and Judah. He goes still farther north to Caesarea Philippi to proclaim the ultimate victory of His kingdom over the darkness of pagan unbelief. He returns a final time southward on this axis as Israel's Messiah to suffer and die in the inner court. Later on this same axis, members of Jesus' earthly body, the church,  *follow*  their Master in His foot-steps as they strive together with His Spirit for the holiness of sanctification. They enter the outer gates of His temple through the outward  *covenant sign of baptism,*  admitting them to the outer court of the  *visible*  church, while spiritual regeneration through faith, the  *new birth,*  admits every true believer both to the priestly inner court and the innermost spaces of the sanctuary. As believer-priests, they now have direct, unmediated, and intimate fellowship with God in prayer and the Lord's Supper.

**The Activities of the Prince on Both Axes.** A priestly-kingly worship leader called the Prince enters at the north or south gate, identifying him with the people, but has a unique role on the Divine East-West Axis, crossing it at right angles between the closed east outer gate and the eastern gate to the inner court to present special offerings that he makes on behalf of the people. Associated by Ezekiel with King David and the "shepherd" of Israel, his roles on both axes as a priest and king (and his association with the east gate through which God's Glory entered) identify him with Israel's Messiah.

**New Testament perspective.** As the Son of David and King of the Jews, the "good Shepherd," and the priest after the order of Melchizedek, Messiah Jesus extends and exceeds the role of Ezekiel's Prince. On the N-S Axis He is identified with the  *people*  as the Son of Man, on the E-W Axis with  *God*  as His greater, beloved Son. Unlike the

Prince, He comes in through the closed East Gate, and goes farther westward into the inner court and its altar to accomplish there what no merely human prince could ever do for man.

**Sacrificial Atonement on the Altar of Burnt Offering.** On the four-horned altar of burnt offering, the four-footed sacrificial animals reflecting the order of Creation are ultimately *provided by God* (on the E-W Axis) in order to be *offered back to Him* by the people (on the N-S Axis). This central altar is of paramount important in Ezekiel, essentially displacing the Torah's emphasis on the holy inner chambers of the Tabernacle (and subsequent First Temple.)

**New Testament perspective.** Jesus dies on both axes on the central altar of Ezekiel's Temple because the salvation He achieves is both God's *sovereign act for man* (in pouring out His wrath at man's sin upon Him) and at the same time His loving, fully willing *self-sacrifice as true man*, whereby we are saved both by the passive obedience of His death and the active obedience of His life. On the night before His crucifixion, as leader of a Passover Seder, Jesus leads his disciples in singing the Hallel---the ending of its last Psalm, no. 118, saying, "*Bind the festal offering to the horns of the altar with cords*" (NJPS Tanakh). The next morning, his four extremities are *bound* (with Roman nails) to the four horns of Ezekiel's altar (on a cross symbolizing the four corners of Creation.) In so doing, Jesus the "*Lamb of God*" reconciles all things to His Father, making peace between God and man, fulfilling and completing the Torah's sacrificial system, and establishing the basis for the future restoration of all the Creation, marred as it is by man's sin (Rom. 8:19ff).

**The Supernatural River on the E-W Axis.** Later in Ezekiel's vision, a stream of supernatural, ever-increasing size flows from the temple back out on this axis into the eastern desert, bringing life wherever it goes, according to the prophecies of the sovereign, supernatural giving of the Spirit in Ezekiel 36.

**New Testament perspective.** The blood and water from His Jesus' spear-pierced side flows eastward, becoming after His Ascension the ever-increasing River of the Holy Spirit, bringing life to the spiritual desert of the world.

*For more of the Scriptural details of these and other aspects of Ezekiel's Temple, and to see the diagrams, refer to Parts 1 and 2 of the "Christian midrash" articles on this **Free Articles** page.*