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A visionary journey to Jerusalem to see abominations in the Temple. The conversion of Saul.

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Transcript

Ezekiel chapter 8. In the sixth year, in the sixth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I sat in my house with the elders of Judah sitting before me, the hand of the Lord God fell upon me there. Then I looked, and behold, a form that had the appearance of a man. Below what appeared to be his waist was fire, and above his waist was something like the appearance of brightness, like gleaming metal.

He put out the form of a hand, and took me by a lock of my head, and the Spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven, and brought me in visions of God to Jerusalem, to the entrance of the gateway of the inner court that faces north, where was the seat of the image of jealousy, which provokes to jealousy. And behold, the glory of the God of Israel was there, like the vision that I saw in the valley. Then he said to me, Son of man, lift up

your eyes now toward the north.

So I lifted up my eyes toward the north, and behold, north of the altar gate, in the entrance, was this image of jealousy. And he said to me, Son of man, do you see what they are doing, the great abominations that the house of Israel are committing here, to drive me far from my sanctuary? But you will see still greater abominations. And he brought me to the entrance of the court, and when I looked, behold, there was a hole in the wall.

Then he said to me, Son of man, dig in the wall. So I dug in the wall, and behold, there was an entrance. And he said to me, go in and see the vile abominations that they are committing here.

So I went in and saw, and there engraved on the wall all around was every form of creeping things and loathsome beasts and all the idols of the house of Israel. And before them stood seventy men of the elders of the house of Israel, with Jeazaniah the son of Shaphan standing among them, each had his censer in his hand, and the smoke of the cloud of incense went up. Then he said to me, Son of man, have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel are doing in the dark, each in his room of pictures? For they say, The Lord does not see us, the Lord has forsaken the land.

He said also to me, You will see still greater abominations that they commit. Then he brought me to the entrance of the north gate of the house of the Lord, and behold, there sat women weeping for Tammuz. Then he said to me, Have you seen this, O son of man? You will see still greater abominations than these.

And he brought me into the inner court of the house of the Lord. And behold, at the entrance of the temple of the Lord, between the porch and the altar, were about twenty-five men, with their backs to the temple of the Lord, and their faces toward the east, worshipping the sun toward the east. Then he said to me, Have you seen this, O son of man? Is it too light a thing for the house of Judah to commit the abominations that they commit here, that they should fill the land with violence, and provoke me still further to anger? Behold, they put the branch to their nose.

Therefore I will act in wrath, my eye will not spare, nor will I have pity. And though they cry in my ears with a loud voice, I will not hear them. Ezekiel chapter 8 opens the account of a new vision which runs up to the end of chapter 11.

Within it Ezekiel is brought to Jerusalem in a vision where he sees abominations being performed in the temple by leaders of the people and the departure of the glory of the Lord, abandoning his temple and the city of Jerusalem, sealing its doom. The beginning of the account of this vision will raise immediate questions for any who are paying closer attention. The date of the vision is in the sixth year, we must presume of the exile of Jehoiachin, the sixth month, and the fifth day of the month.

If the chronology of the events of the book to this point has not been rearranged, we have no reason to suppose that it has, and Ezekiel performed the 430-day sign of chapter 4 immediately after receiving it, the events of these chapters belong to the period during which Ezekiel was still performing that sign. This suggests that Ezekiel's performance of the sign was not continuous, but that it was likely a daily performance for a few hours. Ezekiel was in his house at this point, and the elders of the Judahite exiles were with him, presumably hoping to hear some word from the Lord for them.

Ezekiel had been struck dumb for a period of time in chapter 3 verse 26, likely only speaking when the Lord directly released him to do so, however the elders of the people seem to assume that he will be able to communicate the word of the Lord to them, and it is likely that this vision was a response to the elders seeking of a word from the Lord of him. While the elders of Judah are with him, the hand of the Lord fell upon him, he was suddenly overtaken by a visionary experience, the description of the figure in verse 2 is reminiscent of the figure in the theophanic vision of chapter 1 verses 26 to 27. And above the expanse over their heads there was the likeness of a throne, in appearance like sapphire, and seated upon the likeness of a throne was a likeness with a human appearance.

And upward from what had the appearance of his waist I saw as it were gleaming metal, like the appearance of fire enclosed all around. And downward from what had the appearance of his waist I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and there was brightness around him. Ezekiel is snatched up on a visionary journey in which he is brought to Jerusalem.

His body we must assume remains in the room of his house in the land of the Chaldeans, but his consciousness is brought to Jerusalem. Outside of the book of Ezekiel, one of the closest analogies to this might be in the description of the temptations of Christ in the Gospels, where the devil takes Jesus to Jerusalem and sets him on a pinnacle of the temple. Indeed the account of the temptations of Christ in Luke might even be a demonic parody of the visions of Ezekiel, moving from the wilderness to the high mountain to the extremity of the temple.

The figure puts out the form of a hand. Moshe Greenberg argues that the description here implies that it was not a human hand, but something resembling it that should nonetheless be distinguished from it. Ezekiel is seized by what is widely understood to be a tuft of his hair.

Should we presume that this is an expression of anger on the Lord's part? It may be. The word understood to refer to a tuft of his hair here is only elsewhere used in scripture in reference to the tassels on the borders of the Israelite garments in Numbers chapter 15. Ezekiel is lifted up by the spirit in ways that might remind the hearer of the spirit's animating work in the original vision.

Ezekiel is transported to the entrance of the gateway of the inner court of the temple facing north. He will later move through the temple precincts in four stages. Noting the existence of various attempts to find some rationale for the order of these movements, Joseph Blenkinsop suggests that there is no particular significance to be discovered in the sequence, but that they should rather be regarded as discrete images of idolatry within the precincts.

I haven't encountered a compelling reason for the sequence, so I think it is not unlikely that he is correct. However, there is a more detailed itinerary through the visionary temple later in the book which does seem to have more of a rationale for it. Perhaps someone has or will come up with a persuasive one for the itinerary here.

In the first location, Ezekiel sees the seat of the image of jealousy, which provokes to jealousy, or perhaps the lustful image that provokes to lust, as Blenkinsop would have it. It is likely that this refers to the syncretistic worship of the Canaanite fertility goddess, Asherah. From archaeological findings, it seems that some Israelites treated Asherah as the Lord's consort, not merely serving a false god, but grossly perverting the Lord's self-revelation and sexualising him in the process.

The establishment of an image of Asherah in the temple itself was one of the greatest abominations of King Manasseh, which we read of in 2 Kings 21.7. The carved image of Asherah that he had made, he set in the house of which the Lord said to David and to Solomon his son, In this house, and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all of the tribes of Israel, I will put my name forever. This image, later removed and destroyed in Josiah's reforms, may have been replaced at a later point. The worship of Asherah had been taken up in Israel early on in the Kingdom era, and persisted even among the Egyptian exiles of Jeremiah's day, as we see in Jeremiah chapter 44.

There it seems that the cult of Asherah was peculiarly popular among Israelite women. Daniel Bloch is dubious about claims that there was an actual image of Asherah in the temple at this time, arguing that we lack evidence for this. He suggests that this is more likely a visionary appearance, something that gives a sense of the spiritual state of the people and their hearts.

The glory of the Lord is present there also, highlighting as Bloch notes the spiritual treachery of what is occurring. An alien abomination is established in the Lord's own house. Ezekiel is led through four different scenes, each recounted in a similar manner.

Ezekiel is transported to some new location that we are told about. He beholds something which he then describes. He is instructed by the one leading him, presumably the Lord, to observe the abomination there, and recognise how it incites the Lord's wrath.

And then in the first three of the scenes, he is told that he will witness yet greater

abominations in the final statement. Ezekiel is here being made a witness to the great breaches of covenant that Israel has committed, recognising the provocation of Israel's sins, and the justification of the Lord's abandonment of his sanctuary, and devastation of the people. The first of the scenes is the image of jealousy or lust.

The Lord warns Ezekiel that it gets worse, there are much greater abominations yet to witness. The second scene, in verses 7-13, begins with an instruction for Ezekiel to dig into a hole in the wall, perhaps associated with the sign of Ezekiel chapter 12, where Ezekiel is instructed to dig through the wall, presumably of his house, to leave as an exile. Perhaps the manner of entry into this chamber is an indication of the covert and illicit character of what is taking place in this darkened realm.

Ezekiel is engaged in a clandestine activity, eavesdropping on a secretive ritual in a room filled with adulterous images, like an Egyptian burial chamber. The air is thick with incense, and he catches the seventy elders of Israel in the act of offering to their idols. Ezekiel recognises one of the figures, Jeazuniah, the son of Shaphan.

Presumably Ezekiel knew him from before his deportation. While the other sons of Shaphan, members of one of the great families of Jerusalem at the time, were supportive of Jeremiah, Jeazuniah is clearly not. What he is doing in the darkness is perhaps a sickening realisation for Ezekiel, that even people in the administration who might have seemed faithful are evil and unfaithful.

The rot is pervasive. Each of the seventy elders is offering to his own images, thinking that the Lord has forsaken the land and doesn't see what they are doing. Again, we need not assume that Ezekiel was witnessing an actual concrete event, rather the Lord seems to be granting him a window into the adulterous hearts and worship of the priestly leaders, who probably have their own private adulterous shrines in their homes.

The third scene is at the entrance of the north gate, where women are sitting, weeping for Tammuz, although Bloch observes that Tammuz here might refer to a particular form of pagan lament rather than to the god Tammuz himself. Many think that Tammuz was a Mesopotamian dying and rising god, yet another piece of evidence of the extreme syncretism of the Judahites. The final of the four scenes is in the inner court before the entrance of the house of the Lord, where about twenty-five men are facing east and worshipping the sun, in the very site where the Lord's worship was most concentrated.

The identity of the twenty-five men is not clear. In chapter 11 verse 1 we see twenty-five men again, now at the entrance of the east gateway facing east, presumably the same people. The Spirit lifted me up and brought me to the east gate of the house of the Lord, which faces east, and behold at the entrance of the gateway there were twenty-five men, and I saw among them Jeazaniah the son of Azer, and Pelitiah the son of Benaiah, princes of the people.

Peter Lighthouse suggests that the twenty-five men in chapter 8 might be the high priest and the heads of the twenty-four priestly houses. Worship of the sun, moon and stars was another form of idolatry that had gained popularity during the reign of Manasseh, who had built altars for the hosts of heaven during his reign, as we see in 2 Kings chapter 21 verse 5. Having witnessed the deep treachery of the people and the way that they are provoking the Lord to wrath, Ezekiel and those who hear him should be able to understand why the Lord is acting towards Jerusalem as he is. A question to consider.

In eavesdropping upon what the leaders of the people are doing in their secret places, Ezekiel is made privy to some of what the Lord himself sees when he inspects his people. What are some other examples of scripture's reminders of the fact that the Lord sees all that we do, even in those places where no other person can see us? Acts chapter 9 verses 1 to 31. But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him, and falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? And he said, Who are you, Lord? And he said, I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting, but rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do. The men who were travelling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice, but seeing no one. Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing.

So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias.

The Lord said to him in a vision, Ananias. And he said, Here I am, Lord. And the Lord said to him, Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight.

But Ananias answered, Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem, and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name. But the Lord said to him, Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel, for I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name. So Ananias departed and entered the house, and laying his hands on him, he said, Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.

And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight.

Then he rose and was baptized, and taking food he was strengthened. For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus, and immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogue, saying, He is the Son of God.

And all who heard him were amazed and said, Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests? But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ. When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him.

But his disciples took him by night, and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket. And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple.

But Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles, and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus. So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists, but they were seeking to kill him.

And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea, and sent him off to Tarsus. So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.

The story of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus in chapter 9 of the book of Acts is a critical turning point in the narrative. Much of the rest of the book will be concerned with the missionary journeys of the apostle Paul, while we are introduced to Saul at the martyrdom of Stephen back in chapter 7. Here we read about his conversion. This story follows on from the story of the Ethiopian eunuch.

Like that story, it's concerned with the conversion of a particular individual. The Ethiopian eunuch might have represented the ends of the earth, but Saul represents an extreme of another kind. Saul is the leading persecutor of the church, as we see at the beginning of this chapter.

He's breathing out threats and murder. Just as he was willingly involved in the stoning of Stephen, here he is trying to pursue the Christians that have been scattered after Stephen and bring them back to Jerusalem in chains. The very fact that he is undertaking this mission might give an indication of the counterproductive effects of the persecution of the early church in Jerusalem.

The early Christians had been scattered from Jerusalem by the persecution, bringing the

message wherever they went, and now they are trying to bring them back because the message is spreading everywhere. Like the story of the road to Emmaus or the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, the story of the conversion of Saul takes place on a journey. There's an encounter with the risen Christ.

There is an opening of the understanding. Later on, there's an opening of the eyes, and the story is completed by receiving baptism. The story of the conversion of Saul is told on three different occasions within the book of Acts.

It is that important. There are slight differences between each of the accounts, which means that we need to harmonize them in some way or other. But as they are told for different ends, it's not surprising that different aspects of the story will be highlighted in different places.

The early Christian movement represents a significant threat in Saul's mind, considering the rapid rise of the church in Jerusalem, and then its spread to many different parts following, not least the region of Samaria. It's not surprising that he was concerned. Here we meet him searching out Christians in Damascus, 135 miles north of Jerusalem.

Considering the fact that this movement had risen from nothing, and had grown to such huge proportions in such a brief span of time, Saul recognizes that this is not just a regular breakaway sect. This represents something far more serious, and he is driven by a sort of zeal, a zeal that probably takes the model of Phinehas or the Levites that rallied to the side of Moses in Exodus chapter 32, or maybe the example of the prophet Elijah. All of these great figures of zeal probably lie behind Saul's self-conception as he fights after this new movement.

At this point, the Christian movement is described as the way. In John chapter 14, Jesus spoke of himself as the way, the truth, and the life. Throughout the Old Testament, there are various examples of two-way teachings.

There's a way of wisdom, there's a way of folly, there's a way of righteousness, and there's a way of wickedness. Speaking of Christianity as a way suggests that it is less a matter of teachings than a matter of life and practice. It's a matter of how you live in a particular mode of discipleship, following a master, Jesus the Messiah.

While doctrine was clearly not unimportant, it may not have been as prominent in the understanding of many early Christians as it is in the minds of Christians today. A good early example of teaching Christianity as the way can be found in the Didache, a very early Christian document dating from the first century AD. That document begins as follows.

The text then goes on to elaborate upon these, the first and the second great commandment that sum up the law and the golden rule, at quite considerable length. As

Saul is approaching Damascus, a light comes from heaven and shines all around him, and he falls to the ground hearing a voice saying to him, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? This sort of divine address is very similar to ones that we find in the Old Testament, as the Lord speaks to Abraham, or as the Lord speaks to Moses at the burning bush. Saul responds by asking who is speaking to him, and receives the answer that it is Jesus, whom he is. Within this response is contained a great mystery of the Christian faith, which will become later a subject of considerable theological reflection for Paul himself.

The people of God are united to Christ, and Christ is united to his body. What is done to his body is done to Christ, and the blessings of Christ are enjoyed by his body. Jesus asks Saul why he is persecuting him.

Here we might consider the many similarities between Saul of Tarsus and King Saul. Both are Benjaminites, both persecute the Davidic king. When King Saul persecutes David, David responds in 1 Samuel 26, verse 18, and he said, Why does my Lord pursue after his servant? For what have I done? What evil is on my hands? Christ's question as the Davidic messiah to Saul of Tarsus is a very similar one.

We will see further exploration of the relationship between Saul of Tarsus and King Saul in a few chapters time. Jesus instructs Saul to go into the city, and to wait there until he will be told what to do. The men who are with him recognize that something has gone on.

They experience some aspect of the phenomena, but they do not truly understand what has taken place. They seem to hear the sound of the voice, but they do not understand what was said. When Saul gets up from the ground, he is blind.

Like Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist at the beginning of the book of Luke, his loss of a faculty is an indication of something of his spiritual state. Zechariah failed adequately to hear the word of the Lord, and Saul cannot see the truth of Jesus Christ. Saul spends three days without sight, neither eating nor drinking.

Perhaps we are supposed to see this as a sort of death of the old Saul, and then he is going to be raised from this state in a few days time. The Lord then appears to a man named Ananias, a second Ananias. The first Ananias was the negative example of Ananias, the husband of Sapphira, and here we have a positive Ananias, one who is a faithful disciple, who will be the means by which the church receives Saul for the first time.

Ananias is instructed in a vision to come and to see this man Saul of Tarsus who is praying. Understandably, Ananias having heard about Saul is apprehensive about coming to meet him, but yet the Lord reassures him. Saul is a chosen vessel of the Lord's to carry his name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.

This is a summary of the later mission of Saul that will occupy the book of Acts. In particular, this man who has inflicted much suffering upon the church needs to learn how much he must suffer for the sake of Christ's name. This might be seen as a negative thing, a sort of punishment of Saul, but quite the opposite.

It's a form of honour that he might share in the sufferings of Christ. Once again, this will be an important theme within the writings of Paul himself. He sees within his very own call something that indicates the importance and the value that the Lord places upon the sufferings that he experiences.

His apostleship finds its honour in suffering for and in Christ, not in some supposed victorious Christian life free from all suffering and difficulty and hardship. Ananias visiting Saul places his hands upon him, informs him that he has been sent by Jesus Christ, and that he will receive his sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit. Something like scales fall from his eyes, his sight is restored, he rises and he is baptised.

There is a sort of paradigmatic conversion pattern here. A man who sees the light of Christ is convicted by it, his eyes are opened and he is enlightened, and he rises up, not just physically but spiritually, and is baptised. The change in Saul's character could not be more remarkable.

He spends some time with the disciples at Damascus and immediately proclaims Jesus in the synagogues, declaring that he is the Son of God. Those hearing him are astonished, they know that he was sent from Jerusalem to try and bring Christians back there in chains. And yet here he is, proclaiming the name of the One whose followers he once tried to destroy.

Perhaps we could see some similarities between this account and the story of Christ's baptism and the events after it in Luke chapter 3 and 4. In that account the heavens are opened, there is a voice from heaven, there is a baptism and a time of fasting. That's followed by going to the synagogue and preaching in the synagogue, where people are astonished, thinking that they had the measure of the person who is speaking, when clearly they had not. As there is an attempt to kill Saul in this chapter, there is an attempt to kill Jesus back in Luke chapter 4, and in both cases the protagonist escapes.

Part of what is happening here, which Luke wants us to see, is that Paul is being conformed to Christ. He is becoming like his saviour. The Benjaminite Saul, who was like his Old Testament namesake earlier in the chapter, has now become more like David.

As David was let down through a window by Michael, so Saul is let down over the wall by the people in Damascus. Saul's escape here is also described by him in 2 Corinthians chapter 11, verses 32-33. In Galatians chapter 1, verse 17, he also describes going to Arabia before returning to Damascus.

After leaving Damascus, he goes to Jerusalem, and while he attempts to join the disciples, he finds that they don't trust him, because they know of his history of persecution. It is only when Barnabas steps in and vouches for him that he is able to join. Barnabas, to whom we were introduced back in chapter 4, introduces him to the apostles and tells them his story.

And while the story of Saul began with the martyrdom of Stephen, at the end of this section there may be no one whom Saul more reminds us of than Stephen himself. Like Stephen, he preaches boldly, he disputes with the Hellenists, and people are seeking to kill him. A question to consider, what are some of the ways in which Saul's vision of the risen Christ on the road to Damascus might have informed the later theology of the apostle Paul?