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June 19th: Ezekiel 40 & Acts 17:16-34

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Ezekiel's visionary temple. Paul's speech on the Areopagus.

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Transcript

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they may observe all its laws, and all its statutes, and carry them out. A crucial thing to notice is that no instruction is ever given to build this temple. Rather, Ezekiel is guided through an existing visionary structure and told to measure it.

The dimensions of the tabernacle and the Solomonic temple, their contents and their rituals, were given in some detail because they were symbolic buildings, buildings designed to communicate something of the truth. As buildings, they represented many different things. They stood for the cosmos, for the people as a whole, and for the individual Israelite.

The meaning of these buildings was to be understood in part through seeing their physical form and the performance of practices ordained within them. However, much of their meaning would also have been revealed textually. Only a very small handful of people in a generation would see inside the inmost part of the temple, but every Israelite should have a sense of what was within it, from the instructions delivered to Moses for its construction recorded in the book of Exodus.

Likewise, hardly anyone would have measured the actual edifice, but the exact measurements were given in the instructions delivered to Moses. People would have reflected upon the tabernacle and temple, not merely as physical constructions, but also as textually represented. Ezekiel's temple never became a physical construction, and it never will, but it is an exceptionally elaborate and developed literary representation of a symbolic building, of a perfected Israel, of Israel as it could be.

As a symbolic building, its meaning is rich and multifaceted, but it likely requires close and sustained communal meditation and reflection to start to discern it. In particular, the Lord declares that close consideration of the temple design would lead Israel to be ashamed of their iniquities and spur them to obedience. As we too consider Ezekiel's temple, we need to puzzle over how it would accomplish this end.

The chapter begins by dating the vision, in the 25th year, the 10th day, and the 14th year after the city was struck down. As a book, Ezekiel has an unusual number of dates in it, and these dates are often recorded with a surprising degree of specificity, which raises the possibility that something more might be going on. Back in chapter 1 verses 1-2, the dating of Ezekiel's first prophecy was recorded as follows.

On the 5th day of the month, it was the 5th year of the exile of King Jehoiachin. That dating is surprising. We're never informed as to what the 30th year is dated from, and the 5th day of the month is repeated in the reference.

When we see such anomalies in the text, it's usually a good sign to look closer. Examining the text more closely, James Bajon argues that the repetition of the 5th day of the month makes more sense when we appreciate Ezekiel's numerological preoccupations with the Jubilee. The Jubilee occurred after 49 years, in the 50th year.

Ezekiel's prophecy makes a lot of use of Jubilee-related numbers, 25, half a Jubilee, 49 and 50, and nowhere in the book of Ezekiel is more use made of these numbers than in chapter 40. Adding together the numbers in chapter 1 verses 1-2, we get 30 plus 4 plus 5 plus 5 plus 5, which makes 49. This is curious, especially when we consider the awkwardness of the repetition that makes this sum work.

However, it might easily be chalked up to randomness. The claim, however, that it is random is weakened by chapter 40 verse 1, where we have three numbers, 25, 10 and 14, which again total to 49. 25 is also half a Jubilee, an auspicious number in this chapter, often repeated.

The picture is filled out by some further details that an observant hero might notice. First, the 25th year of the exile is 20 years after the vision of chapter 1. That vision was dated in the 30th year, so we are now in the 50th year. This lends plausibility to the claim that the numbering was that of the Jubilee year itself.

Second, the events occur at the turn of the year, seemingly the same time that the downfall of Jerusalem was described as occurring in 2 Chronicles 36 verse 10. Yet the turn of the year is here connected with the 10th of the month. Some have connected this detail with Exodus chapter 12 verses 1-3, where on the newly appointed first month, on the 10th day, the children of Israel had to take a lamb for the Passover.

However, there is another possibility. As Bajan argues, the 10th was the first of a special sort of year, the Jubilee year. In Leviticus chapter 25 verses 8-10, the law of the Jubilee is recorded for us.

You shall count seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the time of the seven weeks of years shall give you 49 years. Then you shall sound the loud trumpet on the 10th day of the seventh month. On the day of atonement you shall sound the trumpet throughout all your land, and you shall consecrate the 50th year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants.

It shall be a Jubilee for you, when each of you shall return to his property, and each of you shall return to his clan. The 10th of the month, on the turn of the 50th year, by the dating of chapter 1 verse 1, might well be the day of the Jubilee. The numerous allusions to Jubilee in the numbers of this passage, and those that follow, only give further weight to this theory.

Ezekiel is taken to a very high mountain in the land of Israel in his vision. While the temple is presumably in Jerusalem, there is no really high mountain there. Rather the mountain should be understood as the symbolic cosmic mountain, upon which he sees the structure of the visionary temple, like a city.

When he is brought to the mountain, he sees a man with an appearance like bronze, with

a linen cord and a measuring reed, who would guide him through the edifice as the figure in chapter 8, and give him its measurements, using the cord and the reed to do so. When reading these chapters of Ezekiel, and reflecting upon their symbolic numbers, it is important to bear in mind that it is sacred space that is usually measured. The measurements are significant in their details, but the fact that we have measurements at all, is an indication that we are dealing with locations that are marked out from common realms.

The extensive measurement of the temple city and land in this and the chapters that follow, serve to indicate the spread of holy status beyond the immediate realm of the temple itself. The measurements begin with the first part of the temple complex that Ezekiel encounters, the surrounding wall. The wall is measured with the measuring reed that the man has.

We are told the length of the measuring reed itself, 6 cubits, which would be about 10 and a half feet, and more curiously, the cubits in question were long cubits. Bloch notes that the regular cubit was 6 spans or handbreadths, whereas this one would have been the equivalent of 7. As Stephen Cook notes, this closely corresponds with the length of the Egyptian royal cubit. Interesting though that fact is, given the jubilee themes that pervade this chapter, we should probably recognise a symbolism in the unit of measurement itself.

A 6-span measurement lengthened to the equivalent length as a 7-span measurement, although it's important for later measurements to bear in mind that the handbreadths or spans were also lengthened in terms of it. This might remind us of the order of the week, made up of 6 regular days and one holy day of the Sabbath. By distinguishing the measurement being employed from the regular measurement, the hearer is made to think of the connection with the Sabbath more generally.

This is a sort of sabbatical measurement. Each measurement standing, as it were, for a week, crowned with its Sabbath. The temple is oriented towards the east, which of course is where we get the word oriented from.

The east gate would be the most natural place to begin a tour of the temple. The gate is approached with steps. Later we are informed that there are 7 of these steps in the corresponding gates on other sides, so we should presume that there are 7 here.

The steps in different parts of the temple invite us to think of a movement into the temple as an ascent up, something that was always symbolically the case. As you move into the holier parts of the tabernacle or temple, you are symbolically ascending to the presence of God. Within the gate there are 3 side rooms, each with a 1-reed or 6-cubit square floor plan, presumably to serve as guard rooms.

Each was separated by 5 cubits. Past these side rooms was the vestibule, a larger room

that was the final room one would pass through before one left the gate. Perhaps we are to see some significance in the fact that the gate had 7 chambers, 6 side rooms of equal proportions, a reed or 6-cubit square, presumably devoted to the labour of guarding, and a larger antechamber, which would be the last of the rooms that you would pass through.

This might be a visual representation of the Sabbath. The gate was 25 cubits in width and from the front entrance to the exit 50 cubits in length. If we tart up all of the measurements of the specific parts that are described, the 50 cubits measurement can be confirmed.

The entrance of the gate was tall, 13 cubits, and the gate itself was 60 cubits high. The gateway was decorated with palm trees. Next came the outer court, surrounded by 30 chambers and a pavement.

The inner court was set back from the interior of the outer court by 100 cubits on each of three sides. The northern gate is described as pretty much identical to the eastern gate by which Ezekiel first entered, although we are also told that it was opposite a gate to the inner court and that it had 7 steps, again a sabbatical number. We should presume the eastern gate also had this number of steps.

The southern gate, described next, is the same as the northern gate. Next, moving up from the southern gate to the outer court, Ezekiel and the man enter the inner court by its southern gate, which has the same dimensions and features, save for the fact that its stairway has 8 steps. Perhaps there is some significance in 7 steps plus 1, much as the Jubilee has 7 7s plus 1 as the 50th year.

The east and the north of the inner court also have gates with the same features as the southern gate that Ezekiel described. We should note that 6 gates have been described. The 7th gate is the gate to the sanctuary itself.

In verses 38 to 43, the measurement of the temple complex is briefly suspended for a description of facilities for the preparation of sacrifices. Here the key number is 4, a number connected with the altar, with its 4 sides and 4 horns. As Leslie Allen observes, the locations for the preparation of the sacrifices distinguish between the relative holiness of the sin and guilt offerings and the burnt offerings and peace offerings.

In verses 44 to 46, Ezekiel records the chambers for priests, one located at the north facing south and the other at the south gate facing north. These are for the priestly guardians of the temple and the altar respectively. The priestly gods guard the realm of God's holiness, represented by the temple, and the people, represented by the altar.

Those performing these roles must not only be Levites but must be Zadokites. The chapter ends with measurements of the inner court, which is 100 cubits long and broad,

a square. We should probably recall the fact that the Holy of Holies, or most holy place, the inner sanctuary, was a square.

The holy place was a rectangle with a 2 to 1 length to breadth ratio. The tabernacle was set in a courtyard with a 2 to 1 length to breadth ratio. To understand the significance of the dimensions of different temples and sanctuaries in scripture, it's important to compare and contrast their respective measurements and proportions.

Note that Ezekiel's temple gates have a 2 to 1 length to breadth ratio, while its courts are more sacred squares. This is an amplification of the holiness of the place. The final, seventh gate is into the temple itself, which will lead to the throne room of the Lord, the great final square.

There are ten steps leading up to this. As Bajan observes, to enter the temple you would ascend 25 steps, 7 for a gate to the outer court, 8 for a gate to the inner court, and 10 to the temple itself. The theme of ascent to God's holy presence continues.

A question to consider, what are some of the other sacred structures that are measured in scripture? Can you think of lessons we can learn by comparing and contrasting the measurements of some of these other structures? Acts 17, verses 16-34 Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him, and some said, What does this Babyla wish to say? Others said, He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities, because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.

And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean. Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said, Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, To the unknown God. What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually

not far from each one of us, for in him we live and move and have our being.

As even some of your own poets have said, for we are indeed his offspring. Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness, by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.

Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, but others said, We will hear you again about this. So Paul went out from their midst. But some men joined him and believed, among whom were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Amoris, and others with them.

Facing a threat to his safety earlier in Acts chapter 17, Paul was moved away from Berea by some of the believers in verse 15. Paul was now in Athens alone, waiting for Silas and Timothy to rejoin him. No longer a great centre of power and population, the population of Athens had dwindled considerably by Paul's day.

Once one of the most powerful cities in the world, Athens was now overshadowed by the Roman city of Corinth. Athens still had considerable symbolic value on account of its continuing association with culture and learning. Paul was deeply distressed at the abundance of idols and images within the city.

This reaction was a characteristically Jewish one, much that Paul says in this passage will reflect common Jewish polemics against idolatry. Consistent with the general pattern of his missionary work, Paul first focuses upon the synagogue, where he reasons daily with the Jews and with Gentile worshippers. He also speaks to the wider population within the marketplace.

Among the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers who encounter him, the accusation is made that he is a babbler or seed picker and a proclaimer of foreign gods. They seem to think that he's just a dabbler. He picks up one philosophical notion here, another over there, and strings them together without any thought to how it all fits.

These charges challenge both Paul's spiritual authority and the right of the religion that he proclaimed to a place within Athenian life. Some commentators have suggested that the second charge, that Paul proclaimed foreign gods, arose from the misconception that resurrection was a female deity alongside Jesus. This charge also recalls the charge that was made against Socrates.

This is not the first time that Luke seems to have referred to Socrates within his text. In chapter 5 verse 29, there is another allusion to Socrates, as the apostles speak about the fact that they must obey God rather than the man. In aligning Paul with Socrates in this

manner, Luke presents him as wise and the Athenians as foolish in repeating the mistakes of their ancestors.

This likely serves Luke's apologetic ends. Paul is then brought to the Areopagus. Whether this is a situation resembling a formal trial or merely an attempt by a curious council to get a clearer sense of where Paul's teaching stands is unclear.

The softened form of the challenge to Paul might suggest the latter. The description of the Athenians and the foreigners of the city is not a flattering one. They are, as Luke characterises them, driven by a lazy and a faddish curiosity rather than by a genuine love for and commitment to the truth.

Robert Garland has argued that there were three criteria for the introduction of a new religion to the city of Athens. First, the sponsor must claim to represent a deity. Second, he must provide evidence that the deity is eager to reside in Athens.

And third, the deity's residence in Athens must benefit Athenians as a mark of its goodwill. In the speech that follows, Paul subversively addresses each of these conditions. The manner of Paul's speech provides evidence of his scholarly training.

His opening reference to the extreme religiousness of the Athenians has an ambiguity that he will proceed to exploit. As a reference to the piety of his audience, it could be regarded as a shrewd attempt to create a favourable impression. However, through his reference to the altar of the unknown god, Paul paints a picture of an excessive, superstitious piety.

In the saturated market of Athenian idolatry, Paul identifies this monument to uninformed devotion as an object that epitomises the religion of the city, a religion characteristic of the times of human ignorance that he discusses in verse 30. Paul declares the transcendence and the sovereignty of God as the creator of all things. This deity is related to all human beings and is involved in the life and the destiny of the race.

God's engagement in, and ordering of humanity's life, occurs in order that humanity might grope for him and find him. Such a transcendent deity, who is reflected in humanity as his offspring, cannot appropriately be represented by inanimate idols of our own creation. Having introduced this transcendent, personal, providentially active deity, intimately engaged in human affairs, Paul proclaims the end of the age of ignorance and groping in the darkness, with the revelation of Jesus as the bearer of God's salvation and judgement.

This message might remind us of one of the earlier run-ins that Paul had with idolatry, back in Lystra in chapter 14, where Paul delivered a similar message in verses 15-17. Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who

made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways, yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.

While Paul is speaking to pagans, he is presenting them with a message that is very clearly shaped by a Jewish understanding of divine creation and providence. This is not a God who is distanced from the world, rather he is a God who is very close to everyone. He is a God who is our Father, and he is the God in whom we live and move and have our being.

He is the God who directs the affairs of men. He has divided the nations, appointed their times and their places of habitation, and now he has brought to an end the age of their ignorance, calling all people to respond to the message of Christ, who holds the destiny of the whole human race within his hands. He is the one who will judge all, something that is demonstrated by the fact that he was raised from the dead.

The religious marketplace of the Athenians may seem rather remote from that of the more secular world that we inhabit. However, we can learn much from Paul's approach to the Athenians, particularly from Paul's initial move. As Tomor Shalik argues, the altar to an unknown God is precisely the most appropriate place for proclaiming the Christian message.

He claims, While Paul speaks of the altar to the unknown God, and announces that he is proclaiming that God to them, we should observe that although he is finding common ground, he is completely subverting their religious system. The God that Paul proclaims cannot just be fitted into the existing pantheon as yet another God to be worshipped. He overturns the whole pantheon.

He is, as Paul presents him, the God that shows the futility of all idolatry. He is the one true God, and he is beyond the control or the representation of man. Paul's message at the Areopagus received a lukewarm response.

His declaration of a God who lays claim to humanity in Jesus Christ, his revealed and appointed agent of blessing and judgement, cut entirely against the grain of both speculative and superstitious religion, the forms of religion that prevailed in the city of Athens. The listless Athenian preoccupation with hearing something new was answered with a demand for absolute commitment. The darkness of superstition was scattered by the dazzling light of divine revelation.

The council desiring to cast judgement on a new religion found itself called to account before the bar of heaven. It is this same message that we are called to declare to the powers and the rulers and the thinkers of our own age. In our societies, God is often experienced as the thoroughly known God, the God who holds no surprises.

We can talk about ourselves as living in Christian countries. And this claim, although it can be an encouraging one for some Christians to hear, should excite some concerns. In the comfortable alignment of Christianity and our national heritage and identity and culture, God is easily rendered familiar and unthreatening, a tame and mute idol to our cultural and social values.

This sort of dynamic can especially be seen in civil religion, where Christian values are routinely appealed to with the assurance that they align in all principal respects with our particular movements, identities and solidarities. In responding to this, we must join with Paul in proclaiming the transcendent God, who stands above and orders all human affairs, sustaining and upholding us in existence. Closer to us than closeness itself, this God eludes all attempts to reduce him to an object of our mastery.

Like Paul, we must locate the gaps in the captive webs of our cultural idolatries, declaring the identity of our God from these points and calling all to account. A question to consider, how does Paul's speech on the Areopagus represent something of the conflict between Jewish and Christian patterns of religion and belief, and the patterns of religious belief that were more common in a Hellenistic context?