

Ezekiel

Week 6

Abominations in the Temple

Chapters 8-9

Temple Abominations (8)

Fourteen months after his initial vision calling him to serve as a prophet, Ezekiel now experiences a new vision that will dramatically demonstrate the decadence of Jerusalem's religious state. Based on the calendar used for Ezekiel 1:1, the date of this vision would be September 17–18, 592 b.c.¹ The intervening time has been largely spent in performing the sign-acts of Ezekiel 4; depending on the interpretation of the 390 plus 40 days, Ezekiel has either just completed that period or is close to completion of that period.²

A divine apparition that confronts Ezekiel is similar in its brilliance to the one in his call narrative (Ezek 1:26–27). In both instances he uses qualifiers and the combination of blinding fire and shining metal or electrum. It is the magnificence of God's or a divine messenger's glory that is being conveyed here. This follows the pattern of the dangerous nature of contact with the divine found throughout ancient Near Eastern literature³

The rectangular temple structure (facing east) is surrounded by a walled inner courtyard. Outside of this wall is the outer courtyard. The wall is lined with chambers used for various purposes. Ezekiel first is set down in his vision outside the north gate leading from the outer courtyard into the inner court. From this outer courtyard, Ezekiel could look through the gate at the altar that dominated the inner courtyard. The gates leading into the temple precincts were added after Solomon's original construction of the temple (2 Kings 15:35). The hole near the gateway (v. 7) area may have led into one of those chambers lining the courtyard wall, perhaps a storage room that had been transformed into a shrine where the seventy elders stood in their own separate niches and worshiped idolatrous images. The next scene (v. 14) is outside a gate in the same wall further to the west, where women would be allowed. Then at verse 16 Ezekiel is led into the inner court of the temple where he will view a further abomination in the area between the porch of the temple and the altar.⁴

1. Idol of Jealousy

It is possible that the phrase used here, *semel haqqin'ah*, was a euphemism whose meaning would have been apparent to Ezekiel's audience. The phrase *semel haqqin'ah* uses the rare term *semel* for "idol" or "image." Based on other uses of the term, Ezekiel might be referring to an image erected by King Manasseh. Second Chronicles 33:7 says that Manasseh

¹ Matthews, V. H., Chavalas, M. W., & Walton, J. H. (2000). *The IVP Bible background commentary: Old Testament* (electronic ed., Eze 8:1). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

² Duguid, I. M. (1999). *Ezekiel* (p. 130). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

³ Matthews & Walton. 8:2

⁴ Matthews & Walton. 8:4-16

constructed a carved image of a *semel*. The parallel in 2 Kgs 21:7 indicates it was an image of the Canaanite goddess, Asherah.⁵

2. Elders Worshiping Idols

The carvings Ezekiel sees violate the command prohibiting the creation of graven images (Exod 20:4). The laws of Deuteronomy also explicitly forbade the people from carving of images of humans, animals, birds, or fish (see Deut 4:15–18). Further, animals categorized as creeping things were unclean (Lev 11:44).⁶

The text specifies these objects of worship as images carved in relief on the walls. This art form was well known in Assyria and Babylon. Verse 12 additionally suggests that each of the seventy was worshiping in front of a separate niche where an image was engraved. The fact that these carvings were of animals suggests some connection to Egyptian mortuary practices. Animals were not typically the objects of worship in Canaanite or Mesopotamian practice. But the Egyptians used apotropaic rituals to ward off various creatures from the tombs of their ancestors, and incense was used throughout the ancient Near East in apotropaic contexts. The decoration of the walls of houses in Mesopotamia with images of ants and cockroaches may also have been apotropaic.⁷

Shaphan was the scribe of Josiah during religious reforms described in 2 Kgs 22:8–23:30. Shaphan's family members are mentioned favorably in the book of Jeremiah and seem to have been loyal followers of Yahweh (Jer 26:24; 29:3; 36:11–19). The family's positive reputation may explain the specific mention here of one member involved in idol worship. If Ezekiel recognized the man, his presence among the idolaters may have been a shock.⁸

The priests created a cloud of incense on the Day of Atonement to screen the high priest from the divine presence in the holy of holies (the most holy place; Exod 26:33). Ironically, the cloud Ezekiel sees is created for idols and separates people from Yahweh.⁹

3. Mourning for Tammuz

Like other fertility-oriented “dying gods,” the Sumerian demigod Tammuz spent part of the year in the underworld (representing the dry, unproductive seasons) and then came back to life during the time of rains, planting and harvesting. The Mesopotamian ritual that formed part of his worship begged the gods to restore Tammuz and the land's fertility. It included a series of laments (based on those initiated in the epic story by his wife Inanna and his mother and sister). The women who performed these laments would wail and shed tears (a symbolic gesture of the need for rain). The fact that Ezekiel describes women performing this ritual before the gates of the temple in Jerusalem may reflect either the adoption of this fertility god as a substitute for Yahweh or wailing for Yahweh as a dying

⁵ Barry, J. D., Mangum, D., Brown, D. R., Heiser, M. S., Custis, M., Ritzema, E., ... Bomar, D. (2012, 2016). *Faithlife Study Bible* (Eze 8:3). Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

⁶ Barry et al. 8:10

⁷ Matthews & Walton. 8:10

⁸ Barry et al. 8:11

⁹ Barry et al. 8:11

and rising fertility god using Tammuz lamentation liturgy. This adds a Mesopotamian heresy to the Canaanite- and Egyptian-style heresies in the two previous scenes.¹⁰

4. Turning Away from Yahweh

The final and supreme act of idolatry takes place within the inner court of the temple itself, where Ezekiel sees twenty-five men turning their backs on the temple proper and prostrating themselves to the east, in worship of the sun (8:16). This is the ultimate abomination: Instead of bowing down to worship the Lord and seeking his face, they turn their backs on God and worship the created order.¹¹ This would complete the series of scenes that portrayed Canaanite worship (v. 5), Egyptian worship (v. 10–11), Mesopotamian worship (v. 14) and syncretistic worship of Yahweh (v.16).¹²

The number of men present varies from 20–25 based on different OT versions. The Greek text reads 20; the Hebrew reads 25. The Mesopotamian sun god Shamash is associated with the number 20.¹³

branch to their nose. This obscure Hebrew phrase has inspired vast amounts of literature attempting to clarify it. In general it has been understood either as an insulting gesture or action of some kind, or as a final act of idolatry. Block, *Ezekiel 1–24*, 299.¹⁴

Idolaters Killed (9)

Chapter 9 begins with nearly the same phrase that ends ch 8, but with radically different applications.¹⁵ The Lord summons six “guards,” each of whom appears armed with a club. These guards would normally have had the responsibility of standing at the gates, protecting the realm of the sacred from profane intrusion. Here they appear together with a priestly figure dressed in linen, armed only with a writing kit.

These figures are normally interpreted as angelic beings because of their superhuman role in the vision and the symbolic nature of their total number (seven). However, it is worth noting that if 9:1–2 existed as a fragment, without the surrounding context, we would naturally understand it as speaking of normal human figures obeying the summons of the king. This helps us to remember the dual nature of these figures. On the one hand, in the vision they are the angelic servants of the Most High, wreaking his judgments on the earth; on the other hand, those same judgments are carried out in history through human agency, so the six destroyers may equally aptly be seen to represent the Babylonian invaders. If this much is true, is it not also true that the seventh figure, the priestly writer, acts in some sense as Ezekiel’s own *alter ego*? He obediently passes among the people prior to the judgment, distinguishing the righteous from the wicked, marking out those who sigh and cry over the detestable things done in Jerusalem (9:4).¹⁶

¹⁰ Matthews & Walton. 8:14

¹¹ Duguid. 133

¹² Matthews & Walton. 8:16

¹³ Barry et al. 8:16

¹⁴ Duguid.

¹⁵ Engelbrecht, E. A. (2009). *The Lutheran Study Bible* (p. 1321). St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House.

¹⁶ Duguid. 133–134

Traditionally, the bronze altar was in the center of the temple courtyard, although Ahaz had once shoved it into a corner and replaced it with a pagan altar (2Ki 16:14). It was the location of most sacrificial activity.¹⁷

There is an association between God's "glory" and the ark of the covenant as early as the Samuel narratives. In Ezekiel God's presence is tied to the "glory"—a physical manifestation that also plays on the image presented of the ark of God enthroned between the wings of the cherubim.¹⁸ However, His glory has now moved to the threshold of the temple structure, poised to move still further away.¹⁹

mark. Lit, "make a *tau*," the last letter in the Hbr alphabet. Its shape in the ancient script was that of an Eng "X" or a cross. Cypr: "The sign pertains to the passion and blood of Christ, and that whoever is found in this sign is kept safe and unharmed.... When Egypt was smitten, the Jewish people could not escape except by the blood and the sign of the lamb; so also, when the world shall begin to be desolated and smitten, whoever is found in the blood and the sign of Christ alone shall escape" (ANF 5:464).²⁰

The executioners are to be unsparing, killing all three categories of the population, the old, the young, and mothers with their children. The sanctuary was no longer to serve as an asylum (cf. 1 Kgs 1:50–53; 2:28–34; 11:15). The slaughter began at God's sanctuary, "for there his holiness had been most profaned and his Torah most defied" (Muilenburg 574). Those who had committed the ultimate sin of 8:16–17 were to be the first to die. V 7 is strictly out of sequence, since the desecrating slaughter had already begun. It functions "as an explicit divine license to commit an unthinkable desecration."²¹

God's desire is that all shall be saved (e.g., 18:32), but His justice requires that unrepentant sinners must die. A one-sided emphasis that "God is love" dare not eclipse the severity of His wrath. Christ's cross is the maximal expression of both.²²

The biblical concept of bloodguilt derives from the belief that deeds generate consequences and that sin, in particular, is a danger to the sinner. Bloodguilt attaches to the slayer and his family (II Sam. 3:28ff.) for generations (II Kings 9:26), and even to his city (Jer. 26:5), nation (Deut. 21:8), and land (Deut. 24:4). The technical term for bearing bloodguilt *damo bo*, or *damo bero'sho*, meant originally "his blood [remains] in him/in his head" (Josh. 2:19; Ezek. 33:5), and the legal formula *mot yumat damav bo* (Lev. 20:9–16) means that in the case of lawful execution, the blood of the guilty victim remains on his own person and does not attach itself to his executioners.²³

¹⁷ Engelbrecht. 1321

¹⁸ Matthews & Walton. 9:3

¹⁹ Engelbrecht. 1321

²⁰ Engelbrecht. 1321

²¹ Allen, L. C. (1998). *Ezekiel 1–19* (Vol. 28, pp. 148–149). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

²² Engelbrecht. 1321

²³ <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/bloodguilt>