5. The courts of the temple

*(Ezekiel 40; 42:15-20; 46:21-24)*

Jerusalem the centre for future worship

The scriptures teach that in the Kingdom of God the city of Jerusalem will be the centre for Divine worship. The prophet Zechariah says that all nations “shall even go up from year to year to worship the king, the LORD of hosts, and to keep the feast of tabernacles. And it shall be, that whoso will not come up of all the families of the earth unto Jerusalem to worship the king, the LORD of hosts, even upon them shall be no rain”\(^1\). Similarly, Isaiah says that “out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem”\(^2\). Worship in Jerusalem will be focussed around a temple that will be rebuilt upon the site of the ancient temple that Solomon built. It will serve as a dwelling place for the glory of God. The prophet Isaiah speaks of this future temple as “an house of prayer for all people”\(^3\).

This is the temple that Ezekiel was shown in vision by the man whose appearance was like the appearance of brass. What Ezekiel saw is described in detail in chapters 40-43. It is a profitable exercise to seek to visualise what Ezekiel saw, so that we might appreciate more fully the system of worship that will be introduced in the Kingdom of God. This we shall now endeavour to do.

The inner court

Our tour of the temple begins at the very centre of the sanctuary, in Ezekiel 40:44-47, where Ezekiel describes a courtyard called the inner court: “And without the inner gate were the chambers of the singers in the inner court, which was at the

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\(^1\) Zechariah 14:16,17

\(^2\) Isaiah 2:3

\(^3\) Isaiah 56:7
side of the north gate... So he measured the court, an hundred cubits long, and an hundred cubits broad, foursquare; and the altar that was before the house”. Two important facts must be observed with regard to the inner court:

1) It was one hundred cubits square.
2) It contained the altar. The altar will be considered in detail in a later chapter.

The gates of the inner court

The inner court was approached by three gates, that were situated on the north, east and south sides of the inner court. There was no west gate. This is important, as will be seen later:

- “And he brought me to the inner court by the south gate: and he measured the south gate according to these measures”\(^4\).
- “And he brought me into the inner court toward the east: and he measured the gate according to these measures”\(^5\).
- “And he brought me to the north gate, and measured it according to these measures”\(^6\).

The detail of these gates will be considered in the next chapter - at this stage we simply note the outside dimensions of these three gates. They were all the same size - fifty cubits long, and twenty five cubits broad: “And he brought me to the inner court by the south gate: and he measured the south gate according to these measures; and the little chambers thereof, and the posts thereof, and the arches thereof, according to these measures: and there were windows in it and in the arches thereof round about: it was fifty cubits long, and five and twenty cubits broad”\(^7\).

The outward court

Surrounding the inner court and its gates was another larger courtyard, called the outward court: “Then brought he me into the outward court...”\(^8\). This outward

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\(^4\) Ezekiel 40:28

\(^5\) Ezekiel 40:32

\(^6\) Ezekiel 40:35

\(^7\) Ezekiel 40:28,29. See also 40:33 and 40:36 for the dimensions of the east and north gates

\(^8\) Ezekiel 40:17
court also had three gates leading into it, on the east, the north and the south. Again, there was no western gate:

- “Then came he unto the gate which looketh toward the east, and went up the stairs thereof, and measured the threshold of the gate, which was one reed broad; and the other threshold of the gate, which was one reed broad”\(^9\).

- “And the gate of the outward court that looked toward the north, he measured the length thereof, and the breadth thereof”\(^10\).

- “After that he brought me toward the south, and behold a gate toward the south: and he measured the posts thereof and the arches thereof according to these measures”\(^11\).

The record tells us that the gates of the outward court were directly opposite the corresponding gates of the inner court, and that the distance between the two gates was one hundred cubits: “And the gate of the outward court that looked toward the north, he measured the length thereof, and the breadth thereof... and the gate of the inner court was over against the gate toward the north, and toward the east; and he measured from gate to gate an hundred cubits”\(^12\).

### The gates of the outward court

The details of the outward court gates will be considered in the next chapter. At this stage we simply note that these gates were exactly the same size as the three gates that led into the inner court - fifty cubits by twenty five cubits: “And the gate of the outward court that looked toward the north, he measured the length thereof, and the breadth thereof. And the little chambers thereof were three on this side and three on that side; and the posts thereof and the arches thereof were after the measure of the first gate: the length thereof was fifty cubits, and the breadth five and twenty cubits”\(^13\).

It is also useful to know that, whilst the gates of the outward and inner courts were directly opposite each other, they were arranged the opposite way round. This becomes clear from the RSV which tells us that each gate had a “vestibule”

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\(^9\) Ezekiel 40:6

\(^10\) Ezekiel 40:20

\(^11\) Ezekiel 40:24

\(^12\) Ezekiel 40:20,23. See also 40:27 for the gates on the south

\(^13\) Ezekiel 40:20,21. See also 40:13-15 and 40:25 for the gates toward the south and east
at one end. Concerning the outward court gates, the record says that “the vestibule of the gate was at the inner end”\(^\text{14}\), that is, it faced toward the temple. But concerning the gates of the inner court, Ezekiel says that “its vestibule faced the outer court”\(^\text{15}\). This means that the vestibules of all the gates faced into the outward court.

**The wall on the outside of the house**

The outward court was surrounded by a wall: “And behold a wall on the outside of the house round about, and in the man’s hand a measuring reed of six cubits long by the cubit and an hand breadth: so he measured the breadth of the building, one reed; and the height, one reed”\(^\text{16}\). We are not given the outside dimensions of the wall, but from the information we have, the size of the court can be calculated, as illustrated on the diagram on page 51.

If we add up all the dimensions from north to south, we arrive at the following result:

- Length of the outward court gate on the north: 50 cubits
- Distance between the gates: 100 cubits
- Length of the inner court gate on the north: 50 cubits
- Length of the inner court: 100 cubits
- Length of the inner court gate on the south: 50 cubits
- Distance between the gates: 100 cubits
- Length of the outward court gate on the south: 50 cubits

**TOTAL** 500 cubits

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\(^{14}\) Ezekiel 40:9 RSV. The KJV says, “And the porch of the gate was inward”. The Hebrew is פָּרֹח - ulam. The word occurs 34 times in the Old Testament, and in the KJV is always translated “porch”.

\(^{15}\) Ezekiel 40:31 RSV. The KJV says, “And the arches thereof were toward the utter court”. The Hebrew is פָּרֹח - eylam, from פָּרָח - ulam. The word occurs 15 times in the Old Testament, and is always translated “arches” in the KJV, but W Baker and E Carpenter in The Complete Word Study Dictionary of the Old Testament say that it is “a masculine noun indicating a vestibule, porch or portico”

\(^{16}\) Ezekiel 40:5
Thus the total length of the sanctuary from north to south is *five hundred cubits*.

The total length from east to west is more difficult to calculate at this stage, since there are no gates on the west side. This means that the distance marked X on the diagram is not known. But we shall demonstrate in due course\(^\text{17}\) that this distance represents 200 cubits, and thus the total length of the sanctuary from east to west is also *five hundred cubits*. The sanctuary is a perfect square.

- Length of the outward court gate on the east: 50 cubits
- Distance between the gates: 100 cubits
- Length of the inner court gate: 50 cubits
- Length of the inner court: 100 cubits
- Distance X: 200 cubits

**TOTAL** 500 cubits

\(^{17}\) See page 76
Reeds or cubits

This brings us to Ezekiel 42:15-20 which presents somewhat of a difficulty: “Now when he had made an end of measuring the inner house, he brought me forth toward the gate whose prospect is toward the east, and measured it round about. He measured the east side with the measuring reed, five hundred reeds, with the measuring reed round about. He measured the north side, five hundred reeds, with the measuring reed round about. He measured the south side, five hundred reeds, with the measuring reed. He turned about to the west side, and measured five hundred reeds with the measuring reed. He measured it by the four sides: it had a wall round about, five hundred reeds long, and five hundred broad, to make a separation between the sanctuary and the profane place”. This appears to say that the sanctuary was five hundred reeds square, not five hundred cubits. If this were true, then the sanctuary would be in excess of a mile square. How then is this discrepancy reconciled? There are two possibilities:

1) An error has crept into the text

According to this argument, the word “reeds” in this passage is corrupt, and should be substituted with “cubits”. The only support available for this is based upon the Septuagint version of the Old Testament, which omits the word “reeds” everywhere in these verses, and expressly gives “cubits” in verse 17. A number of modern translations, for example the RSV, take the Septuagint as authoritative, and substitute “cubits” for “reeds” throughout this passage.¹⁸

2) There is an additional wall surrounding the sanctuary

This we believe to be the correct explanation to the difficulty.¹⁹ The consistent teaching of scripture is that the temple will be rebuilt upon its old site, in Jerusalem. Zechariah, for example, says, “Therefore thus saith the LORD; I am

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¹⁸ “The Hebrew has five hundred reeds (AV) for the measurements of the four sides of the temple area (16-19), but this is obviously wrong: we must understand five hundred cubits (RSV), which corresponds with the measurements previously given, unless we are to suppose that the reference here is to a previously unmentioned outer wall forming a square of 3,000 cubits each way”. Ezekiel, An Introduction and Commentary, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, J B Taylor, pages 263,264

¹⁹ “The measuring related in vers. 15-20 does not refer to the space occupied by the temple and its courts, and therefore that the wall which the measured space had around it (vers. 20) cannot be the wall of the outer court mentioned in 40:5, the sides of which were not more than five hundred cubits long. The meaning is rather, that around this wall, which enclosed the temple and its courts, a further space of five hundred rods in length and breadth was measured off “to separate between the holy and profane,” i.e. a space which was intended to form a separating domain between the sanctuary and the common land”. Commentary on the Old Testament, Volume 9, C F Keil and F Delitzsch, page 270
returned to Jerusalem with mercies: *my house shall be built in it, saith the LORD of hosts, and a line shall be stretched forth upon Jerusalem”*

Similarly the Psalmist says: “Because of *thy temple at Jerusalem* shall kings bring presents unto thee”.

Isaiah also tells us that “many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to *the house* of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem”.

We also know from scripture that the city of Jerusalem in the Age to come will be built upon the same site as the old city: “Thus saith the LORD: Behold, I will restore the fortunes of the tents of Jacob, and have compassion on his dwellings; the city shall be rebuilt *upon its mound*, and the palace shall stand *where it used to*”.

This being so, it cannot be that the temple will occupy the whole of the site of the city of Jerusalem. But if the temple of the Age to come is surrounded by an additional wall roughly one mile square, this wall will also encompass the whole of the city of Jerusalem, as depicted in the illustration overleaf.

Ezekiel tells us that this surrounding wall will “make a separation between the holy and the common”. Everything within the wall will be holy. This is consistent with the way the scriptures describe Jerusalem in the Age to come: “So shall ye know that I am the LORD your God dwelling in Zion, my holy mountain: *then shall Jerusalem be holy*, and there shall no strangers pass through her any more”.

“Awake, awake; put on thy strength, O Zion; put on thy beautiful garments, *O Jerusalem, the holy city*: for henceforth there shall no more come into thee the uncircumcised and the unclean”.

**More detail on the outward court**

Now that we have an idea of the size and layout of the sanctuary, we can look at things in more detail. We return with the prophet Ezekiel into the outward court.

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20 Zechariah 1:16
21 Psalm 68:29
22 Isaiah 2:3
23 Jeremiah 30:18 RSV
24 Ezekiel 42:20 RSV
25 Joel 3:17
26 Isaiah 52:1
1) The chambers and the pavement

“Then brought he me into the outward court, and, lo, there were chambers, and a pavement made for the court round about: thirty chambers were upon the pavement. And the pavement by the side of the gates over against the length of the gates was the lower pavement”\(^{27}\). The pavement was as wide as the length of the gates, that is, fifty cubits. Since there was no gate on the west side of the outward court, there was most probably no pavement along the western wall. Situated on the pavement were chambers, thirty in all. This means that there were ten chambers on each of the three sides of the outward court.

\(^{27}\) Ezekiel 40:17,18
Ezekiel is told that this pavement was called “the lower pavement”. This suggests that there may have been also an upper pavement, most likely running around the outside of the inner court. We are told that the inner court was surrounded by chambers: “Between the platform of the temple and the chambers of the court was a breadth of twenty cubits round about the temple on every side”.

2) The boiling places
Ezekiel was taken to each of the four corners of the outward court: “Then he brought me forth into the utter court, and caused me to pass by the four corners of the court; and, behold, in every corner of the court there was a court. In the four corners of the court there were courts joined of forty cubits long and thirty broad: these four corners were of one measure”. There were thus four courts within the outward court at each of its four corners, all measuring forty cubits by thirty cubits. Essentially these corner courts were kitchens: “Then said he unto me, These are the places of them that boil, where the ministers of the house shall boil the sacrifice of the people”. Under the Law of Moses the only animal sacrifice that the common people partook of was the peace offering, so these four kitchens may be where the peace offerings are prepared for the mortal population of the Kingdom of God to eat.

Chambers in the inner court
When Ezekiel was brought into the inner court, he saw that on the side of the north and south gates there were special chambers: “Then he brought me from without into the inner court, and behold, there were two chambers in the inner court, one at the side of the north gate facing south, the other at the side of the south gate facing north”. We are not given the dimensions of these chambers. It seems reasonable to conclude that they were situated on the upper pavement running round the inner court. The chambers were to be used by the priests: “And he said unto me, This chamber, whose prospect is toward the south, is for the priests, the keepers of the charge of the house. And the chamber whose prospect is toward the north is for the priests, the keepers of the charge of the altar: these are the sons of Zadok among the sons of Levi, which come near to

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28 Ezekiel 41:10 RSV
29 Ezekiel 46:21,22
30 Ezekiel 46:24
31 Leviticus 7:11-17
32 Ezekiel 40:44 RSV
the LORD to minister unto him”\textsuperscript{33}. Thus the chamber at the side of the south gate belonged to “the keepers of the charge of the altar”. Ezekiel calls these priests “the sons of Zadok”. The chamber at the side of the north gate belonged to another group of priests - “the keepers of the charge of the house”. These are not sons of Zadok. Ezekiel elsewhere calls these priests “the Levites”: “And the Levites that are gone away far from me, when Israel went astray, which went astray away from me after their idols; they shall even bear their iniquity. Yet they shall be ministers in my sanctuary, having charge at the gates of the house, and ministering to the house: they shall slay the burnt offering and the sacrifice for the people, and they shall stand before them to minister unto them”\textsuperscript{34}. We shall consider these two classes of priests, and the different roles that they perform, later on in detail.

We can now add this new information to our diagram of the sanctuary.

\textsuperscript{33} Ezekiel 40:45,46

\textsuperscript{34} Ezekiel 44:10,11
The chambers and the pavement

Boiling Place

Chamber for the Levites

Upper pavement

Outward court

Inner court

Chamber for the sons of Zadok

Lower pavement and chambers