EZEKIEL

Chapter 8

*Idolatry in the Temple*

**In the sixth year, in the sixth month on the fifth day, while I was sitting in my house and the elders of Judah were sitting before me, the hand of the Sovereign LORD came upon me there.  2 I looked, and I saw a figure like that of a man. From what appeared to be his waist down he was like fire, and from there up his appearance was as bright as glowing metal.  3 He stretched out what looked like a hand and took me by the hair of my head. The Spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven and in visions of God he took me to Jerusalem, to the entrance to the north gate of the inner court, where the idol that provokes to jealousy stood.  4 And there before me was the glory of the God of Israel, as in the vision I had seen in the plain. 5 Then he said to me, “Son of man, look toward the north.” So I looked, and in the entrance north of the gate of the altar I saw this idol of jealousy. 6 And he said to me, “Son of man, do you see what they are doing—the utterly detestable things the house of Israel is doing here, things that will drive me far from my sanctuary? But you will see things that are even more detestable.” 7 Then he brought me to the entrance to the court. I looked, and I saw a hole in the wall.  8 He said to me, “Son of man, now dig into the wall.” So I dug into the wall and saw a doorway there. 9 And he said to me, “Go in and see the wicked and detestable things they are doing here.”  10 So I went in and looked, and I saw portrayed all over the walls all kinds of crawling things and detestable animals and all the idols of the house of Israel.  11 In front of them stood seventy elders of the house of Israel, and Jaazaniah son of Shaphan was standing among them. Each had a censer in his hand, and a fragrant cloud of incense was rising. 12 He said to me, “Son of man, have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel are doing in the darkness, each at the shrine of his own idol? They say, ‘The LORD does not see us; the LORD has forsaken the land.’”  13 Again, he said, “You will see them doing things that are even more detestable.” 14 Then he brought me to the entrance to the north gate of the house of the LORD, and I saw women sitting there, mourning for Tammuz.  15 He said to me, “Do you see this, son of man? You will see things that are even more detestable than this.” 16 He then brought me into the inner court of the house of the LORD, and there at the entrance to the temple, between the portico and the altar, were about twenty-five men. With their backs toward the temple of the LORD and their faces toward the east, they were bowing down to the sun in the east. 17 He said to me, “Have you seen this, son of man? Is it a trivial matter for the house of Judah to do the detestable things they are doing here? Must they also fill the land with violence and continually provoke me to anger? Look at them putting the branch to their nose!  18 Therefore I will deal with them in anger; I will not look on them with pity or spare them. Although they shout in my ears, I will not listen to them.”**

**8:1–11:25** The vision contained in these four chapters vividly depicts the departure of the divine glory from the corrupted temple (see 8:4; 9:3; 10:18–19; 11:23). (CSB)

By any reckoning, the visionary narrative of chapters 8–11 is a pivotal one in the book. It probably is not as well-known to the average reader as the call vision (chapter 1) and the vision of the dry bones (chapter 37). But that, of course, does not diminish its intrinsic importance. (CC)

Ezekiel 8–11 contains many scenes that are echoed in the book of Revelation, where the apostle John is given visions of the same heavenly realities witnessed by Ezekiel. These echoes reveal the continuity between OT and NT prophecy. They also confirm that Ezekiel’s visions ultimately center in the person and work of Christ, as the visions of St. John do immediately. One may compare the divine “man” in Ezek 8:2–3 to the appearance of the risen Christ in Rev 1:13–16 and probably Rev 10:1–3 (cf. also Dan 10:4–6 and Acts 9:3–7; 26:13–18). Particularly striking is the correspondence between Ezekiel 9 and Rev 7:1–8; 9:4, where the repentant Israelites (Ezek 9:4), corresponding to baptized believers in Christ (Revelation), are sealed with the mark of Christ on their foreheads (the *taw* in Ezek 9:4 is shaped like a cross). All those without the mark are subject to God’s judgments, but those with the divine seal shall be saved, even though they must endure various kinds of sufferings while God pours out his wrath upon unbelieving humanity. (CC)

**8:1** *In the sixth year, in the sixth month on the fifth day.* Sept. 17, 592 b.c.—the second of 13 dates in Ezekiel. This one, like those in 1:2 and 40:1, introduces a vision. (CSB)

The vision is dated about fourteen months after Ezekiel’s first vision (1:1–2). On our calendar the date would be about September 18, 592 b.c. In the interval since his first vision, the prophet clearly had become recognized and respected as a prophet: “the elders of Judah were sitting in front of” him (8:1), evidently waiting for an oracle—although there probably was no way for Ezekiel or his audience to know when—or even if—one would come. We will encounter the same scene in 14:1; 20:1; and 33:30–31. In 20:1 the elders are specifically reported to have inquired of God through Ezekiel. They never received the message of Jerusalem’s deliverance they vainly kept hoping for even after news of the city’s fall had reached them, as 33:30–31 makes clear. (CC)

 *sitting in my house.* The exiles were free to build houses (see Jer 29:5). (CSB)

 *elders of Judah were sitting before me.* They also had freedom of movement, assembly and worship. A year and two months after his inaugural vision and preaching, the prophet commanded a hearing. Some have seen in such meetings the beginnings of the synagogue form of worship. (CSB)

The “elders of Judah” (8:1) are apparently members of whatever system of self-government the exiles established to substitute for that of the homeland. Jeremiah too mentions the “elders” in exile as among those who were recipients of the letter he sent (“the remnant of the elders of the exiles,” Jer 29:1). The book of Ezra (5:5, 9; 6:7, 8, 14) indicates that this system of rule continued into at least the early postexilic period. (CC)

 *hand of the Sovereign Lord.* See note on 1:3. (CSB)

The expression “the *hand* of the Lord Yahweh *fell* upon me” (Ezek 8:1) is unique. By it Ezekiel indicates the suddenness of the onset of the vision, and perhaps also its overpowering nature (cf. “the hand of Yahweh upon me was strong” in 3:14; cf. also Is 8:11). The expression is more dramatic than “the hand of Yahweh was upon me” in Ezek 3:22, and it contrasts to the usual “the Word of Yahweh came to me” (e.g., 1:3; 3:16; 6:1; 7:1). The verb (נָפַל) will be used again in 11:5 when the prophet states, “The Spirit of Yahweh fell upon me.” When the vision ends and Ezekiel relates its contents to the elders in 11:24–25, it appears that he had remained in body in exile during the vision, and so we are dealing with something like a trance. Apparently the prophet was not physically transported to Jerusalem to see what was going on there. (In contrast, evidently in 3:14–15, Ezekiel was physically translated from one place by the Kebar Canal to another nearby location.) (CC)

**8:2** *figure like that of a man.*† See 1:26 and note. (CSB)

 *like fire … as bright as glowing metal.* A way of describing the blinding brightness of the divine messenger (see Mt 28:3; cf. Ac 9:3). (CSB)

Ezekiel describes the same human, yet also supernatural, form of Yahweh’s Glory he had perceived at the end of the inaugural vision (1:26b–28). This is no angelic messenger or interpreter as in chapters 40–48, but clearly Yahweh himself in a form “like a man” (8:2). *This is another appearance of the preincarnate Christ.* Here we have the “same groping for vocabulary, the prominence of terms for brilliance,” and the same division of the figure’s appearance like electrum above his waist and like fire below his waist as in 1:26–28. (CC)

**8:3** *took me to Jerusalem.* Ezekiel had been directed to prophesy stern judgments on Jerusalem (chs. 1–7). Now he was transported to Jerusalem in visions of God (see 11:24) and shown the reason for the judgments. (CSB)

What is new in this theophany (compared to chapters 1–3) is that the divine “man” stretches out “the form of a hand” to transport Ezekiel to Jerusalem. Whereas in 8:1 Yahweh’s “hand” had been more metaphorical for God’s overwhelming power, here it takes on more concrete form. But since it is God’s, we still meet a certain reticence about naming it; Ezekiel calls it “the *form* of a hand” (rather than the straightforward “Yahweh’s hand”). The Hebrew expression occurs only here and (referring to the humanlike hand of the cherubim) in 10:8. תַּבְנִית (“form”) means a “structure,” usually in the sense of a model, copy, miniature, and so on. It is so used of the “pattern” of the earthly tabernacle and its furnishings built as a “copy” or “type” of the heavenly prototype (Ex 25:9, 40, translated by τύπος, “type,” in Acts 7:44; Heb 8:5) and also of the “plan” of Solomon’s temple drawn up by David (1 Chr 28:11, 12; cf. 28:19). A similar sense occurs in Josh 22:28, where war is averted when the Transjordan tribes of Israel convince the Cisjordan Israelites that they have built an altar that is only a תַּבְנִית (“model, copy”) of the one true altar of Yahweh; they promise not to offer sacrifice on the “copy,” because then it would compete against the one orthodox altar. (CC)

The sense of תַּבְנִית (“form”) in Ezek 8:3 is similar to its meaning (“figure, resemblance”) in 8:10 and 10:8. It then parallels what Ezekiel otherwise expresses by רְּמוּת (“likeness”) or מַרְאֶה (“appearance”), both of which are common in chapters 1 and 10 and are used to describe the divine vision in similitudes. Thus, Ezekiel saw what looked like a human hand, but one that belonged to no mere human; again, the “man” (8:2) is none other than the preincarnate Christ. (CC)

 *idol that provokes to jealousy.* Any idol in the temple provoked the Lord to jealousy, but this one seems to be a statue of Asherah, the Canaanite goddess of fertility, which Josiah had removed some 30 years previously (see 2Ki 23:6). (CSB)

This is Ezekiel’s first sighting of “the statue of jealousy” (8:3), which is the first of the four abominations he will see in the temple. He will see the statue again in 8:5 in the first temple scene (8:5–6). The purpose of this initial sighting of this abomination is to place it in the starkest contrast to the divine “Glory” he sees immediately afterward in 8:4. (CC)

Ezekiel is set down at the north gate of the inner court. This “inner court” is mentioned again in 8:16 and 10:3. Ezek 10:5 refers to the “outer court.” As we learn already in 2 Ki 21:5 and 23:12, by late monarchic times the Jerusalem temple had two courts. (Later Ezekiel will also envision two courts in the eschatological temple in 40:17–19 and 40:28–34.) The “gate of the inner court” (8:3) is the gateway (as שַׁעַר usually should be translated) through the inner wall by which one could enter the courtyard around the temple itself. There probably were at least two other such entranceways; this one happened to be on the north. It probably is the same as the “altar gate” in 8:5, because the great altar of sacrifice was visible through this gate, and sacrificial animals were slaughtered “on the north side of the altar before Yahweh” (Lev 1:11). Apparently, Ezekiel finds himself just outside this gate, that is, in the outer court just north of the entrance to the inner gate. (CC)

The first thing that strikes Ezekiel’s eye is a “statue” (סֶמֶל). The Hebrew word occurs in only two other contexts in the OT (although it is known in Phoenician in the sense of any statue of either a human or of a deity). In Deut 4:16 God had prohibited the construction of פֶּ֖סֶל תְּמוּנַ֣ת כָּל־סָ֑מֶל, “a graven image in the form of any statue,” that is, any sculptured idol that detracted from exclusive worship of Yahweh. Moreover, that prohibition included any “representation of male or female” (נְקֵבָֽה תַּבְנִ֥ית זָכָ֖ר א֥וֹ, Deut 4:16), which would include any figure connected to the fertility cult (with its practices such as sacral prostitution). (CC)

We know that such a statue was made, in violation of that command. 2 Chr 33:7 refers to פֶּ֥סֶל הַסֶּ֖מֶל (“the carved image of the idol,” ESV) that evil King Manasseh had erected in the Jerusalem temple. Probably Josiah removed it as part of his reformation after the rediscovery of the Torah in around 622 b.c. Although it is not explicitly mentioned again, Ezek 8:3 is reason enough to believe that its cult had returned under King Jehoiakim, and probably a majority of commentators think that it is the abomination referred to here. (CC)

Even more precise than 2 Chr 33:7 is the parallel text, 2 Ki 21:7, which describes Manasseh’s idol as פֶּ֥סֶל הָאֲשֵׁרָ֖ה, “the carved image of Asherah” (ESV). This reference indicates the gravity of the offense. Asherah is now quite well-known, both as the highest goddess in the Canaanite pantheon and as the consort of El, the highest god. She may be the “queen of heaven” (Jer 44:17–19, 25) worshiped by the Judean refugees who had fled to Egypt with Johanan (Jeremiah 43–44). The same word (אֲשֵׁרָה, “an Asherah,” e.g., 1 Ki 16:33) is used of cult objects representing her, apparently sometimes sculpted, sometimes of trees, but apparently always made of wood. (CC)

In pagan mythology, Asherah was the mother of seventy lesser gods, including Baal. But in popular piety, she was apparently identified with Astarte as a goddess of fertility and worshiped alongside Baal (cf. 2 Ki 23:4). The OT frequently refers to and condemns the worship of her on the “high places” (בָּמוֹת), where she is the feminine principle alongside the masculine, which is represented either by the Baals (Judg 3:7; 6:26–30) or by מַצֵּבוֹת (cult pillars of stone; Deut 16:21–22; 1 Ki 14:23; and passim). Recent excavations have confirmed how widespread in popular religion a syncretism of Yahweh and Asherah had become. Both at a site called Kuntillet ‘Ajrud in the Sinai and at Khirbet el-Kom, west of Hebron, inscriptions have been found speaking of Yahweh and “his Asherah.” (CC)

Thus, if the סֶמֶל in Ezek 8:3 is indeed an Asherah, as seems plausible, it is easy to understand why it represented the heart and core of Canaanite idolatry and the primary enemy of Yahweh as he sought the faithful and undivided love of his beloved people Israel. It is obvious why their adulterous love affair with Asherah would provoke the passionate outrage or “jealousy” (5:13; 8:3, 5) of the one true God, who was their jilted husband and who had married them in his grace despite their wretchedness (Ezekiel 16 and 23; note his “jealousy” in 16:38, 42; 23:25). Apparently a seated figure (“was seated,” 8:3), she was a direct challenge to Yahweh, who was enthroned above the cherubim inside the Holy of Holies. Both Block and Greenberg observe how fitting it is that this alien goddess should be referred to by a foreign loan word (סֶמֶל). (CC)

**8:4** GLORY OF THE GOD OF ISRAEL –But something else also catches the prophet’s eye, which throws the apostasy just described into bold relief. It is almost as though Ezekiel deliberately takes note of the glaring contrast by placing this verse at this point. The adverb שָׁם (“there”) repeated in both 8:3–4 explicitly links the two verses together. But Yahweh and the idol ultimately *cannot* coexist “there” simultaneously! It is finally the question of truth. For intrinsically “ecumenical,” unionistic, or syncretistic paganism this might have been no problem, but for Yahweh it was an utter impossibility. Yahweh’s “incarnational” presence is often called just כְּבֹוד־יְהוָה, “the Glory of Yahweh,” but here we have the יִשְׂרָאֵ֑ל כְּב֖וֹד אֱלֹהֵ֣י, “the glory of the God of Israel,” as a way of stressing that this Glory alone has the legitimate claim on “the Israel of God” (Gal 6:16), that is, the church of both Testaments. If Israel goes whoring after other gods, she ceases to be his people Israel. What is true of unbelieving ethnic Israel is all the more true of Gentiles should they forsake the God of Israel’s exclusive claim on them through Jesus Christ (Romans 9–11). (CC)

This verse does not specify whether Ezekiel sees the entire throne-chariot that he had seen in the plain in chapter 1, or just the divine man who is the Glory (1:26–28). But the reference to a personage with a hand and a waist in 8:2 would indicate that the main focus from here through the end of chapter 11 is on the divine man, although aspects of the cherubim, wheels, and the rest of the vehicle from chapter 1 will reappear in chapter 10 (the cherubim are also in 9:3 and 11:22). (CC)

**8:5** *idol of jealousy.* See note on v. 3. (CSB)

In the first of the four scenes comprising the rest of the chapter, Ezekiel again sees “the statue of jealousy,” which was the first abomination. Three times 8:5 emphasizes the northerly direction. It may be coincidental, but there may also be a deliberate allusion to “Mount North,” the modern Jebel Akra or the classical Mount Casius (today located on the Turkish-Syrian border, slightly inland from the Mediterranean). It was the Canaanite “Mount Olympus,” the home of the gods and specifically (in this context) of Asherah, whose image appears to be the “statue.” Yahweh, of course, had his own mountain, Mount Zion, which he had elected within the order of history, where a mythological nature goddess could have no legitimate role. In the fullness of time, Mount Zion would be the place where the incarnate Son of God (the divine man) would offer the all-sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the world, then rise again. (CC)

**8:6** DRIVE ME FAR – The end result is that the destruction of the temple after God abandons it because of the people’s persistent apostasy (CC).

**8:7** This second scene, revealing the second abomination in the temple, is the most detailed. The exact location of Ezekiel in the temple during this second part of the vision is impossible to determine precisely—all the more so because it is part of a vision. But since the previous vision had been “north of the altar gate” (8:5), here we would appear to be on the inner side of the gateway, facing the outer court of the temple. Perhaps while standing within the gateway itself, or near its exit, Ezekiel notices a curious hole in the wall. (CC)

**8:8** Upon God’s command to enlarge the hole, the prophet discovers an “opening” or “entranceway” into another chamber. 1 Ki 6:5–6 mentions side chambers around the Solomonic temple, and Ezekiel will envision rooms along the walls of the outer court of the eschatological temple (Ezek 40:17). We are never informed of the purpose of these rooms, but they could have had any number of legitimate uses for preparation, maintenance, and storage for the divine worship liturgies (cf. the vestry, sacristy, and narthex of a church). One would suppose that the “entranceway” to which God directs the prophet was not the usual entrance into the room. From it Ezekiel would be able to observe what is happening in the room without himself being observed. (CC)

**8:10** *all kinds of crawling things and detestable animals.* Probably reflecting Egyptian influence (see 2Ki 23:31–35). (CSB)

Ezekiel obeys Yahweh’s command to enter the room and looks around. We will be informed in 8:12 that the room is dark, but he is still able to see the iconography and occupants of the room. The exact nature of what he sees is not entirely clear, nor is it clear what cult(s) the figures belong to. We are left to infer, but we have even less biblical data than we had for “the statue of jealousy” (8:3, 5). Perhaps the images are a conglomeration of all the alien cults flourishing in Jerusalem. There may be a deliberate contrast between them and the orthodox temple engravings of 1 Ki 6:29, 32, 35. Babylon’s famous Ishtar gate had images of men, lions, and serpent-dragons, and scholars often adduce it as a parallel. The relevance of that parallel is supported by the reference to the Babylonian god Tammuz in Ezek 8:14, and to Judah-Oholibah lusting after Babylonians when she sees their pictures engraved in red in 23:14. Other scholars think of the thereomorphic (beast-shaped) deities of Egypt, often found in tomb niches. Canaanite influences and archaeological finds from northern Syria (Carchemish, Gozan) could also be cited. As for “the fecal deities” (8:10), see the textual note on them in 6:4. (CC)

What can be said with certainty is that the worship of “creeping things” and “beasts” turns the order of creation upside down. In Genesis 1 God had created “creeping things” and “beasts.” God then created man as the one who would rule and have dominion over these creatures (Gen 1:26–28). Here the human worshipers degrade themselves by submitting to these lesser creatures as their gods. This is the same process St. Paul describes:

They exchanged the glory of the immortal God for the likeness of the image of mortal man and of birds and quadrupeds and reptiles. Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to uncleanness, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, who indeed exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. (Rom 1:23–25) (CC)

The apostle’s reference to God’s “glory” (Rom 1:23) may be compared to “the Glory of the God of Israel” in Ezek 8:4, and the “uncleanness” (Rom 1:24) to which the idolaters are consigned may recall the “*detestable* beasts” in Ezek 8:10, since that Hebrew term (שֶׁקֶץ) refers to animals that are declared “unclean” in Lev 11:10–43. (CC)

**8:11** *Jaazaniah.* Not the same person as in 11:1. Ironically, the name means “The Lord hears,” and the irony is sharpened by the quotation in v. 12. (CSB)

Ezekiel sees that seventy men were “standing before” the images, and that phrase (עָמַד לִפְנֵי־) itself often connotes worship. The number seventy (seven times ten) may be partly symbolic of perfection (seven) and completeness (ten), thus representing the whole nation. The number immediately reminds one of the seventy who assisted Moses in governing the Israelites in the desert (Ex 24:1, 9; Num 11:16, 24, 25). One may also compare the seventy-one members of the postexilic Sanhedrin and the seventy(-two) disciples whom Jesus sent out. According to Ezek 7:26 “elders” normally would offer “counsel” and wisdom. Officials and probably all who had risen to political prominence in Judah after the deportation of Jehoiachin would be considered “elders.” Compare 8:1, where there is a corresponding (but probably much smaller) group of “elders” in exile with Ezekiel. (CC)

Special mention is made of the man standing in the center of the group, who may be their leader: “Jaazaniah the son of Shaphan.” He is singled out because of his prominence and the importance of his family elsewhere in the OT. Three generations of the family of Shaphan are prominent in the book of Jeremiah. They agreed with Jeremiah’s stance that Israel should submit to Babylon. Jeremiah’s reason was that Babylon was the agent of God’s wrath at apostate Israel. Most members of the Shaphan family seem to have agreed with Jeremiah’s theology, although the Babylonians probably perceived that agreement as politically motivated in the face of Babylon’s overwhelming military superiority. The family’s “pro-Babylonian” reputation may explain why so prominent a family escaped deportation at the same time that Ezekiel and King Jehoiachin suffered it. The Babylonians probably favored them as useful political allies. (CC)

This Jaazaniah’s father, “Shaphan,” had been state secretary or scribe (סֹפֵר) under Josiah, and to him the lost book of the Torah was turned over when it was found during the repair of the temple (2 Ki 22:3–14). Three of Shaphan’s sons played prominent roles alongside Jeremiah: (1) Ahikam, who had saved Jeremiah from being lynched by a mob enraged by his prediction of the destruction of the temple (Jer 26:24); (2) Elasah, who delivered Jeremiah’s letter to the exiles in Babylonia (Jer 29:3); (3) and Gemariah, who tried to prevent Jehoiakim from burning Jeremiah’s scroll (Jer 36:25; cf. Jer 36:10–12). Ahikam was the father of Gedaliah, whom the Babylonians made governor of the conquered province at Mizpah after the fall of Jerusalem (2 Ki 25:22–25). Nebuchadnezzar had ordered that Jeremiah not be harmed, and he was turned over to Gedaliah for safekeeping (Jer 39:11–14). (CC)

Incense was so commonly used in ancient Near Eastern worship that we would almost be surprised if it were not mentioned here. In pagan use it was thought to placate angry or capricious deities. Various Egyptian reliefs show men on the walls of cities under siege with arms stretched upward in prayer, whose worship leader is a man with a censer. The men in Ezekiel’s vision may be attempting to avert the present Babylonian incursion into Judah, or the vision may portend the future siege of Jerusalem (as did most of Ezekiel’s action prophecies in chapter 4). (CC)

Incense also played a prominent role in the divine services Yahweh prescribed for proper worship. Yet the abuse of it incurred God’s wrath. Its idolatrous use in Ezek 8:11 may be a parody of its prominence in the Yom Kippur ritual, where once a year the high priest (and he alone) entered the Holy of Holies and by the cloud of incense shielded the sacred “mercy seat” (above which God was “incarnationally” enthroned) from human eyes, so the high priest would not die (Lev 16:1–2, 12–13). Perhaps that sacred rite was being aped by the seventy “elders,” who presumably (since they are not called “priests”) either were unordained or should not have been ordained because they were not of priestly lineage (cf. the idolatrous priesthood ordained by wicked King Jeroboam in 1 Ki 12:31; 13:33). One may be reminded that the Christian church traditionally has prohibited uncalled laymen (and all women) from the pastoral office and regular performance of its distinctive duties, though in modern times the biblical qualifications for the pastoral office have been compromised in many denominations—a modern abomination. (CC)

Yahweh gave directions for building the incense altar in Ex 30:7–8, and prescribed the ingredients for the holy incense in Ex 30:34–38, also prohibiting the making or use of it for any other purpose besides divine worship. In Ezek 16:18 and 23:41, Yahweh refers to it as “my incense.” By Yahweh’s own appointment, the incense was a potent propitiator (Num 16:46–47), in connection with Korah’s rebellion). In the Blessing of Moses, incense is parallel to whole burnt offering as a means of atonement (Deut 33:10). (CC)

Incense continued to be used in the early church (cf. Rev 5:8; 8:3–5) and many tradition-minded churches, especially those of the Eastern rite, still employ it. Its modern significance is the same as in the Scriptures. From God’s side, in the Divine Service his presence is revealed through Word and Sacrament, yet also “veiled” as he comes to the worshipers through those means, even as the smoke recalls the cloud that both revealed and veiled the divine Glory, whose presence among sinners is made possible only by atoning sacrifice—ultimately, the sacrifice of Christ, whose pleasing aroma is represented by the pungent smell of the incense (cf. Eph 5:2; also 2 Cor 2:14, 16; Phil 4:18). From man’s side, incense represents prayer arising to God’s throne of grace (Ps 141:2; Rev 5:8; 8:3–4; cf. Lk 1:10: “the whole multitude of the people was praying outside at the hour of incense”). (CC)

**8:12** he focus changes a bit from a wide-angle scene of all the seventy elders to an individualization of each one at his private devotions in his own image chamber—a room where perhaps he worshiped his own patron deity. Why are their rites carried on “in the darkness”? Is it to be taken as another caricature of the Holy of Holies or of Yahweh dwelling in “deep darkness” (עֲרָפֶל, 1 Ki 8:12)? Did their cult require the cover of darkness? Is it to be taken figuratively of the spiritual state of the people who can no longer find true light (cf. Is 8:19–22; 59:9–10; Jn 12:46)? Are they ashamed of what they are doing in secret? People will do sins in darkness that they would never consider doing in daylight (cf. Jn 3:19–21; Eph 5:12). (CC)

If the worshipers think that the darkness conceals the shame of their idolatry, they are wrong. Their rationalizations for their activities, “Yahweh does not see us; Yahweh has forsaken the land” (Ezek 8:12; essentially repeated, but in reverse order, in 9:9), are ironic because Yahweh himself calls the prophet’s attention to the furtiveness of their behavior. The cover of secrecy for aberrant worship is a motif that surfaces in other texts (e.g., Deut 13:6–8; 27:15; Is 29:15; Job 31:27), but “God will bring every deed into the judgment, even every secret thing, whether good or evil” (Eccl 12:14). God sees what is done in secret (Mt 6:4, 6, 18; cf. Lk 8:17). The arrogant presumption that God does not see or hear sinful actions or words appears in other passages as well, for example, Pss 10:1–11; 94:1–7; Job 22:13–14; Zeph 1:12. Jeremiah apparently had to combat the same two rationalizations (that Yahweh could not see and was absent): “ ‘Can a man hide himself in hidden places so I cannot see him?’ declares Yahweh. ‘Do I not fill heaven and earth?’ declares Yahweh” (Jer 23:24). (CC)

The supreme irony in the seventy elders’ rationalization is that it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. What they say (“Yahweh does not see us”) is false about Yahweh, but true about the images they are worshiping (“they have eyes but do not see,” Pss 115:5; 135:16; cf. Dan 5:23). In fact, Yahweh’s ability to see not only the hidden recesses of the temple but also the darkest corners of human hearts is precisely what distinguishes Yahweh from all would-be competitors. The “claim that Yahweh has left the country was a boast of impunity,” but it would come true all too soon: his Glory begins to depart the temple in Ezek 9:3 and forsakes it in 11:22–23. Thus the elders forecast the substance of the remainder of Ezekiel’s visionary visit to Jerusalem (chapters 8–11). (CC)

**8:14** *Tammuz.* The only Biblical reference to this Babylonian fertility god. The women of Jerusalem were bewailing his dying, which they felt caused the annual wilting of vegetation. According to some interpreters, he is alluded to in Da 11:37 (“the one desired by women”). (CSB)

The shocking thing about this third abomination is that, as we apparently move close to the Holy of Holies, where Yahweh sits enthroned above the cherubim, the idolatry becomes even more brazen. The weeping for Tammuz (or perhaps the Hebrew means “performing the Tammuz ritual”; see the textual notes) is not being carried on secretly in darkness (as was the activity in 8:12), but publicly in broad daylight. Women in the OT could serve at the divine sanctuary in a God-pleasing role (e.g., 1 Sam 2:22), but these women, like those in 2 Ki 23:7, were aiding Israel’s apostasy by practicing a ritual about a dead god instead of worshiping the living God. (CC)

Our knowledge of Tammuz is sketchy. The Sumerian King List (third millennium b.c.) lists two kings by the name Dumu-zi/Tammuz, one an antediluvian shepherd king and the other postdiluvian, Gilgamesh’s predecessor at Uruk. By that time Tammuz had been deified, and a complex mythology had developed around him. It centered in his death and banishment to the underworld by his wife, the goddess Inanna. The cult apparently had something to do with the end of spring and the cessation of the rains, and the ensuing “death” of nature (the hot and arid season) was to be counteracted by weeping and mourning. Just how much, if any, of this myth is connected with the annual “dying and rising” of a fertility god is debated. The fourth month of the Mesopotamian calendar was named after Tammuz, and several forms of lament over him were widely practiced as women’s rite for centuries. As late as the tenth century a.d., the pagan Sabaeans of Haran (today near the Turkish-Syrian border) observed a mourning ceremony for Tammuz in his month. (CC)

The rite was probably imported into Judah directly or indirectly from Mesopotamia. This verse is the only certain reference to it in the OT. Commentators usually assume that Tammuz worship coalesced to some degree with the worship of Baal-Hadad in Canaan and of Adonis in Greece (as recognized already by St. Jerome and Cyril of Alexandria). Based on that assumption, Is 17:10–11 is usually interpreted to refer to some form of that cult (נַעֲמָנִים is usually taken as a deliberate distortion of an epithet for Adonis/Tammuz, for whom the Israelites are planting vegetation). There may well be other allusions to Tammuz worship elsewhere in the OT, but our knowledge of ancient pagan practices is still too meager for us to discern the (usually) brief allusions. (CC)

**8:16** *With their backs toward the temple.* Almost all ancient temples were oriented toward the east. Worshiping the sun as it rose required one to turn his back to the temple. (CSB)

Three times Yahweh had promised that Ezekiel would see “greater abominations” (8:6, 13, 15), and now this one is the greatest. Probably it is worst both because of its location “between the vestibule and the altar” (8:16), which is probably closer to the Holy of Holies than any of the previous abominations, and because of its content. One may discern in it three offenses: worship of the sun, filling the land with violence, and “sticking the branch up my [Yahweh’s] nose!” which, whatever its precise significance, was deemed so offensive that Jewish scribes may have felt compelled to alter the Hebrew text. The first and third of those offenses may be cultic or liturgical abuses. But the social crimes summarized as “violence” (חָמָס, 8:17) should not be disassociated from the cultic abominations. The implication of Yahweh’s declaration is that idolatry has a pernicious effect on the entire society. The worship abuses in the temple cause a moral decline throughout the land, so that “they fill the land with violence” (8:17). Probably it is the total, cumulative effect of both (idolatry and widespread violence) that is goading God to fury. (CC)

**8:17** *putting the branch to their nose.* A ceremonial gesture in nature worship, not documented elsewhere in the Bible. (CSB)

This long verse seems to summarize all the manifestations of rank apostasy that Yahweh has just shown Ezekiel, to which are now even added social crimes. “They fill the land with violence” evokes the flood narrative, when God sent the universal deluge because “the earth was full of violence” (Gen 6:13; cf. 6:11). The final clause about the “branch” describes some supremely insulting physical gesture that euphemistically describes how Yahweh feels about the countless ways his subjects have demonstrated their contempt for him. (CC)

The specific forms of idolatry that Ezekiel has witnessed in the temple throughout chapter 8 probably were practiced only during a limited period of Israel’s history. Nevertheless, the matters that seem to have been involved in those abominations, including infractions against the priestly office, sexual immorality, and deviant worship practices, have analogies that have continued to plague the Christian church. Throughout church history, and no less in the modern era, abominations of various sorts have arisen in parts of the visible church that involve distortions of the pastoral office, immorality, and worship practices that contravene the Word of God. (CC)

**8:18** This final verse of the chapter, which looks forward to chapters 9–10, is expressed in emotional terms of wrath and mercilessness that relate to the expressions of divine exasperation we have heard throughout the chapter: the Lord’s “jealousy” (8:3, 5), the repeated abominations, and the exclamatory questions he repeatedly addressed to the prophet. The verse contains three sentences of judgment. (CC)

The first declaration is that Yahweh’s rebellious subjects have so provoked him that he “will act in wrath.” That is the message of virtually the whole first part of the book (Ezekiel 1–24). (CC)

His avowal that “My eye will not pity, and I will have no compassion” articulates his wrath with idioms that are familiar from 5:11 and 7:4, 9. (CC)

Yahweh’s final declaration, “… I will not hear them” (8:18), is new in the book. However, he had used the same Hebrew verb when he predicted that “Israel will not be willing to listen to you because they are not willing to listen to me” (3:7). Now his refusal to listen to them is the just punishment. Possibly it is a rebuttal to the name of “Jaazaniah” in 8:11, which means “Yahweh listens” (see the commentary on 8:11). The divine promise implicit in Jaazaniah’s name has been voided by his outrageous behavior and that of his accomplices (the seventy elders, representing the whole “house of Israel,” 8:11). Especially in the prophets, the lack of mercy is frequently expressed by this theme of God’s refusal to answer prayer (e.g., Jer 11:11; Micah 3:4; Zech 7:13). (CC)

By the three statements in Ezek 8:18, Yahweh adamantly declares that “this time there will be no second chance, no renaissance of relationship with [him]. … He will not allow his heart to overrule his head.” (CC)