

# EZEKIEL

## Chapter 8

### *Abominations in the Temple*

**In the sixth year, in the sixth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I sat in my house, with the elders of Judah sitting before me, the hand of the Lord GOD fell upon me there. 2 Then I looked, and behold, a form that had the appearance of a man. Below what appeared to be his waist was fire, and above his waist was something like the appearance of brightness, like gleaming metal. 3 He put out the form of a hand and took me by a lock of my head, and the Spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven and brought me in visions of God to Jerusalem, to the entrance of the gateway of the inner court that faces north, where was the seat of the image of jealousy, which provokes to jealousy. 4 And behold, the glory of the God of Israel was there, like the vision that I saw in the valley. 5 Then he said to me, “Son of man, lift up your eyes now toward the north.” So I lifted up my eyes toward the north, and behold, north of the altar gate, in the entrance, was this image of jealousy. 6 And he said to me, “Son of man, do you see what they are doing, the great abominations that the house of Israel are committing here, to drive me far from my sanctuary? But you will see still greater abominations.” 7 And he brought me to the entrance of the court, and when I looked, behold, there was a hole in the wall. 8 Then he said to me, “Son of man, dig in the wall.” So I dug in the wall, and behold, there was an entrance. 9 And he said to me, “Go in, and see the vile abominations that they are committing here.” 10 So I went in and saw. And there, engraved on the wall all around, was every form of creeping things and loathsome beasts, and all the idols of the house of Israel. 11 And before them stood seventy men of the elders of the house of Israel, with Jaazaniah the son of Shaphan standing among them. Each had his censer in his hand, and the smoke of the cloud of incense went up. 12 Then he said to me, “Son of man, have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel are doing in the dark, each in his room of pictures? For they say, ‘The LORD does not see us, the LORD has forsaken the land.’” 13 He said also to me, “You will see still greater abominations that they commit.” 14 Then he brought me to the entrance of the north gate of the house of the LORD, and behold, there sat women weeping for Tammuz. 15 Then he said to me, “Have you seen this, O son of man? You will see still greater abominations than these.” 16 And he brought me into the inner court of the house of the LORD. And behold, at the entrance of the temple of the LORD, between the porch and the altar, were about twenty-five men, with their backs to the temple of the LORD, and their faces toward the east, worshiping the sun toward the east. 17 Then he said to me, “Have you seen this, O son of man? Is it too light a thing for the house of Judah to commit the abominations that they commit here, that they should fill the land with violence and provoke me still further to anger? Behold, they put the branch to their nose. 18 Therefore I will act in wrath. My eye will not spare, nor will I have pity. And though they cry in my ears with a loud voice, I will not hear them.”**

**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)

A single visionary experience, climaxing in God’s (the “glory’s”) abandonment of Jerusalem and the temple.

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)

*sat 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)

Apparently leaders selected by the exilic community (cf 33:30–31). (TLSB)

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 LORD GOD.* God’s overwhelming power first came upon Ezekiel at his inaugural vision. Since God cannot be described directly, He is identified with “the form of a hand” in v 3. (TLSB)

*fell upon me there.* Expresses a sudden manifestation. (TLSB)

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 (יָרַד) 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. (CC)

**8:2** *form that had the appearance of a man.* † Hesitant to describe the supernatural “man” who appears. (TLSB)

*fire ... gleaming 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** *hand ... Spirit.* Appear to be virtually interchangeable. (TLSB)

*Spirit.* Obviously God, the Third Person of the Trinity. (TLSB)

*visions of God 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)

The “form of a hand” now becomes active, and the Spirit transports the prophet to Jerusalem. (TLSB)

*inner court.* Ezekiel is transported to the area of the temple that directly surrounded the great altar of burnt offering and the temple itself. (TLSB)

*image of jealousy.* First of the four “abominations” he will witness on this trip. (TLSB)

*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)

Arouses God’s wrath and brings His punishment. (TLSB)

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” (בְּמִזְבְּחֵי), where she is the feminine principle alongside the masculine, which is represented either by the Baals (Judg 3:7; 6:26–30) or by מַצֵּבֹת (cult pillars of stone; Deut 16:21–22; 1 Ki 14:23; and passim). (CC)

**8:4** *vision ... in the valley.* Identifies the figure here with the one Ezekiel first saw at his call (ch 1). (TLSB)

**8:5** *image of jealousy.* Ezekiel is directed to look toward the north gate, where he again spies the “image of jealousy.” (TLSB)

**8:6** *drive Me far from My sanctuary?* As the only true God, He cannot share His home with any other object of worship. (TLSB)

The end result is that the destruction of the temple after God abandons it because of the people's persistent apostasy (CC).

**8:7** *hole in the wall.* Noted as Ezekiel proceeds through the gateway from its northern entrance. (TLSB)

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** *entrance.* Ezekiel enlarges a hole and discovers it leads to some larger room. (TLSB)

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)

**8:9** *vile abominations.* Superlative. All we know about these sights must be deduced from the following verses. (TLSB)

**8:10** *engraved ... idols.* Apparently scratched or painted on the walls, representing the vast number of idolatrous cults flourishing in Jerusalem at the time. (TLSB)

*every form of creeping things...loathsome beasts.* Probably reflecting Egyptian influence (see 2Ki 23:31–35). (CSB)

Language suggests Egyptian influence, where many gods were depicted as animals, birds, snakes, etc., and where wall paintings and carvings are well known. The language also echoes the creation account, where God had made man to have dominion over such creatures (Gn 1:26). But these idolaters had turned the created order upside down! (TLSB)

**8:11** *seventy men of the elders.* Perhaps the same elders mentioned in v 1, although “seventy” suggests a representative number for completeness. (TLSB)

*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)

May have been the leader. His father, Shaphan, may be mentioned to distinguish him from another Jaazaniah, a son of Azzur (11:1). Ironically, Jaazaniah means “The Lord will hear.” (TLSB)

*Shaphan.* A man of this name, three of his sons, and a grandson play a prominent role as defenders and allies of Jeremiah (cf Jer 26:24; 29:3; 36; 39–40). If this is the same Shaphan, this Jaazaniah would be a notorious rebel of an otherwise godly family. (TLSB)

*censer*. Container for incense, which played a prominent role in both pagan and Israelite worship. In paganism, it was thought to placate angry deities. In biblical worship, its rising smoke was associated with prayer (cf Ps 141:2; Lk 1:10). It continued to be used in Christian worship (cf Rv 5:8; 8:3–4), and Christ’s atonement is often described in terms of its pleasant aroma (Eph 5:2; 2Co 2:14, 16). (TLSB)

**8:12** *in the dark*. Perhaps they were trying to hide their activities from others, or this was intended as a substitute for the Most Holy Place with its “thick darkness” (1Ki 8:12). (TLSB)

*room of pictures?* Summarizes v 10. (TLSB)

*The LORD does not see us, the LORD has forsaken the land*. The many invasions they had suffered for over a century led them to a typical pagan thought: a god who could not protect them must have been defeated by other gods. So they invoke the other gods to meet their needs. Ironically, the Lord is about to forsake the land, not in impotence, but in judgment and in the hope that at least a remnant will repent. (TLSB)

**8:14** *north gate*. Inner entrance of gateway, in contrast to its outer entrance at v 3. Ezekiel’s path is uncertain, but appears to move closer to the temple. (TLSB)

*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)

This god is mentioned only here in the Bible, but is probably the same god known as Adonis in Greece and Rome (noted by Jerome and Cyril of Alexandria). In mythology, Adonis died every spring when the rainy season stopped. The weeping was intended magically to help make the rains resume the next fall. The women joined in the idolatry. (TLSB)

**8:15** Cf v 6. (TLSB)

**8:16** The worst of the abominations. (TLSB)

*With their backs to 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)

Ignoring the true God Himself, whose “house” the temple was. This is overt paganism, where the sun-god was normally at the head of the pantheon, and temples were oriented toward the rising sun (whereas the ark of the covenant stood on the west end of the Israelite temple. Traditionally, Christian churches (and graves) have been oriented toward the east because Christ, the sun of righteousness (Mal 4:2), rose at dawn in the east. (TLSB)

**8:17** God’s rhetorical question implies that violence crowned all the abominations (cf Gn 6:11, 13). Abandonment of God’s truth has led to loose ethical standards in many civilizations, including our own. Greg: “Now by Ezekiel are personified men in authority; by the wall is signified the hardness of their subordinates. And what is digging in a wall but opening the hardness of the heart by sharp inquisitions?... First a hole in the wall, and afterwards a door, is perceived, and that then at length the hidden abomination is made apparent; because, in fact, of every single sin signs are first seen outwardly, and afterwards a door is pointed out for opening the iniquity to view; and then at length every evil that lies hidden within is disclosed” (NPNF 2 12:21b). (TLSB)

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

Ezekiel is likely using a popular Israelite idiom for some supremely offensive gesture. The point of the expression is a maximal affront to God. (TLSB)

**8:18** *wrath.* With His love spurned, God’s only alternative. (TLSB)

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)

*My eye will spare.* Implies fulfillment of their apostasy. (TLSB)

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)

**Ch 8** At the beginning of Ezekiel’s visionary visit to Jerusalem, he is led to witness four “abominations” that entail rank syncretism or outright rejection of the true faith. Only when people realize the ever-present and insidious depth of their bondage to sin will they feel any need for a Savior. Ch 9 will show that there were at least some faithful in Jerusalem. The Lord always preserves His remnant by grace. • O Lord, open our eyes to our own idolatries, that we may cling all the more closely to the forgiveness You offer us in Word and Sacrament. Amen.