

Ezekiel 45:17

“Sabbath Sacrifices in the Messianic Temple”

“It shall be the prince’s part to provide the burnt offerings, the grain offerings and the drink offerings, at the feasts, on the new moons and on the sabbaths, at all the appointed feasts of the house of Israel; he shall provide the sin offering, the grain offering, the burnt offering and the peace offerings, to make atonement for the house of Israel.”

Details about the Sabbath appearing in Ezekiel ch. 45, have raised various challenging questions, and have led to a variety of interpretive vantage points. The scene depicted describes a return of Israel’s twelve tribes to the Holy Land, their tribal allotments, the dimensions of the Sanctuary, and the presence of a prince or leader who will be responsible for various duties (45:1-9). Some interpreters take what is detailed as being an idealized form of what would be witnessed following the Babylonian exile, when the Jewish exiles were permitted to return to the Land of Israel and reestablish the Temple and its sacrifices,¹ although perhaps with a better future further to be involved.² More liberal interpreters than not may actually ascribe the oracle of ch. 45 to a figure other than Ezekiel, concluding that it principally concerns post-exilic questions.³

Pre-millennialists will widely approach the scene of Ezekiel ch. 45 as involving the future Millennial Kingdom. Not all evangelical Christian interpreters, though—who may be pre-millennial to various degrees—are at all agreed on the details of what is witnessed, namely because a literal interpretation of Ezekiel 45:17 will require there to be literal animal sacrifices of some kind to be offered in the future.⁴ It is not uncommon for evangelical examiners to allegorize the prophecies of Ezekiel chs. 45-58, depicting a spiritual bounty to be experienced by God’s people, with the Prophet Ezekiel employing the language available to him, from past Biblical history. There are those, however, who are not so keen to just allegorize these prophecies, even with an idealistic scene being depicted. **What principally concerns our examination in this publication, is how in this future period, Torah institutions such as the Sabbath and appointed times (45:21-25) are going to be unambiguously observed.**

The administration of the worship that is to occur in the Millennial Temple is assigned to a particular “prince.” Who is the prince being referred to here? Many Christian and Messianic readers are likely to just assume that this figure is Yeshua the Messiah, overseeing the Temple activities in the Millennium. While this is an option at our disposal, others are not so convinced. The Hebrew labels this prince to be a *nasi* (נָסִי), “one lifted up, i.e. a chief prince,” perhaps involving “tribal chiefs and representatives, acc. to the religious organization” (*BDB*).⁵ Reflecting on Second Temple and post-Second Temple usage, *Jastrow* defines *nasi* as “prince, chief, ruler, officer,” notably as it concerned “the

¹ Cf. Tuell, pp 319-320.

² Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Ezekiel* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 225.

³ Darr, in *NIB*, 6:1581.

⁴ Cf. Duguid, pp 522-524; Wright, *Ezekiel*, 353.

⁵ *BDB*, 672.

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chief of the Great Sanhedrin in Jerusalem and of its successor in Palestinian places.”⁶ It is hardly a surprise that in the future Millennial Kingdom, that there will need to be a designated prince, leader, or *nasi*, to serve as a significant civil leader, chosen by the Messiah to oversee the religious conduct depicted in Ezekiel ch. 45 here. The Jewish commentary offered by S. Fisch in his *Soncino Books of the Bible* volume on Ezekiel, broadly recognizes this *nasi* as a civil figure given religious responsibilities:

“In Jerusalem, territory is to be allocated to the priests, Levites and the *Nasi*, as well as a section for the lay Israelites. Having assigned to the *Nasi* an estate ample for his maintenance, the prophet in God’s name exhorts him and his successors to practise strict justice, placing upon them the responsibility to see that righteousness prevails in the land and accurate standards of weights, measures and coinage are used. The *Nasi* is to receive the prescribed dues from the people and it is his obligation to provide what is necessary for the upkeep of the sacrificial service.”⁷

The thought of John B. Taylor, on what is depicted here in Ezekiel, is that “As a regulation, this is unique to Ezekiel, and it illustrates the real (though limited) cultic responsibility allotted to the civil [leader] of the people.”⁸ This *nasi* is a unique figure for sure. Daniel I. Block describes, “As he had done through Moses...through this prophet Yahweh reveals his magnanimous provision for forgiveness and fellowship with him. Under this constitution, the *nāšî*” plays a critical part; he is guardian and patron of the cult.”⁹ Peter C. Craigie, perhaps taking more of a post-exilic vantage point for the oracle witnessed here, actually concludes that Ezekiel was not entirely correct in what he decreed:

“As things turned out, a royal house did not survive in the restored community after the exile, and in that particular Ezekiel was wrong. But the central message of this portion of Ezekiel’s great vision was relevant, whether Israel had a king or not; and is still relevant today.”¹⁰

A futuristic *nasi* serving as a significant governing figure in the Millennial Kingdom, is still very much a tenable interpretation. Early Messianic Jewish theologian Charles L. Feinberg, although holding to some dispensationalist presuppositions, draws the conclusion for this prophecy, “The setting is the millennium...Because of the dues paid him by the people, the prince is to provide the sacrifices for public worship....It is indisputable that the ancient feasts of Israel will be celebrated in the millennium.”¹¹ And indeed, given not just the past *but also future* significance of the Sabbath and appointed times, Messianic Believers today widely express the view that God’s people should be observing them *in the present*.

Controversy tends to not exist over the Ezekiel 45:17 attestation that the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat* will be observed in the future Millennium as a worldwide day of rest (cf. Isaiah 66:23). Controversy exists when it is seen how the *nasi* or prince will be responsible *l’kafeir b’ad Beit-Yisrael* (לְכַפֵּר בְּעַד בֵּית־יִשְׂרָאֵל), “to atone on behalf of the

⁶ Jastrow, 939.

⁷ Fisch, 310.

⁸ Taylor, 275.

⁹ Block, *Ezekiel 25-48*, pp 659-660.

¹⁰ Craigie, *Ezekiel*, 303.

¹¹ Feinberg, 265

House of Israel" (ATS). The presence of apparently literal animal sacrifices, has caused various Christian interpreters to just allegorize or spiritualize Ezekiel's words. Alternatively, pre-millennial examiners who do not spiritualize Ezekiel's words, tend to instead approach them as depicting these sacrifices as memorials of the final sacrifice of Yeshua the Messiah. Ralph P. Alexander makes the assertion,

"Contrary to the unrighteous behavior of Israel's past leaders, Israel's prince (leader) in the Millennium would be faithful to the Lord's righteous requirements. One of the prince's duties would be the make atonement for the people...[T]he atonement rituals of the Mosaic system and those of the millennial system described in these chapters were picture lessons and reminders of mankind's sinfulness and their need for a complete cleansing from sin and forgiveness through the efficacious atoning sacrifice of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. No other sacrifice ever provided efficacious atonement, and no other sacrifice ever would...These rituals of atonement were commemorative of the complete and finished work of Christ for sin through the sacrifice of himself...They were picture-lessons and reminders to the people of their Messiah's marvelous work."¹²

We have to consider how for a future period such as the Millennium, with sin greatly reduced and with the literal presence of the Messiah Himself reigning from Jerusalem realized—that animal sacrifices such as those witnessed in Ezekiel 45:17 are going to take on a significance which no previous generation had ever experienced. In a world with Yeshua Himself present, the Adversary committed to the bottomless pit (Revelation 20:1-3), sin greatly reduced, and a worldwide respect for God's Law—that bloody animal sacrifices may be necessary to stir those living in this period about the severity of human sin and its consequences, needs to be contemplated by those of us living in the present pre-millennial era.

¹² Alexander, in *EXP*, 6:983; also Cooper, 400.