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Gates and Entrances in Ezekiel 40–48: The Social Utopia of the Temple Vision

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Abstract

The temple vision of Ezek 40–48 devotes considerable attention to measuring and describing the various gates and entrances of the temple compound. Previous studies have tended to focus on the defensive function of the gates. However, these structures not only bar entry but also facilitate access to the temple under certain ritualized conditions. Offering a close reading of the references to the gates in Ezek 40–48, in which particular roles and activities are associated with specific entrances, this article shows how these architectural features of the temple map a differential system in which social hierarchies are organized according to the level, direction, and timing of access ascribed to different groups and individuals within the temple compound. The article concludes by exploring the significance of the gates for how we understand the literary genre of the temple vision of Ezek 40–48, and in particular its nature as a social utopia.

Keywords

Gates – Ezek 40–48 – temple vision – social utopia – space – social hierarchies

1 Introduction

A distinctive feature of the visionary temple described in Ezek 40–48 is the prominence of its monumental gates. Colossal in size and described in vivid detail, these architectural features have an importance that is signaled at

Ezek 43:11 MT with the exhortation to the prophet Ezekiel to describe to the Israelites the entrances and exits of the temple so they might observe “all [the temple’s] plans and all its statutes and do them” (את כל צורתו ואת כל חקתיו) (ועשו אותם).¹ A similar exhortation is found at Ezek 44:5: “Pay attention to the entrance[s] of the temple with all the exits of the sanctuary” (ושמת לבך למבוא) (הבית בכל מוצאי המקדש).² Why is such significance awarded to the temple gates in Ezek 40–48, and what does their role in the visionary space tell us about the likely purpose of the temple vision within the book of Ezekiel?

Scholarly treatments of the gates in Ezek 40–48 have tended to focus on their parallels with known gate structures in ancient Israel, noting in particular the structural similarity between the Ezekiel gates and Iron Age II fortified city gates such as the northern gate of Meggido and the gates of Gezer, Hazor, and Lachish.³ Given the clear defensive function of city gates in the ancient Near East, the apparent modeling of the Ezekiel temple entrances on urban fortified gates has led many scholars to argue that they are defensive structures, working in concert with the outer wall to protect the temple against profanation.⁴ A primarily defensive reading of the gates in Ezek 40–48, however, arguably struggles to account for the ways in which these structures not only bar entry but also *facilitate* access to the temple under certain ritualized conditions.⁵ Indeed, it is noteworthy that all interactions between the various social actors at the temple—even the prophet’s encounters with Yhwh (see Ezek 43:1–4; 44:4)—take place within, or with reference to, the gates. This suggests that the gates not only serve to defend the temple as a space inhabited by the deity, but also to establish the temple as a “social space,”⁶ insofar as the temple serves

1 Cf. 43:11 LXX, which omits the reference to the temple entrances. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of the biblical text are my own.

2 While the MT reads מבוא in the singular, this should probably be corrected to the plural; for this reading, see, e.g., Zimmerli, *Ezekiel* 2, 443; and Konkel, *Architektonik*, 99–100.

3 On the parallel with Megiddo, see Howie, “East Gate”; for those with Gezer, Hazor, and Lachish, see Zimmerli, *Ezekiel* 2, 352–353; and Konkel, *Architektonik*, 254–257. Tova Ganzel has also recently compared the temple gates with Babylonian gate structures; see Ganzel, *Ezekiel’s Visionary Temple*, 72–75.

4 For example, Liss, “Describe the Temple,” 135, argues that the gates “primarily signify guard and protection: No entry!” Zimmerli, *Ezekiel* 2, 361, likewise asserts that the gates “proclaim God’s exclusive and defensive holiness, which does not demean itself with human affairs.”

5 This facilitative aspect of the gates has been noted by Odell, *Ezekiel*, 491, who goes so far as to assert that “[t]here is nothing to suggest that the gates block or restrict access to the courts.” I would argue, however, that the gates fulfill a dual function of both restricting access to the temple and mediating admission to its grounds for particular social actors.

6 On social space, see further Bourdieu, “Social Space”; and Lefebvre, *Production of Space*.