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Idolatry in the Temple

Ezekiel 8: 1-18

Idolatry in the Temple DIG: Where is Ezekiel when the vision begins? To what city is he taken? By whom? In each of Ezekiel's four visions, or four scenes, he is shown a part of the Temple. What about each scene is "more detestable" than the one before? What evil does he sense, as if for the first time? What is the prior history of the provocative idol (Second Kings 21:7, 23:6; Second Chronicles 33:15)? Given that Tammuz is a Babylonian fertility god, and that smelling branches is a form of nature worship, why do you think God was displeased with the actions as Ezekiel saw them? What do these actions reveal about what some Israelites really believed?

REFLECT: The idol that made YHVH jealous kept reappearing in the Temple. What idol has the tendency to reappear in your heart? What can you do to keep it out? The actions Ezekiel saw were typical of Judah's neighbors. Which actions of the people around you do you tend to imitate if you aren't careful? If ADONAI were allowed to look through "a hole in the wall" of your heart and mind, what would He see there? What can you do about anything there that displeases the LORD?

The month of Elul, or September 17, 592 BC during the eleven-year reign of Zedekiah

Scene One: In the sixth year, in the sixth month on the fifth day, while I was sitting in my house and the elders of Judah in Babylon were sitting before me (Ezekiel 8:1a). **The rabbis teach that this was the beginning of the synagogue.** It had been one year and two months since Ezekiel was first called to prophesy. YHVH had been silent for all that time, so Ezekiel had been silent for a year and two months. When Ezekiel spoke, it was because God was speaking, when Ezekiel was silent, it is because God was silent. That's the way it would be for the first seven-and-a-half years of his prophetic ministry until he heard the report of Jerusalem's fall. Ezekiel had been told to lie on one side or the other for 430 days so as to put the sins of the house of Israel and the house of Judah on himself (Ezekiel 4:4-8). Therefore, this vision of the idolatry in the Temple and the departure of the Sh'khinah glory came to him near the end of the time he was lying on his side in bed. The four symbolic actions in view of the people

(Ezekiel Chapters 4 and 5) created the necessary attention to show the exiles that they would not be returning to Y'hudah any time soon; Jerusalem was destined for destruction. The elders of Judah were then at his bedside listening to what he had to say.

At that time, the hand of Adonai ELOHIM fell on Ezekiel and the Sh'khinah glory suddenly reappeared in the same form he saw at his calling (to see link click [Er - Ezekiel's First Vision](#)). 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, the visible manifestation of God's presence (Ezekiel 8:1b-2).

He stretched out what looked like a hand and took me by the hair of my head. The noun for hair is *tsitsith* used of the fringe in the corner of the garment (Numbers 15:38). The Ruach ha-Kodesh lifted me up between earth and heaven and in visions of God He took me to Jerusalem. He was transported in spirit, not body, to the City of David, to the Temple itself to see the idolatry that was going on there. That he did not actually leave Babylon is clear from Ezekiel 11:24. He was carried back to Babylon in spirit after the visions were completed (Ezekiel 11:22-25). What followed was not a description of deeds done sometime in Israel's ancient past, but a retrospective survey of Y'hudah's spiritual depravity. Ezekiel saw conditions as they existed in his day at that very hour (Ezekiel 8:2-3a).



The prophet was taken to the entrance of the north gate of the inner court wall of the Temple, where the idol that provokes to jealousy stood. It appears Ezekiel was set down in the outer court in front of the north gate leading to the inner court. And there before me was the Sh'khinah glory of the God of Israel, as in the vision I had seen in the plain. Then the Holy Spirit 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 (Ezekiel 8:3b-5). It was probably an idol of the goddess Asherah set up by Manasseh (Second Kings 21:7). The idol was destroyed by Josiah (Second Kings 23:6),

but evidently set up again after his death. It was called **the idol of jealousy** because it provoked **Ha'Shem** to jealousy (**Ezekiel 5:13, 16:38 and 42; 36:6; 38:19; Exodus 20:5**).

The reason that **idols** are not to be worshiped is that **ADONAI** is a **jealous** or zealous **God** (**Exodus 20:4-6**), and their idolatry is looked upon as spiritual adultery. The Hebrew term *qanna'* combines the two concepts of jealousy and zeal (not envy or suspicion).²⁸¹ So zeal, or zealousness, meaning a *passionate devotion to*, would be a better term to use than **jealous**, which has negative, even petty connotations. So **idolatry** would cause **God's** zeal to burn like a husband's zealousness would burn against an unfaithful wife (**Hosea 2:2-5**). Because **God** and **Isra'el** are viewed as married, **Isra'el** is viewed as the wife of **ADONAI** (**Deuteronomy 5:1-3, 6:10-15, 7:6-11; Isaiah 54:1-8, 62:4-5; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 16:8; Hosea 2:14-23**). For that very reason, **the Israelites** should not have worshiped other gods. **God** has a right to be zealous over what is rightfully **His**. So this was not a petty jealousy, but a righteous zealousness.²⁸²

A sweeping contrast is seen between **the idol that provokes to jealousy** and **the glory of the God of Isra'el**; the **God** who had chosen **her** in love, who should have been worshiped instead of **the idol in the Temple**. **The north gate** was also called **the gate of the altar** because animals were brought through that **gate** to be sacrificed on **the bronze altar** (**Leviticus 1:11**). At the **gate of the altar**, in the place where acceptable sacrifices should have been brought in, **Ezekiel** saw **the idol that provokes to jealousy**. The worshipers were probably prostrating themselves before **it**. As grievous as their actions were, **the prophet** was told that **they** were performing **even** greater abominations, such as ultimately would drive **the visible presence of the LORD** from their midst (**Ezekiel 10 and 11**). Previous sins had expelled the northern kingdom of **Isra'el** from their land; now **YHVH** warned those in the southern kingdom of **Judah** that **He** also would no longer tolerate their spiritual adultery.²⁸³

The Sh'khinah came to live with **Isra'el** when the Tabernacle was finished (see the commentary on **Exodus Hh - The Glory of the LORD Filled the Tabernacle**), and until this time had dwelt in the Most Holy Place (see the commentary on **Exodus Fs - The Mercy Seat in the Most Holy Place: Christ at the Throne of Grace**). Later, **the Shekinah** was transferred to **the Temple** after Solomon built it. **And said to me, "Son of man, do you see what they are doing - the utterly detestable things the Israelites are doing here, things that will drive me far from My Sanctuary?** It was bad enough that **idolatry** was being practiced on every high hill and under every green tree throughout the Land, **but** to bring it into the very **Temple** compound itself was the last straw. So here **the prophet** got **his** first hint at what **he** was about to see, the departure of **the Sh'khinah glory** from **the**

Temple. As bad as that might be, **the Ruach Ha’Kodesh** told **Ezekiel**, “**You will see things that are even more detestable**” (Ezekiel 8:6).

Scene Two: Then He brought me to the entrance to the court and was shown the worship of Egyptian **gods**. I looked, and saw a hole in the wall. He said to me, “**Son of man, now dig into the wall.**” So I dug into the wall and saw a doorway there. And He said to me, “**Go in and see the wicked and detestable things they are doing here.**” So I went and looked, and I saw portrayed all over the walls were essentially Egyptian deities, all kinds of crawling things and unclean animals and all the idols of Isra’el (Ezekiel 8:7-10). Most of them considered unclean under Isra’el’s dietary laws. The Hebrew word that **Ezekiel** uses for **idols** here is *gillul*, meaning *pellets of dung*. He uses it 38 times beginning in 6:4. That’s what **he** thinks about those **gods**.

The scene reminds us of the Egyptian burial chambers, the walls of which were covered with brilliantly painted images of deities in animal form, including Anubis, the jackal-headed god who weighed the souls of the dead. Egyptian influence was pervasive in Judah after the death of Josiah, beginning with his successors Jehoahaz and Jehoiakim, who ruled as an Egyptian puppet. But even after the crushing defeat of the Egyptians at Carchemish in 605 BC, there was a strong pro-Egyptian party at the court of the Jewish king who looked for Egypt to back Judah against the new Babylonian conquerors. And, in fact, an Egyptian army succeeded in temporarily raising the siege of **Jerusalem**, thus giving rise to the hope of deliverance that proved to be short-lived (see [Fm - Jeremiah in Prison](#)).²⁸⁴

In front of them stood seventy of Judah’s leading citizens, and **Jaazaniah**, the fourth son of **Shaphan** (apparently **their** leader) **was standing among them**. **Shaphan** was a faithful scribe who read to the king Josiah the newly discovered book of Deuteronomy (**2 Kings 22:3; Yirmeyahu 29:3, 36:10, 39:14**). **Shaphan** had three other sons who were just as faithful as **Jeremiah** himself. They were among the few who were pro-**Jeremiah**. But here, **Jaazaniah** was the one black sheep in the family.

Each had a censer in his hand, and a fragrant cloud of incense was rising. They were secretly worshiping false **idols** right within **the Temple** compound. **He said to me, “Son of man, have you seen what the elders of Y’hudah are doing in the darkness, each at the shrine of his own idol?** Thus, the spiritual adultery being practiced by those leading laity leaders was probably aimed at enlisting the support of Egyptian **deities**, which of course also implied the loss of confidence in the **God** of Isra’el and **His** power to act on **their** behalf.

They said: ADONAI does not see us; the LORD has forsaken the Land. They hide

their abominable practices from the public eye, but have no scruples about violating the Torah of God, believing that He is not interested in the affairs of mankind. Moreover, the evils that had taken place against Judah proved that He had abandoned His people and the Land. They would not take responsibility for their own sin. Their reasoning that if God had not left the Land, surely He would have saved them from the Babylonian invaders. The prophet stood observing the strange scene taking place within the supposedly sacred Temple compound. As he stood there, the divine voice again said: You will see them doing things that are even more detestable (Ezekiel 8:11-13). It was as if the Ruach was saying, "Look at what they're doing . . . and they think they can't be seen. And if you think this is bad, wait until you see what happens next!"

Scene Three: Again Ezekiel was transported, and the Holy Spirit brought him to the inner court and the entrance of the north gate of the house of the LORD, and I saw Jewish women sitting there, mourning the god Tammuz. The worship of Tammuz was nature worship. Among the Sumerians and Babylonians he was known as Dumuzi, who was the faithful son of Ishtar. Among the Greeks he was known as Adonis. He is the god of spring vegetation, who died in the winter and descended into the underworld. During that time his followers would weep, mourning his death, which included cultic prostitution. In the spring, however, Tammuz would emerge victorious from the underworld and bring with him the life-giving rains. He was the god of regeneration. The Israelites worshiped the false god of regeneration and worshiped the One True God of regeneration. The worship of the true Giver of rain had been replaced by the debased worship of a pagan deity. The worship of the Creator was replaced by the worship of the cycles of creation that YHWH had established.²⁸⁵ He said to me, "Do you see this, son of man? You will see things that are even more detestable than this" (Ezekiel 8:14-15).

Scene Four: Then the Spirit transported Ezekiel to the inner court of ADONAI's house. This was an area that only the priests could go, but since he was a priest (Ezekiel 1:3), he was able to enter. The way the Temple was constructed, if you looked out of the gate you would be facing east. As you walked into the Holy Place and further into the Most Holy Place you would be facing west. But the pagans, who worshiped the sun, built their temples facing east. The uniqueness of the Temple of the LORD was that it was facing west, in the opposite direction.

And there at the entrance to the Temple, between the portico and the [bronze] altar where the sacrifices were offered, were about twenty-five men. They represented the twenty-four Levitical priestly courses (First Chronicles 24:4-5) with the high priest at

their head, which made **twenty-five** key priests. The apostasy of the laity and of **the women** had already been noted; now it is revealed in the ranks of the priesthood. Like priest . . . like people. But these priests were facing **the east! 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 (Ezekiel 8:16)**. That meant they had turned their backs on **ADONAI** and were bowing down in submission and worship to the sun. This directly violated **God's** command (**Deuteronomy 4:19**). Worst of all, these were the priests of the people!

Five years later, and only one year before the destruction of **the Temple**, **YHVH** spoke through **His prophet Jeremiah**, saying: **The Israelites have turned their backs on Me and not their faces; though I taught them persistently through My Torah, but they would not listen or respond to discipline. They set up their vile images in the house that bears My Name and defiled it (Jeremiah 32:33-4)**. The stage was set for judgment.

The announcement of judgment: Then the Ruach Ha'Kodesh said to Ezekiel, "Have you seen this, son of man? Is it a trivial matter for the people of Judah to do the detestable things they are doing here? Because **their** worship of **the LORD** had deteriorated, that led to unintended consequences. **YHVH** would not allow the rebellion to continue. **The Land** was **filled with violence and God** was **continually angered. Look at them putting the branch to their nose**. The Septuagint (the Greek translation of the TaNaKh) translates this verse as mocking **God**. It was recognized as an obscene gesture toward **Ha'Shem**. **Therefore I will deal with them in anger; I will not look on them with pity or spare them**. It will be judgment without mercy. **Although they shout in my ears, by that point, I will not listen to them" (Ezekiel 8:17-18).**²⁸⁶ **Their** prayers will bring back nothing but the echoes of **their** own words.