

Ezekiel 44:24

“Sabbath Observance in the Messianic Temple”

“Moreover, they shall teach My people *the difference* between the holy and the profane, and cause them to discern between the unclean and the clean. In a dispute they shall take their stand to judge; they shall judge it according to My ordinances. They shall also keep My laws and My statutes in all My appointed feasts and sanctify My sabbaths.”

There are some important statements appearing in Ezekiel’s vision of the Temple, which describe not only the future reestablishment of the Levitical priesthood, but also a significant restoration of purpose for the priests who will serve, which had been lacking in the Prophet Ezekiel’s generation. It is widely agreed among many pre-millennial interpreters that Ezekiel’s vision depicts the Temple to be established during the Messianic Age. It is to be observed how the Levites in general can be Temple attendants and offer general service and sacrifices, but that they cannot serve in anything intimate (44:10-14). It is only the priests from the specific line of Zadok (1 Chronicles 6:50-53), who served as priest during the reign of David (2 Samuel 8:17; 15:24-29; 20:25) and was faithful to God—securing a place for his future descendants—who will be eligible for the select service at the Messianic Temple. Zadok supported Solomon as king (1 Kings 1:8), whereas the line of Abiathar was removed, because he supported Adonijah (1 Kings 2:35).

The Prophet Ezekiel foresaw that there would be a reversal of the crimes that he had seen committed against the sanctuary (44:1-9). Those of the line of Zadok will be those fit enough to fully serve the new Temple, requiring them to observe strict regulations to be fit (44:16-22, 25-27), including the recognition that God will provide for them (44:28-31). A significant component of the Zadokite priests’ duty will be to teach the people the correct Torah instruction, involving an adherence to the laws of clean and unclean, as well as Sabbath adherence (44:23-24). This will be a reversal of the scene of Ezekiel 22:26 (previously discussed).

44:23-24 The Lord asserts, *v’et ami yoru bein qodesh l’chol u’bein-tamei l’tahor yodi’um* (וְאֶת־עַמִּי יִוְרֶוּ בֵּין קֹדֶשׁ לְחֹל וּבֵין־טָמֵא לְטָהוֹר), “And they shall teach my people the difference between the holy and common, and cause them to discern between the unclean and the clean” (v. 23, Jerusalem Bible-Koren). References made to *bein qodesh l’chol*, “what is sacred and what is profane” (NJPS), and *bein-tamei l’tahor*, “contaminated and clean” (ATS), would involve the priests’ responsibility to instruct in the proper adherence to the Torah’s commandments in terms of ritual purity, and obviously also diet.

The Zadokite priests’ possessing a high sense of justice and morality is emphasized: “In lawsuits, too, it is they who shall act as judges; they shall decide them in accordance with My rules” (v. 24a, NJPS). This does not just pertain to their ethics, though, as it is stated, *v’et-Tororti v’et-chuqotai b’kol-moedai yishmoru v’et Shabbetotai yeqadeishu* (וְאֶת־חֻקֹּתַי בְּכָל־מוֹעֲדַי יִשְׁמְרוּ וְאֶת־שַׁבְּתוֹתַי יִקְדְּשׁוּ), “and they shall keep my Torah and my statutes in all my appointed times; and they shall hallow my sabbaths” (v. 24b, Jerusalem Bible-Koren). Whether it involves internal morality or outward purity and action—the priests are required by the Lord to be a worthy example to others, as they direct others in His ways of holiness. Noting the different Hebrew terms employed in this passage, Daniel I. Block details,

“[T]he priests were to be models of obedience to the will of God. The expressions *tôrôtay* [תּוֹרֹתַי], ‘my instructions,’ *huqqôtay* [חֻקֹּתַי], ‘my decrees,’ *kol-mô’aday* [כָּל־מוֹעֲדַי], ‘all my appointed feasts,’ and *šabbôtay* [שַׁבְּתוֹתַי], ‘my Sabbaths,’ cover the entire range of divine expectations: civil, religious, and cultic.”¹

It is further directed how, “The priests shall not eat any bird or beast that has died a natural death or has been torn to pieces” (v. 31; Leviticus 22:8). With some of the surrounding context in view, describing the Zadokite priests’ required behavior, John B. Taylor observes, “The priests were

¹ Daniel I. Block, *New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 25-48* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 643.

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by their lives to be examples of separateness; their ritual holiness was intended to promote ethical holiness among the people they were called to serve....In keeping with their duty to be examples of holiness to the people, the priests also had certain duties of a judicial character and as guardians for the proper observance of festivals and sabbaths."² Lamar Eugene Cooper also states, "The priests were to provide the kind of unblemished example that would encourage Israel to worship God and attract unbelieving nations to serve him....They were to see that all the laws of God were observed, especially the feast days and the Sabbath."³ The priests of Israel were surely supposed to teach the people God's Torah (Deuteronomy 33:10; Malachi 2:7).

As a Jewish commentator, S. Fisch describes, "They are strictly to observe the laws and regulations concerning the sacrifices to be offered on festivals and Sabbaths (Kimchi)." While this does involve a reversal of these instructions having once been ignored or perverted during Ezekiel's time, Fisch goes on to say, though, that "Elijah of Wilma comments that the priests are charged with the task of instructing the people in the whole range of Jewish jurisprudence as later classified in the six Orders of the Mishnah and Talmud."⁴ With a futuristic scene envisioned by the Prophet Ezekiel, and with the Messianic Age Temple yet to be established, it will certainly be interesting to see how much of the traditional Jewish observance of the kosher dietary laws or Sabbath will be taught or directed by the Zadokite priests.

More generally, and looking for some more tangible application of these prophecies by Ezekiel, Christopher J.H. Wright directs readers to the thrust of Ezra 7:10: "For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD and to practice *it*, and to teach *His* statutes and ordinances in Israel." It does have to be fairly recognized how the type of leadership integrity, to be modeled in the future by the Zadokite priests, is something which has been present by many leaders of God's people, both in the Biblical record and throughout history. Wright's thoughts focus on the need for those in pastoral leadership to take important cues from examples such as these:

"Ezra provides an outstanding example of such leadership, with the added observation that he made the law a matter of personal study as well. An admirable example to all who minister God's word, Ezra's triple commitment to the law was to study it, to do it and to teach it. If only leaders in the Christian church had the same depth and breadth of commitment to the Scriptures! For it hardly needs to be said that these same duties belong to the task of pastoral leadership in the church and are strongly commended in the New Testament. Not only did Paul impress on Timothy and Titus the importance of teaching, careful handling of disputes, and setting an example of personal godliness and integrity; he modelled all three in his own ministry."⁵

Ezekiel 44:23-24 application In the future Millennial Kingdom, there is going to be an observance of the Torah's sanctuary regulations (44:5), with the rebellion and abominations witnessed by the Prophet Ezekiel (44:6-7), decisively left in the past. There will be a full obedience of both internal and external instructions for the future (44:9). So significant is this for salvation history that a previous sanctuary in which foreigners were often turned away (Leviticus 22:25), will now find them proactively welcomed (Isaiah 56:3-8) in this new arrangement—implying that the wide-sweeping obedience to God's Torah, from the nations at large envisioned by the Prophets, has come into full reality (Isaiah 2:2-4; Micah 4:1-3). Among the instructions to be honored by all of God's people, Jewish and non-Jewish, will include regulations detailing purity and diet.

In view of the future Zadokite priesthood described by Ezekiel, it does have to be noted how the Apostolic Scriptures do enjoy a priestly call upon all of the people of God (1 Peter 2:5, 9). This is, however, rooted within the original mandate placed upon Ancient Israel (Exodus 19:6), not the specific Levite-Zadokite priestly duty detailed for the future Millennial Temple.

² Taylor, 272.

³ Lamar Eugene Cooper, *New American Commentary: Ezekiel* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 395.

⁴ Fisch, 308.

⁵ Wright, *The Message of Ezekiel*, 351.

Ezekiel 44:24 Sabbath and Rest in the Tanach

Some of these instructions witnessed from Ezekiel can be problematic for many Christian readers—far beyond just a definite future adherence to the Torah’s instruction on clean and unclean, or *Shabbat*.⁶ The author of Hebrews would assert in the First Century, regarding the Levitical priesthood and sacrificial system, “there is a setting aside of a former commandment because of its weakness and uselessness” (Hebrews 7:18), as there has been a necessary “change of law” (Hebrews 7:12) to accommodate for the priestly, Melchizedkian service of Yeshua the Messiah in Heaven (Hebrews 7:13-17). While this Melchizedkian priesthood of Yeshua is surely superior to that of the Levites generally or Zadokites specifically, in order to maintain a high degree of Biblical continuity—where we recognize how God’s covenant with the Levites cannot be broken (Jeremiah 33:20-22)—then the “setting aside” of the Levitical priesthood and sacrificial system needs to be approached as something temporary until the Millennium. During the Messianic Age, there will be an operating Temple, Levite-Zadokite priesthood, kosher and Sabbath observance, and animal sacrifices—all with direct oversight by Yeshua the Messiah. Any animal sacrifices, as recognized by a variety of pre-millennial interpreters,⁷ will be retrospective memorials of His final sacrifice for sin, but not expiatory for sin.⁸

⁶ Cf. Wright, *The Message of Ezekiel*, 348.

⁷ John F. Walvoord, *Israel in Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), pp 125-126; Tim LaHaye, ed., *Tim LaHaye Prophecy Study Bible*, KJV (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 2000), 885.

⁸ For a further evaluation of the issues of Hebrews 7, and the setting side or *athetēsis* (ἀθέτησις) of the Levitical priesthood, consult the commentary *Hebrews for the Practical Messianic* by J.K. McKee.