

Ezekiel

Week 4

Prophecies Against Jerusalem

Chapters 4-5

Four Symbolic Actions (4:1-5:4)

The symbolic actions of 4:1–5:4 set forth the impending siege and fall of Jerusalem. Such actions, performed by the prophets of Israel (cf. Isa. 20:2–4; Jer. 13:1–11; Hos. 1:2 ff.) were an integral element in the self-fulfilling word of God which they were given to communicate and helped to ensure the accomplishment of what they symbolized.¹

In the Mari texts from over a millennium earlier than Ezekiel, prophets were already using symbolic actions and wordplays as a medium for their prophetic message. In one instance a prophet devoured a raw lamb to announce an imminent danger that could devour the land. Forms of street theater are employed by Isaiah (Is 20—traveling naked) and Jeremiah (Jer 19—execration ritual following a procession) to engage their audience and demonstrate through their actions how serious the threat is to the people.²

The Mimic Siege (4:1-3)

Ezekiel draws a plan of Jerusalem on a tile and surrounds it with imitation ramparts, entrenchments and other apparatus of a siege. He himself acts the besieger.³

All of the strategies described here are typical of Assyrian and Babylonian siege engines and techniques. They are often depicted on palace walls in Nineveh and Babylon.⁴

Since Ezekiel is directing the symbolic siege, he must represent God. The iron wall is then understood to be the barrier between God and the people of Jerusalem. It signals that they may expect no help in the coming siege from the Divine Warrior Yahweh.⁵

In the previous chapter, the prophet had been told that he would not be able to act as an intercessor for the people; the appeals process had been exhausted. This is now visually depicted. The prophet is told to “turn [his] face toward” Jerusalem (4:3), adopting an implacable attitude toward it. The iron wall and Ezekiel’s expression communicate God’s abandonment of the city (cf. chs. 8–11), and the dual agency of destruction (human and divine) emerges in 4:3: “It will be under siege, and you shall besiege it.” The catastrophe will not simply be an event of human history (“It will be under siege”) but specifically the

¹ Bruce, F. F. (1979). *New International Bible commentary* (p. 814). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

² Matthews, V. H., Chavalas, M. W., & Walton, J. H. (2000). *The IVP Bible background commentary: Old Testament* (electronic ed., Eze 4:1). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

³ Bruce. 814

⁴ Matthews & Walton. Eze 4:2

⁵ Matthews & Walton. Eze 4:3

result of direct divine action (“You [i.e., the prophet, representing the Lord] shall besiege it”). By his pantomime, Ezekiel is to make the invisible aggressor visible.⁶

The Prophet’s Vigil (4:4–8)

As though crushed by a heavy burden, Ezekiel is to lie on his two sides – [left and right in Hebrew usage corresponding to north and south respectively] – to bear the people’s punishments. (In the *Agnus Dei*, the original wording says “bear the iniquity of the world,” not “take away.”) Ezekiel was not operating as a sacrificial priest, but as a prophet—representing Israel’s sin, which still required atonement.⁷

Ezekiel is to lie on his left side for 390 days, representing 390 years, bearing the guilt of the entire covenant community of Israel. The iniquity of the community is placed on him (4:4). During this period he symbolizes Israel’s long history of accumulated sin, which culminates in the siege and fall of Jerusalem, concretely depicted by eating siege rations throughout the 390 days (4:9). Then during the period of forty days, he represents the punishment of the Exile, which he depicts in terms of the symbolic figure of forty years. Just as Israel’s ancestors in the desert were a lost generation, spending forty years in the desert for their sin (Num. 14:34), so the exilic generation is condemned to a similar fate for the nation’s long history of sin.⁸

arm bared. An indication of God’s hostility. Similar phrases are used of God’s saving activity, recalling the exodus, but Jer 21:5 depicts God warring against unfaithful Jerusalem.⁹

Polluted Siege-Rations (4:9–17)

The stringencies of the siege and the conditions of exile made it impracticable to observe the laws forbidding food that was ritually unclean: Ezekiel’s acted parable is enforced by the divine injunction to restrict himself to siege-rations and to prepare them in a manner that involved their ceremonial pollution, especially for a priest.¹⁰

The fact that Ezekiel’s food has to be weighed out and eaten at a particular time signals that this is the hard rationing that would have been necessary during a siege. Twenty shekels would be equivalent to eight ounces of food. That amount of calories would keep him alive, but it would also significantly weaken him. The weakness of a starvation diet mirrors conditions in Jerusalem.

Water rationing would also be necessary during the siege, since the people would be dependent on the supply in cisterns (see the comment on Jer 38:6) and the pool deriving from the Siloam tunnel. Ezekiel’s ration is one-sixth of a hin or two-thirds of a quart per day. The extremely hot conditions during the summer and fall of 588 would have severely

⁶ Duguid, I. M. (1999). *Ezekiel* (p. 88). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

⁷ Engelbrecht, E. A. (2009). *The Lutheran Study Bible* (p. 1314). St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House.

⁸ Duguid. 90

⁹ Engelbrecht. 1315

¹⁰ Bruce. 815

taxed the besieged people of Jerusalem. Such a small water ration would have further contributed to their misery.

The typical fuel in areas like Mesopotamia and Palestine was dried animal dung or cakes made from the waste pulp of crushed olives. Trees were too precious to be cut for cooking and warming. Ezekiel, however, is horrified when God commands him to cook using human dung, an unclean substance that must be buried away from human habitation (Deut 23:12–14). He was a priest and this act would defile him; he simply cannot bring himself to obey. Thus God compromises by allowing him to cook over animal dung.¹¹

*I have never eaten anything found dead: prohibited in Dt. 14:2. or torn by wild animals: prohibited in Exod. 22:31. foul flesh: such as the flesh of peace-offerings from the third day onward (Lev. 19:5–8).*¹²

The Prophet's Hair Divided (5:1–4)

As the fourth symbolic action Ezekiel cuts off his hair and beard and then divides it into three parts, of which one part is burnt, one is cut up with a knife and one is scattered to the winds. A few hairs remain protected in his lap, but even of these some are later thrown into the fire. Only the merest remnant of hair is left, and this is a sign of the fate of the people of Jerusalem.¹³

sharp sword. Or, “sharp blade,” used as a razor because a sword will be used in the judgments on the people. It is surprising that Ezekiel does not object as he did earlier to preparing his food on human dung. Scripture clearly prohibits priests from shaving their heads or beards. Near Eastern culture generally considered it dishonorable for a man to appear beardless (cf 2Sm 10:4; 1Ch 19:4).¹⁴

The prophet's hair itself becomes the medium for the last sign-act of the prophet in this sequence. Using a set of scales, he is to divide it carefully into three parts, representing the different fates that will meet the inhabitants of Jerusalem (Ezek. 5:2–4). God's judgment is not delivered in a haphazard fashion but is meticulously measured.¹⁵

The Symbolic Actions Explained (5:5–17)

The thoroughness of the devastation needs little clarification; that much was clear from the original sign. However, the reason for the devastation becomes clearer: Israel has transgressed her covenant relationship with God. The language Ezekiel adopts in these verses is not his own creation but is largely borrowed from Leviticus 26, a chapter that lays out the blessings and curses attached to the covenant. There covenant obedience is defined in terms of submission to the Lord alone, specifically through the avoidance of idolatry and

¹¹ Matthews & Walton. Eze 4:10-12

¹² Bruce. 815

¹³ Bruce. 815

¹⁴ Engelbrecht. 1316

¹⁵ Duguid. 98

respect for the Lord's sanctuary (Lev. 26:1–2). This matches the nature of the charge made against Israel in Ezekiel 5: They have committed idolatry and thus defiled the sanctuary (Ezek. 5:9, 11). More generally, they have not followed the Lord's decrees or kept his laws (5:6; cf. Lev. 26:14–15).

As a result, the curses of Leviticus 26 will be operative in their midst. The Lord's face will be set against them (Lev. 26:17). The result will be plagues of wild animals (Lev. 26:22; Ezek. 5:17), the sword and pestilence (Lev. 26:25; Ezek. 5:17), famine through a cutting off of the food supply (Lev. 26:26; Ezek. 5:16), eating of one's own children (Lev. 26:29; Ezek. 5:10), being scattered among the nations, and being pursued by the sword (Lev. 26:33; Ezek. 5:12). This threatened exile will be a consequence of the iniquities of that generation and their fathers (Lev. 26:39; cf. Ezek. 4:5).¹⁶

center of the nations. In medieval times, the phrase was often misunderstood as a geographical statement, but it is a theological one. The election of Zion as the city of David was part of the pivotal messianic promise. The people were misinterpreting God's promise to Zion as a magical guarantee of Jerusalem's impregnability (cf. Jer 7:4), and God must demolish that fantasy. The grace God showed to Jerusalem and His chosen people in the past was well known; now its neighbors will note the imminent judgment upon Jerusalem (and Israel) for its infidelity.

abominations. Ezekiel's all-purpose word for everything contrary to God's will and provoking His wrath. Ezekiel uses it 43 times, more than the rest of the prophets combined.¹⁷

cannibalism. One of the terrible results of a long siege of a walled city was food shortage. It sometimes became so severe that the inhabitants of the city resorted to cannibalism (see comment on 2 Kings 6:29). For instance, the Assyrian annals of Ashurbanipal describe his siege of Babylon 650–648 b.c. and the desperation of the starving people who were reduced to cannibalism. There are also a number of Mesopotamian treaties that contain a curse that calls for the violator of the treaty to feed on his own family or his own people (as in the Ashurnirari V's treaty with Mati'ilu of Arpad). Biblical versions of this type of curse can be found in Leviticus 26:29 and Deuteronomy 28:53–57.¹⁸

This covenant context is important because it demonstrates that the judgment that will befall Jerusalem is neither arbitrary nor unfair. The judgments coming on that city are not random afflictions thought up on the spur of the moment, as if God has lost his temper; they are the execution of the curses on the covenant breakers. Indeed, Israel has not merely failed to live up to God's standards; they have not even lived up to the standards of the nations around them (Ezek. 5:7). Instead of being a light to the nations, they have led the nations further into the darkness. For this reason, God must act to judge.

¹⁶ Duguid. 99

¹⁷ Engelbrecht/ 1316

¹⁸ Matthews & Walton. Eze 5:10

Recalling the covenant curses of Leviticus 26 should also lead to remembering the promise of 26:44–45: “Yet in spite of this, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them or abhor them so as to destroy them completely, breaking my covenant with them. I am the Lord their God. But for their sake I will remember the covenant with their ancestors whom I brought out of Egypt in the sight of the nations to be their God. I am the Lord.”¹⁹

Themes/Application

God’s Wrath

It may surprise us to find how frequently the Bible talks about the wrath of God. Yet if God loves all that is right and good, and all that conforms to his moral character, then it should not be surprising that he would hate everything that is opposed to his moral character. God’s wrath directed against sin is therefore closely related to God’s holiness and justice. God’s wrath may be defined as follows: *God’s wrath means that he intensely hates all sin.*

As with the other attributes of God, this is an attribute for which we should thank and praise God. It may not immediately appear to us how this can be done, since wrath seems to be such a negative concept. Viewed alone, it would arouse only fear and dread. Yet it is helpful for us to ask what God would be like if he were a God that did not hate sin. He would then be a God who either delighted in sin or at least was not troubled by it. Such a God would not be worthy of our worship, for sin is hateful and it is worthy of being hated. Sin ought not to be. It is in fact a virtue to hate evil and sin (cf. Heb. 1:9; Zech. 8:17; et al.), and we rightly imitate this attribute of God when we feel hatred against great evil, injustice, and sin.

Furthermore, we should feel no fear of God’s wrath as Christians, for although “we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind” (Eph. 2:3), we now have trusted in Jesus, “who delivers us from the wrath to come” (1 Thess. 1:10; cf. Rom. 5:10). When we meditate on the wrath of God, we will be amazed to think that our Lord Jesus Christ bore the wrath of God that was due to our sin, in order that we might be saved (Rom. 3:25–26).²⁰

¹⁹ Duguid. 100

²⁰ Grudem, W. A. (2004). Systematic theology: an introduction to biblical doctrine (p. 205-206). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House.