EZEKIEL

Chapter 4

*Siege of Jerusalem Symbolized*

**“Now, son of man, take a clay tablet, put it in front of you and draw the city of Jerusalem on it.  2 Then lay siege to it: Erect siege works against it, build a ramp up to it, set up camps against it and put battering rams around it.  3 Then take an iron pan, place it as an iron wall between you and the city and turn your face toward it. It will be under siege, and you shall besiege it. This will be a sign to the house of Israel. 4 “Then lie on your left side and put the sin of the house of Israel upon yourself. You are to bear their sin for the number of days you lie on your side.  5 I have assigned you the same number of days as the years of their sin. So for 390 days you will bear the sin of the house of Israel. 6 “After you have finished this, lie down again, this time on your right side, and bear the sin of the house of Judah. I have assigned you 40 days, a day for each year.  7 Turn your face toward the siege of Jerusalem and with bared arm prophesy against her.  8 I will tie you up with ropes so that you cannot turn from one side to the other until you have finished the days of your siege. 9 “Take wheat and barley, beans and lentils, millet and spelt; put them in a storage jar and use them to make bread for yourself. You are to eat it during the 390 days you lie on your side.  10 Weigh out twenty shekels of food to eat each day and eat it at set times.  11 Also measure out a sixth of a hin of water and drink it at set times.  12 Eat the food as you would a barley cake; bake it in the sight of the people, using human excrement for fuel.”  13 The LORD said, “In this way the people of Israel will eat defiled food among the nations where I will drive them.” 14 Then I said, “Not so, Sovereign LORD! I have never defiled myself. From my youth until now I have never eaten anything found dead or torn by wild animals. No unclean meat has ever entered my mouth.” 15 “Very well,” he said, “I will let you bake your bread over cow manure instead of human excrement.” 16 He then said to me: “Son of man, I will cut off the supply of food in Jerusalem. The people will eat rationed food in anxiety and drink rationed water in despair,  17 for food and water will be scarce. They will be appalled at the sight of each other and will waste away because of their sin.**

**4:1** *take a clay tablet.* The first of several symbolic acts to be performed by the prophet. After inscribing a likeness of the city of Jerusalem on a moist clay tablet, such as those commonly used in Babylonia, Ezekiel was to place around it models of siege works to represent the city under attack (v. 2). He was then to place an iron pan (perhaps a baking griddle) between himself and the symbolized city (v. 3) to indicate the unbreakable strength of the siege. (CSB)

**4:3** *you shall besiege it.* Ezekiel’s own presence in the scene signified that the siege would actually be laid by the Lord himself. (CSB)

**4:4** *You are to bear their sin.* A representative rather than a substitutionary bearing of sin. The prophet’s action symbolized Israel’s sins; it did not remove them. (CSB)

LEFT SIDE – Ezekiel was facing north (assuming his feet pointed eastward). The left side was also generally considered the less significant side (cf Gn 48:13-19; Ecc 10:2). Looking northward would suggest the Northern Kingdom, Israel, which v5 will confirm. He obviously did not spend the entire day (or even night) in a rigid posture. Evidently, he lay one side and then another long enough for the people to see him lying there and infer the desired lesson. (TLSB)

**4:5** *for 390 days.* The 390 years may represent the period from the time of Solomon’s unfaithfulness to the fall of Jerusalem. Correspondingly, the 40 years of v. 6 may represent the long reign of wicked Manasseh before his repentance (see 2Ki 21:11–15; 23:26–27; 24:3–4; 2Ch 33:12–13). (CSB)

A day stands for a year, the total corresponding to 390 years of Israel’s history. Ezekiel gives no clue about when the historic period begins or ends. The LXX has 150, which could approximate the period of years from Solomon’s apostasy to the fall of Samaria (c 950-722 BC) or perhaps some other period. The span of 390 years fits fairly well with the time from the dedication of the temple (when the glory last moved to the fall of Jerusalem. (Together, 390 and 40 in v. 6 make 430, approximating the years Israel was in Egypt. The lack of clarity and many proposed interpretation encourage a loose symbolic interpretation; the figures prophesy God’s judgment against His sinful people, yet He shall deliver then in the end. (TLSB)

**4:6** *on your right side.* Lying on his left side (see v. 5) placed Ezekiel to the north of the symbolic city; lying on his right side placed him to the south—signifying the northern and southern kingdoms respectively. (CSB)

This number may stand for the long, wicked reign of Manasseh before his repentance (2 Ch 33:12-13). Since 40 is a favorite figure of Ezekiel, it could represent a repetition of the 40 years in the wilderness (cf. Ez 29:11-13). Another ancient line of interpretation applies the numbers to the final judgment. The lack of clarity suggests that we not insist on precise application of the numbers. (TLSB)

**4:7** WITH BARED ARM – his verse adds the detail that while lying on his side, Ezekiel is to stare at the model of the city, as already commanded in 4:3b. No mention is made of which side the prophet should be lying on. Since the verse closely follows 4:6, it might apply only to the 40-day period. But if Ezekiel lay on opposite sides of the model (to its left while on his left side, then to its right while on his right side), the command could apply to the preceding 390 days too. (CC)

The prophet’s “arm bared” vividly acts out that God is the enemy of Jerusalem. Yet because Ezekiel is also bearing the iniquity of the people, he embodies both the Accuser and the accused. We may compare this to the “sacrificial” and “sacramental” postures assumed by the pastor at the altar: facing the congregation when representing God and facing the altar when representing the congregation. (CC)

The same Hebrew noun and verb in “arm bared” (4:7) appear in Is 52:10 in the positive sense of Yahweh fighting *for* Jerusalem: “Yahweh has bared his holy arm in the sight of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.” The phrase recalls similar ones that are strongly associated with the exodus, such as God’s promise, “I will redeem you with an outstretched arm” (Ex 6:6). So it is conceivable, as some commentators assert, that Ezekiel’s audience originally might have misunderstood him to be predicting the deliverance of Jerusalem, just as the false prophets were predicting. But Jeremiah (21:5) too uses exodus language (“with an outstretched hand and a strong arm”) to portray Yahweh as warring *against* unfaithful Jerusalem. (CC)

PROPHESY AGAINST HER – Any doubt is removed by the concluding clause of Ezek 4:7: Ezekiel is to “prophesy against” the model of Jerusalem. “Prophesy” might be used in a broad sense to include the action prophecies being described, but the word usually implies verbalization. Conceivably, then, Ezekiel may have preached at the same time he acted. It seems more likely, however, that this refers to the verbal prophecies that will come a little later. (CC)

**4:8** TIE YOU UP – As in 3:25, it is debatable whether the “ropes” placed on Ezekiel are metaphorical. I am inclined to see metaphor in both instances. But I think that it is more conceivable here than in the first instance that, either by Ezekiel’s own actions or by those of aides, his body was trussed with ropes while he lay on his sides. (In 3:25 it was hard to see how the *people* would literally tie him up.) (CC)

The import here is the same whether or not physical ropes were used. In 3:25 the binding with ropes pertained to his ministry as a whole; here it pertains only to the action prophecy of lying on his sides. But, in a broader sense, the application is the same in both cases: Yahweh is in total control of his prophet’s activity—both his oral messages (the only breaks in his speechlessness, which began in 3:25–27) and his action prophecies. Ezekiel is not free to do anything of his own volition or fabrication. (CC)

In principle, the application to the modern pastor is obvious. In the exercise of the ministry of Word and Sacrament, he is to obey the “thus says Yahweh” of his divine call. He is to preach God’s Word as revealed in the Scriptures—nothing more and nothing less. His actions are circumscribed by that same divine Word: while conducting his ministry, he is to act with the proper reverence and decorum that befits the holy Lord in whose presence, and on whose behalf, he serves. Even while “off duty” (though he never vacates the office), he is to adorn his pastoral office with a righteous “private” life of Christian faith. If he teaches false doctrine (contravening the Word) or if he engages in conduct unbecoming the office (whether in the church or at home), he may be removed. (CC)

**4:9** *Take wheat and barley, beans and lentils, millet and spelt.* A scant, vegetarian diet representing the meager provisions of a besieged city. (CSB)

he point of Ezekiel’s mixture of flour and vegetable meal is an action prophecy of the siege diet the people will be forced to eat (4:9–11). There will not be enough of any one grain to make a loaf of bread. One can survive only by mixing together whatever remainders one can find, and even that product will be unpalatable. (CC)

**4:12** BARLEY LOAF – The “barley loaf” was to be baked in a vulgar way, whereas no special cooking instructions are given for the bread in 4:9. God says nothing about rationing the “barley loaf” in 4:12 (contrast the ration in 4:10 for the bread in 4:9). The two verses use some different Hebrew terminology (see the textual notes). On the part of critics, this apparent discrepancy triggered radical textual surgery; they assumed that the text mixed and confused pictures of the siege of Jerusalem and the later exile. (CC)

The best explanation appears to be that 4:9–11 and 4:12 speak of two separate action prophecies. They are both concerned with scarcity of food, but the diet in 4:9–11 represents that of the residents of Jerusalem during its siege, whereas 4:12 represents the diet of the Israelites in exile, as God explains in 4:13. God’s explanation for 4:9–11 will come in 4:16–17. (CC)

**4:13** DEFILED FOOD –Lands outside of Israel were intrinsically unclean, not because Yahweh’s reign was limited to the “Holy Land,” but because those lands and their peoples were cut off from the divine covenant and temple, and because of the idolatrous practices that held sway in other lands (cf. Josh 22:19; Amos 7:17; and Ezek 36:18b). Most ancient nations were “theocracies,” as was Israel, but with false gods at their head. Hence, people living in those lands were necessarily “unclean,” and the food they ate was necessarily “unclean,” because they were under the dominion of demons (cf. 1 Cor 10:20–21). One might compare their foods with the “unclean food” and “mourners’ bread” that exiled Israelites would eat in Assyria according to the prophetic judgment in Hos 9:3–4 (cf. Deut 26:14). (CC)

**4:14** NOT SO – There may have been an oral tradition, but no written law forbids the use of human dung for cooking. One can well imagine that it was not normally done, or, at least, that priests avoided the practice. In any case, Ezekiel responds to the command in a way comparable to St. Peter’s dissent when the Lord told him to feast on unclean animals (Acts 10:13–16). Modern readers of Ezek 4:12 may be disgusted by the hygienic impurity, but for ancient Israelites, the revulsion would be more akin to St. Paul’s attitude toward eating meat sacrificed to idols (e.g., 1 Corinthians 8–10). Ezekiel’s remonstration (4:14) takes the positive form of a declaration of his scrupulosity in observing matters of ceremonial purity. Ezekiel’s observance undoubtedly was heightened by his priestly background (1:3). (CC)

**4:15** *cow manure.* Commonly used in the Near East as a fuel for baking, even today. Ezekiel again showed his sensitivity to things ceremonially unclean (see note on 1:3), and God graciously responded to the prophet’s objection by allowing this substitute for human excrement. (CSB)

God’s concession to Ezekiel’s protest reveals God as compassionate even when executing his *opus alienum* (his prophet is to condemn Israel’s sin according to the Law). It is comparable to the way God allowed Abraham to bargain with him about sparing Sodom (Gen 18:22–33), even though the destruction of the city would be fully justified (Genesis 19). We might compare it to Jesus’ parables about persistence in prayer (e.g., Lk 18:1–8) and the way Jesus conceded to the Canaanite woman (Mt 15:22–28). Even with the concession to Ezekiel, the point of the action prophecy would still come through clearly: the shame of those in exile with Ezekiel, who would be forced to eat unclean food among the Gentiles (Ezek 4:13). (CC)

**4:16-17** In case anyone had doubts about the meaning of Ezekiel’s action prophecy in 4:9–11, which portrayed the plight of people in a city under siege, God here verbalizes the message in stark language. And, if not right then, at some point in his ministry, Ezekiel would proclaim this to his fellow exiles. In fact, he proclaims it repeatedly in principle, because these verses are virtually a miniature of the rest of his judgment oracles, especially through chapter 24. (CSB)