

EZEKIEL

Chapter 4

The Siege of Jerusalem Symbolized

“And you, son of man, take a brick and lay it before you, and engrave on it a city, even Jerusalem. 2 And put siegeworks against it, and build a siege wall against it, and cast up a mound against it. Set camps also against it, and plant battering rams against it all around. 3 And you, take an iron griddle, and place it as an iron wall between you and the city; and set your face toward it, and let it be in a state of siege, and press the siege against it. This is a sign for the house of Israel. 4 “Then lie on your left side, and place the punishment of the house of Israel upon it. For the number of the days that you lie on it, you shall bear their punishment. 5 For I assign to you a number of days, 390 days, equal to the number of the years of their punishment. So long shall you bear the punishment of the house of Israel. 6 And when you have completed these, you shall lie down a second time, but on your right side, and bear the punishment of the house of Judah. Forty days I assign you, a day for each year. 7 And you shall set your face toward the siege of Jerusalem, with your arm bared, and you shall prophesy against the city. 8 And behold, I will place cords upon you, so that you cannot turn from one side to the other, till you have completed the days of your siege. 9 “And you, take wheat and barley, beans and lentils, millet and emmer, and put them into a single vessel and make your bread from them. During the number of days that you lie on your side, 390 days, you shall eat it. 10 And your food that you eat shall be by weight, twenty shekels a day; from day to day you shall eat it. 11 And water you shall drink by measure, the sixth part of a hin; from day to day you shall drink. 12 And you shall eat it as a barley cake, baking it in their sight on human dung.” 13 And the LORD said, “Thus shall the people of Israel eat their bread unclean, among the nations where I will drive them.” 14 Then I said, “Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I have never defiled myself. From my youth up till now I have never eaten what died of itself or was torn by beasts, nor has tainted meat come into my mouth.” 15 Then he said to me, “See, I assign to you cow’s dung instead of human dung, on which you may prepare your bread.” 16 Moreover, he said to me, “Son of man, behold, I will break the supply of bread in Jerusalem. They shall eat bread by weight and with anxiety, and they shall drink water by measure and in dismay. 17 I will do this that they may lack bread and water, and look at one another in dismay, and rot away because of their punishment.

Chs 4–5 Contains three or four of Ezekiel’s action prophecies (depending on how one classifies them). Their oddity has caused some to prefer reading other prophets who are easier to understand. The prophecies here concern the siege of Jerusalem and are undated. It is impossible to say whether the siege was already going on, but the context suggests that they are predictive prophecies, not contemporaneous. On action prophecies. By usual count, Ezekiel performed a total of 12 action prophecies, two more than his contemporary Jeremiah (cf Ac 21:10–11). Greg: “It is the duty of a ruler to show by the voice of preaching the glory of the supernal country, to disclose what great temptations of the old enemy are lurking in this life’s journey, and to correct with great asperity [roughness] of zeal such evils among those who are under his sway as ought not to be gently borne with; lest, in being too little incensed against faults, of all faults he be himself held guilty” (*NPNF 2 12:22b*). (TLSB)

4:1 *take a brick.* 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)

Ezekiel is to sketch a city on a common mud-brick, before it had dried and hardened in the sun. (TLSB)

4:2 Ancient bricks were often large enough that quite a bit could be sketched on them. But the vocabulary here leaves open the possibility that some of the details may have been represented by other objects placed near the brick.(TLSB)

Siegeworks General term with components following. (TLSB)

siege wall. Rampart erected by the enemy to stop passage of people or material in or out of the city.(TLSB)

camps. The enemy placed garrisons all around the city for an overview and supervision of everything. (TLSB)

4:3 *iron griddle.* Unclear purpose; possibly it represented metal plates or shields often fastened to the wooden battering rams to keep them from being set afire. Less likely, it is a figurative interpretation, understanding it as a barrier between God and the doomed city. (TLSB)

set your face toward it. Ezekiel is to glare at the miniature city, as a sign of God's wrath. (TLSB)

besiege against. Ezekiel's own presence in the scene signified that the siege would actually be laid by the Lord himself. (CSB)

a sign. The entire action prophecy. (TLSB)

4:4-8 The second and most difficult action prophecy. As though crushed by a heavy burden, Ezekiel is to lie on his two sides, 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. (TLSB)

4:4 *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 them 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 *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. (TLSB)

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)

prophesy against the city. Might include the action prophecy itself, but usually implies speaking, most likely referring to prophecies that came later, beginning in ch 5. (TLSB)

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 *cords.* God is in control of Ezekiel’s action prophecies as much as his verbal ones. (TLSB)

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)

4:9–17 A third action prophecy begins—and probably a fourth as well, all about food. Two separate diets, or rations, are spoken of—a siege diet and an exile diet. The initial and concluding verses (9–11 and 16–17) speak of the siege diet of those left in Jerusalem, forming a framework for the whole section. Within that framework, vv 12–15 describe the mundane diet of Ezekiel and his fellow exiles in Babylon. (TLSB)

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)

There will not be enough of any one grain to make a loaf of flat bread (such as pita or variants, still common in the Near East). Vegetables (legumes, beans, and lentils) would not ordinarily be made into bread. Only 390 days of this diet are mentioned; the other 40 may be taken for granted. (TLSB)

The 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)

4:10–11 During the siege, food and water will be scarce enough to be strictly rationed. (TLSB)

twenty shekels. C 8 oz. (TLSB)

sixth part of a hin. C $\frac{2}{3}$ qt. These are near-starvation rations (cf Jer 37:21). (TLSB)

from day to day. Suggests that Ezekiel ate and drank these rations while lying down, perhaps when the most people were likely to see it. Otherwise, he could perform his normal activities and eat at least the exilic diet. (TLSB)

4:12–15 The exile diet. (TLSB)

4:12 *barley cake.* Not dessert, but flat bread, as was the bread of the siege. (TLSB)

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)

on human dung. The use of animal dung (which God will shortly allow as a substitute) was and is fairly common in areas where other fuels are scarce. (TLSB)

4:13 *eat their bread unclean.* When the people of Jerusalem are exiled, they will have no choice but to eat unclean food associated with pagan sacrifices. Cf 1Co 10:20–21. (TLSB)

where I will drive them. Into exile. (TLSB)

bread unclean – 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 *defiled myself.* Ezekiel thinks he will make himself unclean if he eats bread baked on human dung. The Bible contains no prohibition of such activity, though there could have been an oral prohibition, at least among priests. (TLSB)

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

God compassionately accedes to Ezekiel's sensitivities and allows him to use cow's dung, a practice that was common and obviously not offensive to the prophet. See note, v 12. Even with God's concession, the point of the action prophecy would still stand—the shame of those in exile forced to eat unclean food among the Gentiles. (TLSB)

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)

4:16 *He said to me ... Son of man.* Signals the shift of topic back to an interpretation of the action prophecy of vv 9–11 (the siege diet). (TLSB)

supply of bread. Lit, “staff of bread.” As a broken staff is useless, a broken supply signals starvation. (TLSB)

4:17 *look at one another ... rot away.* Vivid language for the horror of starvation, as people can see in others how they themselves look. (TLSB)

Ch 4 Ezekiel's action prophecies illustrate the dreadful judgment that God would visit upon the Israelites for their infidelity. God's ultimate purpose was to save as many as possible, who would repent before the judgment. God's wrath is a reality. Calvary's cross represents the maximum of God's wrath as well as the maximum of His love and great desire to deliver us. • Lord, lead us in true repentance and steadfastness of faith out of our Babylonian captivity, through Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. Amen. (TLSB)