**Ezekiel’s “Street Theater”**

**Chapters Four and Five**

Review of History

* Redeemed from **430** years of bondage in Egypt; **covenant at Sinai**; wilderness for **40** years
* Settled in promised Land; David and Solomon ruled united monarchy (approx. 1010-931 BC); **Temple** built (966 BC)
* Northern kingdom broke away (931 BC) and succumbed to Assyria (722 BC)
* **Judah and Jerusalem** taken by Nebuchadnezzar; waves of exiles to Babylon; Ezekiel (a priest) into exile in 597 BC; Temple destroyed in 587/6 BC after two-year **siege**
* Cyrus (Persian) gave order to return (539 BC); second Temple completed (516 BC)

Review of Prophetic Media

* **Visions** – in Ezekiel’s case, God on His throne in the heavenly realms (ch 1 and beyond)
* **Oracles of judgment**
* Enacted messages that served as **“signs”** – visible pointers that could not be ignored, indicating how God’s word spoken through God’s prophets would come to pass

Review of Chapters Two-Three

* The rebellious children of Israel, including the communities in exile, were like thorns and scorpions around Ezekiel!
* Ezekiel was appointed as watchman to address the rebellious house of Israel
* He was put under restrictions—bound and mute—for more than a year; perhaps a reluctant prophet
* A lesson: we are called to faithfulness, not necessarily success

**Enactment Prophecies: Siege of Jerusalem (Chapters Four and Five)**

Introductory Questions

* Why were these enacted prophecies presented to the community in exile?
* What was involved in siege warfare and why was it necessary?
* To whom did “house of Israel” and “house of Judah” refer?
* What are the implications of “placing” the iniquity on Ezekiel?
* How are we to understand the figures of 390 and 40 days/years?

Model on a brick [clay tablet] (4:1-3)

* Walled city surrounded by siege wall and camps; ramps (or mounds) thrown up against the city; battering rams [see also 21:20 (H 21:27]
* Iron cooking plate as a barrier between Ezekiel and the city model; also between God and His people
* Sign: God set His face against them (Lev 26:17) and hid His face from the faithless people (Deut 31:17-18; 32:20). This utensil appears in Lev 2:5; 7:9 regarding baking the grain offering, but it was not iron; that was used for tools and war implements. This is unusual.
* The ravages of war were the consequences of their utter evil (cf 2 Kgs 24:1-4; see 2 Kgs 25:1-3).

Iniquity Placed on Ezekiel (4:4-8)

Lying on left side

* “You shall place the iniquity of the house of Israel on it” [the side or Ezekiel?]
* “The number of days that you will lie on it [the left side] you will bear their iniquity”
* “I have given to you the years of their iniquity for the number of days”
* “390 days you will bear the iniquity of the house of Israel”

Lying on right side

* “You shall bear the iniquity of the house of Judah 40 days”; each day is a year

Sorting Out Important Terms

* “Bearing” iniquity would be Ezekiel’s priestly role (see Exod 28:38); here, the expression to “place iniquity on [his side]” is unusual. The three most frequently used terms for covenant disobedience are iniquity (*ʿāvōn*),transgression (*pešaʿ*),and sin (*ḥaṭāʾâ*), in that order when they appear together. On the Day of Atonement, iniquity, transgressions, and sins were placed on the goat for Azazel (Lev 16:21). Iniquity is primarily a religious term, and serves as a summary word for all sins against God.
* While “House of Israel” characteristically designates the northern kingdom after the division in 931 BC, it appears frequently in Ezekiel to mean the whole of God’s people. The challenge in this passage is that it occurs alongside “house of Judah,” suggesting they might be considered separately. That, however, is not a foregone conclusion.

Interpretive considerations for numbers of days/years: 390 (house of Israel ) and 40 (house of Judah)

* 390 + 40 = 430 – years in Egypt
* 40 years was a stock number, indicating a generation; it was the length of their punishment in the wilderness (Num 13-14); possibly parallel to the kingdom of Judah’s generation in exile (586 to 546 comes close to Cyrus’ decree for their restoration in 539)
* Perhaps 430 (the composite number) or 390 refers to a period of apostasy that had already passed for which judgment must come: the difficulty is in determining a starting point; it might have something to do with the Temple of Solomon (built in 966 BC) that far too quickly became polluted [ballpark: ca 950 BC minus 430 = 520 BC, approaching the time when the second Temple was completed]
* Period of rejection of whole “house of Israel” from God’s Presence: the united kingdom fractured in 931; the Cyrus restoration of 539 comes close to 390 years
* Or it may point to judgment future to Ezekiel’s time: 586 (destruction of Temple) to mid-second century BC crisis with Antiochus Epiphanes followed by Maccabean restoration of Temple (ca. 160)
* Or . . . . . ?

As If That Was Not Enough: Two Additional Details for the Public Drama

* Verse 7 – with his face turned toward the siege of Jerusalem and his *arm bared*, Ezekiel was to prophesy against Jerusalem. The only other place where this idiom appears is Isaiah 52:10; where it is the Lord’s arm that is bared and it is in conjunction with His rescuing Jerusalem. Ezekiel’s audience may have thought it a positive sign at first. They would soon see that was not the case.
* Verse 8 - the Lord would place cords (cf. 3:25) on him so he could not turn from side to side until the siege was completed; indicated that the sign act was unalterable. [Unlike Micah, his “voice” did not merge with that of the Lord.)
* These were public enactments, but not 24/7; he was also cooking rations during this period. **His whole day [every day] was a drama.** All events occurred within about a year (1:2 and 8:1).

Famine rations (4:9-17)

* Multi-grain bread: wheat and barley; beans and lentils (Gen 25:34; 2 Sam 17:28; the “vegetable” part); millet and emmer (another kind of grain – Exod 9:32)
* Scant portions of bread and water that were consumed publicly were weighed and measured (see Lev 26:26); perhaps symbolic that the Lord’s justice would be deliberate and measured (see below as well)
* Cooking instructions: bake barley cake over “pellets of human filth”; Deut 23:12-14 indicates the uncleanness associated with this
* Question: were God’s instructions a test to see if he was still aware of and shaped by purity concerns; had he softened and absorbed culture? [possibly compare with Hag 2:11-13]
* Sign: Ezekiel’s eating symbolized Israelites whom the Lord had driven into unclean lands of exile; food they would consume there would be unclean
* Ezekiel was appalled: in no uncertain terms, he rejected any suggestion of contact with uncleanness:
  + His whole person would not come in contact with uncleanness
  + He had never eaten from any carcass or animal that had been torn; these two terms often appear together in the category of unclean foods (Lev 7:24; 11:39-40; 17:15; Deut 14:21; etc.); contact with death was the most severe contamination
  + Contaminated meat (seems to have been refuse associated with sacrifices) would not come into his mouth (Lev 7:18; 19:7; Isa 65:4)
* The Lord substituted cattle dung (Hebrew word only used here) as fuel (a common practice). After Ezekiel’s protest, the “contaminating element of the dramatization” (dung) was maintained but just not *human* dung. This would still likely shock his audience in exile.
* This is how bad it would be - recap:
  + the staff of bread (food supply) would be broken (Lev 26:26)
  + terrible emotional distress in circumstances of extreme rationing - anxiety at lack of food; horror (only here and 12:19) at specter of not enough water
  + rotting corpses (the basic meaning of the verb is to rot or decay)

Radical Haircut: Sword as Razor (5:1-4)

* Sword is central to this section – it was premiere military equipment, and most frequent agent of death in OT; here used first as a razor on Ezekiel’s head and beard; afterwards, striking the hair; Sign: violent death
* The section is shaped by threes (indicates superlative): hair divided into three parts; three symbolic destructions; three recurrences of fire
* A small amount in garment fold, but even part of that was cast into the fire; warning to those who were “remnant” not to be complacent
* Weighing hair connects with previous weighing ingredients of bread
* Scene again points to meticulous care – the judgment that God would mete out is deliberate and carefully measured

Israel/Judah “on Trial“ (5:5-9)

* “This is Jerusalem” – introduces the guilty party into the court
* Her intended status (Deut 12:11; Ps 132:13-14; I Kgs 8:41-43; Mic 4 and Isa 2) was to be extraordinary and a light to nations; instead, Jerusalem and Judah were a dark blot, worse than the nations round about them (who are mentioned four times]
* The sovereign Lord indicts and judges [shift to first person “I”] – “because . . . therefore”
* “Thus saith the sovereign Lord” (3x) – irrevocable decree against them
* Indictment and sentence
  + Rebelled against the Lord’s standards/judgments (*mishpatim*) and rejected His statutes/decrees (*ḥuqqot*) – no moral anchor anywhere
  + *Mishpatim* *-* both standards of human conduct (as articulated for Israel in the covenant) and punishments that match their disregard for common standards
  + *ḥuqqot* (statutes/decrees) – something inscribed permanently
  + Abomination (*to’evah* – vss 9 and 11) – a) an action or object that is utterly repulsive to God (45 x in Ezekiel, often referring to idolatrous abominations in the Temple); b) anything repulsive on basis of group norms (falsehood is right up there at the top)
* “I am against you, even I” - and it would be public (vs 8)

Covenant-Based Consequences (5:10-17)

“’As I live’ saith the Lord” and “also I . . .” (vs 11); “I, the Lord, have spoken” (vss 15, 17)

* Cannibalism (Lev 26:29; Deut 28:53-57; Isa 9:18-20; 2 Kgs 6:24-31) and scattering all the remnant (5:10)
* Sanctuary had been defiled (three terms – made unclean, introduced detestable things, abominations)
* In response, the Lord would withdraw (\* perhaps “shave”), His eye would not pity, and He would not show mercy (three declarations)
* Destiny of each “third”: death by pestilence and famine in the city; falling by sword around the city; scattered to the wind with the Lord emptying the sword after them
* Three indicators of the full venting of the Lord’s fury (My anger completed; My wrath come to a rest; satisfied Myself): “they will know . . .” (vs 13); repeated in vs 15 (anger, wrath, reproach). Just as His mighty redemptive acts identified Him, so also His covenant judgments, all driven by passionate, jealous, covenant love
* “All who pass by” (cf. Lam 1:12; 2:15)
* They would be an object of public horror and contempt; emphasis on “round about you”; reproach, contempt, chastisement, horror
* The Lord would be on the offensive, shooting deadly arrows of famine (an expression that appears only here) to destroy them; famine mentioned three times (vss 16-17)
* Connecting with the beginning of the chapter, Lord would bring the sword against them
* The themes of Deut 32:23-25 reverberate – **Ezekiel likely expected his audience to know this text**

What Did It Cost Ezekiel to Convey This Horrific Message?

What Might Ezekiel’s Signs Mean for Us?