

Ezekiel 4: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Ezekiel chapter 4. This is a sign for the house of Israel.

The house of Judah.

During the number of days that you lie on your side, three hundred and ninety days, you shall eat it. And your food that you eat shall be by weight twenty shekels a day.

From day to day you shall eat it. And water you shall drink by measure, the sixth part of a hymn. From day to day you shall drink. And you shall eat it as a barley cake, baking it in their sight on human dung.

The Lord said, Thus shall the people of Israel eat their bread unclean among the nations where I will drive them. Then I said, Our Lord God, behold, I have never defiled myself.

[2 : 0 5] 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. Then he said to me, See, I assign to you cow's dung instead of human dung, on which you may prepare your bread.

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.

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. There are various examples of prophetic sign acts in scripture.

We might think of Jeremiah's breaking of the earthenware flask at the entry of the potsherd gate in Jeremiah chapter 19, or his hiding of the loincloth in chapter 13. The sign act with the loincloth is a good example of a prophetic sign that was performed in several stages, with its meaning only being revealed at the end.

Ezekiel chapter 4 contains a similarly extended sign act, once again with several stages to it. The meaning of this elaborate sign act, and its various elements, has perplexed and been much debated by commentators, with many different potential interpretations having been proposed.

[3 : 2 0] We will have to puzzle our way through some of these, hopefully arriving at some better understanding by the conclusion. In considering the meaning of such signs, it is important to bear in mind that the purpose of the signs is not merely one of illustration, although they can be a dramatising illustration that intensifies the message of the prophet.

If they merely serve such a purpose, the complicated and convoluted character of the sign here might lead us to believe that it failed in its primary purpose. Rather, meditating upon the sign should challenge and inform our interpretation of the reality.

The non-obvious character of the sign intentionally serves to provoke such meditation. The fact that a sign act like Ezekiel's was bizarre and performed over a very extended period of time would provoke considerable curiosity and speculation in the population.

One could imagine many theories circulating among the Judean exiles about what this strange prophet was doing and what it might mean. The fact that Ezekiel had seemingly been struck dumb by the Lord would likely have intensified this curiosity.

Some have regarded prophetic sign acts as functioning as a sort of sympathetic magic, as the inaction of something using symbols that affected the corresponding reality.

[4 : 35] However, this is to mistake what is taking place. The symbols are connected to the affecting of a reality, but this is because the sign act is performed as a dramatic presentation of the efficacious word of the Lord.

In this chapter alone, Daniel Block identifies seven distinct acts that belong to this sign act. This continues into the following chapter. He writes, No fewer than nine clusters of actions are involved.

1. The siege of the brick. 2. The erection of the barrier between Ezekiel and the brick. 3. Ezekiel's lying on his left and right sides respectively. 4. The bearing of Ezekiel's arm.

5. The binding of Ezekiel. 6. Eating rationed food and drinking rationed water. 7. Eating cakes baked over feces. 8. Shaving and disposing of Ezekiel's hair.

9. The isolation of a remnant of hair. Ezekiel begins by taking a brick and inscribing a plan of the city of Jerusalem, which presumably would have been recognisable to those watching.

[5 : 37] Having engraved the city on a brick, presumably while it was drying, Ezekiel surrounded the city with a model siege, with a siege wall, a mound or a ramp, which would have made the wall of the besieged city accessible to the besieging army and their siege engines, a number of camps, several military divisions by which the city could be enclosed on all sides, and battering rams by which walls and gates could be breached.

Having set up the model city and the siege around it, Ezekiel is then to place an iron griddle, which would have been used to bake cakes, between himself and the city. The prophet must then set his face toward the city and press the siege against it, with the iron griddle between him and it.

Here the prophet seems to represent the Lord, who has set his face against Jerusalem and the men of Judah. The iron griddle dividing the prophet from the city symbolises the barred presence of the Lord, who is acting as the enemy of Jerusalem and its rulers.

Perhaps the most confusing aspect of the sign act is what follows. Ezekiel is instructed to lie on his left side, presumably facing the city. He is supposed to do this for 390 days.

There are several questions raised by this part of the sign. First, what is meant by bearing their punishment at the end of verse 4? James Jordan argues that this should be translated as lift up, not bear.

[6 : 59] Ezekiel is not bearing the sin of the city in some expiatory sense, but lifting it up and placing the punishment of the house of Israel upon Jerusalem. Second, what is the house of Israel referring to here?

Commentators have commonly seen a distinction between the northern and the southern kingdoms here, especially as the house of Judah is mentioned in verse 6. However, there are some complications with this interpretation.

As Bloch observes, Ezekiel routinely refers to the house of Israel in a manner that makes it interchangeable with the house of Judah. At the very least, a sharp political separation between the northern and southern kingdoms does not seem to be operative.

The northern kingdom fell to the neo-Assyrian empire around 722 BC. It was sure to live than the southern kingdom, and the difference between the length of days associated with them is a peculiar detail here.

Perhaps, as James Jordan suggests, the distinction between the house of Israel and Judah here is a more subtle way of referring to the religious constitution of the people at various periods of their history.

[8 : 13] Another possibility is that the house of Israel refers to the unified body of the people, and the house of Judah to that which formerly ruled over it in the period of the United Kingdom.

Third, are the days days of punishment for past sin, or past days of sin that will lead to punishment? Do the days look back to the past sins of the nation, or forward to a period of its judgment?

If it does look back, from when does it look back? From the time when the sign is being performed in the early 590s BC, or from the year of the coming fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC?

Did the 40 years associated with Judah look forward or look back? Are we counting back 430 years, or only 390? Given the variations in understandings of biblical chronology, relevant dates can also vary considerably.

Among people who calculate the 390 years back, which I think is the correct understanding, Blart calculates it from around the time of the building of the Temple of Solomon to the fall of Jerusalem.

[9 : 17] James Bajon calculates the 390 years from the time of Ezekiel's performance of the sign to the time of Absalom's coup and Israel's rejection of David. The 40 years and his reckoning come later, after the advent of Christ and before the destruction of Jerusalem.

James Bajon, using a very different chronology, counts back 430 years to what his chronology has as the beginning of Solomon's reign. Leslie Allen mentions the possibility of the number 430 referring to the period of the duration of the monarchy in the history of the books of the kings.

The emphasis on defilement in the context needs to be understood with reference to the presence of the Lord's sanctuary in the midst of the people. However, he favours the alternative that the number 390 might refer to the period of the nation's disunity, anticipating promises of the nation's reunification later in the book.

We might find some help in understanding the numbers if we consider other pieces of relevant biblical evidence. In particular, some of the numbers in question should be familiar to us.

An association between 40 days and 40 years is something that we see elsewhere in Scripture, in Numbers chapter 14, verses 33 to 34, where, as a result of the people's rejection of the promised land, after the spies returned with a bad report after 40 days of spying it out, the Lord declared to Moses and Aaron, The combined numbers of 40 and 390 also make a number that should be familiar.

[11 : 08] 430, a number that is important enough to be repeated twice when it is given to us in Exodus chapter 12, verses 40 to 41. The time that the people of Israel lived in Egypt was 430 years.

At the end of 430 years, on that very day, all the hosts of the Lord went out from the land of Egypt. So the numbers in question have symbolic and historical associations.

They also need not be seen as absolutely exact. Rather, they can be rounded numbers. My suspicion is that the years ought to be understood to be moving backward through the history of Israel and Judah, so that the 40 years relate to a time that preceded the 390.

Ezekiel's days are working down through a period of accumulated guilt, going all the way down to the bottom. Depending on the chronology that we use, there are a number of earlier dates that would seem noteworthy candidates for significance here.

The beginning of David's reign, which was for 40 years, the beginning of Solomon's reign, which was also for 40 years, the beginning and completion of the building of the temple, and the division of the kingdom.

[12 : 16] Depending on where we come down on the chronology, for instance, we could consider the 390 years to relate to the period where the house of Israel was in rebellion against David, and the nation was divided, hence why it is called Israel, or the period after the building of the temple, where the nation was a self-defiling religious body.

The 430 days symbolically represent the period as one of a sort of existence under Egyptian hegemony, much as they had been in Egypt eating Egyptian bread that had to be cut off with the purging out of the leaven.

So Israel has been living among the nations as a defiled nation themselves, and now they must be judged and later purified. If we see a connection with Egypt in the 430 days, perhaps the period of 40 days at the end is doing a sort of double duty, symbolizing both the continued judgment as part of the 430, but also transition and return, much as the period of Israel in the wilderness, where 40 days had also corresponded to 40 years, but where the 40 years were also after the fulfillment of the 430 in Egypt.

Ezekiel eats the defiling starvation rations of bread for the first 390 days, bread associating Israel with the nations, and perhaps also with their experience in Egypt, but seemingly not in the final 40.

Jordan also observes the timing of Ezekiel's sign, seven days after the first appearance of the Lord to him, on the fourth month and fifth day of the month, in the fifth year of Jehoiakim's exile.

[13 : 47] If we count off the days according to a lunar calendar, it takes us up to the final day of the sixth month of the sixth year. The next day, the Feast of Trumpets, would begin a seventh, sabbatical year, perhaps anticipating a greater jubilee to follow.

This is an intriguing possibility, especially given the various jubilee themes that are at play throughout the book of Ezekiel. Ezekiel, after the period of time is completed, is to set his face toward Jerusalem, with his arm bared, and to prophesy against it, once again presumably representing the Lord in his judgment.

The Lord declares that he will place cords upon Ezekiel, reminding the hearer of verse 25 of the preceding chapter, where the Lord had bound Ezekiel's mouth. And you, O son of man, behold, cords will be placed upon you, and you shall be bound with them, so that you cannot go out among the people.

It seems as though Ezekiel was only performing the sign for a part of every day. Perhaps just as the Lord had restricted Ezekiel's speech, he prevented his body from moving during his performance of the sign, presenting thereby the inalterable character of his word.

During the 390-day period, Ezekiel has to eat small rations, about eight ounces daily of a bread of mixed grains, perhaps representing the sort of food that one would eat during a siege.

[15 : 09] Such a diet would bring a person to the brink of starvation. It also recalls the curse of Leviticus chapter 26, verse 26. When I break your supply of bread, ten women shall bake your bread in a single oven, and shall dole out your bread again by weight, and you shall eat, and not be satisfied.

Verses 12 following might refer to the earlier loaf of bread, or to a separate sign act, the creation of bread defiled by being cooked with human dung, representing impurity.

Ezekiel recoils at the instruction that the Lord gives here, and the Lord concedes to him, making an allowance for him to eat food cooked over cow's dung instead. The sign corresponds to the nation's defiling of itself over the period of the 390 years, but more directly points to the fate that it will suffer on account of its accumulated impurity.

A question to consider, how do you imagine the exiles of Judah responding to the various stages of Ezekiel's sign act as it progressed through its different elements?

