

SIEGE & EXILE
EZEKIEL 3:22 - 7:27

²²Then the hand of YHWH was upon me there; and he said to me, Rise up, go out into the valley, and there I will speak with you. ²³So I rose up and went out into the valley; and the glory of YHWH was there, like the glory that I had seen by the Chebar canal; and I fell on my face. ²⁴The spirit entered into me, and set me on my feet; and he spoke with me and said to me: Go, shut yourself inside your house.

²⁵As for you, son of man, cords shall be placed on you, and you shall be bound with them, so that you cannot go out among the people; ²⁶and I will make your tongue cling to the roof of your mouth, so that you shall be speechless and unable to reprove them; for they are a rebellious house. ²⁷But whenever I speak with you, I will open your mouth, and you shall say to them, "Thus says the Lord YHWH"; whoever listens will listen, whoever will not will not; for they are a rebellious house.

Since in all likelihood 3:16b-21 is to be considered a later insert, this passage continues on from Ezekiel's account of the vision that inaugurated his prophetic 'career'. Verse 22 picks up 1:4, 'the hand of YHWH was on me there' – which introduced the inaugural vision.

Typically, Ezekiel is here told by God to perform dramatic actions as signs of what God is doing or threatening to do in the lives of his sinful people. He is told to leave the Chebar canal and go out to the open and deserted plain, and is given the strength to do so by the same 'spirit' that lifted him up in 2:2.

He is told to shut himself in his home (3:24) – an action that symbolises the siege of Jerusalem. Ezekiel is bound: he can move only under God's direction and with the power of God's spirit. He is struck dumb. Ezekiel can speak only when YHWH directs him to do so, and by the power of the spirit.

Ezekiel is not the only prophet to have acted out the revelations received from YHWH. Ahijah of Shiloh was instructed to tear his garment into ten strips to demonstrate God's will to hand over the rule of the ten northern tribes to Jeroboam (see 1Kings 11:29-31). Another example is Zedekiah putting iron horns on his head to symbolise Ahab's victory over Syria (see 1Kings 22:11). Elisha shot arrows to indicate Joash's victory over Syria (2Kings 13:14-19). Isaiah walked naked as a sign that the Egypt and Nubia would be enslaved by the Assyrians (see Isaiah 20). Jeremiah's mourning prefigured the fate of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 16:1-9). He shattered a jar to demonstrate what would happen to Judah (Jeremiah 19). He wore a yoke as a sign of the victory of Babylon over Judah and the enslavement of the people.

However, as we shall see, action-signs characterise Ezekiel's mission to an unprecedented degree.

This is the first of three symbolic actions in which Ezekiel is to mime the meaning of the words he is inspired to deliver.

Verses 1-2 offer a good description of how armies at the time besieged a city.

Ezekiel is called to symbolise in his person the punishments that Israel has called down upon itself by its infidelity. Since directions were given facing east, we are to picture Ezekiel lying down with his head to the west and his feet to the east. The command to lie on his left side (4:4) has him facing north, that is, to the northern kingdom of Israel. The prophet is suffering for the sins of the people – an idea that is developed in Isaiah 53:6 where we read: ‘YHWH has laid on him the iniquity of us all.’

When he lies on his right side (4:6), he is looking towards the south, that is, to the southern kingdom of Judah.

390 plus 40 equals 430. Is there an allusion here to the following from the Book of Exodus? If so the spotlight is on Israel’s slavery.

The time that the Israelites had lived in Egypt was four hundred thirty years. At the end of four hundred thirty years, on that very day, all the companies of YHWH went out from the land of Egypt.

– Exodus 12:40-41

Ezekiel’s actions portray the dreadful siege that YHWH is threatening. The reference to Exodus holds out hope of an end to enslavement. They must suffer the consequences of their rebellion, but YHWH remains the God who saves.

¹And you, son of man, take a brick and set it before you. On it engrave a city, Jerusalem; ²put it under siege – build a siege-wall against it, and cast up a ramp against it; set camps also against it, and plant battering rams against it all around. ³Then take an iron plate and place it as an iron wall between you and the city; 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.

⁴Then lie on your left side, and place the punishment of the house of Israel upon it; you shall bear their punishment for the number of the days that you lie there. ⁵For I assign to you a number of days, 390 days, equal to the number of the years of their punishment; and so you shall bear the punishment of the house of Israel.

⁶When 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; 40 days I assign you, one day for each year. ⁷You shall set your face toward the siege of Jerusalem, and with your arm bared you shall prophesy against it. ⁸See, I am putting ropes on you so that you cannot turn from one side to the other until you have completed the days of your siege.

severe rationing during siege

⁹And you, take wheat and barley, beans and lentils, millet and spelt; put them into one vessel, and make bread for yourself. During the number of days that you lie on your side, 390 days, you shall eat it. ¹⁰The food that you eat shall be twenty shekels a day by weight; at fixed times you shall eat it. ¹¹And you shall drink water by measure, one-sixth of a hin; at fixed times you shall drink.

¹²You shall eat it as a barley-cake, baking it in their sight on human excrement. ¹³YHWH said, “Thus shall the people of Israel eat their bread, unclean, among the nations to which I will banish them.”

¹⁴Then I said, “Ah Lord YHWH! I have never defiled myself; from my youth up until now I have never eaten what died of itself or was torn by animals, nor has carrion flesh come into my mouth.”

¹⁵Then he said to me, “See, I will let you have cow’s dung instead of human excrement, on which you may prepare your bread.”

¹⁶Then he said to me: Son of man, I am going to break the staff of bread in Jerusalem; they shall eat bread by weight and with fearfulness; and they shall drink water by measure and in dismay. ¹⁷Lacking bread and water, they will look at one another in dismay, and waste away under their punishment.

In this second symbolic action, the actions commanded by God in verses 9-11 demonstrate the severe rationing that the people will suffer when the city is under siege. They will be forced to make their bread from scraps of whatever they can find.

Using human excrement for fuel was something abhorrent. This is expressed in the Torah:

When you relieve yourself outside, you shall dig a hole with it and then cover up your excrement. Because YHWH your God travels along with your camp ... therefore your camp must be holy, so that he may not see anything indecent among you and turn away from you.

– Deuteronomy 23:13-14

Verse 13 introduces the theme of exile. Ezekiel, a priest, insists that he has never eaten in an ‘impure’ way. YHWH’s response (verse 15) highlights the possibility of avoiding uncleanness even while exiled in an unclean land.

Verses 16-17 reinforce the severity of the rationing.

In this third symbolic action the blade demonstrates YHWH's determination, having 'bared his arm'(4:7) to attack his people with the sword. Shaving evokes the image of enslavement. We are reminded of the words of Isaiah:

On that day YHWH will shave with a razor hired beyond the River—with the king of Assyria—the head and the hair of the feet, and it will take off the beard as well.

– Isaiah 7:20

It is also a sign of mourning (see Jeremiah 41:5).

Dividing the hair into three lots demonstrates that a third of the population of Jerusalem will perish in the city, a third while be killed attempting to escape, and the remaining third will be exiled.

Verse 3 symbolises the fact that YHWH will bind a remnant to himself, protecting them against destruction. Verse 4 states that even these must face judgment.

These sign-actions are followed in verses 5-17 with a commission to deliver YHWH's word to his rebellious people. Jerusalem is YHWH's favourite, 'set in the centre of the nations'(verse 5). This makes her rebellion all the worse (verse 6).

Ezekiel is to announce YHWH's threat of punishment (verses 8-9).

¹And you, son of man, take a sharp blade; use it as a barber's razor and run it over your head and your beard; then take balances for weighing, and divide the hair. ²One third of the hair you shall burn in the fire inside the city, when the days of the siege are completed; one third you shall take and strike with the blade all around the city; and one third you shall scatter to the wind, and I will unsheathe the sword after them.

³Then you shall take from these a small amount, and wrap it in the skirts of your robe. ⁴From this, again, you shall take some, throw it into the fire and burn it up; from there a fire will come out against all the house of Israel.

⁵Thus says the Lord YHWH: This is Jerusalem; I have set her in the centre of the nations, with countries all around her. ⁶But she has rebelled against my ordinances and my statutes, becoming more wicked than the nations and the countries all around her, rejecting my ordinances and not following my statutes.

⁷Therefore thus says the Lord YHWH: Because you are more turbulent than the nations that are all around you, and have not followed my statutes or kept my ordinances, but have acted according to the ordinances of the nations that are all around you; ⁸therefore thus says the Lord YHWH: I, I myself, am coming against you; I will execute judgments among you in the sight of the nations. ⁹And because of all your abominations, I will do to you what I have never yet done, and the like of which I will never do again.

the severity of divine punishment

¹⁰Surely, parents shall eat their children in your midst, and children shall eat their parents; I will execute judgments on you, and any of you who survive I will scatter to every wind. ¹¹Therefore, as I live, says the Lord YHWH, surely, because you have defiled my sanctuary with all your detestable things and with all your abominations—therefore I will cut you down; my eye will not spare, and I will have no pity.

¹²One third of you shall die of pestilence or be consumed by famine among you; one third shall fall by the sword around you; and one third I will scatter to every wind and will unsheathe the sword after them.

¹³My anger shall spend itself, and I will vent my fury on them and satisfy myself; and they shall know that I, YHWH, have spoken in my jealousy, when I spend my fury on them.

¹⁴Moreover I will make you a desolation and an object of mocking among the nations around you, in the sight of all that pass by. ¹⁵You shall be a mockery and a taunt, a warning and a horror to the nations around you, when I execute judgments on you in anger and fury, and with furious punishments – I, YHWH, have spoken – ¹⁶when I loose against you my deadly arrows of famine, arrows for destruction, which I will let loose to destroy you, and when I bring more and more famine upon you, and break your staff of bread.

¹⁷I will send famine and wild animals against you, and they will rob you of your children; pestilence and bloodshed shall pass through you; and I will bring the sword upon you. I, YHWH, have spoken.

The section concludes with a series of later additions that repeat earlier verses and show signs of reminiscences from the actual experience of the 587 siege.

The desecration of the temple is described in detail in chapter 8. Ezekiel and his contemporaries had no other way of understanding the dreadful experience of the siege and consequent destruction of Jerusalem and its sanctuary than to see it as an expression of YHWH's jealous fury at the failure of its inhabitants to honour the covenant.

In the previous section we witnessed a number of dramatic actions performed in silence by the prophet, each of them signifying action that YHWH was threatening. Here Ezekiel's gesture reinforces the content of his message. The 'mountains' were Israel's original habitat when the level country bordering the Mediterranean and the east-west plain of Esdraelon separating Samaria from Galilee were controlled by Egypt or the Philistines. As verse 3 makes clear, Israel expanded into the whole of Canaan.

The traditional word for the cult sites for idol worship is 'high places' (verse 3, בְּמִקְדָּשָׁם). Verse 4 speaks of the altars (בְּזִבְחֵיהֶם) on which animals were sacrificed to the pagan idols (גִּילְגָּלִים), and the 'incense braziers' (תְּהִמִּינִים). Burning corpses on an altar rendered the altar impure (unfit for cult). The failure of internal reform to eliminate this pagan cult (see Josiah's attempt in 2Kings 23:4-20) means that YHWH will destroy it by means of foreign invasion.

Divine punishment is in order that 'you shall know that I am YHWH' (verse 7).

In verse 8 we are reassured that 'I will spare some'. Some of these will be 'scattered through the countries'. Foreign nations will see in them the suffering of those whose hearts are unfaithful. It is through the eyes that the heart opens to the world, and it is their eyes that have seduced them (verse 9).

The disaster that comes upon Israel, and the suffering of exile will be remembered (verse 9, זָכַר), that is to say, it will be recalled as a constitutive element of Israel's faith in their God whose actions are seen in their history. Once again we are told: 'they shall know that I am YHWH' (verse 10; see verse 7).

¹The word of YHWH came to me:
²Son of man, set your face toward the mountains of Israel, and prophesy against them, ³and say: You mountains of Israel, hear the word of the Lord YHWH! Thus says the Lord YHWH to the mountains and the hills, to the ravines and the valleys: I, I myself will bring a sword upon you, and I will destroy your high places. ⁴Your altars shall become desolate, and your incense braziers shall be broken; and I will throw down your slain in front of your idols. ⁵I will lay the corpses of the people of Israel in front of their idols; and I will scatter your bones around your altars.

⁶Wherever you live, your towns shall be waste and your high places ruined, so that your altars will be laid waste and ruined, your idols broken and destroyed, your incense braziers cut down, and what you have made wiped out. ⁷The slain shall lie fallen in your midst; then you shall know that I am YHWH.

⁸But I will spare some. Some of you shall escape the sword among the nations and be scattered through the countries. ⁹Those of you who escape shall remember me among the nations where they are carried captive, how I was grieved at their wanton heart that turned away from me, and their wanton eyes that turned after their idols. Then they will be loathsome in their own sight for the evils that they have committed, for all their abominations.

¹⁰And they shall know that I am YHWH; I did not threaten in vain to bring this disaster upon them.

¹¹Thus says the Lord YHWH: Clap your hands and stamp your foot, and say, Alas for all the vile abominations of the house of Israel! For they shall fall by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence.

¹²Those far off shall die of pestilence; those nearby shall fall by the sword; and any who are left and are spared shall die of famine. Thus I will spend my fury upon them.

¹³And you shall know that I am YHWH, when their slain lie among their idols around their altars, on every high hill, on all the mountain tops, under every green tree, and under every leafy oak, wherever they offered pleasing odour to all their idols.

¹⁴I will stretch out my hand against them, and make the land desolate and empty, throughout all their settlements, from the wilderness to Riblah. Then they shall know that I am YHWH.

Ezekiel is told: 'clap your hands and stamp your foot'. He is to rejoice in YHWH's victory over those who have forgotten him to worship false gods (compare Nahum 3:19).

In 5:2, we hear of sword, fire and dispersion. In 5:12 we hear of sword, pestilence and dispersion. Ezekiel is fond of listings of three. Here we have sword, famine and pestilence (verse 11).

The whole land will lie desolate from the desert to the south, separating Israel from Egypt, to Riblah on the Orontes to the north. In 587, king Zedekiah's sons and the leading nobles of Judah were executed by the Babylonian general at Riblah (2Kings 25:6, 20-21).

Ezekiel places the terrible disaster of the destruction of Jerusalem (587) against the background of a more universal and ultimate judgment of which it is a particular realisation. In doing so he is giving expression to a prophetic tradition that we can find, for example, in Amos 5:18-20 (in relation to the destruction of Samaria, 721), in Isaiah 2:5 - 4:1 (referring to the same period in Judah), and in Zephaniah (a century later in Judah).

Ezekiel announces God's judgment against 'the land of Israel'. It is one of annihilation, and is part of divine judgment that extends to the 'four corners of the earth' (verse 2). The word 'end' (יָדָה) echoes the words spoken by God to Noah:

I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth.

– Genesis 6:13

Verses 3-4 underscore the fact that what is seen as divine punishment is, when we look at the level of human decision and indecision, the effect of people's sinful actions.

Verses 6-9 do little more than repeat what has already been stated in verses 2-4.

¹The word of YHWH came to me:

²You, son of man, thus says the Lord YHWH to the land of Israel: **An end! The end has come upon the four corners of the earth.** ³Now the end is upon you. I will let loose my anger upon you; I will judge you according to your ways; I will punish you for all your abominations. ⁴My eye will not spare you, I will have no pity. I will punish you for your ways, while your abominations are among you. Then you shall know that I am YHWH.

⁵Thus says the Lord YHWH: **Disaster after disaster! See, it comes.** ⁶An end has come.

The end has come. It has awakened against you; see, it comes! ⁷Your doom has come to you, O inhabitant of the land. The time has come, the day is near — of tumult, not of revelling on the mountains. ⁸Soon now I will pour out my wrath upon you; I will spend my anger against you. I will judge you according to your ways, and punish you for all your abominations. ⁹My eye will not spare; I will have no pity. I will punish you according to your ways, while your abominations are among you. Then you shall know that it is I YHWH who strike.

¹⁰See, the day! See, it comes! Your doom has gone out. The rod has blossomed, pride has budded. ¹¹Violence has grown into a rod of wickedness. None of them shall remain, not their abundance, not their wealth; no pre-eminence among them.

¹²The time has come, the day draws near; let not the buyer rejoice, nor the seller mourn, for wrath is upon all their multitude. ¹³For the sellers shall not return to what has been sold as long as they remain alive. For the vision concerns all their multitude; it shall not be revoked. Because of their iniquity, they cannot maintain their lives.

¹⁴They have blown the horn and made everything ready; but no one goes to battle, for my wrath is upon all their multitude. ¹⁵The sword is outside, pestilence and famine are inside; those in the field die by the sword; those in the city — famine and pestilence devour them. ¹⁶If any survivors escape, they shall be found on the mountains like doves of the valleys, all of them moaning over their iniquity. ¹⁷All hands shall grow feeble, all knees turn to water. ¹⁸They shall put on sackcloth, horror shall cover them. Shame shall be on all faces, baldness on all their heads. ¹⁹They shall fling their silver into the streets, their gold shall be treated as unclean. Their silver and gold cannot save them on the day of the wrath of YHWH. They shall not satisfy their hunger or fill their stomachs with it. For it was the stumbling block of their iniquity.

²⁰From their beautiful ornament, in which they took pride, they made their abominable images, their detestable things; therefore I will make of it an unclean thing to them.

The Greek Version of verses 10-27 is considerably shorter than the Hebrew text. The Hebrew text appears to include later additions by editors who attempted to 'clarify' the staccato utterances of Ezekiel. This may explain the somewhat disjointed nature of the text as we now have it.

Verses 10-11 focus on injustice (the 'rod'), pride and violence as what brought on divine judgment.

Verses 12-13 insist that the judgment will fall on everyone, whatever their place in society. Whether you buy or sell, everything loses meaning in light of the end (compare Isaiah 24:2).

Verses 14-16 speak of war as seen from the losing side.

Verse 17 describes the ensuing panic and verse 18 uses the language of mourning rites.

They have been seduced by wealth and it has betrayed them (verse 19). They have looked to false gods who have proved useless (verse 20).

So far the objection has been to false cult. Here in verse 22 social crimes are added, with the accent on 'violence' as in Genesis 6:11,13 - the key crime that brought about the Flood.

People desperately seek 'peace', that is to say, they want to live in harmony with their God and with a world blessed by God. They seek it 'in vain' because their actions have destroyed the harmony (verse 25).

Their political leaders can do nothing (verse 27).

The final statement demands that we rise above the human plain of decision and indecision to know that it is YHWH who is bringing about the disaster. Dreadful as the judgment is, the presence of YHWH cannot fail to open up a way of hope!

²¹I will hand it over to strangers as booty, to the wicked of the earth as plunder; they shall profane it.

²²I will avert my face from them, so that they may profane my treasured place; the violent shall enter it, they shall profane it.

²³Make a chain! For the land is full of bloody crimes; the city is full of violence.

²⁴I will bring the worst of the nations to take possession of their houses. I will put an end to the arrogance of the strong, and their holy places shall be profaned.

²⁵When anguish comes, they will seek peace, but there shall be none.

²⁶Disaster comes upon disaster, rumour follows rumour; they shall keep seeking a vision from the prophet; instruction shall perish from the priest, and counsel from the elders.

²⁷The king shall mourn, the prince shall be wrapped in despair, and the hands of the people of the land shall tremble. According to their ways I will deal with them; according to their own judgments I will judge them. And they shall know that I am YHWH.

