

EZEKIEL

Hard to Heart

"Iron Chef Hebraica"

4:1-17

Do you remember Baghdad Bob? It was the colorful nickname given to Mohammed Saeed al-Sahhaf, the Iraqi Information Minister, during the 2003 invasion of Iraq to depose Saddam Hussein.

He became infamous for his propaganda-filled press briefings during the war. On April 7, 2003, for example al-Sahhaf claimed that there were no American troops in Baghdad and that the Americans were committing suicide by the hundreds at the city's gates. At that time American tanks were patrolling the streets only a few hundred meters from the location where the press conference was being held.

He gained something of a cult following in the west, appearing on T-shirts, cartoons, and the internet. One such site featured sound bites of the minister, as well as photoshopped pictures of him on the Star Wars Death Star maintaining that "everything is just fine."¹

Sixth century Judah had its versions of this guy. They were false prophets who were telling the Jews that everything was going to be OK, that the exile in Babylon would be short-lived, and that the Temple would never fall.

Ezekiel was in Babylon charged with telling the exiles the truth. Jerusalem would suffer a third siege during which the Temple would be ruined and the glory of God would depart from Israel.

His 'telling' of the truth would not just be very dramatic; it would be accomplished through drama. Ezekiel would come out of his house each

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muhammad_Saeed_al-Sahhaf

day and perform a four-act drama telling the immediate future of Jerusalem.

We'll look at it one full act at a time reserving the fourth and final act for next time.

Ezekiel 4:1 "You also, son of man, take a clay tablet and lay it before you, and portray on it a city, Jerusalem.

Ezekiel 4:2 Lay siege against it, build a siege wall against it, and heap up a mound against it; set camps against it also, and place battering rams against it all around.

Ezekiel 4:3 Moreover take for yourself an iron plate, and set it as an iron wall between you and the city. Set your face against it, and it shall be besieged, and you shall lay siege against it. This will be a sign to the house of Israel.

Notice Ezekiel is told to take an "iron plate," which is probably a cook pan. In a moment he's going to bake some bread. Hence he was the first Iron Chef.

Beginning with chapter four and continuing through chapter twenty-four Ezekiel prophesies the destruction of Jerusalem. Four symbolic acts in chapters four and five serve as visual lessons.

We know from our last study that Ezekiel was bound by ropes inside his house. It wasn't his enemies that bound him. It was probably his family or neighbors who bound him. He was bound in obedience to the word of the Lord to portray that he was God's prisoner.

It was an object lesson to show the Jews they, too, would be bound in the sense that they would remain in exile in Babylon for quite some time. They would be in their own homes and communities but prisoners nonetheless.

Ezekiel was also an intermittent mute! He only spoke when God told him to and then only the words God wanted spoken.

Now we see he would come out of his house each day to perform a drama. We can assume he was unbound at some point in order to act-out the various parts of the drama.

Act One involved what is variously translated as a "tile" or a "brick" or a "clay tablet." Soft clay would be baked to make it durable and then be used

for writing or drawing. I'm told great quantities of these have been uncovered in Babylon by archaeologists.

On the tablet Ezekiel drew the city of Jerusalem. The people who gathered to see the daily drama would immediately recognize the shape of the city and its major features.

After completing the drawing of the city Ezekiel then "lay siege against it." He constructed a siege wall and mounds and camps and battering ramps.

It seems this was a pretty detailed model. The camps were probably complete with little Babylonian soldiers.

But surely Jerusalem would stand! Surely God would not let His glory depart! That is what the so-called prophets were proclaiming (with the notable exception of Jeremiah).

Now came the dramatic final movement of Act One. Ezekiel took an iron plate and placed it between himself and the city. This may not strike terror into our hearts but it would strike terror in the heart of a Jew. Allow me to read a lengthy passage from Deuteronomy.

Deuteronomy 28:15 "But it shall come to pass, if you do not obey the voice of the Lord your God, to observe carefully all His commandments and His statutes which I command you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you:

Deuteronomy 28:16 "Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the country.

Deuteronomy 28:17 "Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl.

Deuteronomy 28:18 "Cursed shall be the fruit of your body and the produce of your land, the increase of your cattle and the offspring of your flocks.

Deuteronomy 28:19 "Cursed shall you be when you come in, and cursed shall you be when you go out.

Deuteronomy 28:20 "The Lord will send on you cursing, confusion, and rebuke in all that you set your hand to do, until you are destroyed and until you perish quickly, because of the wickedness of your doings in which you have forsaken Me.

Deuteronomy 28:21 The Lord will make the plague cling to you until He has consumed you from the land which you are going to possess.

Deuteronomy 28:22 The Lord will strike you with consumption, with fever, with inflammation, with severe burning fever, with the sword, with scorching, and with mildew; they shall pursue you until you perish.

Deuteronomy 28:23 And your heavens which are over your head shall be bronze, and the earth which is under you **shall be iron**.

Uh-oh. The earth “shall be iron.” All the curses of disobedience were going to come to pass. Other passages, in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, speak of God setting His face against His people if they disobeyed and rebelled.

House lights down; curtain; end of Act One.

Act Two:

Ezekiel 4:4 "Lie also on your left side, and lay the iniquity of the house of Israel upon it. According to the number of the days that you lie on it, you shall bear their iniquity.

Ezekiel 4:5 For I have laid on you the years of their iniquity, according to the number of the days, three hundred and ninety days; so you shall bear the iniquity of the house of Israel.

Ezekiel 4:6 And when you have completed them, lie again on your right side; then you shall bear the iniquity of the house of Judah forty days. I have laid on you a day for each year.

Ezekiel 4:7 "Therefore you shall set your face toward the siege of Jerusalem; your arm shall be uncovered, and you shall prophesy against it.

Ezekiel 4:8 And surely I will restrain you so that you cannot turn from one side to another till you have ended the days of your siege.

This would be a good place to mention that liberal scholars like to suggest that Ezekiel suffered from epilepsy or catalepsy. They point to his tongue sticking to the roof of his mouth and his lying, or they say falling, down. Of course it's part of their theory that none of this was supernatural but was rather superstitious. They say the Jews saw Ezekiel acting this way and, not knowing what we now know about modern medicine, assumed he was having a seizure.

All of those kinds of interpretations stem from a disbelief in the inspiration of the Bible. If the Bible is inspired, and it is, then this is what God commanded and empowered Ezekiel to perform. It was not an undiagnosed illness that had superstitious overtones.

God told Ezekiel to lie on his left side and put the sin of the house of Israel on himself. If Ezekiel prostrated himself with his head toward Jerusalem he was facing north when he lay on his left side (and south when he lay on his right side. His facing north, which represented Israel, the Northern Kingdom, was to be for “390 days.”

After remaining on his left side for 390 days, he was to lie on his right side, and bear the sin of the house of Judah. His facing toward the south, representing Judah, the Southern Kingdom, was to last for 40 days.

It's best to understand him as lying on his side for a period of time each day for 390 days then the next 40 days. He did it as part of this daily performance of the four-act drama.

Each day represented a year in the life of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and then the Southern Kingdom of Judah.

Scholars are somewhat baffled by the exact time periods. Some see them as referring to the past, while some see them as yet future to Ezekiel's prophesying.

God calls them "the years of their iniquity," so it seems best to see them as having occurred in the past - before the siege being depicted. As far as when each period began, what triggered each, we are nowhere told. We only know that the length of the siege somehow corresponded to the years of their sin and rebellion according to some heavenly reckoning.

God is merciful. He is longsuffering. We ought to revel in those things but not take advantage of them. I will still reap what I've sown - unless I confess my sin and experience the faithfulness of God in forgiving it and in cleansing me.

Even then there could be consequences to my sin. Physical consequences; financial consequences; social consequences. Not everything can be undone. Better to not tempt the Lord!

In verses seven and eight you get some stage direction for this drama. Ezekiel would come out for Act Two and face the siege model he had built. Then he would bare his arm. The Scripture that comes to mind is Isaiah 52:10, "The Lord has made bare His holy arm In the eyes of all the nations; And all the ends of the earth shall see The salvation of our God."

Next he had to prophesy against the city. Perhaps he quoted from Isaiah applying it as God showing His power to the nations by allowing Babylon to besiege and destroy Jerusalem in His sight. Babylon was God's tool.

Finally Ezekiel allowed himself to be tied up again and began the ordeal of lying on his side.

Whatever “side” he was laying on had to bear the entire burden of his weight. It represented first Israel then Judah bearing the punishment for their iniquities.

A third siege seemed unlikely. After all, Babylon was firmly in control of Jerusalem. Unknown to the exiles but known to God were the schemes of King Zedekiah in Judah to break the existing treaty with Nebuchadnezzar. He would incur the wrath of the Babylonian monarch and Jerusalem would pay dearly for it.

On to Act Three.

Ezekiel 4:9 "Also take for yourself wheat, barley, beans, lentils, millet, and spelt; put them into one vessel, and make bread of them for yourself. During the number of days that you lie on your side, three hundred and ninety days, you shall eat it.

Ezekiel 4:10 And your food which you eat shall be by weight, twenty shekels a day; from time to time you shall eat it.

Ezekiel 4:11 You shall also drink water by measure, one-sixth of a hin; from time to time you shall drink.

Ezekiel 4:12 And you shall eat it as barley cakes; and bake it using fuel of human waste in their sight."

Ezekiel 4:13 Then the Lord said, "So shall the children of Israel eat their defiled bread among the Gentiles, where I will drive them."

Ezekiel 4:14 So I said, "Ah, Lord God! Indeed I have never defiled myself from my youth till now; I have never eaten what died of itself or was torn by beasts, nor has abominable flesh ever come into my mouth."

Ezekiel 4:15 Then He said to me, "See, I am giving you cow dung instead of human waste, and you shall prepare your bread over it."

Ezekiel 4:16 Moreover He said to me, "Son of man, surely I will cut off the supply of bread in Jerusalem; they shall eat bread by weight and with anxiety, and shall drink water by measure and with dread,

Ezekiel 4:17 that they may lack bread and water, and be dismayed with one another, and waste away because of their iniquity.

A city besieged was a city starving. Rationing would come first but eventually the supplies of food and water and fuel would become depleted. You'd be forced to eat and drink things that were disgusting, using fuel that was even more disgusting.

Ezekiel is given a recipe for baking bread. One author, in looking at the list of ingredients, claims the following:

Barley and millet, throughout history, has been considered a poor man's food. Barley is a hardy grain that survives drought and frosts. It also grows in alkali soils. It is usually fed to livestock, but humans can eat it too if they can stomach the flavor. Millet is a bland tasting grass used mainly in disadvantaged counties to feed the poor (and the seeds are given to birds). The recipe was intended to help survive famine during an upcoming siege, not because it tastes good or that it's healthy for you.

It's a little comical that there is a company, *Food for Life*, that produces a bread and other products they call Ezekiel 4:9.

We can't help but focus on the fuel. Ezekiel was instructed to use human waste as his fuel.

Truth is, in many parts of the world animal dung is used for fuel, even for cooking. It was certainly used in the sixth century. According to the Jewish Encyclopedia it was used by the Jews.

Human dung, however, was to be treated differently and was not used for fuel. It wasn't to be handled. It's use would render the food defiled. It showed the absolute awfulness of the siege.

Ezekiel objected to the use of his own waste as fuel. It was too much for him. He had always kept to the law. God graciously allowed him to substitute cow dung.

Now personally I think Ezekiel's presentation would have been much more powerful if he had gotten over his inhibitions. But even God won't make a person violate their conscience. God didn't want to stumble His prophet.

The drama will conclude with Act Four in chapter five and a sermon putting it all in perspective.

Some of you have seen or even participated in the Gospel being presented through drama. It can be very powerful. I wouldn't mind, and would welcome, a quality drama ministry.

Maybe, too, we should think of our own lives as being more dramatic.

Or, better yet, maybe we should think of a few dramatic ways in which we might call attention to the Gospel and to Jesus.

At the very least we should understand the power of our example, however subtle it might be. If someone knows you are a Christian then you can be sure they are watching you. Your acts have greater meaning to them because you've told them you live for God in the power of His Spirit.

We are all actors but in the truest, most honest sense. We are acting as ourselves empowered by God. Each day we grow into the role more-and-more as we are being conformed into the image of Jesus.

In the famous monologue from Shakespeare's *As You Like It* you read,

*All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts...*

He goes on to describe what was commonly known as the seven stages of man, from infancy to beyond old age when a man needs caring for - just as he did when an infant!

Well, that might describe the natural man. It doesn't describe the spiritual man - the man who has been born again.

The spiritual man is going from glory-to-glory on the earth until he is one day glorified in Heaven.

That is the drama we are acting out.