

A Historical Survey of the Book of Ezekiel

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ABSTRACT

The book of Ezekiel is replete with a lot of messages that make its story very interesting. In spite of the uniqueness of the book, past biblical scholarship only selected and studied certain themes. Much have therefore not been written on the historical analysis of the whole book. The thrust of this study is to make an historical survey of the whole book; historical method is also used in its analysis. The findings of the work reveal that the book was written for a specific people living in a particular tragic time in their history. The study concludes that there are still different aspects of the book that are yet to be explored.

Keywords: Historical Survey, uniqueness, analysis, tragic, biblical scholarship.

INTRODUCTION

The book was named after its author “Ezekiel” which means God strengthens or “God will strengthen”. He was the son of Buzi and of a priestly family, possibly of the Zadokite line (Ezekiel 1:3, 40:46). He manifested great familiarity with Jerusalem where he spent his early years.[1] He lived in a time of unprecedented calamity.[2] When we study the author we shall understand those tragic overwhelming calamities and sorrow that led to the emergence of the book.

The key to understanding the book of Ezekiel is to remember that it was written for a specific people living in a particular tragic time in their history.[3] Traditionally, the book is thought to have been written in the 500 B.C.E during the Babylonian exile of the southern Israelite kingdom, Judah.[4] It is, however, necessary to examine the tragic events that culminated the writing of the book. After the death of Solomon, the years of the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah were years of decline in every area of their national life. Moral and spiritual decadence reached its zenith in the Northern kingdom under Ahab and Jezebel (I Kings 17:1-22:40)), who reigned from about 874 to 853. Although the Northern kingdom continued for another hundred and thirty years, the fall of Samaria, its capital, finally came in 722 B.C.E. at the hands of the Assyrians. Assyria had become so weak, politically, when Samaria was overthrown and it soon fell prey to the rising power of Babylon. With the end of Assyrians dominance and the captivity of the northern kingdom, there was a glimmer of hope for Judah. A new young king named Josiah who desired to see a spiritual moral revival in his kingdom[5], ascended the throne.

The reign of Josiah was a watershed in Judah’s spiritual development. Although his reforms were based on the discovery of the book of the law during the reconstruction work of the temple; Assyria’s weakening influence coupled with his own strong desires made the reforms possible. Assyria’s collapse may be dated by the fall of Nineveh in 612 B.C.E., and Babylonia supremacy was sealed seven years later. In 609 B.C.E., Pharaoh Necho was going to the aid of Assyria against the Babylonian menace, Josiah took a pro-Babylonian stand and fought Necho at Megiddo. Josiah was brutally mothered in the battle. As a result of

the death of Josiah, Judah immediately became a vassal state under Egypt. Necho came back to Jerusalem and made Josiah's son Jehoahaz king of Judah. Necho's campaign against Babylon was unsuccessful and so, to establish his hold on Syria and Palestine, he had Jehoahaz deported to Egypt after a reign of only three months and replaced him with his brother, Eliakim, giving him the throne name Jehoiakim. At the initial stage, Jehoiakim cooperated with Egypt. He placed heavy taxation on the people, reinstated pagan worship and quickly eradicated the reforms of his father.

When Nebuchadnezzar defeated Necho at Carchemish in 605 B.C.E, he came to Jerusalem and allowed Jehoiakim, who had been placed on the throne by Necho, to remain as king over Judah but took with him into Babylon a few of the seeds of the royal family and made them Eunuchs in his palace in Babylon. Daniel and his three friends were among the royal household first deported to Babylon in 605 B.C.E. After Jehoiakim who had been placed on the throne by Nebuchadnezzar had reigned for eleven years, (Jer. 23:34) he rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians. Nebuchadnezzar came a second time in 598 B.C.E. to besiege and to encompass Jerusalem. Before Nebuchadnezzar could get there, Jehoiakim had died. Jehoiakim's successor was his eighteen-year -old son Jehoiachin also called Coniah and Jeconiah (Jer. 22:24, 28; I Chr. 3:16). He too had aspirations for breaking the stronghold of Babylonian power. He hoped that Egypt would be the key to his plan, hence he moved to form an alliance. After the expected help from Egypt failed to materialise and after a three month' siege, Jehoiachin surrendered on the second day of Adar 597 B.C.E. which is interpreted as the 16th of March 597 B.C.E. [6] Together with the queen's mother and the palace retinue, and all the leading citizens of the land, (the princes, the might men of valour the artisans), Jehoiachin was taken into captivity to Babylon.[7] Ezekiel was among those captives and it is against this background that the book of Ezekiel can be understood. Since there was nothing like the book of Ezekiel before the Babylonian deportation. It was during the exile that Ezekiel received his call. The book of Ezekiel can, therefore, be described as a compendium of information about the exile. For a better understanding of the topic, the work shall examine the purpose of the book, theological theme of the book, the prophet's use of symbols and interpretation of the selected text.

THE PURPOSE OF THE BOOK OF EZEKIEL

As earlier stated at the beginning of this chapter, the prophetic ministry of Ezekiel must be understood against the turbulent background of the last days of Judah as an independent state.[8] It was while in exile in the midst of this turbulence that Ezekiel was called by Yahweh to be his prophet.[9] Hence, we can infer from this that the book of Ezekiel was composed in Babylon by the prophet.

The prophetic message and literary structure of the book are closely related. The book's three-part message is a theodicy (i.e. a defense or interpretation of God's judgment of Judah and the resultant destruction) and it corresponds to the three dimensions or phases of Ezekiel's ministry to the Hebrews in exile. The purpose of Ezekiel's divine commission as God's "watchman" was to warn a generation of obstinate and hardened Israelites of impending judgment, to underscore each generation's accountability for sin (Ezek. 8:20) and to call those worthy to heed the counsel "to repent and live"[10] (Ezek. 18:21-23,32). The book of Ezekiel was, therefore, written to remind the Israelites of the sin which had brought judgment and exile upon them and to encourage and strengthen their faith with prophecies of future restoration and glory.[11]

The book of Ezekiel is not a random collection of messages from the prophet[12]. The message of the book has an inner consistency which fits in with the structural balance.[13]

The picture of the character and personality of Ezekiel, for instance, appears consistent throughout the whole book; there is the same earnestness, eccentricity, priestly love of symbolism, fastidious concern with detail, sense of the majesty and transcendence of God.[14] The purpose of the book can be summarized as follows: To present the reality of God, the reality of judgment, the reality of restoration, the reality of

redemption and the prospect of restoration. For clarity, each of these points shall be explained briefly.

To present the reality of God: The introductory chapters on Ezekiel's call center on a fresh vision of the character of God. (Ezek. 1:1-3, 27). As we can see from the introductory chapters, it is the aim of the book to present God as the prime mover of history. He is real and he controls the affairs of the universe.

To present the reality of judgment: The first two-thirds of the book contain judgment that announced the fall of Judah and the destruction of Jerusalem, (Ezek 1-24:27). The Israelites had committed sin against God. The book, therefore, was written to assure the people that God's judgment is a reality.

To present the reality of restoration: With the judgment messages as background, the book presents the promise of restoration (Ezek. 33:1-37;28), the power of restoration (Ezek. 38:1- 39:29) and the prospect of restoration (Ezek 4:1-46-24).[\[15\]](#)

To present the reality of redemption (Ezek. 47:1-48,35). Ezekiel realised the promise of redemption in a prophetic vision as he saw the fulfillment of the promises in the river of life. (Ezek. 47:1-12), the land of the redeemed (Ezek. 47:13-48:29) and the city of God (Ezek. 48:30- 35).

It is, therefore, not an overstatement to conclude that the book was not written by accident. God inspired his prophet to write so that the purpose with which the book was written can be fulfilled. The fulfillment of these purpose eventually served as a great lesson not only for Israelites but all the readers.

THEOLOGICAL THEME OF THE BOOK OF EZEKIEL

From the review of the contents of the book of Prophet Ezekiel, it can be argued that what sets the book of Ezekiel off from other prophetic books is the unique way the prophet develops certain traditional themes. [\[16\]](#) At least six significant theological themes can be identified in the book. These themes include: Yahweh's lordship over all nations and events; God's holiness and transcendence; moral and cultic demands; individual responsibility, the sinfulness of humanity and hope of restoration. For better understanding, each of these themes will be explained below.

The Divine Lordship: Ezekiel's doctrine of God is most clearly seen in the formula that ends nearly every oracle: "so that they will know that I am Yahweh." God acts in events to manifest that he alone has the power to punish and restore. Divine activity reveals that Yahweh does indeed take seriously the punishment of sin while at the same time will never forget his lasting promise of care and covenantal love towards Israel. Above all, the divine concern is seen in Yahweh's ability to give life when there appears to be only death (Ezek. 37:1-14; 47:1-2).

The Holiness and Transcendence of God: The book opens with an account of the call of the prophet. The majesty and transcendence of God are portrayed in the vision of Yahweh on his chariot throne, reigning as the Lord of creation (Ezek. 1:1-28)[\[17\]](#). Yahwey was portrayed as a holy God who transcends his creation but who also shows concern for the sinfulness of humanity.

Ezekiel must have known that the God of Israel was the God of the whole world, as its creator and sustainer. His priestly traditions would have taught him that He was the God of all the nations, and their judge; but there must, nevertheless, have been great comfort from him and for the exiles to know that this God whose dwellingplace was on Mount Zion could appear to them by the river Chebar, amid all the sordid heathenism and idolatry of Babylonian life.

The Sinfulness of Humanity: The holiness and transcendence of God are presented in contrast to the sinfulness of humanity, especially of Judah.[\[18\]](#) Ezekiel used parables to illustrate his point. In chapter 16,

he told the story of a child who was abandoned, rescued from certain death, cared for by a benevolent benefactor, and who grew to be a young woman of marriageable age. When she was betrothed and prepared for marriage, she decided instead to become a harlot (Ezek 16:15). From this point, Ezekiel clearly identified Israel or Judah as the harlot and the story of her life as an allegory of its history. Other passages in general are Ezekiel 8:1-18; 20:1-44- and 23:1-49)- Prophets such as Annas had stressed the social sins of the nation, but Ezekiel took his message a step further and stressed the spiritual root of sin as the violation of God's holiness presented in his character and commandments.^[19] The nation was so sinful that Ezekiel portrayed Yahweh reluctantly departing from the temple (Ezek. 10:1ff) and finally leaving Jerusalem.

Moral and Cultic Demands: Ezekiel continues the traditions of vehement protest against the corruption of Israel in both injustice and in false worship (Ezekiel 5-6; 17-18; 20:22). Ezekiel clearly understood that the root of Israel's turning from Yahweh was a loss of "knowing" God and his covenant statutes. God gave his statutes and regulations to enable them to serve him faithfully. God, therefore, demands moral uprightness from them.

Inevitability of Judgment

Messages of judgment had been the regular output of prophets for many years but that very fact made Ezekiel's task more difficult. There was a great deal of difference between threats of judgment and a message that judgment was imminent. This was why Ezekiel was given the responsibility to act as a national watchman for Israel to give warning of the disaster that was about to strike. God's message to him was that the God who spoke would also act: "I the Lord have spoken, and I will do it" (Ezek. 17:24; 22:14; 24:14; 36: 37:14). God had spoken the word of judgment, and men could no longer reject it with the excuse that though the prophets had threatened, nothing had happened in the past (Ezek. 12:22), or that it all referred to the distant future (Ezek. 12:27). God affirms: "the word which I speak will be performed" (Ezek. 12:28).

Individual Responsibility: The book of Ezekiel teaches that every man is treated as an individual by God. What happens to him is not dependent purely on heredity, nor on environment, but is conditioned by personal choice. The choice that matters is commitment to God proving the commitment by obedience to the commandments. When this is done, man's wickedness will not be held against him. Conversely, the righteous man has to be warned not to trust in his righteousness as an excuse for playing with evil; if he does so, he is showing that his true commitment is not to God. This is no statement of justification by works; it is saying that a man's life is a matter of his heart. God does not average out a man's life; it is the direction of his commitment that counts. And basic to Ezekiel's analysis of the whole issue is that the Lord has no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezek. 18:23,32); he wants him to turn and live. The message of the book of Ezekiel on individual responsibility helped to demonstrate that the difference between guilt before God, and accountable consequences of sins are more far-reaching and will affect others for generations to come.^[20]

The Promise of Restoration: Although repentance is for the individual, salvation is to be enjoyed by him as a member of a restored community. The new Israel is to be brought to life miraculously by the working of God's spirit, who alone can make dry bones live (Ezek 37:17). It will be a community without the Old divisions of Israel and Judah to tear it apart (Ezek. 37:17). It will enjoy the blessings of an everlasting covenant, and the covenant watchword: "they shall be my people, and I will be their God" will be written into its constitution (Ezekiel 11:20; 14:11; 36:28; 27:23, 27). The land will prosper and flourish, and from out of the sanctuary in the new Jerusalem will flow the symbolic river of life to water the waste places of the earth (Ezek. 47:1-12). All this, however, is but the external aspect of the restoration that God promises to his righteous remnant. Internally, He holds out the offer of a new heart and a new spirit for the individual Israelite, so that he may be made clean from the defilement of his sins and the uncleanness of the exile and may be motivated from within to live after God's commandments (Ezek. 36:24-28).

PROPHET EZEKIEL AND THE USE OF SYMBOLS

When one reads through the Bible and looks at the messages of the prophets, one will observe that they delivered their messages, oftentimes, symbolically; the prophets, probably, chose to use the method so as to impress their messages on the minds of the people that they might listen to them and remember. For example, on one occasion when he was leaving Jerusalem, Jeroboam met Ahjah, the prophet of the ancient sanctuary of Shiloh. Ahijah stripped of his new outer garment and tore it into twelve shreds, ten of which he gave to Jeroboam, with the assurance that, on obedience to his laws, God would establish for him a kingdom and dynasty equal to that of David (I Kings 11:29-40). Isaiah chapter 20 is given over entirely to a sign sermon, Isaiah walked naked and barefoot through the street of Jerusalem for three solid years. This was a sign sermon interpreted to denote Israel's dependence on a naked, helpless and fruitless nation. Jeremiah took an earthen vessel, a jar, and smashed it into pieces for a sign of what God was going to do with the nation in judgment.[\[21\]](#)

Ezekiel seems to have more symbolism than any other book in the bible. The book combines prophetic oracles with legal reflections, prose and poetry, extremely detailed historical and theological allusions, sober judgment and wild vision, verbose sermonizing, with vivid dramatic presentation. This leads to a wealth of material and a breadth of vision far greater than those found in other prophetic books. [\[22\]](#) The auto-dramatic focus of Ezekiel in words that are coupled with symbolic actions links him most closely with the pre-classical prophets such as Elijah and Elisha. Some of the symbolism he employed in prophetic activity can be found in the following passages: Ezk 2:8-3; 4:1-17; 5:1-17; 5:1-17; 6:11-14; 12:3-7, 17-20; 21:6-7, 12-23; 24:15-24; 37:15-23.

Ezekiel was caught up in ecstasy and frequently reinforced his oracles with dramatic actions. Being a priest by training and upbringing, symbolism on a grand scale was second nature to him, especially symbolism that combined word and deed. [\[23\]](#) In his opening vision in chapter one, the symbolism of the four faces suggests that the government of God relates to all time, space creatures and spheres. It is universal and sovereign (Ezek. 1:10). It moves forward with unerring precision, never thwarted by the creature it and never obliged to deviate from its set course (Ezek. 1:12). The mysterious wheels within wheels indicate that God's way are past finding out. His movements in history and on earth are often beyond man's understanding, but they are all part of His blueprint for the ages (Ezek. 1:15-17).[\[24\]](#)

Ezekiel used symbolism to arouse curiosity and etch the truth indelibly upon the people's mind. He mapped out the city of Jerusalem on a large rectangular piece of clay that had been dried in the sun. [\[25\]](#) Like a child with toy soldiers and equipment, he moved miniature mounds and battle towers against the model (Ezek 4:12). The onlookers did not have to be told that their beloved city was the target of an attack. Ezekiel then set up a large iron baking grill between the beloved city and the invaders (Ezek 4:3). The audience must have realised that the enemy was rigid in its determination to batter down the resistance.

In chapter 4:5, Ezekiel lied down on his side with his head pointing towards Jerusalem; he went through the performance for several hours, each day, for a total of 430 days. For 390 days, he faced the north, reminding the people that the ten tribes of the north (Israel) would feel the weight of their sins for four centuries. Then for 40 days, he faced the south, reminding the people that the southern kingdom (Judah) must also bear the burden of its apostasy, although for a much shorter period. The pending siege against Jerusalem would last as many days as the total years involved in the departure of the whole nation from the living God.[\[26\]](#)

Ezekiel became a baker of bread. The ingredients consisted of the poorest quality of flour – a crude and unpalatable mixture (Ezek. 4:9). He restricted his diet to this meager fare for 390 days. Both the quality and the quantity of his meals vividly portrayed famine conditions (Ezek. 4:10,11). The food was not only sickening but scarce.[\[27\]](#) To worsen the situation, Ezekiel had divine instructions to use human faces for

fuel (Ezekiel 4:12). This would give the bread a loathsome odour and repulsive taste. It symbolised how intensely the divine holiness recoiled against the idolatrous Jews. In God's sight, the people were as vile as dung. It also suggested how polluted the people would become when the conditions of the siege made it impossible for them to find food that met the dietary standards of levitical law (Ezek. 4:13).

Ezekiel objected strenuously to such an extremity. He had never violated ceremonial law by eating anything that had died a natural death or suffered mutilation (Ezekiel 4:14). He was horrified not because he had a squeamish stomach but because he had a holy regard for God's word, which required the immediate burial of human excrement (Deut 23:12-14). Ezekiel's long faithfulness to ceremonial observance prompted the Lord to rescind the order. To Cow's dung as a substitute (Ezek. 4:15).

As a part of his symbolic action, Ezekiel shaved his head bald and his face clean with a sharp sword.[\[28\]](#) This depicted how thoroughly Babylon would scrape the inhabitants off the land of Judah (Ezek 5:1). The weighing of the hair points to a discriminating judgment under divine supervision and in harmony with divine justice.[\[29\]](#) The dividing of the hair pictures the threefold fate of the Jews: a third will perish inside the city walls; a third will die fighting outside the city; another third will survive but scatter to the four points of the compass (Ezekiel 5:2). Of those who escape death, a mere handful will remain in Judah, where they must endure the rigours periodic testing. (Ezek. 5:3-4).[\[30\]](#)

To convince the exiles of the impossibility of an early return, Ezekiel acted out what would soon occur in Jerusalem to delay the return indefinitely.[\[31\]](#) In broad daylight, he hastily stuffed his knapsack with a few belongings, slung it over his shoulder, and wandered aimlessly from place to place (Ezek. 12:3). Under the cover of darkness, he broke through the walls of his house, covered his eyes, and groped his way uncertainly along (Ezek. 12:4-5). In all of these irregular activities, he was enacting the scenes that would come to pass in Jerusalem; of course, this information was significant for the rebels in exile[\[32\]](#) (Ezek. 12:6).

The Lord himself interpreted Ezekiel's symbolic pantomime so that he could explain his actions to inquirers (Ezek. 12:8,9). It was a forecast of judgment upon Zedekiah and the residents of Jerusalem (Ezekp-1 2:10). The people would share the punishment of the prince. Captivity would be the penalty for their perversities (Ezek. 12:11). Zedekiah would be obliged to carry his own suitcase and sneak off into the night through a breach in the walls of the city[\[33\]](#) (Ezek. 12:12). Despite his disguise, however, he would not get far, for God intended he should fall into a trap set by the Babylonian army (Ezek 12:13). Snared like the fox, he would be extradited to Babylon but would never actually see his prison; the soldiers would gouge out his eyes.

In Ezek 12:17-18, another symbolic action was used. Ezekiel simulated a starvation diet and shivered in anticipation of the siege. [\[34\]](#) The residents of the city might rest comfortably at the moment, but soon enough terror would grip them as they received reports of the advancing invader (Ezek 12:19-20). [\[35\]](#) Ezekiel thinks, perhaps, a different kind of description will make efficient impact upon the elders in order to convince them that the city of Jerusalem and the temple are destined for destruction (Ezek 21:12). He employs the imagery of justice and death. God will wield a bayonet against the wicked, but the righteous will also fall in the fray. The razor-sharp sword in the hand of Israel's foe will first smite the house of David (Ezek. 21:12). The royal family has not responded to the discipline[\[36\]](#) of the sword (Ezek. 21:13).

Ezekiel's strange reaction to death of his wife is a symbol of how the exiles will respond to the demise of Jerusalem (Ezek. 24:15-19). The loss of their beloved city will reduce them to stony silence. Part of their judgment for not believing Ezekiel's warnings will be their inability to give vent to their bottled-up emotions. In this traumatic experience, they will begin, at last, to listen to the prophet of God. [\[37\]](#) The vision of the Valley of Dry Bones is an appropriate picture of Israel during its exile in Gentile domain. The difficulty of restoring her to political influence is seen in the fact that the nation is not only a corpse but a skeleton pricked clean by heathen buzzards. The bones are scattered all over the whole world[\[38\]](#) (Ezekiel

37:1-2).

Nevertheless, in obedience to the divine command, that scattered, dried-up nation will come together again as a political organization. According to the prophet, an awful upheaval in the world of nations will result in Israel's reinstatement as a political entity (Ezek. 37:7). Verse 11 substantiates this interpretation of the vision. When all hope in human ability to restore the monarchy is gone, then Israelite's God will show Himself mighty to save them from national extinction under the rule of Gentile kings (Ezek. 37:12,13). Thousands of Jews from each of the twelve tribes of Israel will experience the new birth after the tribulation. God will transport these regenerated survivors to Palestine and, thus, demonstrate how faithful He is to the covenant[39]. Ezekiel's power of imagination was further demonstrated in his use of parables (Ezek. 15)5 those of the twig and the two eagles (Ezek. 17), and of the lioness and her whelps (Ezek 19), the allegory of Jerusalem as the forest which is to be turned (Ezek. 20.45ff), as the gallant ship (Ezek. 27), Pharaoh as the crocodile that had been captured (Ezek-29, 32) and the cedar which is felled (Ezek.31).[40]

In all indication, it is probable that prophet Ezekiel made elaborate use of symbols to communicate his message because the Israelites familiarity with the words of Yahweh through His prophets had no doubt whittle down the power inherent in God's messages. Consequently, the messages no longer made serious impact on their existence as a nation. Ezekiel, therefore, believed that the use of symbols would etch the truth of God's messages indelibly upon the people's mind.

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE SELECTED PERISCOPE

Prophet Ezekiel lived during the Babylonian exile and was active as a prophet from 593 B.C.E to, at least, 571.[41] According to his own account, he lived as an exile and did all his preaching in Babylon, probably in the Jewish settlement of Tel-abib in the Kebar canal near the ancient city of Nippur. (Ezek. 1:1-2; 3:15). The use of signs and symbols to communicate God's messages by Ezekiel is partly to be accounted for by the circumstances he found himself. He was dwelling in a country in which symbolical figures were striking and not unusual; partly by the psychological fact that his symbolic actions were to educate his people.[42] It is this environment that must have nurtured and shaped the message of his preaching[43]. Ezek 4:5:1-5, shall be considered as the selected periscope.

In the selected periscope, (Ezekiel 4:5:1-5) Ezekiel was instructed to present his messages in symbolic actions.[44] These symbolic actions were God's way of communicating truth Without words. The prophetic dramatisation in Ezekiel 4:1-3 focuses on the tile. The prophet makes the tile, and it is the object of his lessons. Ezekiel used a clay brick commonly used in building. He drew the map of Jerusalem on the clay so that the completed object represented the city of Jerusalem. Using the clay brick as his focal point, the prophet enacted a battle against it. He constructed a siege wall, a mound or rampart, set up military camps around it, and employed battering rams against it. Using an iron pan to represent an impenetrable barrier, he glared upon the city with the intensity and determination of a General that was leading an attack.[45]

Ezekiel's actions demonstrated that he had some knowledge of Assyro-Babylonian battle tactics The tile mentioned in the text was a tablet of soft clay, baked to make it durable, like those used by the Babylonians for writing purposes. On tables like these, the Babylonians and Assyrians wrote their private contracts, historical inscriptions and other data.[46] These were their books, great quantities of which have been uncovered by archaeological excavations. The method employed by Ezekiel described the form of ancient Assyro-Babylonian warfare. Whenever they wished to besiege cities, they erected mounds from which they filled up trenches; then they moved about wooden towers so that they might gather the soldiers close to themselves and would then strike.[47]

While the use of dried animals, dung as fuel, may seem unusual or even repulsive to Westerners, it was a common practice in the ancient Near East that continues to this day.[48] Animal waste was usually mixed

with straw, sun dried, then turned for fuel. Trees were scarce; thus, such a practice was necessary. Since wood was a commodity too precious to be used as fuel, animal dung then became the only substitute. Ezekiel, being one of the captives in Babylon, must have been influenced by the practice of the Babylonians. Therefore, his symbolic actions in the selected periscope (i.e. Ezek<4:5:1-5) seems to be a reflection of his Babylonian background.

Jerusalem lay in the center of various world empire that rose and fell in the northern Mediterranean, Asia, Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, and North Africa. The land of Israel often was the battle ground of those warning groups.[49] Israel and Jerusalem have been an amazing focal Point, theologically and politically, for the last four thousand years. Ezekiel, being aware of the Position of Jerusalem, in the world affairs, refers to it as the “navel of the earth” (Judges 9:37). The phrase “in the center of the nations” in Ezekiel 4:5, has overtones of God’s elect purpose for Israel.[50] Israel especially Jerusalem was that “place which the Lord shall choose out of all your tribes to put his name there” (Deut 12:5; Psalm 48:1-44).

From the time Israel practiced theocracy (Exod 19:1-8), there was a clear delineation of God’s elect purpose for the nation (Exo dus 19:5-6) as the channel of his redemption. In this sense also, Israel was set in the “midst” of the nations as a kingdom of priests, and Israel was supposed to be instrument of God’s missionary purpose[51]. Jerusalem remains the main focus in the selected periscope because of its strategic position.

The use of imitative magic as a form of pagan worship was so common in Babylon during the time Ezekiel was in exile. For instance, it was the practice of the Babylonians, during that period, to write the names of the enemies on a clay vessel with the purpose of smashing it against the wall to ensure the defeat of targeted adversaries[52]. The symbolic actions of Ezekiel in the selected periscope resemble the Babylonian imitative magic. In view of this similarity, it has been argued by scholars such as Taylor and Smart that the symbolic actions employed by Ezekiel and other Old Testament prophets were vestiges of the primitive forms of magic the Hebrews borrowed from the Babylonian culture.[53] Nevertheless, such claim overlooks an important difference between earlier forms of imitative magic and the symbolic actions of Ezekiel. Early forms of magic were attempt to influence the gods or the events of the future or both. The Old Testaments prophets, by contrast, were acting out a message that was just as much inspired revelation as was the spoken or written word. They were not trying to influence God or the future but communicating their messages through dramatic forms.

INTERPRETATION OF EZEKIEL 4;5: 1-4 IN PAST BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP

Different opinion(s) have come into biblical scholarship within modern times in respect of the book of Ezekiel. As early as the time of the formation of the canon of the Old Testament, Jewish scholars raised questions about the book of Ezekiel.[54] According to them, the Torah which was the norm of scripture conflicted at a number of points with Ezekiel. For instance, the new moon burnt offering in Ezekiel 46:6 is one bullock without blemish, six lambs and a ram. Whereas in Numbers 28:11; it is two bullocks, seven lambs, and one ram.[55] The rabbis were also bothered about the beginning of the book, which with its mysterious symbolism and imagery gave rise to esoteric doctrines concerning God.[56] Ezekiel 4:5:1-4 has generated a lot of controversies. One of the widely accepted hypotheses of modern biblical critics is that contrary to the general impression given by the book that some or even the symbolic actions in Ezekiel 4:5:1-4 took place in Palestine, it has been argued by scholars that the actions took place in Babylon. Auvray [57], while establishing the probability that Ezekiel’s prophetic activity in the selected text took place in Palestine, argued that the Babylonian background is purely editorial. Torrey,[58] while corroborating Auvray’s view, submitted that it would be folly and wretched mockery if all he did was to perform dramatic actions and utter oracles many hundreds of miles distant from those whom he was supposed to learn. Since the prophet was specifically instructed to go to the “house of Israel”, a term which sometimes, apparently, refers to the people of Judah and Jerusalem (Ezekiel 4:8). Smith[59], therefore, submits that Ezekiel’s

prophecies in the selected text were addressed, not to the exiles of Palestine. Smith^[60] concludes that Ezekiel delivered two sets of oracles, both in Palestine and the exile which were artificially united by a redactor.

In view of the above interpretation in respect of the locality of Ezekiel's activities, one can, therefore, infer from the interpretations and agree with Smith that it is probable that Ezekiel delivered two sets of oracles both in Palestine and Babylon the problem of interpretation must have been a scribal error. Since the prophet persistently affirmed that the "hand of God was upon him", it might also be interpreted that while in Babylon, physically, he was in Palestine at the same time in a vision to carry out Yahweh's assignment.

Chapter four focuses on the sign of the siege of Jerusalem which Ezekiel was to perform in his own house in the presence of the exiles. It consists of three interconnected and mutual supplementary symbolic actions, the first of which is described in Ezek 4:1-3 the second in Ezek 4:4-8 and the third in Ezek 4:9-17.

The directions in Ezek. 4:1-2 contain the general basis for the siege of Jerusalem which the prophet was to lay before Israel as a sign. Upon a brick, he was to sketch a city (to engrave with a writing instrument) which was to represent Jerusalem: around the city, he was to erect siege-works – towers, walls, camps, and battering-rams; he was to inscribe the representation of them and place before himself the picture of the besieged city. The selection of a brick, that is, of a tile-stone, not burnt in a kiln, but merely dried in the sun, was not only a reminiscence of Babylon and monumental inscriptions; but such a practice was also common in Palestine where such bricks were a common building material (Isa. 9 :9). "To make a siege" i.e. "to bring forward siege works", became the general expression in both Babylon and Palestine. The siege works mentioned were not probably to be placed by Ezekiel as little figures around the brick, so that the latter would represent the city, but to be engraved upon the brick around the city being portrayed. The expressions: "to make a siege," "to build towers," "to erect a mound", and so on, are selected because the drawing was to represent what is done when a city is besieged.^[61]

In verse 3, the inscribed picture of the city is at once termed "city" and in verse 7 the picture of the besieged Jerusalem is being described as the "siege of Jerusalem". The meaning of the picture is clear. Everyone who saw it was to recognise that Jerusalem would be besieged. The prophet was further instructed to place an iron pan as an iron wall between himself and the city sketched on the brick, and direct his countenance steadfastly towards the city. The iron pan, erected as a wall, is to represent neither the wall of the city nor the enemies' rampart, for this was already depicted on the brick. The iron wall, according to Rosenmuller, ^[62] represents a firm, impregnable wall of partition, which the prophet, as a messenger and representative of God, was to raise between himself and the beleaguered city.

In Khefoth's explanation, the pan was primarily to be used by the prophet for preparing his food during the period of his assignment. The explanation of Kheforth might not be perfectly true since the text mentions nothing relating to that. If he were to use the pan for such a purpose, he could not, at the same time, have placed it as a wall between himself and the city. The choice is to be explained simply from this, that such a plate was to be found in every household, and quite fitted for the object intended. If any symbolic element is contained in it, the hard metal, in Grotiu's view might perhaps be taken to typify the hard, wicked hearts of the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

The symbolic siege of Jerusalem was to be a sign for the house of Israel, that is, a pre- announcement of its impending destiny. The "iron plate" can as well be interpreted as an object representing Yahweh and the city.

The symbolic action in Ezekiel 4:4-8, as observed by Rosenmuller,^[63] has two parts. According to him, in the first part, Ezekiel 4:4-6, the prophet was to lie for a hundred and ninety days upon his left side, bearing the punishment of the house of Israel which, here, means the former northern kingdom. Thereafter, for forty

days, he was to lie on his right side doing the same thing for the southern kingdom of Judah. This symbolic action of Ezekiel has raised a lot of problems; how are we to conceive of the prophet lying, presumably, motionless for such a length of time? It is indeed contrary to nature that a man should lie down for whatever reason for such a period of time. The impossibility of reconciling the action of the prophet with reality has led some to think of cataleptic or similar normal conditions. While some have drawn parallels between Ezekiel's action and Indian magical practice, many people believe that he was a victim of mental disorder and emotional trauma. In view of the confusion created by Ezekiel's symbolic action in the text under consideration, one can, therefore, conclude that, perhaps, the text represents an experience which Ezekiel only had in vision, and which he recounted to his audience without actually carrying out the symbol.

As regards the number of years representing the periods of the siege, there is really no unanimous explanation. In Taylor's submission, they represent total periods: a total of 390 years of Israel's punishment. [64] However, we still need to interpret the historical application of the message to the nations involved. We must not necessarily insist that the prophet ought to have spent the last forty of his days lying on both sides to represent both Israel and Judah, suffering at the same time. [65] Elison [66], while admitting that it is possible to take consecutive view of these Periods, opts for the concurrent view in the light of the 390 days mentioned in Ezekiel 4:9. Regarded, however, as periods of punishment, both numbers cannot be explained consistently with the chronology, but must be understood as having a symbolic significance. The space of years, which was announced to both kingdoms together as the duration of their chastisement, recalls the 430 years, which in the far past, Israel had spent in Egypt, in bondage (Ex 12:40) Hitzig [67] posits that the 40 years of Judah chastisement were to be viewed from the 40 years' sojourn of the Israelites in the wilderness. Von Rad [68] and Feinberg [69] also argued that the forty years of exile of Judah is in round number and, probably, refers to the period from 596 to the return in 538.

Whatever interpretation given to the number of years or days, representing the period that both the northern and southern kingdom of Israel would suffer for their iniquities, as recorded in the selected text, they (the number) are to be taken ideally rather than literally. It will, therefore, appear unwise to dogmatise as to how the 40 and 390 (or 190) years are to be reckoned.

Ezekiel 4:8, the second part of the prophet's action, as observed by Frank [70], introduces a new element: Yahweh is to bind the prophet so that he cannot move. This seems to have some connection with, and perhaps to presuppose Ezek. 3:25. And Ezek. 4:8 has a fairly plain meaning: 'the consequent discomfort symbolised the rigours of the siege. If, however, the symbol is read as referring to the exile, it alludes to the restriction of movement there. Gray [71] argued that it would not be possible for Ezekiel to carry out all the instructions given in verse 9- 5:4 if his hands were permanently tied, as it was suggested in Ezek 4:8. It is indeed mutually exclusive for the prophet to be preparing food when his hands were tied. This, of course, is to be explained metaphorically or perhaps, he spent a part of everyday lying, facing the requisite direction with his face towards the model of the besieged city. The prophet's "bare arm" also signifies readiness for drastic action. Gray [72] further explained that it is probable that Ezekiel, after performing this daily demonstration, could, constantly, release himself and enact some of the other symbolic actions associated with the siege. Then, presumably, when no spectators were around, he could revert to the normal manner of conduct within his house.

For the whole of 390 days of Ezekiel's demonstration, he was to limit himself to a stringent diet. Two interpretations, according to Rowley [73], are given: first, that Israel and Judah were to live on famine rations and that their diet was to be unclean. There seems to be confusion in Rowley's submission because it is not quite clear whether they represent siege conditions within beleaguered Jerusalem or the defilement, as well as the enforced economy of living under conditions of exile. Wellhausen [74] took the whole section as referring to the siege, which Ezekiel thought would last for 370 days (verse 9). He argued that the 390 days, as recorded in Ezek 4:5, carried over from Ezek. 4:9 so that what was intended in the verse was the days of

siege whereas Ezekiel 4:5 presents it as the years of the Israelites exile. Wellhausen[75] maintained that Ezekiel 4:13 should be treated as a gloss brought about by this confusion. Cornill[76] reconstructed the text of the whole chapter, even more drastically in order to group the sections which referred to the siege and the exile, respectively.

A critical look at the various interpretations of past biblical scholarship in respect of Ezek. 4:3-8 reveals that the poor living conditions of the Israelite exiles in Assyrian territory had probably been intermingled with the horrors of siege starvation and with the defilement of living in exile in Babylon. This confusion is, however, traceable to the error originating from the editor.

Ezekiel 4:9-17 deals with unclean or defiled rationing of food in the besieged city. The passage as a single symbolic action depicts the conditions of both the siege and the exile. The prophet was instructed to “take wheat and barley, beans and lentils, millet and spelt” (Ezekr4:9) and make bread from them to be eaten throughout the time of the siege. Adeyemo[77] posits that although the mixture of the ingredients made the food nutritious, it was an unusual recipe for bread and signalled that the people under the siege would be so desperate for food that they would combine anything they could find to make bread. This point is underscored by the careful weighing of the small amount of food and water to be consumed each day (Ezek. 4:10- 11). Ezekiel was to eat just eight ounces (2.25 grams) of bread and drink just two cups of water a day. Newsome, while corroborating Adeyemo’s view, explained[78] that the scarcity of food in the siege made necessary the mixing of all kinds of grain for bread. He further explained that the action was not forbidden by the law of Moses, for the rules of Leviticus 19:19 and Deuteronomy 22:9 are not applicable here. He maintains that the portions stated were daily rations given in an orderly manner, not when hunger dictated. Considering the impossibility of surviving under such a stringent condition, Levensons,[79] however, argued that the prophet must have augmented his diet with other foods when nobody was around. There is no scintilla of evidence in Levensons assertion. It cannot be substantiated, it is probably a figment of his imagination and therefore be misleading, if such a stance is adopted.

In Ezekiel 4:12, the prophet was asked to bake his bread in the sight of the people, using human waste for fuel as a sign that the people of Israel will eat defiled food among the nations. Scholars disagree with the claim that the food was regarded as defiled since it involved a mixture of different kinds of grains and legumes which made it nutritious. The reference to “defiled food” in the text can, therefore, be interpreted in terms of the difficulty involved in observing the dietary laws laid down in Leviticus when they were under siege or subject to foreign domination. While the prophet could accept calmly the limitations imposed on his diet, his whole being revolted at the command to take his bread, using human dung as fuel.[80] As a priest’s son, Ezekiel had always kept the dietary law (Ezek 4:31). His sensibilities reacted against this pollution even though it was commanded by the Lord for a purpose. The prophet was more concerned with that which offended his conscience than that which displeased his taste. That which died a natural death was forbidden in Leviticus 6:24; 28:8, that which was torn of beasts was prohibited because the blood was not thoroughly drained (Exod. 22:31. Leviticus 17:11-16; Deut.12:16). With his priestly background, Ezekiel had these injunctions of the law. The Lord understands Ezekiel’s feelings and allows him to use an acceptable substitute, cow dung, as fuel that is still used in arid regions of the world, most especially by the Bedouin and Fellahin of Arabia and Egypt.[81] The purpose of the sign was to show how Israel’s position as a separate, sanctified people would be destroyed. The state of exile itself was defiling, as seen in Amos 7:17 God wanted to show the defilement which would come upon the exiles through their being compelled to live and eat in a heathen environment.[82]

In Ezekiel 5:1, the prophet was to take a sharp sword and use it as a barber’s razor to shave his head and his beard. This, Archer[83] remarks, must have been an odd and excruciating experience for the prophet. He, thereafter, weighed the hairs he had removed and then divided them into three piles (Ezek. 5:16). When the days of his siege came to an end, he was instructed to burn one of those piles of hairs inside the city (Ezek

5:1), to strike the other with his sword to scattered around the city (Ezek 5:3), He was to take out a few of the hairs he had retrieved and throw them into the fire (Ezek. 5:2).

The shaving of the hair in Ezek 5: by the prophet could symbolise disgrace (II Sam 10-41) or mourning (Isa. 15:2; Jer 41:5). Fohrer[84] may be right when he says that ‘the hair was taken as the part of the body in which life and force resided, or it symbolised the whole man from whom it had been taken, so that he experienced the same thing the hairs did. The shaving which followed the sword of war had been interpreted as the severance of the inhabitants of a city or country from the basis of life.[85] Interpreting the symbol in the context of this selected text (Ezek 5:1) means that the Israelites would be separated from the basis of life. The sword represents the Babylonians[86] while the balances suggest the inerrancy of the divine judgement. Zimmerli[87] points out that dividing and weighing of the hairs can be interpreted as judicial procedures (Dan5:26ff). According to Zimmerli,[88] the first of the three parts into which the hair was divided symbolises those who would perish during the siege, the second pile of the hairs signifies those who were killed in battle, in skirmishes near the city or, like Zedekiah in his attempt to escape (II Kings 25:4ff), or else in general carnage which would accompany the captured. The last part means those who survived and were deported. Sharing the same view with Zimmerli. Vawter[89] remarks that a third of the inhabitants of Jerusalem would be destroyed within the city, a third would be killed by the sword in fighting around the city, and a third would be scattered among the nations and would continue to be harried by hostile forces. From among these survivors, according to him, would emerge the handful of those who would be preserved.

The prophet was instructed, almost as an afterthought, in verses 3 and 4 to retrieve a few hairs from the third portion and to treat them according to further distinctive instructions. Some scholars are of the view that Ezekiel’s original prophecy consisted of only verses 1 and 2, the rest being secondary material. This may not be perfectly true and every instruction given to the prophet is necessary to an understanding of the prophet’s message.

As seen from the interpretations of the past biblical scholarship above, it is obvious that interpretations of Ezekiel 4.5.1-4 is a complicated task. To this extent, any interpretation must be considered only a probability, we must, therefore, take our choice among the probabilities. What seems a thoroughly subjective approach to one scholar may appear to be an objective induction to another.

CONCLUSION

In this study, we have been able to examine the purpose of the book of Ezekiel, the theological theme; the Prophet’s use of symbols; historical background and interpretation of the selected text in past biblical scholarship. It must therefore be established that there are still other areas of the book that need to be studied. Scholars should therefore endeavour to beam their searchlights into these areas for the benefit of humanity.

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