

Ezekiel 4:1

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Thou also, son of man, take thee a tile, and lay it before thee, and pourtray upon it the city, even Jerusalem:

Analysis

Thou also, son of man, take thee a tile, and lay it before thee, and pourtray upon it the city, even Jerusalem: God commands Ezekiel to perform the first of several prophetic sign-acts dramatizing Jerusalem's coming siege. The Hebrew levenah (לְבָנָה, "tile" or "brick") refers to a clay tablet commonly used in Mesopotamia for writing, maps, and construction plans. Ezekiel, trained as a priest (1:3), now becomes a prophet-dramatist, enacting God's judgment through visual theater.

The command to "pourtray" (chaqaq, חָקַק) means to inscribe, engrave, or draw—Ezekiel creates a detailed siege map on the clay surface. Specifying "the city, even Jerusalem" (ha'ir et-Yerushalayim, הַעִיר אֶת-יְרוּשָׁלָם) emphasizes the shocking reality: God Himself is directing judgment against His holy city, the dwelling place of His name (1 Kings 8:29). This wasn't random catastrophe but divine discipline.

Theologically, this verse reveals God's sovereignty over history's course. The siege isn't Nebuchadnezzar's initiative alone but God's ordained judgment for covenant unfaithfulness. The prophetic drama also demonstrates God's patience—He warns before He strikes, giving opportunity for repentance. The exile audience watching Ezekiel's performance would understand: Jerusalem's fall was certain unless the people repented. This anticipates Christ, who wept over Jerusalem's coming destruction (Luke 19:41-44) because the city rejected her Messiah.

Historical Context

This prophecy dates to approximately 593 BC, during Ezekiel's exile in Babylon following Nebuchadnezzar's first deportation (597 BC). Jerusalem still stood, and many exiles believed their captivity would be brief—false prophets promised quick return (Jeremiah 28:2-4). Ezekiel's siege dramatization contradicted this false optimism, declaring Jerusalem faced total destruction.

Clay tablets were ubiquitous in Mesopotamian culture for administrative records, literary texts, and architectural plans. Archaeologists have recovered thousands of cuneiform tablets from ancient Babylon and Assyria. Ezekiel's use of this medium would have been culturally familiar to the exiled community while dramatically subverting expectations—instead of building plans for Babylon's glory, the tablet depicted Jerusalem's doom.

The city plan Ezekiel drew likely included walls, gates, and surrounding terrain—similar to ancient Near Eastern siege maps found in archaeological contexts. The exiles in Tel-Abib would gather to watch this street theater, understanding its ominous implications. Within a decade (586 BC), Ezekiel's prophetic drama became horrific reality when Babylonian armies breached Jerusalem's walls, destroyed the temple, and slaughtered or exiled the remaining population.

Related Passages

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

Study Questions

1. How does God's use of visual, dramatic prophecy instruct us about communicating spiritual truth effectively?
2. What does Ezekiel's obedience to perform strange, countercultural acts teach about faithful prophetic ministry?

3. How should we respond when God's warnings contradict popular religious optimism?

Interlinear Text

אוֹתֶה וְיִנְתַּחַת הַלְּבָנָה לְבַנְתָּה אֶת־הַבָּנָה
H859 Thou also son of man take H0 thee a tile and lay H853
H1121 H120 H3947 H3843 H5414

לְפָנֶיךָ יְמִינְךָ וּמִקְרָבְךָ עַל־יְהוּדָה אֶת־יְרוּשָׁלָם:
it before thee and pourtray H5921 upon it the city H853 even Jerusalem
H6440 H2710 H5892 H3389

From KJV Study • kjvstudy.org