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Ezekiel plays the part of an exile. The Apostle Peter's testimony concerning the Gentiles to the Jerusalem Christians.

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Transcript

Ezekiel 12. The word of the Lord came to me, Son of man, you dwell in the midst of a rebellious house, who have eyes to see, but see not, who have ears to hear, but hear not, for they are a rebellious house. As for you, Son of man, prepare for yourself an exile's baggage, and go into exile by day in their sight.

You shall go like an exile from your place to another place in their sight. Perhaps they will understand, though they are a rebellious house. You shall bring out your baggage by day in their sight, as baggage for exile, and you shall go out yourself at evening in their sight, as those do who must go into exile.

In their sight dig through the wall, and bring your baggage out through it. In their sight you shall lift the baggage upon your shoulder, and carry it out at dusk. You shall cover

your face, that you may not see the land, for I have made you a sign for the house of Israel.

And I did as I was commanded. I brought out my baggage by day, as baggage for exile, and in the evening I dug through the wall with my own hands. I brought out my baggage at dusk, carrying it on my shoulder in their sight.

In the morning the word of the Lord came to me, Son of man, has not the house of Israel, the rebellious house, said to you, What are you doing? Say to them, Thus says the Lord God. This oracle concerns the prince in Jerusalem, and all the house of Israel who are in it. Say, I am a sign for you, as I have done, so shall it be done to them.

They shall go into exile, into captivity, and the prince who is among them shall lift his baggage upon his shoulder at dusk, and shall go out. They shall dig through the wall to bring him out through it. He shall cover his face, that he may not see the land with his eyes.

And I will spread my net over him, and he shall be taken in my snare, and I will bring him to Babylon, the land of the Chaldeans. Yet he shall not see it, and he shall die there. And I will scatter toward every wind all who are around him, his helpers and all his troops, and I will unsheathe the sword after them.

And they shall know that I am the Lord, when I disperse them among the nations, and scatter them among the countries. But I will let a few of them escape from the sword, from famine and pestilence, that they may declare all their abominations among the nations where they go, and may know that I am the Lord. And the word of the Lord came to me, Son of man, eat your bread with quaking, and drink water with trembling and with anxiety.

And say to the people of the land, Thus says the Lord God concerning the inhabitants of Jerusalem in the land of Israel, They shall eat their bread with anxiety, and drink water in dismay. In this way her land will be stripped of all it contains, on account of the violence of all those who dwell in it. And the inhabited cities shall be laid waste, and the land shall become a desolation.

And you shall know that I am the Lord. And the word of the Lord came to me, Son of man, what is this proverb that you have about the land of Israel, saying, The days grow long, and every vision comes to nothing. Tell them, therefore, Thus says the Lord God, I will put an end to this proverb, and they shall no more use it as a proverb in Israel.

But say to them, The days are near, and the fulfillment of every vision. For there shall be no more any false vision or flattering divination within the house of Israel. For I am the Lord, I will speak the word that I will speak, and it will be performed.

It will no longer be delayed, but in your days, O rebellious house, I will speak the word

and perform it, declares the Lord God. And the word of the Lord came to me, Son of man, behold, they of the house of Israel say, The vision that he sees is for many days from now, and he prophesies of times far off. Therefore say to them, Thus says the Lord God, None of my words will be delayed any longer, but the word that I speak will be performed, declares the Lord God.

After the great vision of the glory of the Lord departing from the temple in chapters 8-11, we have a cluster of oracles starting in Ezekiel chapter 12. Chapter 12 has two prophetic sign acts delivered to Ezekiel with their performance and their associated messages, followed by two oracles. The first sign act and message concerns the coming fall of Jerusalem.

It is addressed to the rebellious house of Israel. We should recall that Ezekiel speaks of the people as the house of Israel, whether those still living in the land or the exiles in Chaldea. He refers to them in such a manner even though the northern kingdom of Israel had fallen to the Neo-Assyrians over a hundred years earlier.

This message seems to be delivered to the exiles in particular. While their fate is much to be preferred to the fate of those still remaining in Jerusalem, they can even be described as good figs in Jeremiah's prophecy. They are nonetheless described as a rebellious house in language that might recall the famous prophecy of Isaiah chapter 6 verses 9-10. And he said, Go and say to this people, Keep on hearing but do not understand, keep on seeing but do not perceive.

Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes, lest they see with their eyes and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed. Even in exile, the house of Israel is insensible to warnings. In chapters 4 and 5 Ezekiel had previously performed an extended form of prophetic theatre, a sign act representing the destruction of Jerusalem and the slaying and scattering of its people.

Now he is instructed to perform a further sign act. He is to prepare, as someone imminently about to go into exile, for the journey. He would presumably pack necessities for a lengthy and gruelling journey, a journey on which one can imagine many of the refugees might have died, and maybe also any portable valuables.

He is to leave his house like an exile in the sight of the people. Since they are already in exile, one can imagine that they might have initially wondered whether this was an image of their soon return to Jerusalem from exile. Like a number of other prophetic sign acts, what is going on in the sign act may be quite ambiguous until its later stages.

Some sign acts can be like puzzles extended over time, presumably encouraging spectators to speculate about what they meant and what might happen next. Sign acts also seem, perhaps purposefully, to be designed to wrong-foot spectators on occasions,

to lead them to expect something different from what actually occurs. If it looks as though Ezekiel is in exile about to return to the land, the next part of the sign would have complicated that interpretation.

Ezekiel has to dig through the wall of his house, presumably from the outside in, as he must do it in the sight of the people. Some have connected this to the mode of King Zedekiah's failed escape from the city of Jerusalem at its downfall, but Daniel Bloch argues that this doesn't seem to be what is going on here. Ezekiel, for one, isn't digging through the wall from the inside out, but from the outside in.

In digging through the wall of his house, which would have been quite possible for a typical Babylonian house of sun-dried bricks, from the outside in, Ezekiel is taking on the position of the invader, breaking through the wall of a city, for instance. In playing the role of an exile, he is playing the part of someone who is about to be forcibly taken into exile. Not someone trying to escape, nor someone returning home from exile, as those watching him might have initially suspected.

At first glance, verse 12 might seem to be a reference to Zedekiah's attendance digging through the wall to bring the king out. However, Bloch argues, and I think correctly, that we should rather recognise that the digging is coming from the other side of the wall. The army of the Chaldeans are the ones who breach the wall, in order to drag out the king and his people, and to take them into exile.

When Ezekiel performs the sign act, he must also cover his eyes, so that he will not see the land. The interpretation of the oracle is given in verses 8-14. The people had puzzled over the meaning of Ezekiel's prophetic sign act.

He had grabbed their attention, and now they wanted to know what it meant. The Lord declares to Ezekiel that the prophecy concerns Zedekiah and those who remain with him in Jerusalem. Ezekiel is enacting what will happen to them.

Zedekiah is referred to, not as the king, but as the prince in Jerusalem. Perhaps the point is that King Jehoiachin remains alive and in exile, and that Zedekiah isn't really a king, as long as that is the case. Zedekiah is also a vassal king, reduced to being a puppet of foreign powers.

He's not really exercising much authority of his own. The way that the sign works may be less straightforward than the hearer might initially suppose. Are the house of Israel in the place of Ezekiel carrying the exile's baggage, or are they the contents of the baggage itself? It might well be that the latter is the case.

In verse 12, however, Ezekiel's act seems to correspond to the action of Zedekiah himself. Zedekiah's face will be covered, so that he will not see the land with his eyes. As Jeremiah and 2 Kings record, Zedekiah's eyes were taken out after his capture.

The point here may be a broader reference to the alienation from the land that exile will involve. Zedekiah and the exiles will never see the land again. Block notes Jeremiah 22 verses 10-12 in this connection.

Weep not for him who is dead, nor grieve for him, but weep bitterly for him who goes away, for he shall return no more to see his native land. For thus says the Lord concerning Shalom the son of Josiah, king of Judah, who reigned instead of Josiah his father, and who went away from this place. He shall return here no more, but in the place where they have carried him captive, there shall he die, and he shall never see this land again.

It is the Lord who will be behind all of this. He is snaring Zedekiah and the Jerusalemites like a hunter, and will send them away to Babylon and the land of the Chaldeans. Verse 13 is a prediction of Zedekiah's capture, deportation to Babylon, and likely also the removal of his eyes, so that he would never actually see the place of his captivity.

All of his forces would be routed and scattered. The first sign act in the prophecy that follows ends with the familiar form of a recognition formula, and they shall know that I am the Lord. The proof of the Lord's identity as the creator and ruler of all, and the one who will judge all the people who are unfaithful to the covenant, will be in the dispersion of the people.

However, as foretold in the sign act of the Hare in chapter 5, a small remnant would escape. They are saved in order that they might bear witness to their past sins and the justice of the Lord's judgment upon them. A new sign act begins in verse 17, although we lack context for it beyond that.

We don't know when exactly it was performed. The sign act is a strange one. Ezekiel has to perform the mundane act of eating and drinking with trembling hands, as if in a state of terror.

Presumably he would eat in public in an exaggerated manner, feigning to be in great fear and anticipation of some great disaster about to fall. One can imagine this bizarre performance making viewers feel quite unsettled. Perhaps he was spilling lots of water while drinking and struggling to get the bread to his mouth as his hands were shaking too much.

The meaning of the sign is given in verses 19 to 20. The interpretation initially focuses upon the state of the people in Jerusalem, who will be deeply afraid and would eat in a manner similar to the way that Ezekiel has been eating. However, the interpretation extends to include the land, which will be stripped, devastated and its cities laid waste on account of the people's wickedness.

Following the two sign acts in the first half of this chapter, we have two oracles,

delivered against opponents and critics of the prophet. The first concerns a saying that is circulating among the people, claiming that the supposed visions are falling to the ground unfulfilled. People have been cynical about the warnings of the prophets, not believing that their words are going to come to pass.

In the book of Jeremiah, Jeremiah had conflict with false, flattering prophets who were active in the years prior to the fall of Jerusalem. Ezekiel likely is speaking concerning similar people. The threats of the faithful prophets would come upon the house of Israel soon and would not be delayed much longer.

Perhaps contemporaries were sceptical when years passed without the disasters threatened by Jeremiah and Ezekiel materialising. However, the fulfilments would suddenly come upon them. The Lord would perform his word.

There were others who, without denying the words of the prophets, considered any fulfilment that they would have to be far off in time. They need not be concerned. The prophecies relate to events that would befall the people after their time.

However, the Lord refutes this. The fulfilment of his words will not be delayed. It will fall upon the people very soon.

A question to consider. Many people of Ezekiel's day denied the urgency of the word of the Lord, considering the words of faithful prophets either to be empty or concerned with a time after their own. The chapter began by speaking of people with eyes that don't see and ears that don't hear.

These tactics of dismissing the urgency of the word of the Lord is the way that these eyes that don't see and ears that don't hear work. What are some of the other ways that people have used to dull themselves to the urgency of God's word? In Acts chapter 10 the gospel had been received by the centurion Cornelius and all of his household. Both Cornelius and Peter had received visions and when brought together Peter declared the message of the gospel to his whole household.

They received it gladly and the spirit descended upon them in a manner that resembled the events of the day of Pentecost itself. Repetition is an important feature of Acts chapter 10 and this feature of the narrative continues into Acts chapter 11. It's not just the event but the communication and recognition of the events by others that is important.

Here the events will be recounted to other members of the church in Jerusalem. Their acknowledgement that the Gentiles are true members of the people of God as Gentiles is an important part of the story. This is part of the means by which the two peoples, Jews and Gentiles, will be brought together as one within the church.

Word of what has taken place reaches the Judean Christians and the apostles, seemingly

not by Peter himself. When Peter goes up to Jerusalem he has to put out some fires that the news has started. He's been criticised by the circumcision party.

The ground for their criticism does not seem to be that Peter did not circumcise Cornelius in his household but that he received a Gentile's hospitality and ate with him in the first place. While Diaspora Jews may have held laxer customs concerning fellowship and hospitality with Gentiles, Judean Jews were far more conservative on the matter and regarded the separateness of Jews from Gentiles as maintaining a very important standard of purity. While they were very concerned that Peter remained separate from the Gentiles, in chapter 10 verse 20 the Holy Spirit had instructed him to rise and go with them without hesitation.

The Lord does not draw those sorts of distinctions. It seems fitting, given the background of the Gospel of Luke, that there should be such a focus upon eating and table fellowship here. Much of Jesus' ministry and teaching in the Gospel of Luke occurs in the context of the meal table, who you eat with, who is invited, where people sit.

These are all issues that are prominent within Luke's Gospel and their importance continues into the story of the early church which is formed around meal tables. Christ demonstrates his resurrection to his disciples by eating and drinking with them and the early believers in Jerusalem break bread from house to house. In chapter 6 the appointment of the seven as important leaders within the life of the early church centred upon providing for tables.

Now the meal table as a place where the people of God are being gathered and formed is going to be redefined in another way as people who were not expected to be invited are invited to take their seats as no less honoured guests, even though many of those already sitting at the table might feel discomforted by their presence. In response to the concerns of the circumcision party, Peter proceeds to tell the story from the very beginning. While he was in the city of Joppa praying, he saw a vision within which a great sheet descended from heaven by its four corners.

The sheet contained a great many different animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, birds of the air, unclean creatures that Peter as an observant Jew would have been forbidden to eat. Perhaps we are supposed to see the sheet as a sort of tablecloth, a tablecloth that's spread with all these things that Peter can eat. In chapter 10 he is described as being hungry at the time and he's being invited to a meal.

When he refuses, the word of the Lord comes to him, What God has made clean do not call common. This happens on three occasions and then the sheet is finally removed. It is at that very moment that the three men sent from Cornelius in Caesarea arrive at Joppa, at the house of Simon the Tanner where Peter is staying.

The spirit then instructs him to go with them, not making a distinction. Peter is also

accompanied by six other men who will serve as Jewish witnesses of what's taking place among the Gentiles. As he delivers the message of the gospel to Cornelius and his household, the Holy Spirit descends upon them in just the way that he had descended upon the disciples at Pentecost.

All of the significance of the event at Pentecost, all of the significance of the Spirit's descent upon the church was now being applied to the Gentiles, these people that would seem to be outsiders, not included in the covenants of promise, not counted among God's people nor considered as the children of Abraham. All of this, for Peter, confirmed the word that Christ had given after his resurrection, that as John had baptised with water, they would be baptised with the Holy Spirit. The reception of the Holy Spirit was a sign of God's blessing, the fulfilment of his promise, and marked out the recipients as true members of the people of God.

In light of all of this, not to have fellowship with the Gentiles would be presuming a holiness that exceeded God's own. God had given them his own Holy Spirit. Was Peter to refuse to eat with them? The heroes of Peter's account were silenced by it.

It was now apparent to them, as it had been to Peter, that the Lord had made the Gentiles recipients of his blessings, just as they had been. It is worth spending a few moments considering the role of Peter in all of this. Peter elsewhere is described as the apostle to the circumcision.

Why is it that Peter was sent to Cornelius? Surely that would be the task for Paul, who as we see in Galatians chapter 2 was commissioned as an apostle to bring the gospel to the uncircumcised. The answer, I believe, is that Peter was chosen for this task precisely as the apostle to the circumcised. He is the one that could represent the church of the circumcision, and in that capacity recognise his brothers and sisters, believers of the Gentiles.

Peter's bearing witness to God's reception of the Gentiles in this chapter is a very important part of the story then. It is for this task particularly that he has been set apart. While some other party, like Philip, could have brought the gospel to Cornelius, it is Peter who is in the best position to recognise the Gentiles.

Just as Peter and John confirmed the work of God among the Samaritans back in chapter 8, so Peter confirms the work of God among the Gentiles in this chapter. The fact that he is called to give some account of himself suggests that although Peter is the leading apostle, a fact that we see in a great many different ways within the gospels, he is not a figure in which all leadership authority is concentrated. He is expected to give an account of himself to other leaders of the church.

A question to consider. In Numbers chapter 11 we read of an event from which some illuminating analogies could be drawn with the story of the Gentiles' reception of the

gospel. What is the event and how can those analogies help us to understand what is taking place here?