



His Image

The prophet Ezekiel was called by God to rebuke the Hebrews for their sin, and to warn them of the coming siege and destruction of Jerusalem. Early in Ezekiel's prophetic ministry, the Spirit of God commanded him to do something unusual:

Ezekiel 4:1 "Now, son of man, take a clay tablet, put it in front of you and draw the city of Jerusalem on it. ² Then lay siege to it: Erect siege works against it, build a ramp up to it, set up camps against it and

put battering rams around it. ³ Then take an iron pan, place it as an iron wall between you and the city and turn your face toward it. It will be under siege, and you shall besiege it. This will be a sign to the house of Israel.

⁴ "Then lie on your left side and put the sin of the house of Israel upon yourself. You are to bear their sin for the number of days you lie on your side. ⁵ I have assigned you the same number of days as the years of their sin. So for 390 days you will bear the sin of the house of Israel.

⁶ "After you have finished this, lie down again, this time on your right side, and bear the sin of the house of Judah. I have assigned you 40 days, a day for each year. ⁷ Turn your face toward the siege of Jerusalem and with bared arm prophesy against her. ⁸ I will tie you up with ropes so that you cannot turn from one side to the other until you have finished the days of your siege. "

Discuss (or think about):

- Imagine that you are one of the Hebrews observing Ezekiel go through these strange and elaborate actions. What would be your reaction?
- How would observing Ezekiel's actions have a different impact on you than if he had relayed God's message verbally?
- Who does Ezekiel represent at different times? What "roles" does God have him play?

Ezekiel took actions with symbolic or metaphoric meaning for the Jewish people throughout his ministry, as did other prophets. Hosea was commanded by God to marry a prostitute as a metaphor for the Hebrew people's betrayal of the Lord and His willingness to redeem His "bride" from her shame. Isaiah walked around naked and barefoot for three years as a "sign and portent" of coming shame for the Hebrews.

Although we would hesitate to call these real incidents in real people's lives "art," they have many qualities of theater or performance art. The prophets "enacted" what God wanted the people to see about themselves rather than communicating God's message verbally. Their actions were symbols or metaphors for the larger idea that God wanted the people to hear.

Most art utilizes symbol and metaphor to communicate. A symbol is "something that represents something else by association, resemblance, or convention, especially a material object used to represent something invisible"; a metaphor is "one thing conceived as representing another." (*American Heritage Dictionary*) The painter of a beautiful landscape isn't usually just documenting something he/she saw - the artist is trying to communicate an

idea *about* the landscape. The viewer has a point of reference for “landscape” so will (it is hoped) recognize the idea the artist is trying to convey through the physical image.

In his book *Word Pictures*, filmmaker Brian Godawa writes:

The word *image* is a root word for *imagination*, [defined traditionally as] “the ability to shape mental images of things not present to the senses.” So the category of *image* might include anything that engages the imagination rather than the rational intellect. This would include visual images, music, drama, symbol, story, metaphor, allegory and other forms of creativity. (p. 21)

Later, he writes:

God does not merely use images to reveal his *message*. He often uses images to reveal *himself*.... Consider the dozens of metaphors used of God, such as a lion (Hos 5:14), a lamb (Rev 21:22), a shepherd (Ps 78:71), a farmer (Ps 80:8), a vinegrower (Is 15), a potter (Rom 9:20-23), even a drunken soldier (Ps 78:65), a father (2 Cor 6:18), a lover (Jer 3:20), a bridegroom (Is 62:5), a king (Ps 10:16), a consuming fire (Heb 12:29).... The fact that God uses anthropomorphisms - human traits attributed to a nonhuman subject - to talk about himself is a powerful indicator of the value of imagination and human imagery in communicating and understanding truth. (pp. 59-60)

Discuss (or think about):

- How do these metaphors for God influence how you view him?
- What other symbols and metaphors can you think of from scripture? What ideas do they make physical and concrete?
- What role does (or can) imagination play in faith?



Try this:

Read Revelation 21-22, describing the New Jerusalem. Really use your imagination - visualize the creation that John describes. Don't try to figure out literally what the images - the symbols and metaphors - stand for, just allow them to live in your imagination for awhile and let them affect your emotions. Pray as you feel led. Involve your body and voice, if you wish. Consider listening to some music you find inspiring as you contemplate the images - how does incorporating some other expressive form change the experience?

Think about something you did or that happened to you today. Write down the events as they occurred, in all their detail. How could you translate your story from a simple retelling of a seemingly meaningless series of events into metaphor - into art? What deeper meaning might be expressed through the story? What symbols are in the story, and what might they stand for - to you, and, potentially, to others? Write your story, and share it with someone!

Cited:

Godawa, Brian. *Word Pictures: Knowing God Through Story and Imagination*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009.