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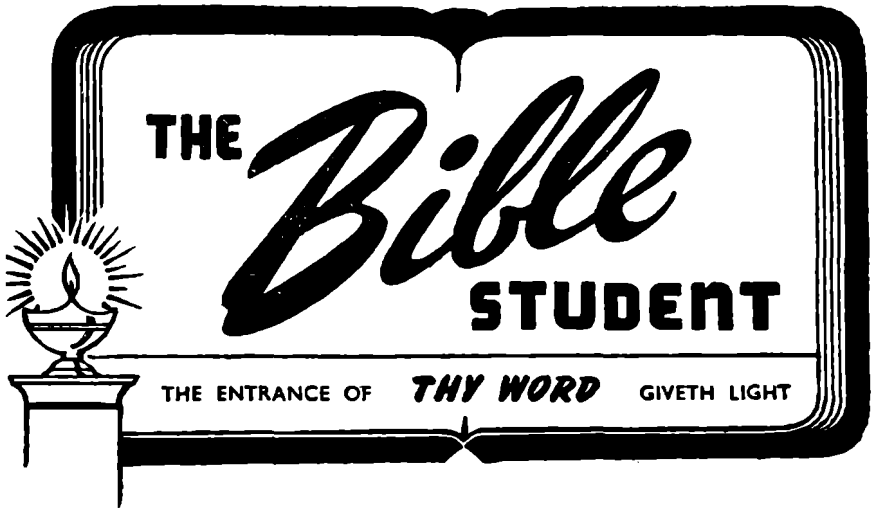
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Editor: A. McDONALD REDWOOD

The fourth method is what we call '*extempore*' preaching. Of course, this does not mean preaching without preparation, but, having prepared, the preacher allows himself the fullest liberty in the Spirit in the delivery of the message. For some types of mind this is the best method, but for some other it would be unsafe. Whatever method be adopted, three things are essential if preaching is to be good and effective, namely, *thoroughness* in preparation, and *naturalness* and *freedom* in delivery.

THE PROPHECY OF EZEKIEL

H. L. ELLISON, B.A., B.D.

The Midnight Hour (24:1-27)

In January 588 B.C., when Jehoiachin's captivity had lasted almost ten years (v. 1), Zedekiah's plots and treacheries had their reward, and Nebuchadnezzar's army ringed Jerusalem for its last agony. The iron ring was to relax for a few weeks to deal with the relieving army of Pharaoh Apries (Jer. 34:21 f; 37:5, 11), but it is doubtful whether it even came to a battle. Certainly the Egyptians were soon back over their frontier (Jer. 37:7), and they did not stir again to save their Judean allies from their fate.

On the very day that Jerusalem was invested—cf. v. 1 with 2 Kings 25:1; Jer. 39:1—God revealed the fact to Ezekiel and ordered him to make a special note of the date. It is not likely that this was to enhance Ezekiel's reputation as a prophet. It was rather to anticipate and prevent any later suggestion that the siege and capture of Jerusalem could have been due to some passing inattention and carelessness on Jehovah's part (cf. 1 King 18:27).

It is impossible to be sure whether the remainder of the chapter is to be looked on as happening on the day on which the siege began and on the next, or whether it extends over some time. We have earlier seen that the dates prefixed to the sections of the prophecy need only apply to the first oracle in the section; the remainder may extend up to the next recorded date. In view,

however, of the general impression given, it is probably best to assume that the whole chapter is to be dated on the tenth and eleventh days of the tenth month.

The Parable of the Pot (24:3-14)

Though it is not necessary, it is probable that we should picture Ezekiel acting out his words, for the pot of the parable is a common cooking pot, in which a whole lamb could easily be cooked. 'Take the choicest one of the flock' (v. 5 RSV) is the correct rendering; it should be obvious that we should continue, 'Pile the logs under it' (RSV). This is demanded by common-sense and v. 10; the error is due to dittography in the Hebrew, i.e., a letter has been written twice instead of only once.

The message in vs. 3-5 is a complete one, for it graphically depicts the extreme straits of the besieged. In v. 6 we pass over to Jerusalem itself, symbolized by the cooking pot. The fate of the besieged is glanced at in v. 6 b; RSV seems to get the meaning, when it renders the final words 'without making any choice'. If we assume that Ezekiel has been acting out his message, then the rust-marks on the cooking pot (the AV 'scum' should be ignored) remind him of blood-stains, and we are back in thought in ch. 22:1-16. By v. 7 Ezekiel is stressing Jerusalem's completely callous and casual attitude towards murder, however brought about. Lev. 17:13 is sufficient comment on v. 7c. In fact it was a very widespread belief that blood that had not been covered cried aloud for vengeance, cf. Job 16:18, and in part Gen. 4:10, Is. 26:21

God now (v. 9) returns to the original thought of the prophecy, but pictures Himself as making up the fire. As a result the contents, apparently, are not merely well cooked and unceremoniously dealt with, but actually destroyed. The best translation of the difficult Hebrew of v. 10 would seem to be, 'Multiply the logs, kindle the fire, make an end of the flesh, and empty out the broth, and let the bones be burned up'. Once the contents are destroyed the empty pot is replaced on the flames until it melts as the only way of getting rid of the rust (v. 11). It is difficult to interpret v. 12; RV mg and RSV are superior to RV tx and AV, but they are probably only approximations to the meaning.

The Death of Ezekiel's Wife (24:15-24)

If the suggestion made above is correct, the revelation of his wife's coming death will have come to Ezekiel, while the people were still gathered round him listening to the parable of the pot. God prohibited all the normal outward forms of mourning to Ezekiel (v. 16 f.). 'The bread of men' means ordinary bread, i.e., the bread that mourners were accustomed to eat. So the RSV 'the bread of mourners' is justified.

It is easy enough to motivate God's prohibition, so far as Ezekiel is concerned. The loss of his wife was but a trifle compared to the coming destruction of the sanctuary (v. 21), and if we wished, we could find a loose parallel in Jer. 16:1-9. But this does not explain why the exiles will not mourn, when the news of the destruction of Jerusalem is received. *The New Bible Commentary's* explanation that this is a Divine prohibition of mourning is quite impossible. The suggestion of ICC and Cam. B. that the shock will be too stunning for tears will hardly bear investigation, and in the light of Ezekiel's continued warnings and of the occasional rumour that must have filtered through, it is questionable whether the shock will really have been so great. There is, however, an explanation which is reasonable in itself and which really establishes the parallel between Ezekiel and the exiles.

Zedekiah's revolt must have meant a very considerable aggravation in the position of the Judean exiles. They will all automatically have come under suspicion as potential rebels, cf. the drastic treatment some years earlier of Ahab and Zedekiah (Jer. 29:21 f.) for prophecy which was probably only by inference treasonable (cf. Vol. XXIV, p. 63). Any outward manifestation of grief over the chastisement of rebels against whom Nebuchadnezzar felt especially strongly could only have received the worst interpretation. In other words there will have been the implicit official prohibition of mourning which is parallel to God's explicit prohibition to Ezekiel. Just as the noting of the day on which the siege began was an implicit stress on the working of God, so the realization that the deprivation of the right of outward mourning had been foreseen and acted out would bring a consciousness

that the destruction of city and sanctuary were an act of the sovereignty of God. But the realization of the sovereignty of God is the first step to a new hope (v. 24).

The End of Ezekiel's Dumbness (24: 25-27)

In Vol. XXIV, p. 63 I discussed Ezekiel's 'dumbness' in the context of 3:26 without coming to any really certain conclusion. I did, however, consider that it was probably a symbolic dumbness, i.e., Ezekiel could speak normally, but refrained from doing so, except when he had a message to give from God. There is nothing in the explanation that does not fit the present context. 'That day' (vs. 26, 27) must not be stressed; it was not until six months after the destruction that a fugitive arrived with the news (see note on 33:21 later).

The Prophecies against the Nations (ch. 25-32)

Prophecies against the nations are found in many of the prophetic books, most notably in Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. With the exception of a very few, e.g., Is. 18; Jer. 27:1-11, it is most unlikely that the normal prophecy about the nations ever came to the ears of their rulers, and it is obvious that some were never intended to. The prophets' ministry was almost always to Israel, and if they spoke of Israel's neighbours, it was to enforce and explain their message to Israel.

There is no reason at all for thinking that Ezekiel's messages in these chapters were ever carried to the countries mentioned, and it is most improbable that they could have been. Their very position, which is that in Isaiah, and the original one in Jeremiah¹ points to their real purpose. The true Biblical teaching on the sovereignty of God is the mean between two extremes. We are apt so to stress the universal sovereignty of God and His judgments on the nations that do not know Him, that we are tempted to feel that there is room for some area of favouritism where His own people are concerned, that He can somewhat relax His requirements from them. A very large part of the prophetic message is devoted to disproving this idea, and this was the main

¹ See my *Men Spake from God*, p. 77.

purpose of Ezekiel's messages of judgment—that is one reason for their modern relevance. The opposite error is so to stress God's activities among His people, that we think of the nations as left to their own devices, and so we are tempted to despair when faced by their hostile forces. None of the exiles who had grasped and accepted Ezekiel's message were in danger of thinking that Jerusalem had fallen by accident, or because Jehovah was weaker than the gods of Babylon, but they were in very real danger of losing heart as they faced the gross darkness of heathendom around them. So to them was given this group of prophecies showing God's rule over and judgment on certain of the nations with whom they had been brought into contact.

The nations dealt with fall into two obvious groups. First there are the Ammonites (25:1-7), Moabites (25:8-11), Edomites (25:12-14) and Philistines (25:15-17). Though, with the possible exception of the last, they had joined with Zedekiah in his plotting (Jer. 27:2) they had made their peace with Nebuchadnezzar in time. They had then, as is so often the case, shown their loyalty by ostentatious zeal against Jerusalem. Ezekiel shows that their sudden shift in loyalties will not save them from their doom. The second group are Egypt (29-32) and Tyre (26:1-28:19) with Sidon (28:20-24). Here a symbolic element certainly enters in. Egypt is for Ezekiel the land where Israel first learnt idolatry (20:7 f) and trust in foreign powers (23:3). Tyre represents the commerce of the time, rejected by more than one of the prophets as fundamentally evil and heartless. But, though I have never met any recognition of the fact, Tyre symbolizes Babylon itself, for all through its long history Babylon had been one of the greatest commercial centres of the world. Ezekiel could not foretell the downfall of Babylon without the most serious danger to him and his hearers. But if all Tyre's riches and commerce and the power that riches can buy could not save her in the hour of her need, then Babylon would equally go down to her fate, when her hour had struck.

A justification of this stress on the mercantile character of Babylon may be found partly in a reference to Ezekiel's own words in 16:29 (see RV mg., RSV), 17:4. A few quotations from stand-

ard works will support it. 'The Babylonians had a most modern idea of "law and order", and to this was no doubt due their commercial stability, which survived all wars and conquests unimpaired'.¹ 'The Assyrians, however, were not a commercial nation. . . . When the Babylonian merchants realized this, and saw that under the firm Assyrian rule of Northern Syria their trade was free from possible interference by the petty princes of that region . . . the merchants, the most important element in the body-politic, formed an unwavering pro-Assyrian party, which was ever ready to barter its self-respect for shekels'.² 'Commercial interests were therefore the leading influences in Babylonian life, even in religion'.³ 'Further, we must not lose sight of the fact that the Neo-Babylonian kings . . . engaged as freely in commercial transactions as the humblest of their subjects. At Babylon buying and selling and getting gain seem to have been in the very atmosphere of the place. This characteristic of the golden city appears to have continued long after her supremacy had passed away and to have furnished much of the imagery in Rev. 17'.⁴

The Prophecies Against Israel's Neighbours (25:1-17)

This former group of prophecies creates few difficulties. They are very typical and are in many ways reminiscent of Amos 1:3-2:3. The accusation in each case fastens on one point, and the punishment is stated in fairly general terms. As we do not know enough details of the last hours of Jerusalem, we cannot fully appreciate the condemnations. It is interesting to note that v. 8 shows that Israel's claim to be Jehovah's elect people was already making it unpopular.

The doom prophesied against Ammon and Moab is that they should become the prey of Arab tribes. In fact it was not very long before their territory was occupied by the Nabateans. It is likely that 'and Seir' (v. 8) should be omitted with the best MS of LXX. 'The side of Moab' (v. 9)—better 'the shoulder

¹ Hall: *The Ancient History of the Near East*, p. 204

² Hall, *op. cit.* p. 455

³ Breasted: *Ancient Times*, p. 174

⁴ Boutflower: *In and Around the Book of Daniel*, p. 138

of Moab'—is the long line of the mountains of Moab as seen from Jerusalem. The ICC with a small textual change renders the difficult words that follow 'from Aroer in its whole extent'.

The outstanding feature of the prophecy against Edom is that the ultimate instrument of punishment is to be Israel (v. 14). This was fulfilled in the time of John Hyrcanus (134-104 B.C.); he conquered the Edomites and gave them the choice of Judaism or the sword. Though many of the Edomites, or Idumeans, remembered their origin, they became fanatical Jews in religion.¹ This was how Herod could become king of the Jews.

No agent of punishment is mentioned for the Philistines. In fact by the time of the Hashmoneans, i.e., after 165 B.C. the former Philistine cities regarded themselves as being Greek; the older elements in their population seem largely to have disappeared.

The Prophecies against Tyre and Egypt (ch. 26-32)

These prophecies introduce us to one of the major difficulties in Ezekiel, indeed in prophetic literature generally.

In ch. 26 he prophecies not merely the complete destruction of Tyre, but its destruction by Nebuchadnezzar. Moreover the destruction is to be final; Tyre will not be rebuilt (v. 14). Lest there should be any misunderstanding it is followed by a lament over Tyre (ch. 27), its prince (28:1-10) and its king (28:11-19). Yet sixteen years later—cf. 29:17 with 26:1—he announces that Nebuchadnezzar 'had no wages from Tyre for the service that he served against it' (29:18); in its place he promised him the spoil of Egypt (29:19). In 30:1-19 we have the prophecy of the results for Egypt. In 29:1-16 is a description of the devastation of Egypt, which, however, is not directly linked with the promise to Nebuchadnezzar.

Tyre was besieged by Nebuchadnezzar from 586 to 573 B.C. and was terminated by Ithobaal the king acknowledging the supremacy of Babylon. In 567 B.C., the 37th year of Nebuchadnezzar, there was fighting between Babylon and Pharaoh Amasis, but unfortunately the tablet giving us the information is badly damaged

¹ Cf. Josephus: *Bel. Jud.* IV iv-v.

and we cannot be sure whether Nebuchadnezzar penetrated into Egypt. The fact that he left inscriptions in the Isthmus of Suez certainly does not justify Petrie's dogmatic conclusion, 'Thus he (Nebuchadnezzar) doubtless occupied the fortress of Tahpanhes' (cf. Jer. 43:8-13¹). All we can say from the available evidence is that Nebuchadnezzar will at the most have penetrated the border districts of the Delta and may have fulfilled the Tahpanhes prophecy of Jeremiah, but certainly neither the wider prophecy of Jer. 43 nor Ezek. 30:1-19. Ezek. 29:10-13 was not fulfilled either in the time of Nebuchadnezzar or later.

Tyre was taken and destroyed by Alexander the Great in 332 B.C., but only 18 years later it had regained much of its earlier importance, which it was able to maintain to some extent right down to the time of the Crusades. After its recapture by the Saracens in 1291 it gradually dwindled into the fishing village it now is. It is argued by some that the prophecy of 26:14 was in fact fulfilled, for it is claimed that Nebuchadnezzar did destroy the old town on the mainland, and that the city which was captured by Alexander and which carried on the name through the centuries was built on a small island off the original site. The present village is also on this island site, though it has now been linked with the mainland by silting. Even if we could consider that such a 'fulfilment' were in fact an adequate meeting of the prophet's words, the suggestion is based on an error of fact. It seems absolutely certain that the original town of Tyre was from the first on the island. Whether it was also on the mainland, or whether that was a later extension is not clear, but the name given by the Greeks to the latter, Old Tyre, was due to misunderstanding.

It should be clear that the answer we give to this problem of unfulfilled prophecy will throw much light on the nature of the fore-telling of the future as a whole.

Our starting point must be Jer. 18:7-10. Here it is stated categorically that all national prophecy is conditional. It is

¹ For the inscription see *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, p. 398b, for Petrie's views his *Egypt and Israel*, p. 93, and for a general survey of the evidence, Hall: *The Ancient History of the Near East*, p. 549.

based on conditions in existence at the time of the prophecy, and if these are changed, then the prophecy ceases to be in force. The most obvious example of this is Jonah's prophecy to Nineveh. Not only was it not fulfilled, but quite obviously Jonah did not expect it to be (4:2).

Except where a promise is confirmed by God's oath (Gen. 22:16, Ps. 105:9, Heb. 6:13) we are safe in concluding that every statement of God about the future has some element of the conditional in it. Where the prophecy is concerned mainly with the doom or prosperity of an individual or of a people, a change of behaviour can annul the prophecy. This explains the apparent smugness of Hezekiah's answer to Isaiah (Is. 39:8), when the latter foretold the Babylonian captivity. He knew that by living God-fearing lives his descendants could postpone the judgment indefinitely. Something will have happened both in Tyre and in Egypt to cause the doom uttered not to go into effect, and for Ezekiel this was so obvious that neither apology nor explanation was necessary.

Where, however, the prophecy is one of God's purposes of blessing to mankind, the element of condition is merely one of time and manner not of substance. For example, had David's successors walked in his ways, God's promise (2 Sam. 7:12-16) to David would have been fulfilled in all its details. Their sin led to the fall of the royal house, but the essential portion of the promise was fulfilled in Christ.

If we could grasp this clearly, it would clear away much false exegesis on prophetic Scripture. We would feel under no compulsion to explain away the obvious force of a promise like that of Huldah to Josiah (2 Kings 22:18ff); many prophecies that are conveniently relegated to the Millennium, will be seen to refer to the time of the prophet; no difficulty will be found in recognizing minor contradictions and development in the message of any particular prophet.

This view may be challenged on the ground of general principle but this will not take us very far. The general principles of Scripture interpretation must be discovered in Scripture, not in our feeling of what is right and proper. Far more important is the

challenge based on Daniel and Revelation, which give a very different picture to that suggested above. Not enough know that Daniel is not placed among the prophetic books in the Hebrew Canon of Scripture, and of those that know not sufficient take it seriously. When the modern scholar classes Daniel and Revelation as apocalyptic, it is no case of mere scholars' jargon. There is a deep difference between them and prophecy, as that term is normally understood in Scripture.

We are transported to that contradiction which runs through all Scripture, that between the sovereignty of God and the free-will of man. Prophecy appeals to the free-will of man. For that reason the absolute foreknowledge of God is veiled. As excellent example is to be found in Jer. 18; in v. 11 we have God's appeal to the people, which, if accepted, would invalidate so much that Jeremiah had foretold; yet in v. 12 is the clear indication that God knew well how the appeal would be received. God's foreknowledge and sovereignty never lead Him to ignore man's free-will, as He turns to plead with him. On the other hand apocalyptic reveals God's sovereignty. It is not God's appeal to man, but His encouragement of His own in the hour of their trial.

Though I have said that prophecies of a nation's doom or blessing could be annulled, in most cases this is too strong a statement. Again and again where a prophecy was not fulfilled literally, we find it coming into force at a later date in all main essentials. Jonah did not see Nineveh destroyed, but about a century and a half later the Medes and Babylonians rased it to the ground, never to be rebuilt. Babylon in her turn was not destroyed in the manner prophesied by Jeremiah in chs. 50-51; but for all that Babylon sank in due course and did not rise again. Those that argue that Babylon must be rebuilt that it may be destroyed in accordance with prophecy have no strong ground to stand on. Tyre was not destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, and when it was destroyed two and a half centuries later, it was soon rebuilt. For all that the day came when it had sunk so low as a fishing village, that none that stand on the shore can imagine the old commercial centre in all its pride. Egypt was never left without inhabitant, but it has become 'the basest of all kingdoms', and all the efforts of its politicians will never restore it to its old pre-eminence.