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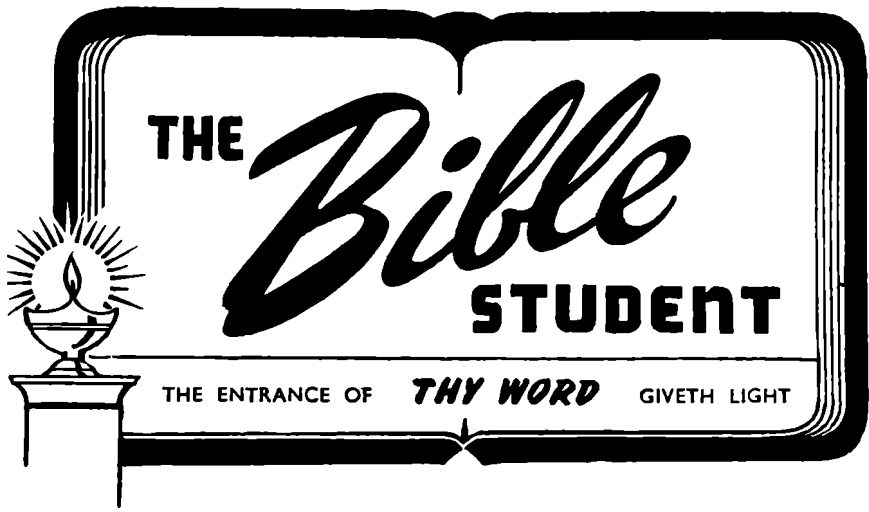
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NEW SERIES

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VOL. XXV No. 1

THE PROPHECY OF EZEKIEL

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The Problem of Prophets and of Prophecy (12: 21-14: 11)

There is nothing easier than being wise after the event, but we generally take to ourselves unmerited credit for being it. It is in that spirit that we are apt to be unsparing in our condemnation of the Israelites of old for their rejection of the prophetic message. We normally forget that for the average man things were not quite so simple as we imagine. We picture men like Jeremiah and Ezekiel as isolated, lonely, unique, but to their contemporaries they were merely eccentric members of the fairly large company of the prophets. That which distinguished them in public thought from the other prophets was mainly that they had a message of unrelieved doom, whereas the others preached hope and peace.

It is most important that we should realize this. The phrase 'false prophets' is one of the New Testament, not of the Old. They are never presented to us as just deliberate frauds, and the sole definite marks given us by which we may recognize the true prophet are of a nature which demands a truly spiritual man to use them aright.

When Micaiah Ben-Imlah faced Ahab's four hundred prophets (1 King 22), he did not state that they were false prophets, but that Jehovah had deliberately caused them to be led into error. We may reasonably assume that Micaiah considered that normally they were reliable communicators of God's will. A very similar statement is made, as we shall see, by Ezekiel (14: 9 f.). The same thought is found in an early prophecy of Jeremiah (4: 10), but here it is not far-fetched to see Jeremiah himself misled for a time by the message of the deceived prophets. Did the false prophets wear a 'hairy mantle' (Zech. 13: 4 R.V.), so did at

least Elijah (2 Kings 1: 8 R.V.) and John the Baptist (Matt. 3: 4). Did the false prophets do their acted signs, e.g., 1 King 22:11, Jer. 28: 10, so did at least Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Did the false prophets dream dreams and see visions, so did probably all the true prophets as well. When Jeremiah was challenged and contradicted by Hananiah Ben-Azzur (Jer. 28: 1-4), he did not denounce him as a false prophet, he merely maintained that the balance of probability was that he was right and Hananiah was wrong (Jer. 28: 5-9).

Even the apparently clear test of Deut. 18: 22, i.e., the fulfilment of the prophetic message, was not always adequate. Deut. 13: 1, 2 clearly envisages that the sign given by the prophet might come to pass, even though his object was to seduce the people to follow other gods. In practice it must have been exceptionally difficult to apply this test. That the false prophets must very often have been correct in their predictions is obvious enough—however we may explain it—for otherwise they would not have retained public esteem for long. On the other hand the element of contingency in most prophecy made many a prediction of the true prophet *seem* to be falsified. The principle is clearly expressed in Jer. 18:7-12, and the non-fulfilment of Jonah 3:4 at the time foretold (though it was fulfilled later) the most obvious example of its application. We shall later find other outstanding examples in Ezekiel's prophecies against Tyre and Egypt, and we may be certain that minor examples were frequent. So the remarkable fulfilment of some prophecies—though most of those we consider most remarkable had their fulfilment still future in the earlier part of Ezekiel's prophesying—was offset in the popular mind by the apparent non-fulfilment of others. The strongest influence, however, had been worked by the very long-suffering of God. His postponement of complete doom had been taken to mean that the prophecies of Isaiah and Micah would not go into effect at all (Ezek. 12: 21-28), or at some time in the dim and distant future that did not concern the contemporaries of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and this in turn prevented the renewed prophecies of doom from being taken very seriously.

The simple fact seems to have been that the false prophets could not be classified under any one heading. Some were quite simply mad (cf. Jer. 29: 26); some will have been clever frauds; some were doubtless, to use modern terms, psychic

mediums with powers and knowledge more than can be explained by common human experience, whatever may be their source; yet others were godly men who either wished themselves into the body of the prophets instead of awaiting God's call, or having been truly called by God found it easier to compromise with men than to give God's message in all its stark unattractiveness. The last named in particular will have been good and attractive persons whose whole influence seemed placed on God's side, but because it was man's version of God's will that they were proclaiming, they will ultimately have done more harm than the pure deceivers.

We today would for the most part set doctrinal tests for the false prophet, but nothing could be more foolish. Orthodoxy is often nothing more than a sign of spiritual inertia, and the deceiver will always be prepared to say 'shibboleth', if he thinks it financially rewarding. In speaking of false prophets the Bible is not concerned with their theological soundness or unsoundness but with their fruits. 'By their fruits ye shall know them' said the Lord (Matt. 7: 16) and Jer. 23: 9-40 seems a prophetic commentary on the words. First immorality of life is condemned (v. 9-14); today too there is far too great a proneness to overlook laxity of living, when a preacher combines orthodoxy in doctrine and great eloquence in preaching. Secondly the prophetic message is condemned which has no bearing on the spiritual needs of the hearers and so reveals that it has not been learnt from God (v. 15-24). Judged by this standard all too many sermons today fall into the same condemnation. Thirdly the message of unworthy derivation is rejected (v. 25-29); dreams are not an adequate way in which to learn the message of Almighty God. If some modern preachers were as frank as to the origin of some of their sermons as were the prophets of Israel, we could well pass a similar comment. Then come those that could not even pretend to have received a message from God (v. 30-32), but either borrowed it from someone else, or simply invented something to suit. These shortcomings are not unknown today also. The problem of the prophet of old was only the problem of the preacher today in a somewhat different setting.

This explains why Ezekiel, before he went further with his message of condemnation, had to try and teach the exiles how God looked on the prophets whose reiterated message had so fatally

blunted the spiritual receptivity of those that had put their trust in them.

The Despising of Prophecy (12: 21-28)

Quite apart from the effect of the false prophets, there were two interrelated obstacles in the minds of his hearers, one quite general, one linked with Ezekiel himself, that prevented his message being taken seriously.

The former was one that the exiles had been familiar with before they had been taken from their homes—'in the land of Israel' (v. 22); the R.S.V., though linguistically justifiable, misses the point—and which was equally current in Jerusalem and Tel-abib. It was assumed that because past prophecies of doom had not gone into fulfilment, they had been annulled, not merely suspended (v. 22). This attitude of mind can easily be understood and is reflected in 2 Pet. 3:4. Micah and Isaiah had spoken as though the Assyrian invasions of Judah were the judgments of the Day of Jehovah instead of their foreshadowing, even as the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 was a foreshadowing of the coming of Christ. Instead of recognizing that the grace of God had caused a postponement of the worst, they believed that the worst had come and had proved much easier than expected. In extenuation let us remember that Sennacherib did reduce Judah to a shade of its former self, so that Hezekiah could venture to use the word 'remnant' (cf. Isaiah's teaching on the remnant) for those that remained. When prophets like Huldah (2 Kings 22:14-17), Zephaniah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel arose, the bulk of the people just did not take them seriously. Many doubtless expected punishment for the evil days of Manasseh, and saw it in the premature death of Josiah and the exile of Jehoiachin, yet they would not believe that matters could go any further. Ezekiel assured them that not only his prophecies but also all the postponed prophecies were about to be fulfilled (v. 23). In addition all those prophecies of hope that had falsely buoyed them up (v. 24) would come to an end as well. The destruction of the temple so discredited the false prophets that they did in fact die out—cf. Zech. 14:2-6 for a picture of them after the exile.

The second obstacle was one that Ezekiel personally met in the presumably more receptive section of the exiles (v. 26-28). Their experience had been such as to make them willing to believe his message, but whatever the reason they considered that he was

speaking of a future outside their own life-span. To them too came the assurance that all the evils that Ezekiel had foretold were on the verge of fulfilment.

The Foolish Prophets (13: 1-16)

This section faces us with several difficulties. One is the surprising fluctuation between the second and the third person. Though we shall not follow out the thought, there is much to be said for Cooke's suggestion¹ that we have here Ezekiel's interweaving of two prophecies, one in the second person against the prophets in the Babylonian exile (cf. Jer. 29:8, 15, 21-23, 32), and a second later prophecy against the prophets who have shared in the final fate of Jerusalem. Then there are considerable variations between the Hebrew and the old versions, with the probability that in many cases the versions are correct; certainly the rendering of the R.S.V. in vv. 2, 6, 10, 11 is in each case to be preferred.

Ezekiel calls the prophets 'foolish'; the word *nabal* is the strongest of the words translated 'fool'. Where the context calls for it, it means a mental and spiritual obtuseness that borders on atheism; 'as applied to the prophets, *nabal* would mean insensible to Jahveh's benefits, as in Deut. 32:6 (of Israel)' (I.C.C. *ad loc.*). There is no sin in using one's reason; to do so, instead of listening to God, when one is one of God's spokesmen, shows, however, extreme spiritual obtuseness. They prophesied 'out of their own heart', i.e., mind (R.S.V.), but they were not just vulgar deceivers. They followed 'their own spirit' (v. 3). Spirit (*ruach*) in such a context is something powerful and dominating. Instead of letting themselves be dominated by the Spirit of God, they were dominated by their own desires and motives. It is not the worldly or 'unsound' teacher and preacher who is the real danger to the Church, but the man who allows himself so to be dominated by his own deepest desires that he is preaching them, although he has convinced himself that it is the Word of God he is preaching.

Ezekiel compares the prophets to the foxes that live among ruins (v. 4, R.S.V.)², thinking probably mainly of their destructiveness. In the day of trouble they have neither defended the 'breaches' nor built up the 'wall' (v. 5, R.S.V.). They have had their visions

¹ G. A. Cooke: *Ezekiel* in the International Critical Commentary, quoted as I.C.C.

² Not jackals, as held by many.

all right (vv. 6, 7), but since they were the expression of their own desires they were vanity and lies. Self-deceived they 'expect' Jehovah 'to fulfil their word' (v. 6, R.S.V. correctly, cf. R.V. mg.). When the emptiness of their message is discovered, they will suffer a threefold punishment (v. 9): they will lose their honoured place in the councils of the people, they will be struck out of the citizen-roll of true Israelites, and they will not return from exile to the land of Israel again.

One of the main causes of false prophecy is laid bare in vv. 10-16, viz., the instinctive desire to swim with the stream. Those who denounce traditionalism and normally are the slaves of it themselves fail to realize that only the willingness to put truth before everything else and unflinching surrender of the whole of one's being to the Holy Spirit can keep a man from proclaiming what he is expected to. The prophets are pictured as saying, 'All is well'—the implication of 'Peace'—and as whitewashing (R.S.V.) the jerrybuilt wall the people have put up. The very approval (whitewashing) by the prophets prevented the people seeing how flimsy was their structure until the storm of judgment came and swept it all away.

The False Prophetesses (13 : 17-23)

This section is most instructive. Apart from it we only know of Miriam, Deborah, Huldah and Noadiah as prophetesses, and the usual tendency has been to regard these four as rare exceptions. But here we see that the prophetess was no uncommon phenomenon, and it would be unjustified to assume that all, apart from the four already named, were of the type here described. It is one more proof of how very dangerous the argument from silence is, when it is applied to the Bible.

It is clear that the women here described would be termed sorceresses rather than prophetesses today, and Ezekiel shows his contempt for them by using the *hithpael* of the verb 'to prophesy' of them in v. 17, rather than the *niphal* he uses elsewhere in the chapter (*ha-mitnabbe'oth* compared with *ha-nibha'im*), a real distinction hardly representable in English. Seeing, however, that no more doom is pronounced on them than the complete loss of their influence (v. 23), it is clear that their sin is less in God's sight than that of the prophets. Those who are very fond of quoting 1 Tim. 2:11-14 in order to keep their sisters in Christ

in their right place normally overlook that while the nature of Eve's fall is a reason why the woman should not be a teacher in the Church, the fact that Adam 'was not deceived' makes his sin the greater, for he sinned open-eyed. So too in Old Testament times the relatively underprivileged position of women made them largely the maintainers of the age-old superstitions of the Near-East. For that little blame rested on them compared to that incurred by the prophets who spoke from their own hearts instead of allowing God to speak through them.

It is only comparatively recently that archaeological research has made it possible for us to understand the details of the magic described (for particulars see I.C.C.). Hence both the A.V. and the R.V. are defective in their renderings. In addition the Jews after the return from exile soon forgot what was intended, and so a number of scribal errors crept in. The R.S.V. is useful for getting the correct rendering, though it is probably incorrect in v. 19 along with other English versions. The handfuls of barley and crumbs of bread were probably not their pay, but some of their instruments of divination. The hunting of souls refers probably to the power that a sorceress will so often gain over those that consult her.

A passage like this is a needed reminder how far short popular religion fell of the teaching of the prophets. It should be clear too that those that resorted to magic arts and divination would not be likely to have an ear for the spiritual message of the prophets.

The Idolater and the Prophet (14 : 1-11)

Before Ezekiel can leave the false prophets, there is yet another aspect of the problem to be dealt with. A generation normally had the prophets it wanted, just as a church normally has the ministry it secretly wants. So here we have a picture of the men who were largely responsible for the flourishing of the false prophets.

They are called 'elders of Israel' (cf. 20:1); it is not likely that any difference between them and 'the elders of Judah' (8:1) is intended. They are said to 'have taken their idols into their heart', which probably means that they had set their affections on them. They are spoken of as typifying the people generally (vv. 4, 7), and so there is no reason for inferring that they were particularly guilty themselves. On the other hand, since apart

from this passage there is no evidence for idolatry among the exiles, it may well be that Ezekiel is referring not merely to the visible forms of idolatry as described in ch. 8 but also to all the false gods of the heart that separate a man's allegiance from Jehovah.

No greater insult can be offered to God than for the man who offers Him no allegiance, or at best a divided one, which He will not accept, to come to His prophet and to ask to know His will, which he will only do, if it suits him. He may do it to seem respectable in the eyes of man, or out of superstition, or just because it is customary. In any case, the prophet will be silent and 'I the Lord will answer him Myself' (R.S.V., vv. 4 (!), 7). The answer will be one of such judgment that it will 'seize the house of Israel by their heart' (v. 5, I.C.C.). The prophet will be silent, not because he has seen through the man's hypocrisy, but because God has given him no answer, and the true prophet does not speak unless he has a word from God. This does not exclude the possibility of the man's doom being declared by the prophet.

What of the false prophet? The true prophet, who looked only to God, could afford to be silent, but not so the false prophet. His reputation depended on his being able to give an acceptable answer, whenever it was wanted. Faced by the Divine silence, when the idolater asked Jehovah's will, he would be enticed (v. 14, R.V. mg.) and give the type of answer that would give most satisfaction. All unknown to him, however, God would be behind the answer, using it to the destruction of both the enquirer and the prophet. The false prophet does not create a generation that does not know God, but is created by it, and he is one of God's instruments of judgment on that generation.

(To be continued)