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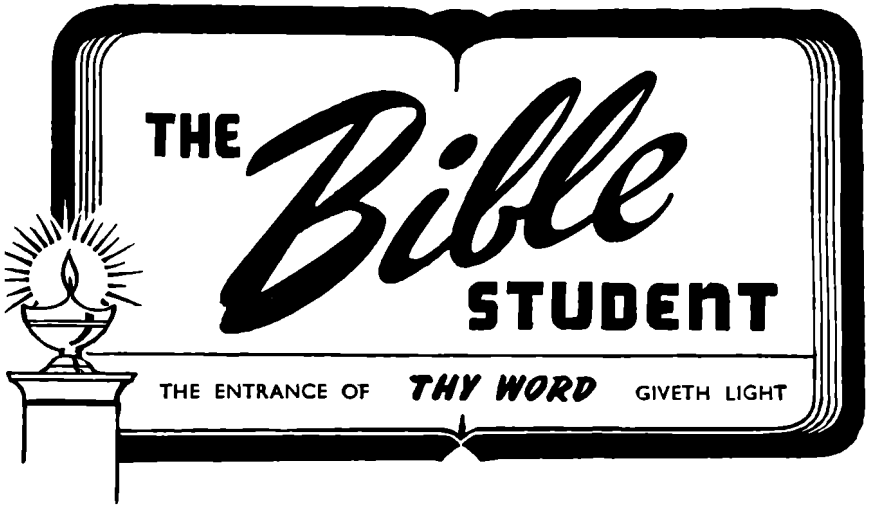
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Vol. XXV. No. 3

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NEW SERIES

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VOL. XXV No. 3

THE PROPHECY OF EZEKIEL

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The Treacherous Folly of Zedekiah (17: 1-24)

This chapter is a prophecy of Zedekiah's doom, not of his actions. We may, therefore reasonably date it about 588 B.C., the time of Zedekiah's revolt against Nebuchadnezzar. This would place it later than 20:1, which is dated in 590 B.C. There is little doubt that the break in chronological order is deliberate, for ch. 17 is a necessary appendix to ch. 16.

The coming judgment on Jerusalem was to be a judgment on the whole history of Israel, yet it was a judgment on its last generation as well. Their repentance could have postponed the day of doom, as did the reformations of Hezekiah and Josiah, though it could not have permanently averted it. So Ezekiel turns from the long story of Israel's apostasy (ch. 16) to the criminal and sacrilegious folly of those left in Jerusalem.

His message is in 'a riddle and . . . a parable' (RSV allegory). At the same time the riddle is so transparent, that it would have been a thick head indeed that did not understand it. The reason for the form of the message is not far to seek. The hearts of the majority of the exiles will always have been with those that prophesied an early return (see Vol. XXIII, p. 150). They had been discredited, but with the outbreak of Zedekiah's rebellion the hopes of many must have flared up again, and Ezekiel's message of doom will have grown increasingly unpopular. So he tried yet another method to gain his hearers' attention.

The actual language of the allegory needs little comment. The imagery used may seem bizarre to us, but its individual portions are found elsewhere in the Bible. The eagle, or rather

vulture, is symbolic of the speed of the conqueror (Jer. 48:40; 49:22, Is. 46:11); for the cedar representing the Davidic house one may compare Is. 10:33-11:1. Most commentators satisfy themselves with the remark that the metaphor is changed in v. 5, but that is surely to deal superficially with such a master of the symbolic as Ezekiel. In dealing with 12:12 (Vol. XXIV, p. 159 f.) we saw that Ezekiel did not regard Zedekiah, but Jehoiachin as the true king. Similarly in 11:14-21 (cf. Jer. 24) it is made abundantly clear that the true Israel was to be sought for in captivity not among those left in the land. So the change from the cedar to the vine shoot carries its own implied condemnation with it, especially in the light of ch. 15. Further evidence that the change of metaphor has this deeper meaning is seen in the derogatory 'seed of the land' (v. 5); this does indeed stress the generosity of Nebuchadnezzar in not putting a foreign ruler over the land, but it is not a natural expression for a member of the royal family. We should note too the return to the picture of the cedar in vv. 22 ff., when Ezekiel deals with the true king who is to come.

Ezekiel condemns first of all the folly of Zedekiah's action. Though the first eagle had planted the vine shoot 'beside many waters', it turned to the second eagle to be watered! Judah had been so reduced in strength that all it could hope for by a successful rebellion against Babylon was a change of masters, and Egypt, being nearer, would probably have made its hand felt the more heavily.

More important was the breach of Zedekiah's oath (v. 13, 2 Chr. 36:13). We do not know enough of the circumstances to understand Ezekiel's stress on this. Presumably in all cases where kings of Israel or Judah had voluntarily or under duress accepted the overlordship of Assyria they had sworn an oath of loyalty. Evidently there were special circumstances operating in Zedekiah's case; that Nebuchadnezzar himself felt bitterly about it is suggested by his exemplary punishment of Zedekiah (2 Kings 25:6 f.). Ezekiel says that since Zedekiah had called Jehovah as witness to his oath ('Mine oath . . . My covenant' v. 19), Jehovah would guarantee Nebuchadnezzar's victory and Zedekiah's punishment.

Finally Ezekiel confirms his stress that not in Jerusalem and its present ruler is the hope of the future to be found. The deliber-

ately enigmatic language of vv. 22 ff. without any explanation is probably to be explained by his knowledge of Jer. 22:28 ff. He does not want to increase the anguish of the king in exile by an express reference to the doom already uttered, but for the careful hearer the implication was there. It was not the transplanted cedar twig that was to be re-planted 'in the mountain of the height of Israel', i.e., Zion, but another twig altogether, not taken from the twig growing in exile, but from the parent tree. But there had to be a re-planting, which implied that the old dynastic tree had in fact met its doom, cf. Is. 11:1, where stem (A.V.), stock (R.V.) are best rendered stump (R.S.V.). 'All the trees of the field' (v. 24) means all the mighty of the world; for the thought of the verse cf. both the song of Hannah (1 Sam. 2) and the song of Mary (Luke 1). (Many take the passage as a promise to Jehoiachin's descendants, but I believe this to rest on an insufficiently careful reading of vv. 3 f., 22).

There is no need to doubt the Messianic nature of the passage, though this is not stressed. Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel knew that the Messianic hope was one of the causes why the people did not take the warnings of doom sufficiently seriously. So neither of them was prepared to stress the hope until the doom had come.

If the passage is Messianic, then the beasts (LXX, R.S.V.) and the birds must represent the nations of the world that come to the Messianic king (cf. Is. 2: 2 ff.). This being so, we would do well not to accept without due thought the interpretation of the Parable of the Mustard Seed which demands that the birds that come and lodge in the branches of the mustard plant must of necessity be symbols of something evil.

The Individual and the Justice of God (18:1-32).

For those who insist on regarding the prophets as inspired dogmatic theologians with the added gift of being able to see the future this chapter and 33:1-20 create very real difficulties. They are in apparent contradiction with so much in Ezekiel and also apparently over-simplify human experience. Further they seem to deny the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints and to present a legalistic conception of salvation without parallel in the Bible.

If on the other hand we are prepared to accept the prophets as being first and foremost God's spokesmen to their own generation and dealing with the problems of their own times, most of the difficulties vanish.

The subordination of the individual to the community in the Old Testament, though a fact, is normally exaggerated. The Divine principle of justice, 'visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children' (Ex. 20:5; 34:7) is *never* carried over into Israelite law. The suggestion by some critics that Dt. 24:16 shows the influence of a later and better period has no evidence to support it, for nothing can be based on the acts of a man like Ahab (2 Kings 9:26). There are only two apparent exceptions to this statement. But in the punishment of Saul's sons and grandsons for the wrong done to the Gibeonites (2 Sa. 21:1-9) it is not primarily a wrong done to men that is being punished, but the breach of a solemn oath (Josh. 9:15, 19). When we consider Achan's fate more closely, it should be obvious that the fact that even his inanimate household goods share in it (Josh. 7:24 ff.) shows that the true explanation is, that by bringing the stolen articles into his tent, he had made it and his family and his goods an extension of Jericho that had to share the fate of Jericho.

In other words, if the children suffered with their parents, the innocent with the guilty, it was God's doing. But even then 'visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children upon the third and upon the fourth generation of them that hate Me' is far outweighed by 'shewing mercy (steadfast love, R.S.V.) unto a thousand generations (R.V. mg., American Jewish Version) of them that love Me'. In addition the fact that the fundamental laws of the Pentateuch are always addressed to the individual shows that the responsibility for their observance must always be in the first place individual.

The fact is that the popular modern conception of the individual is derived from Greek thought rather than from the Bible, and may even be regarded as anti-Biblical. We tend to think of our bodies giving us our individuality and separating us, one from the other. In the Old Testament it is our flesh—a word for body hardly exists in Hebrew—that binds us to our fellow-men; it is

our personal responsibility to God that gives us our individuality. Since man (*'adam*) is bound to the ground (*'adamah*) from which he has been taken, and through it to all who live on the same ground, he cannot help influencing them by his actions. Abominable conduct causes 'the land to sin' (Dt. 24:4, cf. Jer. 3:1, 9). That is why drought, pestilence, earthquake, etc., are for the Old Testament the entirely natural punishment of wickedness (cf. Ps. 107:33 f.). If a man dwelt in a polluted land, he could not help sharing in its pollution. The chief terror of exile was not that the land of exile was outside the control of Jehovah—a view that was probably held by very few—but rather that it was an unclean land (Amos 7:17).

The repetition of the main message of this chapter in ch. 33, where Ezekiel is re-commissioned for his work after the fall of Jerusalem, a repetition which in its literary form must be due to the prophet himself, gives the vital clue to its interpretation. It is fundamentally a message to the exiles, not to those that had been left in Jerusalem. For the latter Ezekiel had no message except of doom—and it is worth noticing that if we confine ourselves to his prophecies spoken after the deportation of Jehoiachin, this is true of Jeremiah too. But even of them Ezekiel makes it clear that the *few* righteous among them would be delivered (9:4; 14:14). There is no Old Testament passage that suggests that the righteous must perish with the wicked, but they will suffer with them.

'In the land of Israel' (v. 2, R.V. mg.) among the survivors a mood of deep pessimism had crept in. The prophets' message of doom had produced the attitude that if the people were doomed through the sins of their ancestors, it was no use for them, 'the children' (v. 2), to bother about their own behaviour. They assumed that the effect of their ancestors' guilt would outweigh the righteousness of their few descendants. Jeremiah answered this attitude (Jer. 31:29 f.) by proclaiming a revelation of the grace of God in a new covenant that could break the whole entail of the past (Jer. 31:31-34).

Cynical and pessimistic 'wisecracks' travel fast, and the proverb had reached the exiles, who used it in rather a different sense. They implied by it that Jeremiah and Ezekiel were at fault in

proclaiming that the exile was God's grace to them. If that were so, they would prosper, but as it was, 'Our transgressions and sins are upon us, and we pine away in them; how then should we live?' (33:10). For men with no knowledge or hope of true life after death the only certain sign of God's favour they knew was earthly prosperity; without it they were obviously under the wrath of God—the whole theme of *Job* revolves around this concept.

Ezekiel does not deny corporate suffering, which affects the righteous also. In 11:14-21 he had made it clear that exile was a place of suffering and deprivation, but ultimately of spiritual blessing (see Vol. XXIV, p. 186 ff.), a theme expanded in 36:22-32. But whereas in a few short years a doom would descend on Jerusalem that would leave only a handful of survivors (14:12-23), the exiles would *live*. Obviously Ezekiel is not thinking of eternal life and death in the Christian sense, but of physical survival, when so many were to go down to Sheol. A study of the later chapters of his prophecy shows that he had a deeper meaning as well. Like so many others among the prophets the future was foreshortened for him, and he thought that the restoration that he foretold would follow immediately on the sufferings of his own time. In other words, those who lived would live on into the Messianic age in which death was to be abolished (Is. 25:6 ff.). So in fact he was speaking better than he knew.

Since God had brought the exiles to Babylonia for a spiritual purpose, it was obvious that He had to make spiritual men and women of them. Those who showed by their lives that they spiritually belonged to those that had remained in Jerusalem, or who decided that it was not worth paying the price to obtain the promises proclaimed by Ezekiel would of necessity have to be weeded out of His remnant by God. Under normal conditions God might use prosperity and sufferings as His judgments. In the misery of exile, however, where most were stripped to the minimum of life, life and death became the criteria of God's attitude. This explains why ch. 18 is so phrased in black and white.

Righteousness and Wickedness

The Bible exists to give God's judgment of man, not that man may sit in judgment on his fellow-man. So it normally pictures

the extremes, leaving him who is neither one thing nor the other to the judgment of his God, who is the reader of all his secrets and motives. Here the contrast is drawn between the just (R.S.V. righteous, *tsaddiq*) and the wicked (*rashá*).

The *tsaddiq* is the man who lives up to a standard; in the Bible obviously God's standard. In the Old Testament that standard is the Law, and the test of living is mainly an external one. But we should never make the mistake of labelling the Old Testament as legalistic. The *tsaddiq* knew that he had not achieved the standard perfectly, and that if God accepted him, it was in grace. But on the other hand his actions were the ground of his acceptance because they revealed the true desires of his heart. The *rashá* is the man who deliberately rejects God's Law, in part or whole. To men he may sometimes seem attractive, but he is rejected by God, because his actions show his true attitude towards God.

The test of character given by Ezekiel is instructive. The list begins with the centuries' old sin of Israel, the Canaanized, idolatrous worship of Jehovah (v. 6 a). Then follows sexual passion which respects neither one's neighbour's home nor the normal decencies of married life (v. 6 b). Next we have the taking advantage of another's weakness, either by ignoring the law to which he dare not appeal, or by open robbery (R.S.V.) (v. 7 a). Next in order come simple inhumanity and hardness of heart (v. 7b). Then v. 8 condemns the man who profits from his riches, from his neighbour's weakness of character, or from his position in society, while v. 9 presents the demands of the law in a generalized way.

It will be seen that the picture often given of Ezekiel as a formalist finds no support here. He, as do all the prophets, proclaims man's attitude to his fellow-man as the true index of his attitude towards God. The mention of idolatrous worship in the first place is no denial of this. The peculiar evil of the Canaanized worship of Jehovah, condemned by the prophets as Baal worship, lay in its reducing Jehovah to the level of a nature god, whose demands consequently were largely ritual and mostly arbitrary rather than moral.*

* See my *Men Spoke from God*, p. 31, 36 ff.

(To be continued)