

CHAPTER V

ICHABOD¹

JEHOVAH ABANDONS HIS TEMPLE (8:1 - 11:25)

BY the end of his prophesying through symbolic actions (4:1-5:4) Ezekiel had become a highly respected member of his community. This may have been partly due to his aristocratic, priestly origin, but probably still more to the nature of his prophecy. I earlier suggested (p. 31) that it was fear that led to his initial rejection. The leaders of the exiles will soon have realized that Ezekiel's message was one that Nebuchadnezzar would welcome rather than punish. At any rate a year and two months (8:1) after his inaugural vision, we find the elders of Judah sitting before Ezekiel in his house. This implies that they had come to discover the will of Jehovah, and were sitting in the respectful position of scholars to learn from Ezekiel.

Ezekiel's visit to Jerusalem described in this section was purely in the spirit; there is no real suggestion that his body was carried there. This is indicated by the nature of what he saw, for much cannot be taken literally, and by actions which would hardly have been physically possible (e.g. 8:8), and even more by the definite statement in 8:3; 11:24 (cf. 3:12, 14). This is no abstract point, for we shall see below that much, if not all, of the vision in ch. 8 is to be taken symbolically, which could hardly be the case, if Ezekiel had been physically in Jerusalem. Though it is not stated, it is likely that Ezekiel spoke aloud during the vision, giving the elders some idea of what he was passing through; thus they will have been a guarantee that it was a genuine vision and not mere invention, when the whole came to be told (11:25). Whether, as some think, the purpose of the elders' visit was in some way connected with the theme of the vision, we cannot now know.

In 8:2 we should read with LXX "the appearance of a man" (so RSV—the same consonants in older Hebrew MSS.). It is the same symbolic vision of God as in 1:27. Since we are dealing with a vision, there is no reason for finding difficulty in the fact that Ezekiel's transportation to Jerusalem is first ascribed to the hand of God and then to the Spirit (8:3).

¹ 'The glory is departed' (I Sam. 4:21f.).

To get a clear picture of what follows, it must be borne in mind that in one major detail Solomon's temple differed widely from Zerubbabel's and Herod's. On the temple-mount from north to south lay three groups of buildings, the temple, the royal palace, the House of the Forest of Lebanon. The first two had each its own court, while the whole complex was surrounded by "the great court."¹ In other words, the temple had only one court that strictly belonged to it. The incidents seen by Ezekiel took place partly in the temple court proper, partly in the adjacent great court. I understand that what took place in the great court symbolized those cults and practices that had not the official sanction of the temple authorities.

When Ezekiel arrived in spirit in the temple court, the glory of God had already left the holy of holies, and he saw it first in some unspecified part of the court (8: 4).

THE IDOLATRY OF JERUSALEM (8: 5-18)

It is usually assumed that Ezekiel's vision represents the actual and mainly public idolatry of Jerusalem in the time of Zedekiah, but there are apparently insuperable difficulties in accepting this view. An open reversion to the forms of religion swept away by Josiah's reformation would have meant public apostasy, but neither in II Kings 23: 31-25: 26; II Chron. 36: 1-21, nor in Jeremiah is there any indication of this. The references to idolatry in Jer. 2 are to the period before Josiah's reformation was carried through. We find idolatry in Jer. 7: 16-18, but we get the impression rather of a popular drift back to the old ways, as they were under Manasseh, rather than of an official reintroduction of the old. This is borne out by Jer. 44: 15-23, for v. 18 is incompatible with an open resumption of the old heathen rites of the "divine mother" in the time of Zedekiah. So it is much more likely that we have here a mainly symbolic picture of the false beliefs that held sway in Jerusalem, though they may have had only a restricted public expression.

In fact the four forms of idolatrous worship presented do represent what we know from other passages to have been the false religious tendencies in the century and a half before the exile, though in the last the priests seem to have gone further than any before them.

(1) The Image of Jealousy (vv. 3, 5). That we are dealing with popular religion seems to be shown by the image's being *outside* the north gate (see RV or RSV of v. 5), and so in the

¹ See the diagram accompanying the article "Temple," in *International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* or *Hastings' Dictionary of the Bible*.

great court. That an image in connexion with Jehovah worship is intended is virtually certain (cf. Ex. 20: 4f., Deut. 4: 23f., 5: 8f., which are shown by the context to refer primarily to images of Jehovah, or in connexion with Him), but in view of the fact that the archaeologist has yet to discover an image of Jehovah, or indeed of any male god, in any undoubtedly Israelite setting,¹ though images of goddesses are common, it seems more likely that an image or symbol of Asherah, the mother-goddess of the Canaanites, conceived of as Jehovah's wife (cf. I Kings 15: 13 RV mg., II Kings 21: 7 RV, etc.) is intended.²

The reference here will be to that popular Canaanization of Jehovah worship that was the curse of Israel from the time of the Judges and was stigmatized by the prophets as merely Baal-worship. It bore the same relation to the revelation of Sinai as popular Roman-Catholicism does to the religion of the New Testament. The position of the image just outside the most popular gateway to the temple court shows that this debased conception of Jehovah dominated the popular mind but had not yet been reinstated into the public rites of the temple, whence it had been removed by Josiah.

(2) The Worship of the Elders (vv. 6-12). It is usually taken for granted that the mention of animal worship refers to Egyptian idolatry, introduced, perhaps on political grounds, early in the reign of Jehoiakim. But apart from a few cults Egyptian religion was not for export, and if there had been a cult brought in for political reasons, it would probably have been that of Amon or perhaps Osiris. ICC (p. 94) points out rightly that certain aspects of Babylonian religion would fit the description equally well. But "all the idols of the house of Israel" (v. 10) suggests that any such interpretation is too narrow, and "every man in his chambers of imagery" (v. 12) makes a purely literal understanding dangerous, as indeed does the way that Ezekiel gains access to their worship. The precise figure too of seventy contrasted with the "about five and twenty" of v. 16 suggests that it is to be taken symbolically as meaning that all, or virtually all, the elders were involved in this idolatry, whereas only a few of the priests had taken the final step of apostasy.

It is probable that Ezekiel is referring to all the foreign cults, especially from Assyria and Babylon that had poured into the country in the time of Ahaz and Manasseh, but which had

¹ See G. E. Wright: *The Old Testament against its Environment*, p. 24f.

² A good example of such debased worship was revealed in the papyri discovered at Elephantine or Yeb, see any good *recent* work on Biblical archaeology.

influenced mainly the ruling classes. Ezekiel's picture of them is probably intended rather to express his disgust of them than to describe them accurately. Once Judah had learnt to worship other gods beside Jehovah and even as His superiors in power, it needed more than a superficial reformation to eradicate the conceptions that lay behind it and the memories of the worship in which many of the older ones will have been reared. The combination of secrecy with defiant despair, "The Lord seeth us not; the Lord hath forsaken the land" (v. 12 RV mg., cf. 9:9 RV mg.) reminds us of the mentality of Jer. 44: 18. They were still ashamed to go back openly on the covenant made under Josiah, but they had opened their hearts to the idolatries and memories of the past.

(3) The Wailing for Tammuz (vv. 13, 14). The very fact that it is the women, the most conservative element in oriental religious life, who are seen wailing for Tammuz, is the best refutation of the suggestion that we have to do with a recent importation from Babylonia. We are dealing here with a popular form of the vegetation myth found in Old Testament times everywhere from Canaan to Babylonia, in which the god of vegetation, here Tammuz, died in the summer heat—only later was he thought of as returning to life. Ezekiel's vision was about August, when Palestine is at its most parched and burnt from the summer heat, and green is to be seen only where there is running water or irrigation. Doubtless the name may have been a new importation, but the cult was ancient.

The previous idolatries were firstly a degrading of Jehovah and secondly an admission of the gods of the conquering lands beside Him as objects of worship. Here, however, there is pure nature worship, in which the covenant of Sinai could find little, if any, place. We may gather that in the average home the women had little real share in religion. The inevitable result was that they all too often were the transmitters of the worst superstitions and beliefs of the neighbours of Israel.

(4) Sun Worship (vv. 15-18). The approximately twenty-five sun-worshippers were, as we may infer from where they were standing, either priests or Levites; from 9: 6 we see they were of senior rank. Here was not merely debasing of Jehovah worship, or the linking of it to other cults, but, as the position of the worshippers shows, a deliberate rejection of Jehovah. They were worshipping Shamash, the Babylonian sun-god, thereby recognizing that the gods of Babylon had defeated Jehovah, who could no longer help them. With their idolatry went not merely social violence but also some supreme insult to Jehovah: it is expressed in the words, "and lo, they put the

branch to My nose," as a valid Rabbinic tradition preserves v. 17, which was changed to its present form out of respect to God. The "branch" is generally explained by reference to the ritual of the Persian honouring of the sun. This has, however, no real connexion with the sun-worship of Babylonia, nor is there any evidence that any such ritual was there used. In addition it is not even certain that reference is being made to the actual sun-worship. It is better to follow Jewish tradition and see in the word *zemorah* not a branch but some act of peculiar insult or obscenity. From this part of the vision we can see the justice of Jeremiah's condemnation of the priests (Jer. 5: 31; 6: 13).

THE JUDGMENT OF JERUSALEM (9:1 - 10:2)

This vision is not symbolically descriptive like the preceding, but is symbolically predictive, for Zedekiah's rebellion against Nebuchadnezzar had not even broken out yet.

The instruments of judgment are obviously angels, though they are always called men. It has been maintained that their number mirror the seven planet-gods of Babylonia, the one with the writer's ink-horn corresponding to Nebo. Any such assumption is entirely needless, for in a vision where symbolism plays such a part seven is an obvious number. But, if the suggestion has truth in it, it would mean no more than what we said of the cherubim (p. 22), i.e. that Jehovah is the Lord of whatever "gods" there may be.

The angels were armed with "clubs" (9: 2—so ICC, which compares it with Jer. 51: 20ff, where the same word is used, cf. RV mg. and RSV *ad loc.*). The slaughter was not to be indiscriminate, which is perhaps why angel instruments rather than a general catastrophe are used for the judgment. The apostasy was not absolute, and so a mark of safety was to be placed on the foreheads of God's people (v. 4, cf. Rev. 7: 3). The separating of the innocent from the guilty is in accord with the principle enunciated in Jer. 31: 29f.; Ezek. 18. The Hebrew for mark is *tav*, the same as the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet, which at that time had a cross shape (either that of the Latin or St. Andrew's cross). There can be little doubt that this is one of the many examples where the Hebrew prophets spoke better than they knew.

After the killing of the apostates the city itself was set on fire (10: 2). Ezekiel's efforts to intercede (9: 8) were of no avail, for the evil had gone too far. This is a note frequently struck at this time, cf. 11: 13; 14: 14; Jer. 7: 16; 11: 14; 14: 11, 15: 1.

"The residue of Israel" is, of course, Judah, the only part of "all Israel" left after the destruction of Samaria.

THE THRONE OF GOD (10: 3-22)

There is little in the description of the chariot-throne of God here that adds anything to the description already given in 1: 4-28, and it is not clear why the description should be repeated. It may be simply that since Ezekiel will not have preached his call—testimonies were probably not as popular among the prophets as they are with us—the description became a natural and necessary part of his telling of this vision. It was only the later placing in front of it of the story of his call that made this description seem redundant.

Here it is made explicit that the four living creatures, the supporters of the throne, are in fact the cherubim. It is probable that Ezekiel only realized this when he saw them in the temple court and came to understand that they were the beings symbolized by the cherubim in the holy of holies and on the mercy seat. The use of the fire by the angel-scribe (v. 7) is left to our imagination.

There would seem to be considerable textual error in this section, perhaps just because scribes felt that they were dealing with repetition. Verse 14 is the immediate sequel to v. 12; v. 13, referring to the wheels, is out of place—perhaps a scribe's eye was caught by the mention of the wheels at the end of v. 12. There is no suggestion elsewhere that the cherubim (v. 12) were full of eyes; this is said in 1: 18 of the wheels, and it is likely that the text has been disordered. The suggestion of the RSV making v. 12 refer to the wheels is quite possible. Already the rabbis wondered what had happened to the face of an ox in v. 14. Since no explanation is given what the face of a cherub is like, it seems obvious that we have to do with a careless scribal error.

The movements of God in this section are far from clear, and it being a vision, it may be that we should not ask for the coherence that waking sight would give. It is, however, clear that, just as the glory had already left the sanctuary, when Ezekiel first saw it (8: 4) so in 10: 19 it is preparing to leave the temple precincts altogether.

THE JUDGMENT ON THE PRIESTLY LEADERS (11: 1-13)

It has been urged that this section is an isolated prophecy, placed here for convenience, or that it has been accidentally moved from its original place after 8: 18; the ground for this

view is that there is no room for it here, as God's judgment has already been carried out (9:1-10:2, see especially 9:6) and there is no room for any further judgment. When, however, the purely symbolic nature of the still future judgment is remembered, the difficulty seems to disappear. It is, moreover, a commonplace in Hebrew narrative to place elements, which would hold up its flow, out of their strict chronological order.

There are no serious grounds for doubting that the twenty-five men (v. 1) are the same as in 8:16. The description in v. 6 agrees with 8:17, and their activity in v. 2 suits their position as leading priests, while their blatant idolatry (8:16f.) matches their cynicism (v. 3). The two names given us cannot be identified with any probability.

With their rejection of Jehovah went a rejection of His will. They refused to see in the capture of Jerusalem and the deportation of Jehoiachin the confirmation of Jeremiah's message and the judgment of God. They saw in their position a sign of God's favour rather than the reverse. It is not clear whether we should follow RV tx. or mg. in v. 3, but in either case the general gist of their words is clear enough. If we take RV tx., it means "Let us prepare for war"; to follow the margin means, "Let us ignore all warnings of judgment to come." In either case they were basing themselves on the confidence that however hot the flames of Babylonian attack, the city walls would protect them, even as a cauldron protects its contents from the fire. They were basing themselves on the fact that Nebuchadnezzar had never technically captured Jerusalem (cf. II Kings 24:12) and still more on their fanatical trust in the temple condemned by Jeremiah (Jer. 7:4).

"We be the flesh" reflects further the pride of those left in the city, which had already been condemned by Jeremiah (Jer. 24). For them the exiles under Jehoiachin were the offal thrown out on the dung-heap of Babylonia; they were the good flesh preserved by God in Jerusalem.

The spirit of prophecy fell on Ezekiel (v. 5), and in pronouncing their doom he declared that God's favourites would be those whose deaths they had caused (vv. 6f.). They would not even have the privilege of dying in Jerusalem (vv. 7-10). Undoubtedly we have here a prediction of the execution of some of the leaders of the people at Riblah (II Kings 25:18-21), but since judgment fell on Pelatiah at once, so in the case of some of the others it may have meant merely death in exile. Death in a heathen land, and that probably without burial, was looked on as an aggravation of God's punishment (cf. Amos 7:17). A statement like that in v. 7 virtually implies a resurrection,

though Ezekiel may not have realized it at the time, for only so could God's value-judgment be openly shown.

Though Pelatiah did not hear Ezekiel's message, there is no ground for considering his death as merely visionary or symbolic. This result of his message was completely unexpected by Ezekiel, and it drove him to intercession (v. 13). Goethe, early in his famous play, shows Faust sitting down to translate the Gospel according to John. He says:

'Tis writ, "In the beginning was the word!"
 I pause perplex'd! Who now will help afford?
 I cannot the mere Word so highly prize;
 I must translate it otherwise,
 If by the spirit guided as I read,
 "In the beginning was the Sense!" Take heed,
 The import of this primal sentence weigh,
 Lest thy too hasty pen be led astray!
 Is force creative then of Sense the dower?
 "In the beginning was the Power!"
 Thus should it stand; yet, while the line I trace
 A something warns me, once more to efface.
 The spirit aids! from anxious scruples freed,
 I write, "In the beginning was the Deed!"¹

Faust here stands for the modern man and his suspicion of words. He has no understanding for the old tales of magic and wonder in which the right word or words are so important. But with all the folly of these tales our forefathers were expressing their awe of words, there having remained with them some broken and distorted memory of the power of the Divine Word.

When Ezekiel spoke the Word of God he had caused something to come into being that was active and creative: The sudden death of Pelatiah reminded him of his other messages of woe, which if allowed to go into full operation, might imperil the existence of all Israel.

The Church today suffers from too much preaching. Sunday by Sunday a spate of words is poured out all around the world, but their fruit is small in proportion to their quantity. Few who speak really grasp that they are there to proclaim the Word of God and not their views about the Word, and so there are only few who know the power that belongs to the Word.

GOD'S GRACE TO THE EXILES (11: 14-21)

God answered Ezekiel's plea by confirming the promise He had earlier given to Jeremiah (Jer. 24) and expanding it. His

¹ Goethe: *Faust*, Pt. I, 1.876-889, translated by A. Swanwick.

promise is apparently addressed not merely to the exiles with Jehoiachin but also to the earlier exiles from the North ("all of them," v. 15 RV). We should follow the chief versions in this verse and read "the men of thy exile," i.e. thy fellow exiles (so RSV), instead of the impossible "the men of thy kindred," which is not even a true translation of the Hebrew. We should also absolve those left in Jerusalem of callous cruelty by rendering with a minor change in the Hebrew vowels "They have gone far from the LORD" (RSV). Primitive conceptions like the one we find in I Sam. 26: 19 were still prevalent; the exiles were looked on as far from Jehovah, because far from His land, while those living near the temple were thought to be basking in the smile of His favour.

The English versions seem to miss the force of the Hebrew in vv. 16f., which should be rendered: "Whereas I have removed them . . . and whereas I have scattered them . . . and have become to them a sanctuary in small measure . . . therefore . . . I will gather you." In fact v. 16 seems to be an indirect continuation of the Jerusalemites' claim; Jehovah answers it in v. 17 with a promise of restoration. The "little sanctuary" of AV has been a comfort to many, but as a translation it seems to be linguistically impossible. We are not dealing with a gracious promise, but with the spiritual loss felt by the exiles by their separation from the temple. The exile was punishment. Like all God's punishments it was remedial for some and productive of ultimate blessing, yet even those that profited most had to feel its bitterness to the full.

The threefold "you" in v. 17 is emphatic in contrast to v. 15. The interpretation of v. 19 is complicated by textual difficulties. Three MSS. and the Syriac read "a new heart and . . . a new spirit." The change of text involved in Hebrew is small, but on the whole it is likely that it is an unconscious or deliberate assimilation to 18: 31; 36: 26. LXX and Vulgate read "another heart and . . . a new spirit." Here the only change involved concerns the two most easily confounded letters in Hebrew, R and D, cf. p. 37. The present Hebrew text may be supported by an appeal to Jer. 32: 39, but since here too LXX has in both cases "another" for "one," we merely have added proof of how easily these two words could be confused. The Targum, the official rabbinic translation into Aramaic, has "a fearful heart." This is a legitimate paraphrase of either LXX or the Syriac rendering, but not of the Hebrew. So we shall probably be safe in rendering "another heart," or possibly "a new heart," there being no essential difference in meaning; the remainder of the verse seems to support this. If we retain the Hebrew text,

"one heart" refers presumably to the removal of the old jealousies between north and south, cf. 37: 22. "Within you" should be as in many MSS. and all the versions "within them" (RSV).

Though we shall consider the gracious promise of vv. 17-20 in closer detail, when we deal with its fullest form in 36: 16-38, there is one point that should be noted here. Though Ezekiel stresses the sovereignty of God, he is no determinist. Salvation is God's work, but man has to prepare the way for it by repentance. God brings back the people to their land (v. 17), but before the transformation of character (vv. 19f.), which is also God's work, there is the removal of all traces of idolatry by the people (v. 18), the outward sign of their change of heart. Note in this connexion 18: 31 and see the notes on ch. 18 as a whole.

Similarly the judgment on those left in Jerusalem is nothing arbitrary, the result of an unexplained Divine decree. We have no parallel in the Bible to the expression "the heart of their detestable things" (v. 21). In addition the Hebrew is much more difficult than the English implies. So we should almost certainly make a small emendation and translate with RSV, "But as for those whose heart goes after their detestable things and their abominations . . ." These are in the first place the men of Jerusalem, as the vision of ch. 8 had shown, and their destruction would be the punishment of their impenitent idolatry. But the threat holds good for the exiles too, if they cling to their old idols or turn to the idols of Babylon (cf. 14: 2-6).

THE TEMPLE FORSAKEN (11: 22-25)

Ezekiel's long vision ended with the sight of the withdrawal of the chariot-throne eastward to the Mount of Olives. Years later he was to see it return to the new temple by the way that it had gone (43: 1-4). But from now on, however long the final judgment might be deferred (in fact a trifle under five years), the temple was only an empty shell, and the offerings brought there a mere outward show. Rev. 3: 20 reveals that the same may become true of a Christian church.