

CHAPTER VII

JERUSALEM, QUEEN AND HARLOT

AN ALLEGORY OF JERUSALEM (16: 1-63)

THIS is, with the probable exception of ch. 40-48, Ezekiel's most elaborate allegory. The fact that it ill accords with modern taste is no ground for passing over it quickly, for it stresses some of his basic concepts. It may be too that, if we had not developed a false modesty, we should not have so much pernicious sexual description in many a modern novel. Of course the imagery is ugly and unattractive, but it only matches the even more ugly sin it represents.

The chapter falls naturally into four divisions, vv. 1-43, 44-52, 53-59 and 60-63. There is every reason for thinking that the first and second divisions represent distinct but related oracles, while for reasons given in their right place the last two divisions are probably later than the destruction of Jerusalem.

The use of Jerusalem is purely symbolic. It has no reference to the city as such, but to the southern kingdom, which in the first division, as is usually the case in Ezekiel, represents all Israel. No reference of any kind is intended to the pre-Israelite past of the city. Many would see in "the Amorite was thy father, and thy mother was a Hittite" (vv. 3, 45) a historic note about the origin of Jerusalem,¹ but it is extremely improbable that this is meant especially in the light of v. 45. It is far more likely that the Amalekite and the Hittite stand for the Semitic and non-Semitic elements that made up the Canaanite scene during the period of the Patriarchs and at the Conquest.

THE FOUNDLING CHILD GOD'S BRIDE (16: 1-14)

Ezekiel is far too skilful an artist to make the common mistake of those that deal in allegories. He makes no effort to make the *details* of his story tie up with the details of the Patriarchal period. He is concerned to give a general spiritual picture, not the outward historical one. Two things are stressed, the foundling's completely weak and unwanted position, and her positive and negative ignorance of God.

The former is stressed in vv. 4-6. The careful reader of the

¹ E.g. F. F. Bruce: *The Hittites*.

Patriarchal stories may well notice an apparent inner contradiction running through them, a contradiction which has been used by many modern scholars to strengthen their theories that we need attribute little historical value to them. Sometimes the Patriarchs seem to be rich and powerful, sometimes they seem weak and relatively poor. Though we are not yet able to give a certain explanation, the discoveries of recent archaeology suggest that it may well lie in the conditions of the time, one of great folk-movements that wrought great changes on the face of the Near East.

Now in Gen. 14: 13 we find the title "the Hebrew" attached to the name Abram. Two meanings for it have normally been offered, either "descendant of Eber" (cf. Gen. 10: 24f.), or "the man from the other side," i.e. "the immigrant," but neither interpretation is supported by the other uses of "Hebrew," or by the apparently cognate forms discovered by archaeology. An example is its use in Gen. 40: 15, for it is impossible to suppose that the descendants of Abraham had grown so powerful in Canaan, or one of its districts, that it had become known to the Egyptians as their land. Equally a different sense seems demanded in Gen. 43: 32. The concordance will show that Hebrew is not Israel's name for itself.

Archaeology has established an almost certain link between Hebrew and the Habiru (Akkadian), Apiru (Egyptian) and 'prm (Ras Shamra; vowels uncertain), who are found in inscriptions ranging from the nineteenth to the twelfth centuries B.C. It is obviously not a national name; they are "landless soldiers, raiders, captives and slaves of miscellaneous ethnic origins."¹ Some form of poverty, landlessness or lower social standing seems implicit in the name, whatever its actual meaning may be, and so we can best understand it in Ex. 21: 2; Deut. 15: 12; Jer. 34: 9, 14. (See also additional note, p. 70.)

If then we bear in mind the almost certain social stigma implied in "Abram the Hebrew" and that, as the story of Joseph shows, the name clung to his descendants, and if we add the degradation of the slavery in Egypt that followed, it becomes very much easier to understand Ezekiel's very strong picture in vv. 4-6.

Far worse, however, is the ignorance of God implied. Whatever the precise implication of "I thoroughly washed away thy blood from thee" (v. 9), we cannot reasonably disassociate it from v. 6, which is best rendered "In thy blood live" (ICC). The pollution of Israel's birth remained until the time of Jehovah's marriage with her (vv. 8-10), viz., at Sinai. However

¹ W. F. Albright: *From the Stone Age to Christianity*, p. 182.

high the faith of the leading patriarchs, the beliefs of Abraham's old home had lived on among the people until at least the time of Joshua (Josh. 24: 14f.). We have it also implied in Gen. 35: 2, for the action there described was of course merely external, and in the story of the golden calf (Ex. 32), which is best explained by Semitic and not by Egyptian parallels. We have no grounds for thinking Gen. 38: 1-6 to be in any way exceptional, and it is a fair supposition that virtually all Jacob's daughters-in-law were drawn from heathen stock, thus largely explaining v. 3. Then 23: 3 makes explicit what is here implicit, that Egypt strengthened the root of heathenism in Israel. This is also implied by v. 7 rightly understood. The Hebrew, "I made thee a myriad" (AV mg., RV mg.), obviously contradicts the allegory, and the same is true of the AV and RV text. We should render with LXX and Syriac, "Grow up like a plant of the field" (RSV). In other words the foundling was left to grow up a young savage, by the light of nature, naked! This is probably the main reason why Moses and not Abraham is always looked back to as the founder of Israel's religion.

The "badgers' skin" (v. 10—RV "sealskin") should be simply "leather" (RSV) and so also in Ex. 25: 5, etc.

THE HARLOT (16: 15-34)

This section covers the spiritual history of the people from the Conquest to the prophet's own time. He speaks of a harlot, and of whoredom or fornication rather than of adultery and of an adulteress, for it is not so much the disloyalty of Israel that is being stressed, as so often, but rather her unnatural and irresponsible wantonness. The adulteress may by some be excused by the strength of passion and blind love, but for a harlot there is no excuse except that of stark necessity. But for Israel there is not even this excuse. She has not been paid by her lovers, but has paid those that have taken their pleasure of her (vv. 31, 33f.).

The first stage in the downward path is in vv. 15-22. Here the amalgamation of Jehovah worship with the religion of the Canaanites, which was the besetting religious sin of Israel, is described (see p. 36, or in more detail my *Men Spake from God*, p. 36f.). This religion, though considered Jehovah worship by the people, was point-blank called Baal worship by the prophets without the least qualification. Its climax was human sacrifice (vv. 20f.). There are no reasons for thinking that it was practised after the period of the Judges (and then only exceptionally,

Judges 11: 31, 39) until the times of Ahaz and Manasseh (II Kings 16: 3; 21: 6, Mic. 6: 7). But it was always the logical conclusion of bringing Jehovah down to the level of a nature god, for as Jer. 7: 31 makes quite clear, it was to Jehovah that these sacrifices were offered. *Molech* (II Kings 23: 10) is only Jehovah's title as king (*melech*) with the rabbinically added vowels of *bosheth* (shame).

The second stage of the downward path is given in vv. 23-34, that of open apostasy and idolatry, again a natural consequence of debased religion. The meaning of v. 24 is far from certain. The Greek, Syriac and Latin versions all understood a reference to brothels and their signs, and it is quite likely that Ezekiel is referring to the high places in this way. Since, specially in the northern kingdom, they were centres of immorality in the name of religion, the picture would be apposite.

The truly allegorical nature of Ezekiel's oracle may be seen in his reference to Egypt. So far as we can judge, Egyptian religion, apart from the cult of Isis, who came to be identified with Ashtoreth or Astarte, was seldom exported, and we have no direct Biblical record of the worship of Egyptian gods, not even in I Kings 11: 4-8, where it might have been expected (cf. also p. 42). The worship referred to in v. 26 was the constant turning to Egypt for help against Assyria, a practice so strongly condemned by Hosea and Isaiah. To look to Egypt for help implied a recognition of the power of Egypt's gods, even though they might receive no formal worship. Ezekiel's epithet "great of flesh" applied to Egypt (cf. 23: 19-21) shows partly Ezekiel's deep repugnance for all things Egyptian, partly the bitter lesson that Israel was so slow to learn from experience that the apparent strength of Egypt was only flabby fat.

The only effect of turning to Egypt in the time of Hezekiah had been the cutting short of Judean territory by Sennacherib, who handed over many of the cities he had captured to the Philistine kings who had remained loyal to him.¹

Ezekiel then passes over to Assyria (v. 28) and Chaldea, i.e. Babylonia named after the ruling people in it (v. 29). For the latter before the rise of Babylon to world power see II Kings 20: 12-19. The sense has been missed in v. 29; we should render "with the trading land of Chaldea" (RSV, cf. RV mg.). The Canaanites, particularly in their Phoenician branch, were great traders, and so "Canaan," "Canaanite" are used in the sense of trade and trader, e.g. 17: 4; Hos. 12: 7; Zeph. 1: 11; Zech. 14: 21; Prov. 31: 24, cf. RV tx. and mg. in each case. In the case of Assyria the recognition of the power of its gods was

¹ See Pritchard: *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, p. 288a.

actively expressed by the worship of "the host of heaven" from the time of Ahaz and Manasseh to Josiah's reformation.

It should be specially noticed that he makes not the slightest mention of the many attempts at reformation in the history of Israel. One and all they had been external for all but a handful of people, and the heart of the people had remained unchanged, even if the outward forms of worship had been altered. It has been one of the worst features of the traditional exegesis of the Old Testament that it has normally ignored the plain teaching of Ezekiel and of other prophets and has tried to whitewash many of the Old Testament characters and has deliberately placed many incidents in far too favourable a light.

THE JUDGMENT ON THE HARLOT (16: 35-43)

Provided we do not try unduly to stress the allegory the main picture is correct. It was the unfaithfulness of Jehoiakim and Zedekiah (see especially 17: 13f., 16) that led to Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of Jerusalem. Though obviously there was no joining together as such of her lovers (v. 37) to destroy her, yet Israel had been progressively weakened by all the peoples she had come into contact with, when she was unfaithful to Jehovah, and in this way they had prepared her for her final doom.

THE ALLEGORY OF THE SISTERS (16: 44-52)

A new allegory begins with v. 44, but though it is not the continuation of the preceding one, it is obviously closely linked with it in thought, and no doubt in time too. In the former, Jerusalem, though strictly symbolizing only Judah, obviously refers to the history of Israel as a whole. In the latter Jerusalem stands for the Southern Kingdom only, while Samaria represents the Northern. But what of Sodom?

Sodom is depicted as dwelling "at thy right hand" (v. 46), i.e. south of Jerusalem. The cities of the Plain probably lay at the north end of the Dead Sea;¹ i.e. due east of Jerusalem; but since this is an allegory, and Sodom is pictured as balancing Samaria to the north—"at thy left hand"—this is not sufficient evidence on which to hold that a literal Sodom is not intended. But even though "elder" and "younger" (v. 46) mean more and less powerful than Jerusalem (Samaria was a very recent city compared to Jerusalem; I Kings 16: 24), it is hardly likely that Ezekiel is joining together two capitals and a mere provincial

¹ For a different view see *The Westminster Historical Atlas to the Bible*, p. 65f.

town. In addition we must remember that there is no parallel in Scripture to the promise of the restoration of Sodom in vv. 53, 55. Since the promise to Samaria and Jerusalem in v. 53 is obviously literal, we have no right to spiritualize that to Sodom. Furthermore it is not a restoration of cities that is meant, but of their rightful inhabitants. Samaria had never ceased to be a city. Sargon immediately after its capture claims, "The town I rebuilt better than it was before and settled therein people from countries which I myself had conquered."¹ So it seems reasonable, remembering that this is an allegory, and that there were no Sodomites to restore, to see in Sodom the small heathen states and cities left round Israel. Since the essential link of the Israelite kingdoms with Canaan is stressed (v. 45), there seem to be no valid grounds for not seeing in Sodom all that had survived of the Canaanites and their culture. After all, most had been smashed by Sennacherib and the remnant were to share in the coming destruction, cf. ch. 25.

The "daughters" of the three sisters are presumably, as so often, the dependent towns and villages of the main cities.

It is impossible to set out in mathematical terms wherein Jerusalem's sin was greater than that of her sisters. God's standard of judgment takes factors into consideration which can only tentatively be used by men. Sodom's sin was not unnatural, as was that of the harlot Jerusalem; it was the working out of the inherent weakness of Canaanite religion. It should not be forgotten, and it is of outstanding importance for the interpretation of this allegory, that the destruction of Sodom by God was only the first act in His judgment on Canaan that should have been completed by the Israelites at the conquest, but which was in fact carried out very half-heartedly. Israel knew that the religion of Canaan was under the judgment of God, so all copying of it made them more guilty than those whom they copied.

It is doubtless true that the Northern Kingdom never showed such religious corruption as did Judah in the reign of Manasseh, but it is not here that we have to seek the greater sin of Jerusalem as compared with Samaria. It is rather that Judah refused to learn the lesson of the downfall of the Northern Kingdom (23: 11; Jer. 3: 6-13).

If I am right in holding that vv. 53-59 are a later addition (see below), then the lesson of this allegory is that since Sodom and Samaria rightly went to their doom, there can be no hope at all for Jerusalem, for her sins are even blacker.

¹ See Pritchard: *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, p. 284b.

THE RESTORATION OF THE SISTERS (16: 53-59)

There are two reasons why we should look on these verses as Ezekiel's later ending to his allegory. The shame he foretells for Jerusalem, which is the main point here, would turn away the hearers' thought from the original lesson of the allegory, which was the certain destruction of Jerusalem. In addition, and more important, until judgment has fallen on Jerusalem, Ezekiel holds out hope for the exiles brought to Babylonia with Jehoiachin, but not for the doomed city. It would be quite inconsistent with the ever darkening gloom of his oracles to give even this qualified word of hope.

All prophecy is contingent (Jer. 18: 7-10, cf. p. 102), and so the promise of restoration to Sodom and Samaria is conditional on their repentance, even though that is not mentioned. But though, largely thanks to the work of Ezekiel, Judah was restored and Israel was not, except in so far as it amalgamated with Judah (cf. p. 132), the prophecy had a remarkable fulfilment. It was not until the second century B.C. under the Hashmoneans that Jerusalem began to win back something of its old splendour. For long it was outshone by Samaria and other cities of the land.

RECONCILIATION (16: 60-63)

Here in these verses we have both the conclusion of the allegory of the unfaithful wife and of that of the sisters. It is also to be dated after the fall of Jerusalem for the same reasons as vv. 53-59. The marriage had been broken beyond hope of repair (Jer. 3: 1, RV mg.) and the full punishment of God had to fall on the sinful people. But, for all that, God would in free grace once again pick them up, once again make a covenant with them, once again take them as His bride. The details of the promise must wait until we come to ch. 36, where they are developed in full, but for the present let us remember Jeremiah's great promise, which lies behind Ezekiel's message: "Behold the days come, saith Jehovah, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah; not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers . . . forasmuch as they brake My covenant, and I had to lord it over them . . . I will put My law in their inward parts, and in their heart will I write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people . . . I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin will I remember no more" (Jer. 31: 31-34).

In the light of such an act of grace Jerusalem can be restored

to her pre-eminence once more, but there is ever to remain the memory of the path of shame she had trodden. God would blot out the past, but the very memory of it would keep Jerusalem faithful to Him.

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 (cf. p. 16). 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, quite apart from being the largest bird of the Near East, is symbolic of the speed of the conqueror (Jer. 48:40; 49:22; Isa. 46:11); for the cedar representing the Davidic house one may compare Isa. 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 (p. 51) 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. 22ff., 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, II Chron. 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 (II Kings 25: 6f.). 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 deliberately enigmatic language of vv. 22ff. without any explanation is probably to be explained by his knowledge of Jer. 22: 28ff. 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. Isa. 11: 1, where stem (AV), stock (RV) are best rendered stump (RSV). "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 (I Sam. 2: 1-10) and the song of Mary (Luke 1: 46-55). (Many take the passage as a promise to

Jehoiachin's descendants, but I believe this to rest on an insufficiently careful reading of vv. 3f., 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, RSV) and the birds must represent the nations of the world that come to the Messianic king (cf. Isa. 2: 2ff.). This being so, we would do well not to accept without due thought the interpretation of the Parable of the Mustard Seed (Mark 4: 30-32) which demands that the birds that come and lodge in the branches of the mustard plant must of necessity be symbols of something evil.¹

Additional Note:

W. F. Albright has recently identified the term Hebrews with donkey-men, donkey caravaneers. He considers that many of the subsidiary meanings resulted from their being forced into other occupations as the donkey was replaced by the mule, and later by the camel. Cf. his *The Biblical Period from Abraham to Ezra*, pp. 5-9.

¹ This view has recently found eloquent re-affirmation in Lang: *Pictures and Parables*, pp. 87-92.