

## CHAPTER VIII

### GOD AND THE INDIVIDUAL

#### THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE JUSTICE OF GOD (18: 1-32)

**F**OR 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; Deut. 5: 9) is *never* carried over into Israelite law. The suggestion by some critics that Deut. 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 (II 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 (II Sam. 21: 1-9) it is not primarily a wrong done to men that is being punished, but the breach of a solemn oath (Joshua 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 (Joshua 7: 24ff.) 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. For that matter the killing of Naboth's sons may have been "justified" by their father's having been condemned for blasphemy (I Kings 21: 10, 13).

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 "showing mercy (steadfast love, RSV) unto a thousand generations (RV mg., AJV) 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" (Deut. 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. Psa. 107: 33f.). 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 33: 10-20, 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, RV 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 rare righteousness of their descendants. Jeremiah answered this attitude (Jer. 31: 29f.) 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, though ultimately of spiritual blessing (see p. 47), a theme expanded in 36: 22-36. 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 hoped that the restoration that he foretold would follow immediately on the sufferings of his own time. In other words, those who lived might live on into the Messianic age in which death was to be abolished (Isa. 25: 6ff.). So in fact he was speaking better than he knew, for those who lived in Ezekiel's sense will surely be sharers of fuller life at the resurrection.

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 belonged spiritually 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 (RSV "righteous," *tsaddiq*) and the wicked (*rasha'*).

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 *rasha'* 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. 6a). Then follows sexual passion which respects neither one's neighbour's home nor the normal decencies of married life (v. 6b). 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 (RSV) (v. 7a). 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.<sup>1</sup>

It is worth stressing once again that vv. 17, 20, *in their context*, do not affirm that the righteous son will not suffer for the sins of his wicked father; they stress that in the great issues of

<sup>1</sup> See my *Men Spoke from God*, p. 31, 36ff.

life, life and death, only the man's own actions are taken into consideration.

We should stress "all" in vv. 21, 24. Ezekiel is thinking neither of a periodic turning over of a new leaf with its short-lived reformation, which is fair enough while it lasts, nor of the temporary wavering of the righteous, who has found the temptations and trials of life too strong for him. He is thinking of a radical change to good or bad.

"Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked?" The message of Ezekiel begins with the vision of the all-triumphant God visiting the exiles in their humiliation and shame; it shows the careful and loving marking out of the few righteous for preservation in the doomed city of Jerusalem; it gives the exiles the hope of transformation and glory (11: 17-20), and finally issues through destruction and judgment in the perfect establishment of God's will on earth. Nowhere in the Old Testament is the picture of sin blacker, of failure more complete than in Ezekiel, just because the prophet knows that the purpose of the God that condemns is salvation for all who will hear and turn.

#### A LAMENT (19: 1-14)

Though God had held out His promise of life to those exiles that would walk in His ways (ch. 18), there were two who could not benefit from it because of the sins of others, Jehoahaz and Jehoiachin, and so Ezekiel lifts up a lament over them.

There are numerous variations in the interpretation of this chapter, but this seems to be the only one that takes its position—due as I believe to Ezekiel himself—in the book seriously and does justice to it. This becomes the more obvious when we realize that the second half (vv. 10-14) comes in all probability from a slightly later date. Many see in these verses a prediction of the ruin of Zedekiah, but there is no claim that a prediction is being made. In addition it would involve the verbs in vv. 12-14 being taken as prophetic perfects,<sup>1</sup> but this idiom is seldom used unless the fact is made clear from the nature of the passage. It is far simpler to see two laments in the chapter; vv. 1-9 bewail the sad plight of Jehoahaz and Jehoiachin, while vv. 10-14, written after the fatal outcome of Zedekiah's rebellion, show its fatal effect on Jehoiachin's fortunes. In this way too the complete change of metaphor is most easily explained.

<sup>1</sup> To stress the certainty of the prediction, or the vividness of the vision the prophet often uses a "perfect" where a "future" would be expected. In most cases where a literal translation would create ambiguity the future has been used in English versions. The best known example of the prophetic perfect, translated as such, is Isa. 9: 6a, though in v. 6b our translations revert to futures, see also footnote to p. 80.

The mother (v. 2)—“What a lioness was your mother among lions!” (RSV)—is the kingdom of Judah. Jehoiakim is not mentioned because his fall was of his own creating. He was one of the most despicable of the descendants of David, for whom the only suitable fate was that he should “be buried with the burial of an ass” (Jer. 22: 19), i.e. no burial at all. Though it is not the reason for his omission, Ezekiel’s imagery could in any case well dispense with him, for Jehoiakim had never been chosen king by his subjects (II King 23: 34).

As elsewhere in Ezekiel’s allegories (cf. p. 61) we must avoid stressing the details. It is of no importance that Jehoahaz and Jehoiachin were, in fact, given little or no possibility of showing what they were capable of. Indeed, just here lies their tragedy. II Kings 23: 32; 24: 9 pass condemnation on them, but in the three months that each of them reigned there is no suggestion that either had merited his fate. Jeremiah strikes a similar note of regret in 22: 10ff. (Shallum=Jehoahaz) and 22: 24–30 (Coniah=Jeconiah=Jehoiachin). The young lion (*kepir*) is never a lion-cub but the lion in his first strength, cf. Isa. 31: 4; Amos 3: 4; Mic. 5: 8, etc.

Of Jehoahaz’ fate we know nothing, and we may well assume that he did not long survive in Egypt. Whether or not Zedekiah’s rebellion made Jehoiachin’s position worse we cannot be sure (cf. p. 19), but when he was finally released (II Kings 25: 27–30), it was as a broken man of fifty-five with no hope of restoration to his throne and with the right of succession for his descendants denied by God (Jer. 22: 29f., cf. I Chron. 3: 17). And so for the king in prison through the sin of his father and the criminal folly of his uncle Ezekiel laments in vv. 10–14.

The meaning has been obscured by textual difficulties. Already the rabbinic exegetes recognized that “in thy blood” (v. 10) is meaningless; “in a vineyard” (RSV) may be correct. A reference to RV mg. in v. 11 will show that the grammar in Hebrew is self-contradictory. RSV, which has the general support of LXX, will give the approximate force of what Ezekiel will have written:

Its strongest stem became	a ruler’s sceptre;
it towered aloft	among the thick boughs;
it was seen in its height	with the mass of its branches.

He is referring once again to Jehoiachin, under whom the vine was plucked up (v. 12). But the fire (v. 14) is Zezekiah—Ezekiel will not even call him a rod, or stem, just as he will not call him king (cf. p. 51).