

## CHAPTER XII

### THE PROPHECIES AGAINST THE NATIONS

#### THEIR PURPOSE

**P**ROPHECIES against the nations are found in many of the prophetic books, most notably in Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. With the exception of a very few, e.g. Isa. 18; Jer. 27: 1-11, it is most unlikely that the normal prophecy about the nations ever came to the ears of their rulers, and it is obvious that some were never intended to. The prophets' ministry was almost always to Israel, and if they spoke of Israel's neighbours, it was to enforce and explain their message to Israel.

There is no reason at all for thinking that Ezekiel's messages in these chapters were ever carried to the countries mentioned, and it is most improbable that they could have been. Their very position, which is that in Isaiah, and the original one in Jeremiah<sup>1</sup>, points to their real purpose. The true Biblical teaching on the sovereignty of God is the mean between two extremes. We are apt so to stress the universal sovereignty of God and His judgments on the nations that do not know Him, that we are tempted to feel that there is room for some area of favouritism where His own people are concerned, that He can somewhat relax His requirements from them. A very large part of the prophetic message is devoted to disproving this idea, and this was the main purpose of Ezekiel's messages of judgment—that is one reason for their modern relevance. The opposite error is so to stress God's activities among His people, that we think of the nations as left to their own devices, and so we are tempted to despair when faced by their hostile forces. None of the exiles who had grasped and accepted Ezekiel's message were in danger of thinking that Jerusalem had fallen by accident, or because Jehovah was weaker than the gods of Babylon, but they were in very real danger of losing heart as they faced the gross darkness of heathendom around them. So to them was given this group of prophecies showing God's rule over and judgment on certain of the nations with whom they had been brought into contact.

<sup>1</sup> See my *Men Spoke from God*, p. 77.

The nations dealt with fall into two obvious groups. First there are the Ammonites (25: 1-7), Moabites (25: 8-11), Edomites (25: 12-14) and Philistines (25: 15-17). Though, with the possible exception of the last, they had joined with Zedekiah in his plotting (Jer. 27: 2f.), they had made their peace with Nebuchadnezzar in time. They had then, as is so often the case, shown their loyalty by ostentatious zeal against Jerusalem. Ezekiel shows that their sudden shift in loyalties will not save them from their doom. The second group are Egypt (29-32) and Tyre (26: 1-28: 19) with Sidon (28: 20-24). Here a symbolic element certainly enters in. Egypt is for Ezekiel the land where Israel learnt idolatry (20: 7f.) and trust in foreign powers (23: 3). Tyre represents the commerce of the time, rejected by more than one of the prophets as fundamentally evil and heartless. But, though I have never met any recognition of the fact, Tyre symbolizes Babylon itself, for all through its long history Babylon had been one of the greatest commercial centres of the world. Ezekiel could not foretell the downfall of Babylon without the most serious danger to him and his hearers. But if all Tyre's riches and commerce and the power that riches can buy could not save her in the hour of her need, then Babylon would equally go down to her fate, when her hour had struck. This must not be understood to imply that 26: 1-28: 19 are not really prophecies against Tyre. They are. If they were merely thinly veiled allegories, the Babylonians would have understood as well as Ezekiel's direct hearers. But for those that had ears to hear, the deeper meaning was present. This explains too why Ezekiel probably exaggerates the glory of Tyre, which had already begun to wane under the earlier attentions of the Assyrians.

A justification of this stress on the mercantile character of Babylon may be found partly in a reference to Ezekiel's own words in 16: 29 (see RV mg., RSV), 17: 4. A few quotations from standard works will support it. "The Babylonians had a most modern idea of 'law and order,' and to this was no doubt due their commercial stability, which survived all wars and conquests unimpaired."<sup>1</sup> "The Assyrians, however, were not a commercial nation. . . . When the Babylonian merchants realized this, and saw that under the firm Assyrian rule of Northern Syria their trade was free from possible interference by the petty princes of that region . . . the merchants, the most important element in the body-politic, formed an unwavering pro-Assyrian party, which was ever ready to barter its self-

<sup>1</sup> Hall: *The Ancient History of the Near East*, p. 204.

respect for shekels."<sup>1</sup> "Commerical interests were therefore the leading influences in Babylonian life, even in religion."<sup>2</sup> "Further, we must not lose sight of the fact that the Neo-Babylonian kings . . . engaged as freely in commercial transactions as the humblest of their subjects. At Babylon buying and selling and getting gain seem to have been in the very atmosphere of the place. This characteristic of the golden city appears to have continued long after her supremacy had passed away and to have furnished much of the imagery in Rev. 17."<sup>3</sup>

#### THE PROPHECIES AGAINST ISRAEL'S NEIGHBOURS (25: 1-17)

This group of prophecies creates few difficulties. They are very typical and are in many ways reminiscent of Amos 1:3-2:3. The accusation in each case fastens on one point, and the punishment is stated in fairly general terms. As we do not know enough details of the last hours of Jerusalem, we cannot fully appreciate the condemnations. It is interesting to note that v. 8 shows that Israel's claim to be Jehovah's elect people was already making it unpopular.

The doom prophesied against Ammon and Moab is that they should become the prey of Arab tribes. In fact it was not very long before their territory was occupied by the Nabateans. It is likely that "and Seir" (v. 8) should be omitted with the best MS. of LXX. "The side of Moab" (v. 9)—better "the shoulder of Moab"—is the long line of the mountains of Moab as seen from Jerusalem. The ICC with a small textual change renders the difficult words that follow "from Aroer in its whole extent."

The outstanding feature of the prophecy against Edom is that the ultimate instrument of punishment is to be Israel (v. 14). This was fulfilled in the time of John Hyrcanus (134-104 B.C.); he conquered the Edomites and gave them the choice of Judaism or the sword. Though many of the Edomites, or Idumeans, remembered their origin, they became fanatical Jews in religion.<sup>4</sup> This was how Herod could become king of the Jews.

No agent of punishment is mentioned for the Philistines. In fact by the time of the Hashmoneans, i.e. after 165 B.C., the former Philistine cities regarded themselves as being Greek; the older elements in their population seem largely to have disappeared.

<sup>1</sup> Hall, *op. cit.*, p. 455.

<sup>2</sup> Breasted: *Ancient Times*, p. 174.

<sup>3</sup> Boutflower: *In and Around the Book of Daniel*, p. 138.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Josephus: *Bel. Jud.* IV, iv-v.

## THE CONDITIONAL NATURE OF PROPHECY

These prophecies introduce us to one of the major difficulties in Ezekiel, indeed in prophetic literature generally (cf. also pp. 52 and 132).

In ch. 26 he prophesies not merely the complete destruction of Tyre, but its destruction by Nebuchadnezzar. Moreover the destruction is to be final; Tyre will not be rebuilt (v. 14). Lest there should be any misunderstanding it is followed by a lament over Tyre (ch. 27), its prince (28: 1-10) and its king (28: 11-19). Yet sixteen years later—cf. 29: 17 with 26: 1—he announces that Nebuchadnezzar “had no wages from Tyre for the service that he served against it” (29: 18); in its place he promises him the spoil of Egypt (29: 19). In 30: 1-19 we have the prophecy of the results for Egypt. In 29: 1-16 is a description of the devastation of Egypt, which, however, is not directly linked with the promise to Nebuchadnezzar.

Tyre was besieged by Nebuchadnezzar from 856 to 573 B.C. and was terminated by Ithobaal the king acknowledging the supremacy of Babylon. In 567 B.C., the 37th year of Nebuchadnezzar, there was fighting between Babylon and Pharaoh Amasis, but unfortunately the tablet giving us the information is badly damaged and we cannot be sure whether Nebuchadnezzar penetrated into Egypt. The fact that he left inscriptions in the Isthmus of Suez certainly does not justify Petrie's dogmatic conclusion, “Thus he (Nebuchadnezzar) doubtless occupied the fortress of Tahpanhes” (cf. Jer. 43: 8-13).<sup>1</sup> All we can say from the available evidence is that Nebuchadnezzar will at the most have penetrated the border districts of the Delta and may have fulfilled the Tahpanhes prophecy of Jeremiah, but certainly neither the wider prophecy of Jer. 43: 11ff. nor Ezek. 30: 1-19. Ezek. 29: 10-13 was not fulfilled either in the time of Nebuchadnezzar or later.

Tyre was taken and destroyed by Alexander the Great in 332 B.C., but only eighteen years later it had regained much of its earlier importance, which it was able to maintain to some extent right down to the time of the Crusades. After its recapture by the Saracens in 1291 it gradually dwindled into the fishing village it now is. It is argued by some that the prophecy of 26: 14 was in fact fulfilled, for it is claimed that Nebuchadnezzar did destroy the old town on the mainland, and that the city which was captured by Alexander and which carried on the name through the centuries was built on a small

<sup>1</sup> For the inscription see Pritchard: *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, p. 308b, for Petrie's views his *Egypt and Israel*, p. 93, and for a general survey of the evidence, Hall: *The Ancient History of the Near East*, p. 549.

island off the original site. The present village is also on this island site, though it has now been linked with the mainland by silting. Even if we could consider that such a "fulfilment" were in fact an adequate meeting of the prophet's words, as if a slight shift in a town's site were to make it a new entity altogether, the suggestion is based on an error of fact. It seems absolutely certain that the original town of Tyre was from the first on the island. Whether it was also on the mainland, or whether that was a later extension is not clear, but the name given by the Greeks to the latter, Old Tyre, was due to misunderstanding.

It should be clear that the answer we give to this problem of unfulfilled prophecy will throw much light on the nature of the foretelling of the future as a whole.

Our starting point must be Jer. 18: 7-10. Here it is stated categorically that all national prophecy is conditional. It is based on conditions in existence at the time of the prophecy, and if these are changed, then the prophecy ceases to be in force. The most obvious example of this is Jonah's prophecy to Nineveh. Not only was it not fulfilled, but quite obviously Jonah did not expect it to be (4: 2).

Except where a promise is confirmed by God's oath (Gen. 22: 16; Psa. 105: 9; Heb. 6: 13) we are safe in concluding that every statement of God about the future has some element of the conditional in it, something ancient Israel was as unwilling to believe as we are. Where the prophecy is concerned mainly with the doom or prosperity of an individual or of a people, a change of behaviour can annul the prophecy. This explains the apparent smugness of Hezekiah's answer to Isaiah (Isa. 39: 8), when the latter foretold the Babylonian captivity. He knew that by living Godfearing lives his descendants could postpone the judgment indefinitely. Something will have happened both in Tyre and in Egypt, and it may be in Babylon, to cause the doom uttered not to go into effect, and for Ezekiel this was so obvious that neither apology nor explanation was necessary.

Where, however, the prophecy is one of God's purposes of blessing to mankind, the element of condition is merely one of time and manner, not of substance. For example, had David's successors walked in his ways, God's promise (II Sam. 7: 12-16) to David would have been fulfilled in all its details. Their sin led to the fall of the royal house, but the essential portion of the promise was fulfilled in Christ.

If we could grasp this clearly, it would clear away much false exegesis on prophetic Scripture. We would feel under no compulsion to explain away the obvious force of a promise like that

of Huldah to Josiah (II Kings 22: 18ff.); many prophecies that are conveniently relegated to the Millennium, will be seen to refer to the time of the prophet; no difficulty will be found in recognizing minor contradictions and development in the message of any particular prophet.

This view may be challenged on the ground of general principle but this will not take us very far. The general principles of Scripture interpretation must be discovered in Scripture, not in our feeling of what is right and proper. Above all we can ignore the naïve complaint made to me that this deprives us of certainty *in details* in our study of prophecy yet unfulfilled; as though we were intended to have this certainty. Far more important is the challenge based on Daniel and Revelation, which give a very different picture to that suggested above. Not enough know that Daniel is not placed among the prophetic books in the Hebrew Canon of Scripture, and of those that know not sufficient take it seriously. When the modern scholar classes Daniel and Revelation as apocalyptic, it is no case of mere scholars' jargon. There is a deep difference between them and prophecy, as that term is normally understood in Scripture.

We are transported to that contradiction which runs through all Scripture, that between the sovereignty of God and the free-will of man. Prophecy appeals to the free-will of man. For that reason the absolute foreknowledge of God is veiled. An excellent example is to be found in Jer. 18: in v. 11 we have God's appeal to the people, which, if accepted, would invalidate so much that Jeremiah had foretold; yet in v. 12 is the clear indication that God knew well how the appeal would be received. God's foreknowledge and sovereignty never lead Him to ignore man's free-will, as He turns to plead with him. On the other hand apocalyptic reveals God's sovereignty. It is not God's appeal to man, but His encouragement of His own in the hour of their trial. There is no contingency in apocalyptic, but also, as the long history of exegesis shows, no certainty of interpretation. We have to choose in God's wisdom between the relative simplicity of prophecy with its contingency and the determinism of apocalyptic with its exegetical uncertainty.

Though I have said that prophecies of a nation's doom or blessing could be annulled, in most cases this is too strong a statement. Again and again where a prophecy was not fulfilled literally, we find it coming into force at a later date in all main essentials. Jonah did not see Nineveh destroyed, but about a century and a half later the Medes and Babylonians razed it to the ground, never to be rebuilt. Babylon in her turn was not destroyed in the manner prophesied by Jeremiah

in ch. 50-51; but for all that Babylon sank in due course and did not rise again. Those that argue that Babylon must be rebuilt that it may be destroyed in accordance with prophecy have no strong ground to stand on.<sup>1</sup> Tyre was not destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, and when it was destroyed two and a half centuries later, it was soon rebuilt. For all that the day came when it had sunk so low as a fishing village, that none that stand on the shore can imagine the old commercial centre in all its pride. Egypt was never left without inhabitant, but it has become "the basest of all kingdoms," and all the efforts of its politicians will never restore it to its old pre-eminence.

This very inadequate survey of this problem should show us once again that the foretelling of the future in prophecy has always a spiritual purpose, which is liable to be lost, if we concentrate on fulfilment. We have also been warned against reading preconceived ideas into Scripture, which must always be allowed to interpret itself.

#### THE DOOM OF TYRE (CH. 26)

In our study of Scripture we must beware of two contrasted errors. The expositor must never yield to the temptation of constantly striving for the new and the novel. On the other hand he must not allow himself to be unduly impressed by apparent unanimity of opinion on any one passage. It is generally agreed that "Aha, she is broken that was the gate of the peoples" (v. 2, RV) represents Tyre's rejoicing over the fall of a commercial rival, for "Caravan traffic from north to south would have been subject to taxation by the Jews" (NBC *ad loc.*).

Such an interpretation is doubly unacceptable. Even if we take Jerusalem as a personification of the kingdom of Judah, which is far from certain, it is very doubtful whether at any time after Solomon the southern kingdom had exercised any influence on the trade routes that were Tyre's concern. Josiah may possibly have had this power, but it will have been far too short a time to create the impression that Judah might become in any sense Tyre's rival. What is far more important is that Tyre's trade would be far more seriously threatened by Jerusalem's fall than by her continued existence. Once Babylon controlled the whole of the Mediterranean coast from the Taurus range to the frontier of Egypt it could exercise a stranglehold on Tyre's trade.

<sup>1</sup> This does not apply to those that base their view on their interpretation of Revelation.

The fundamental sin of Egypt was pride (29: 3, 9) that rendered it insensible to the needs of others (29: 6f.); the neighbours of Israel had been condemned for essentially spiritual sins (ch. 25), and at least in the case of Ammon (25: 3) and Moab (25: 8) it involved hatred of Israel's position and religion. It is reasonable to assume that the sin of Tyre was of the same type.

From whatever direction one approaches Jerusalem there is even today something about one's first view of it that stirs one's pulse. Partly it is due to the very unexpectedness of the city, among the bare hills of Judea. Though it is easy to exaggerate the unsuitability of its site for a capital, Jerusalem could never be a natural commercial centre. Even if the frontiers of the State of Israel were pushed to the Jordan or beyond it, Tel-Aviv would remain its commercial and industrial centre. The very reverse is true of Tyre. For the conditions of the time its position was ideal for world commerce. So too under very different surroundings was that of Babylon.

Both Isaiah (2: 2-4) and Micah (4: 1-4) had prophesied the day, when Jerusalem would be the magnet for all peoples. Jerusalem and Tyre stood for two goals, two ideals, two loyalties that could never be reconciled. It may well be, however, that the choice of the epithet "gate" is a cryptic pointer to the deeper meaning of the prophecy I suggested on p. 100. Babylon is really Babel, or Bab-ili, the Gate of God. It was not merely political or commercial supremacy that Babylon claimed, but religious too, as is reflected in Nebuchadnezzar's demand for the worship of the image of Marduk (Dan. 3: 1-6). The destruction of Jerusalem was a matter of joy to all forms of natural religion, especially those that glorified man's physical achievements.

C. S. Lewis in his *The Screwtape Letters* (p. 45) makes Screwtape say, "One must face . . . an appalling truth. He really *does* want to fill the universe with a lot of loathsome little replicas of Himself—creatures whose life, on its miniature scale, will be qualitatively like His own, not because He has absorbed them but because their wills freely conform to His. We want cattle who can finally become food; He wants servants who can finally become sons. We want to suck in, He wants to give out. We are empty and would be filled; He is full and flows over." Here is the difference between Tyre (or Babylon) and Jerusalem. But the many nations that Tyre looked to to replenish her shall be her doom (v. 3). Note in this connexion the rejoicing of the nations over the king of Babylon (Isa. 14: 9-20), and Jer. 51: 48.

Tyre's daughters (vv. 6, 8) are the suburbs of Tyre on the mainland. The isles (vv. 15, 18) are the more distant coast-

lands (so RSV in v. 15, but not v. 18), not necessarily islands, though they are included.

### THE LAMENT OVER TYRE (CH. 27)

Ezekiel now compares Tyre to a gallant ship manned by sailors from the other Phoenician cities. It is caught in a storm and lost with all hands. It is lamented by sailors everywhere (vv. 3b-9a, 25b-36). Into this fine poem he has inserted a catalogue of Tyre's commerce in prose (vv. 9b-25a). This division is well seen in RSV though it erroneously reckons v. 9b as part of the poem.

The picture of Tyre as a ship was probably suggested by the fact that the city proper was an island; this explains v. 4a also. Senir=Hermon (v. 5; Deut. 3:9). Render v. 6b with RSV, "They made your deck of pines from the coasts of Cyprus, inlaid with ivory." Elishah (v. 7) has not been identified with certainty. Arvad (v. 8) was built on an island north of modern Tripoli. Since the ship is Tyre, there is much to be said for the conjecture that we should read Zemer in v. 8b (RSV, ICC, cf. Gen. 10:18), a town near Arvad. Gebal (v. 9) or Byblos = Jebel between Beirut and Tripoli. Lud (v. 10) = Lydia; Put = Egyptian Punt, i.e. the African coast of Red Sea. "With thine army" (v. 11) should probably be "and Helech" = Cilicia (RSV, Moffatt); Gammadim—Gammad has not been identified with certainty. Tarshish (v. 12) here, by virtue of the metals mentioned, probably a Spanish town or district. Javan (v. 13) = Ionians; Tubal and Meshech, tribes from Asia Minor (see comment on 39: 1). Togarmah (v. 14) probably = Armenia. Dedan (v. 15) is mentioned again in v. 20 and so RSV, Moffatt, Cam. B., etc., follow LXX and render "the men of Rhodes"; ICC gives good reasons against and we may assume two branches of the Arab tribe, one in Edom, the other in Arabia. RSV, Moffatt, ICC follow 25 Hebrew MSS., Aquila and the implication of LXX and render Edom in v. 16; the difference is minimal, and the confusion has frequently been made in the Hebrew text. "Minnith . . . pannag" (v. 17) have had no certain explanation; the renderings of Moffatt and RSV are guesses. Helbon (v. 18) a famous vine-growing district N.E. of Damascus. The names in v. 19 have been corrupted, but no certain emendation has been offered. Though Canneh and Chilmad (v. 23) are presumably in Northern Mesopotamia, they have not been identified. Neither AV or RV of v. 25a can be said to be particularly intelligent; render with RSV, Moffatt, Cam. B., ICC, ". . . travelled for you with your merchandise."

"Suburbs" (v. 28) is misleading; "countryside" (RSV), or "coast" (Moffatt) is better. Similarly replace "astonished" (v. 35) by "appalled" (RSV, Moffatt). "Hiss" (v. 36): not a sound of disgust but of astonishment, cf. I Kings 9: 8.

#### THE DOWNFALL OF THE KING OF TYRE (28: 1-19)

This section contains a prophecy of the punishment of the king of Tyre (vv. 1-10) and a prophetic dirge over his fall (vv. 11-19). Many, contrasting *prince* (v. 2) with *king* (v. 12), think that two persons are intended, but this view is based on a misunderstanding. Prince = *nagid*, which with varying English translation is a regular title for the Israelite kings, see especially I Sam. 9: 16; 10: 1, even though it is used for lesser men as well, for it means "leader." It is deliberately used of the king of Tyre to stress that he only held his office at God's appointment. King (*melek*) stresses the popular concept of kingship in the Fertile Crescent, which regarded the ruler as the representative of the gods and as more than human, though actual divinity was apparently only ascribed to him in Egypt. In our exposition we shall see that the two titles are deliberately chosen to fit the contents of the two portions.

#### AN ALLEGED PORTRAIT OF SATAN

For many vv. 11-19 are primarily a picture of Satan, before his fall in a pre-Adamic Eden, looking forward to the Antichrist.<sup>1</sup> Those who implicitly hold this view have generally little idea of how unknown it is in wider Christian circles, or of how little basis there is for it in fact.

The Jews "were intrusted with the oracles of God" (Rom. 3: 2). There were deeper meanings in the Old Testament that could not be grasped until the Messiah came, but that is not the case here. There were prophecies of Christ they refused to see once they had rejected Him, but that has no relevance here. Except in the two cases just mentioned it seems very hazardous to give to an Old Testament passage a meaning that Jewish exegesis knows nothing of. In one very fanciful Rabbinic passage<sup>2</sup> it is said that the king of Tyre, incorrectly called Hiram, actually entered Paradise; otherwise they see the first man described in the passage.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The most careful exposition of this view known to me is in Pember: *Earth's Earliest Ages*, pp. 47-54 (15th edit.).

<sup>2</sup> *Derek Eretz Zuta* 1 at end.

<sup>3</sup> *Pesiqtha* 36b, 73b and six parallels in other works, *Wayyiqra Rabba* 20.

The application of the passage to Satan was common among leading Church fathers in the second half of the fourth century A.D. It is, however, striking that though it was held by Jerome, when he came to write his commentary on *Ezekiel* he omitted it.

Most cogent of all, however, is that any such interpretation detaches vv. 11-19 from their setting. A striking feature of the book is its very real unity, but here we are asked to believe that without giving any warning Ezekiel's gaze wanders first back to a period before man, and then on to almost the end of time though apparently speaking of the contemporary scene. The argument that much of the language could not be used of a mere man is really based on ignorance of the implications of Ezekiel's language.

It is worth mentioning that exactly the same arguments are valid against the efforts to interpret Isa. 14: 4-23 of the fall of Satan. But this does not mean that there is no truth in the view. All men who go the way of Satan mirror him and his sin in some measure. There is a real parallel between the fall of proud man and proud tempter, but Scripture does not give a picture of the fall of Satan mirroring the fall of men, but the fall of men mirroring the yet greater fall of the evil one.

#### THE PRIDE OF THE KING OF TYRE (28: 1-10)

Ithobal II, king of Tyre, in spite of his pride, was merely Jehovah's *nagid*, the ruler He had appointed to lead Tyre, "for there is no power but of God" (Rom. 13: 1). But in his own eyes he was a god (*'el*). The use of *'el* rather than *'elohim* shows that he was not claiming deity, but rather that as representative of the gods he had been granted divine strength and power. Ezekiel tells him he is only *'adam* (v. 2), i.e. he is a man like all other men, linked with mankind for he is taken from one common soil (*'adamah*), to which, like all others, he will return.

Jeremiah had proclaimed to Ithobal among others (Jer. 27: 3) that Jehovah had set Nebuchadnezzar as king over him. His defiance of the king of Babylon, based on the strength of Tyre (v. 2), was a defiance of Jehovah as well. For Daniel (v. 3) see p. 59. The heart of God (vv. 2, 6) is, of course, unchangeable. The plural "deaths" (vv. 8, 10) should be rendered "violent death." The Phoenicians practised circumcision, while the Babylonians did not (v. 10), so not only would his vaunted power fail him, but he would fall by those he despised religiously (see also p. 115).

## THE DIRGE OVER THE KING OF TYRE (28: 11-19)

Lamentation (v. 12) is a false translation of *qinah*, which means in itself a funeral dirge, the connotation of sorrow, which is inherent in lamentation, being secondary and indeed unnecessary. Both here, and in 27: 2; 32:2, 16; Amos 5: 1, sorrow is not implied but rather the opposite. In the very similar passage, Isa. 14: 4-23, it is called a *mashal* (v. 4), i.e. a taunt-song. It has largely been this failure to realize the formal nature of *qinah*, the indubitable lack of sympathy in Ezekiel, and the traditional element of exaggeration in the average funeral dirge, that has prevented so many from recognizing the mockery in the prophet's words, which have then been taken literally.

In our justifiable rejection of the modern view that the early stories of Genesis are merely pagan myths purified of their polytheism we tend to forget the far truer view of our fathers that the pagan myths represent a polytheistic corruption of the truths of the Bible. We do not know enough about Canaanite myth to be certain what form their corruption of the Eden story may have taken, but it is more than probable that we have it reflected here. Many will find it distasteful to find it suggested that we may have heathen myth in the Bible, but they forget that, if I am right, we have here a mocking funeral dirge over a heathen king, in which a mocking use of the king's own beliefs is to be expected.

Adam was the first king; that is why the Messiah is "the second man" and "the last Adam." In Israel the offices of king, priest and prophet were separated to show that human sin had brought in a dislocation in God's order that only the Messiah could heal. But elsewhere the king was the re-embodiment of the first man, the perfect representative and vice-regent of the gods.<sup>1</sup> It is this false proud view of the king of Tyre that Ezekiel is using. If Ithobal is the re-embodiment of the first man, Ezekiel can speak of him as being in Eden—the different picture of Eden can be explained by supposing that it was so described in Canaanite myth.

Our detailed exposition of the dirge must cope with the difficulties of the Hebrew, which, as LXX suggests, are in large part due to an imperfectly transmitted text. Though the force of v. 12 is clear enough, it is likely that the renderings of RSV, "You were the signet of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty," or Moffatt are nearer what Ezekiel said. The nine precious stones of v. 13 reappear on the high priest's breast-

<sup>1</sup> See my *The Centrality of the Messianic Idea for the Old Testament* (Tyndale Press), pp. 9-14, and Bentzen: *King and Messiah*, ch. 5.

plate, so there is little doubt that LXX is correct in reading all twelve.

The crux in our understanding depends on the rendering of vv. 14, 16. The Hebrew is exceptionally difficult. When RSV renders, basing itself largely on LXX:

With an anointed guardian cherub I placed you . . .  
I cast you as a profane thing from the mountain of God,  
and the guardian cherub drove you out  
from the midst of the stones of fire

it takes substantially the same course as Moffatt, ICC, Cam. B. and NBC. Ithobal-Adam is pictured all wise, the prototype priest, in Eden, which in the Canaanite myth was evidently placed on the mountain of the gods (v. 16). The first sin is transformed into Tyre's sin: "In the abundance of your trade you were filled with violence, and you sinned" (v. 16a, RSV).

Commentators find difficulty in "thy sanctuaries" in v. 18, for they do not see why Ezekiel should be concerned with heathen holy places. The difficulty was felt as early as LXX, which translated, "I have profaned." Equally unnecessary is Moffatt's "you have profaned your sacred position." The Hebrew prophets were fully aware that though the religion of their neighbours was false it yet contained broken elements of the truth. For them it was a grievous thing that any man should deliberately fall below what little of the truth might have been preserved for him.

#### THE DOOM OF SIDON (28: 20-23)

Sidon was almost certainly an older city than Tyre, indeed it was probably the oldest of the South Phoenician cities, cf. Gen. 10: 15. So, though by the time of David Tyre had become their chief city, the Phoenicians are called Zidonians, i.e. Sidonians, in the Old Testament, e.g. Judges 10: 12; 18: 7; I Kings 11: 1, 5; 16: 31; I Chron. 22: 4; Ezek. 32: 30. Tyre was so severely mauled by Nebuchadnezzar that under the Persians Sidon once more became the more important. This is probably the point of the oracle. Tyre had not come under the doom of God that others should profit by continuing in her ways. Sidon might seek to inherit Tyre's glory but would only share in her doom. Today Saida, as it is now called, is only a small port of purely local importance. "They shall know" (vv. 22, 23) hardly refers to the inhabitants of Sidon, but rather to the survivors of Israel.

## THE RESTORATION OF ISRAEL (28: 24-26)

Though Egypt was technically the neighbour of Israel, the sand-sea between them was a very effective barrier. Since the invasion of Shishak (I Kings 14: 25f.) and Zerah (II Chron. 14: 9-15)<sup>1</sup> Egypt had played little part in Judah's history beyond using her as a cat's-paw to protect herself against Assyria and Babylon. Both Isaiah (Isa. 30: 7) and the Rabshakeh (II Kings 18: 21) had mocked her ineffective show of strength. So before turning to the old crocodile of the Nile Ezekiel here sums up God's condemnation of Israel's true neighbours, big and little, that had harmed her. He indicates clearly that all are covered, whether they have been mentioned by name or not. This short oracle is a preparation for ch. 33-39.

It is worth noting that God will bring Israel to know Him along a twofold road. "Ye (they) shall know that I am Jehovah" occurs in slightly variant forms fifty-four times in Ezekiel (see p. 37). It never refers to any subjective, intuitive or mystic knowledge of God, but to the learning of His character by His works of judgment. But these works of judgment are equally on apostate Judah and on the God-defying nations; on the nations they are purely judgment, but on His people their ultimate object is grace.

## THE PROPHECIES AGAINST EGYPT (CH. 29-32)

We have here a group of seven prophecies: 29: 1-16 is dated about January 587 B.C., some seven months before the fall of Jerusalem; there is every reason for thinking that 30: 1-19 is from approximately the same time; 30: 20-26 is dated about April 587 B.C. and 31: 1-18 is two months later, little over a month before the fall of the city; 32: 1-16 and 32: 17-32 were spoken within a fortnight of one another early in 585 B.C., i.e. after the fall of Jerusalem; finally 29: 17-21, the latest dated prophecy in the book, comes on New Year's Day, 571 B.C.—its position is explained by its being in some measure an expansion of 29: 1-16.

That numbers are used symbolically in Scripture, and especially in a book like Ezekiel, is obvious, and none is more often so used than seven. Yet here only preconceived ideas are likely to find any symbolical significance in the seven prophecies for surely 29: 17-21 was not added just to make up the seven. The more we became acquainted with the revelation of God, the more we gain the impression of supreme common sense, if we

<sup>1</sup> If he was an Egyptian; see NBC, p. 357b.

may reverently use this term of God. The Scriptures obstinately refuse to fit into any human prefabricated mould, and repeatedly the obvious and simple interpretation is the correct one.

### THE DOOM OF EGYPT (29: 1-16)

We have here an allegorical poem (vv. 3ff., cf. RSV) and its prose interpretation. Pharaoh is compared to a water monster (*tannin*), i.e. a crocodile. There is nothing to be said for the traditional rendering "dragon." There is a deeper meaning as well. *Tannin* is used as a parallel to Leviathan in Isa. 27: 1 and to Rahab—used of Egypt in Isa. 30: 7, RV—in Isa. 51: 9. The comparison is not only with the ugly, complacent head of the crocodile protruding from the waters of the Nile, but also with the old rebellious chaos powers that Semitic mythology spoke of. Pharaoh's subjects are compared to the fish of the Nile.

Two reasons are given for Pharaoh's punishment, but it is likely that both ultimately go back to the same cause.

The lesser is his completely callous use of Israel as a cat's-paw (vv. 6f.). This was clearly seen by the Rabshakeh (II Kings 18: 21), and it lies behind Isaiah's condemnation of every approach to and entanglement with Egypt (see also p. 64). Behind the Pharaoh's willingness to use others without any thought of their welfare lay not only the natural selfishness of man but even more the belief that he was a god incarnate. It is always a very evil thing when a man persuades himself that for any reason he is not subject to the normal limitations of man; he will always end by falling lower than the normal level of mankind.

The greater cause of punishment was Pharaoh's pride, a pride that will have gone back to the same origin. His claim, "My Nile is my own; I have made it" (v. 3, RSV) was peculiarly foolish. The Nile is the life of Egypt; on its mysterious rise and fall depends the fertility and life of the land. One could almost say that the Nile is Egypt. But whether Egypt's southern frontier was the normal one of the First Cataract at Syene (Aswan), or whether at the height of Egypt's power it was moved a thousand miles upstream to the Sixth Cataract south of Meroe, the sources of the Nile and the mystery of its flooding that meant life for Egypt remained unknown, as Herodotus bears testimony. Then and now man's ability to use the forces of nature leads him to believe that he is lord of nature and that he can dispense with its true Lord.

The punishment of Egypt is conquest ("a sword", v. 8), for

it had callously given up others to conquest, and the failure of the Nile floods ("an utter waste and desolation," v. 10, 30: 12) from the Delta to the First Cataract—from Migdol to Syene (v. 10, RV mg., RSV). Though the complete desolation for forty years (vv. 11ff.) has seen no literal fulfilment, nor is there the slightest reason to think that it will, Egypt has seen repeated conquest, famine and humiliation. Modern Egypt dreams of a renewal of past glories, but we may be sure that any apparent satisfaction will be of short duration.

#### EGYPT'S HUMILIATION (29: 17–32: 16)

In God's wisdom, whatever blows Egypt may have suffered from Nebuchadnezzar, and however far he may have penetrated across the frontier, he was not the executor of God's wrath. It may be that there were spiritual reasons in Egypt; it may be that it was Nebuchadnezzar's pride, so graphically described in Daniel, that deprived him of this conquest, which was reserved for Cambyses, the son of Cyrus (525 B.C.). It would have been more merciful for Egypt had Persia been able to keep a firm grip on the land. It was ruined by constant fighting and brutal extortion, so that the conquest by Alexander the Great in 332 B.C. was hailed with joy. There followed the long line of fifteen Ptolemys, Greeks by blood, culture and outlook. Under them Egypt became, at least in its cities, and to some measure even in the countryside, Hellenized. The alien royal house degenerated more and more until after the battle of Actium it dropped like a ripe plum into the hands of the Romans in 30 B.C.

Since then it has been ruled by Arab and Turk, Fatimid and Saracen, Mamluk, Ottoman, Turk and Albanian. Misrule, extortion and plague have kept the land poor. Even its language has disappeared, displaced first by Greek and then by Arabic, leaving only "the mere jargon"<sup>1</sup> of ecclesiastical Coptic. Even were Egypt to rise once again to the rank of a first-class state, it would be no more a true descendant of the Egypt that once was than is modern Italy of ancient Rome, or Greece of Athens and Sparta.

In his valuable study of ch. 27<sup>2</sup> Prof. Sidney Smith suggests that the reason why Nebuchadnezzar gained no wealth, when he finally captured Tyre (29: 18), was that as he could not invest it by sea, its riches were shipped off, either for necessities or safety, during the siege, and he explains 27: 27, 34, in this way. "Every head was made bald, and every shoulder was

<sup>1</sup> *Chambers's Encyclopaedia*, Vol. V, p. 32b.

<sup>2</sup> *The Ship Tyre in Palestine Exploration Fund Quarterly*, 1953, p. 97 seq.

peeled" ("rubbed bare," RSV) in Nebuchadnezzar's army (29: 18) by the constant wearing of helmets and the carrying of burdens for the siege works.

#### EGYPT IN SHEOL (32: 17-32)

As this section is appealed to by various smaller sects as a justification for their views on "life" after death, it calls for somewhat closer attention.

It is clear that vv. 19-21 are a funeral dirge over Egypt; whether vv. 22-32 are also in poetry or only in rhythmic prose must with our present knowledge remain doubtful. The doubt arises, as in certain other poetic passages in Ezekiel, from the uncertain state of the text. In either case, however, we are dealing, as in Isa. 14: 4-21 with poetic language and imagery, and it is inadvisable to take all the details literally.

Ezekiel is called to seal Pharaoh's fate by taking up the funeral dirge (v. 18, cf. 27: 2; 28: 12 and see p. 32) in which he is to be joined by representatives of the nations—read, "send them down with a lament, you and the women of the mighty nations" (Moffatt). The versions bear testimony to the uncertainty of the text in v. 20. The RSV, "They shall fall amid those who are slain by the sword, and with her shall lie all her multitudes," is attractive but not certain. Just as in Isa. 14: 9f. the great chiefs among the dead in Sheol greet the dead Pharaoh (vv. 19, 21).

Ezekiel then pictures Pharaoh touring Sheol. He sees each nation with its own portion. Assyria, Elam, etc., represent in each case the king and around him lie the bodies of his warriors. On the basis of this it has been claimed that Sheol is no more than a poetic name for the grave; it should be clear, however, that here we are dealing entirely with poetic and semi-symbolic imagery. In the first place the kings of each nation are represented by one typical figure, possibly, in the setting, the last of his line. Then his warriors are buried around him as they never were in fact, especially when their kingdom went down in fire and storm. The weapons in v. 27 are as much shadow weapons as everything else in Sheol. The fact is that Sheol is so much a shadow land, that so far as reality for the living is concerned, it matters not whether its inhabitants are pictured as rising to greet the newcomer in irony, or whether they are seen tidily taking their rest, each in his appointed place.

Already in 28: 10 we had the death of the uncircumcised as a mark of shame; here it is virtually a refrain. In the setting Moffatt's "ashameful death" seems to bring out the meaning best.

One of the vexed questions in the Old Testament is whether it recognizes any difference of position among the dead, any divisions of Sheol. Terms like "the uttermost parts of the pit" (v. 23) can hardly be made to bear any such construction by themselves, and the general impression we gain is that there is no discrimination in Sheol. But what are we to make of v. 27? It certainly suggests discrimination and difference. On the whole, however, though neither Moffatt nor RSV agree, it seems best to follow LXX and Syriac with most modern commentaries and omit the negative. No reason seems to be given or suggested for differentiating between Meshech-Tubal and the "mighty men of old" (so RSV, Moffatt following the Versions), and probably none is intended. Equally we should probably follow recent commentators, and also RSV, Moffatt, in the conjectural reading involving a very small consonantal change "whose shields are upon their bones" instead of "their iniquities are upon their bones."

Meshech-Tubal, as the concord "her" shows, is a compound name (as against RSV and Moffatt). Though the commentators think of tribes in Asia Minor, as is indeed the case in 27: 13, it seems unlikely here. There is no evidence that the difficulties the Muski created for the Assyrians through the centuries had made any great mark on Judah's memory, nor does the interpretation explain the compound name, which many commentators seek to avoid by omitting Tubal. It seems far more likely that the names are used as in 39: 1 (see p. 134) of the wild tribes that periodically broke into the Fertile Crescent, coming no one knew from where. The most recent example had been the Scythians, who had appeared suddenly round the end of the Caucasus, had rocked Assyria to its foundations and had been virtually exterminated by the Medes.

Though the Edomites and the Phoenicians had not yet gone down to Sheol, the word of the Lord had gone out against them, and so with prophetic certainty they are included in the picture. "The princes of the north" are the petty kings of Northern Syria.

So Pharaoh is left with the cold comfort (v. 31) that as is the doom of all nations that forget God so was his—for Ezekiel's hearers there was the further message, clear even if unexpressed, that as Egypt had gone, so would Babylon go in the day of God's choice. It is hard to imagine a more dramatic close to Ezekiel's prophecies against the nations. He now turns to the future of Israel; the destruction of Jerusalem can be followed by national resurrection, but there is no future for the nations of the world as they go down into silence.