

## CHAPTER XIII

# EZEKIEL

### THE STRUCTURE OF EZEKIEL

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THE problems connected with Ezekiel are of a very different kind from those dealt with in earlier chapters. There are no generally accepted problems of authorship, as in Isaiah. Still less does the book contain structural difficulties of the kind we find in Jeremiah. Ezekiel would seem to have put his book together himself, and he carefully dated the various sections, *viz.* 1: 2; 8: 1; 20: 1; 24: 1; 26: 1; 29: 1; 29: 17; 30: 20; 31: 1; 32: 1; 32: 17; 33: 21; 40: 1. In addition, for reasons to be considered later, we have no longer the short oracles linked often only by spiritual connexions we have become familiar with in the earlier prophets; for the most part the book consists of full-length addresses or writings. The problems relate rather to the prophet's personality and activities, and to the interpretation of some parts of his book.

#### *Ezekiel's Early Life.*

If our interpretation of 1: 1 is correct (see below), Ezekiel was born in 622 B.C. This means that he was over twenty years younger than Jeremiah, and that he was an infant in arms, when Josiah's reformation was sweeping the outward signs of idolatry out of Judah.

We have no information about his father, Buzi, beyond that he was of priestly family. The respect, however, accorded to Ezekiel by the elders of the people in exile (8: 1; 14: 1; 20: 1), and his being considered important enough to be taken into exile with Jehoiachin (cf. II Kings 24: 14) suggest that his was among the more important of the priestly families.

We are not told definitely in the Old Testament at what age the priest was to start his duties; there is no definite information on the subject in the Talmud with regard to New Testament times. There is, however, an intrinsic probability that it was thirty (cf. Num. 4: 3, and perhaps Luke 3: 23, though this may link rather with II Sam. 5: 4). Since, however, a meticulous observance of every detail of the ritual was expected of the priest, a long period of preparation was normal for the young men of priestly family. It is quite clear from his prophecies that Ezekiel, unlike Jeremiah, had early steeped himself in the priestly traditions, and had learnt all the details of his holy duties to which he looked forward. His whole course of life was rudely interrupted when, at the age of twenty-five (597 B.C.), he was taken as captive to Babylonia by Nebuchadnezzar; cut off from every hope of becoming an active priest, it must have seemed to the young man that life had lost all meaning. We must never forget that when the epigram declares, "Jeremiah was a prophet who happened to be a priest; Ezekiel was a priest who happened to be a prophet," it is stating a real truth, even though expressed with typical epigrammatic exaggeration.

At first Ezekiel may have nourished hopes of an early return to the temple in Jerusalem (Jer. 29: 8f), but Jeremiah's letter and the fate of Ahab and Zedekiah (Jer. 29: 21ff) will have shown him that there was no hope that he would ever serve the Lord as priest in His temple. The greater, then, must have been his spiritual distress when he became thirty and realized with renewed force how the sin of his people had cut him off from his spiritual heritage.<sup>1</sup>

It was under such circumstances that God revealed Himself to Ezekiel (1: 1) and showed him that he was to fulfil his priestly vocation by acting as His prophet.

### *The Call of Ezekiel (1: 1—3: 21).*

In the height of summer 592 B.C., Ezekiel was transported in a trance (3: 12, 14) to the banks of the river Chebar, a canal

<sup>1</sup> This interpretation of "the thirtieth year" is widely denied, but those who do so have nothing adequate to offer in its place. The one objection of weight is that a birthday could hardly be so referred to; apart from a few cases of royalty, the Bible ignores birthdays and is concerned merely with birthyears.

south of Babylon. As he stood there he saw a great storm-cloud being borne down on him out of the North (1: 4). As it drew nearer he saw that it was the chariot-throne of God (1: 5-28). We shall make no effort either to clarify Ezekiel's description or to expound its symbolism. For the former, recourse should be had to a commentary, if the study is felt to be profitable. As regards the latter, seeing that the rabbis themselves declared that he who had come to understand the Chariot knew all the mysteries of creation, and restricted its study to those over thirty, it is clear that for them, too, the symbolism presented the very greatest difficulties.

Ezekiel no more explains the living creatures or cherubim (10: 20) than Isaiah the seraphim (Isa. 6: 2); for us to attempt the task would lead us far beyond the limits of this book (but see note on 28: 14 below). Note that in 41: 18f, probably for ease in reproduction, the cherubim have only two faces.

It is widely claimed by scholars that the cherubim of the vision show strong traces of the winged figures so common in Mesopotamian temples. While we consider the claim to be exaggerated, we have no interest in denying it. In the vision, the Chariot comes from the North, though Jehovah's residence in Zion is to the West (10: 4, 19; 11: 23; 43: 2ff). The simplest explanation is that the home of the Babylonian gods was in the North (Isa. 14: 13). If the Chariot comes from the North, it is because Jehovah has met and defeated the gods of Babylonia on their own ground; if the bearers of His Chariot remind us of the Babylonian temple guardians, it is because they have become His slaves. We are not suggesting that Ezekiel believed in the objective existence of the Babylonian deities, but simply that in such symbolical visions the details may carry implications which are far from obvious at first consideration.

If we find Ezekiel's symbolism over-elaborate and far-fetched, we must not forget that the whole of the priestly ritual was symbolic, as indeed was the lay-out of the Temple, and so symbolism had become second nature to him. It is essential for our study of Ezekiel to remember this, and also to bear in mind that there are Christians for whom Ezekiel is one of the most precious of the books of the Old Testament just because of its symbolism. The greatest difficulty of ch. 1 lies in the fact that when it comes to the glories of Deity, symbolism is as inadequate as direct description, and more difficult.

#### *Ezekiel's Commissioning.*

Ezekiel is addressed as Son of man (2: 1, and often elsewhere). This cannot be equated with the title "The Son of

Man," which our Lord used for Himself; it means no more than "man."

In 2: 3-7 Ezekiel is introduced to those to whom he is to prophesy, "nations that are rebellious" (ver. 3, so R.V.), *i.e.* both Judah and Israel. As the term "Judah" is very seldom used in Ezekiel, it is clear that "the House of Israel" and "the Children of Israel" refer in the first place to the Southern Kingdom, unless the context clearly shows otherwise. It is therefore far from clear how far Ezekiel's message was consciously addressed to the Northern exiles at all. Since Ezekiel was of the tribe of Levi, the term Israel was the more natural one for him: cf. the very similar use in Jeremiah. At first Ezekiel is given no clear indication of the result of his message. R.S.V., N.E.B. amend the text unnecessarily in ver 3.

There follows a symbolic description of the source of his message and inspiration (2: 8-3: 3). His great prophetic predecessors felt themselves too much in the confidence of God to have used such a picture, but there is none that more clearly and forcefully shows the union of divine and human in the prophetic message. It is clearly divine, from God—this is symbolized by the already written roll. But the prophet does not merely deliver it to his hearers; he must first digest and assimilate it, making it a living part of himself. This is the human part of his message. The roll contained only "lamentations, mourning and woe" because there was a virtual re-commissioning (33: 1-20) before Ezekiel began his work of upbuilding and comfort.

It is then (3: 4-11) made clear that the rebellious nations are the House of Israel, and that he will not be listened to. The Holy Spirit by returning him to his home (3: 12-15) shows him that his message is to be addressed particularly to the exiles there.

As he sits mute among his old surroundings for a week (3: 15) the word of the Lord comes to him again (3: 16-21) and makes it clear to him that his task is first and foremost that of watchman over the souls of the exiles. This is reinforced by the repetition and expansion of this commission just before the news of the destruction of Jerusalem reached the exiles (33: 1-20, 21) with the resultant change in the content of his prophecies. Ezekiel is above all the pastoral prophet, the priest watching over the souls entrusted to him.

#### *To Whom Did Ezekiel Prophesy?*

The interpretation given above would seem to be the obvious one, but in recent years it has been vigorously challenged, even by conservatives.<sup>1</sup> It is said that chs. 4-24 are

<sup>1</sup> A survey of modern views on Ezek. may be found in Bentzen: *Introduction to the Old Testament II*, p. 122 seq.

addressed exclusively to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and that it is unprecedented for such prophecies to be spoken at a distance rather than face to face. There is not even a suggestion that they were sent in writing to distant Judaea. It is further claimed that certain passages presuppose Ezekiel's presence in Jerusalem (*e.g.* 5: 2; 11: 4-9, 13; 12: 2; 20: 30f). Ezekiel's message is to the House of Israel and the Children of Israel (2: 3), and it is said that these terms are in fact consistently used of those still in Jerusalem (but cf. 11: 15; 37: 16). Pfeiffer goes so far as to say that the view that Ezekiel remained in Tel-Abib "turns Ezekiel into a Jonah who failed to obey the divine command, 'Go, get thee unto the house of Israel'."<sup>1</sup>

The great objections to this view are that it does not explain how Ezekiel came to express himself so badly that men have misinterpreted his prophecy for centuries; that it is impossible to reconstruct the prophet's movements with any certainty; that a certain amount of re-arrangement of the text seems to be demanded. It should be noted that many of the references to the House of Israel suit the exiles just as well and sometimes better than those still living in Jerusalem.

Though we have rejected this view as unfounded, we believe it does furnish a clue to the understanding of chs. 4-24. We entirely agree with Pfeiffer's inability to accept Cooke's judgment, "No doubt we find it difficult to adjust ourselves to the position of a prophet in Babylonia hurling his denunciations at the inhabitants of Jerusalem across 700 miles of desert."<sup>2</sup> Such a picture seems to us mildly ridiculous. But we do not believe that these prophecies were either spoken to or intended for Jerusalem.

Ezekiel is the pastoral prophet; his task is the building up of God's new community. Jer. 24 gives both God's purpose for those taken into captivity with Jehoiachin and the popular explanation of their exile, a view that will have been shared by the exiles themselves. Before the prophet could begin his building up (chs. 33-48), he had to bring the exiles to a proper understanding of the principles that were leading God to hand over Jerusalem to destruction. How well he succeeded in making some of the exiles realize their high calling may be discovered by the attentive student of Ezra and Nehemiah.

The phrases taken to imply Ezekiel's presence in Jerusalem can be adequately explained by the extraordinary vividness of his trance visions, and by the symbolism that colours his whole message.

<sup>1</sup> *Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 536.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 536 quoting Cooke: *Ezekiel* (I.C.C.), p. xxiii f.

Our interpretation also explains why there is nothing in Ezekiel that would even hint at Jeremiah's contemporary activities. We may well suppose that one so imbued with the priestly outlook as Ezekiel must have found Jeremiah's root and branch condemnation of ritual and ceremonial rather painful at times. But it seems impossible to believe that had Ezekiel actually prophesied in Jerusalem or even sent his messages there, he would not have sought to strengthen the hands of the older prophet, so hated and so lonely.

*A Prophet Restrained (3: 22-27).*

It would seem that a short interval is to be assumed between this and the previous section, during which Ezekiel's message had met serious opposition. Now God commands him to abstain from public ministry (ver. 24). Since the exiles would oppose him—the language of ver. 25 is probably to be taken figuratively of the restraint of bitter opposition, rather than of physical restraint—God would match restraint with restraint (ver. 26) by making the prophet dumb, though from time to time he would be able to speak (ver. 27).

This is a suitable point for considering one of the major problems of interpretation in Ezekiel. Ezekiel's dumbness is mentioned again in 24: 27; 29: 21; 33: 22; on the other hand, there are passages where it is virtually denied, e.g. 14: 4; 17: 2f, 12; 19: 1; 20: 3, etc. In ch. 4 he is described as lying on his side for 430 (or 390, cf. ver. 9) days, bound with cords (ver. 8), unless indeed this verse implies some form of paralysis; yet at the same time he is pressing the siege of Jerusalem with his model (4: 1-3) and also for 390 days making cakes and eating them, measuring his water and doing other actions apparently incompatible with his physical position. That these are not to be taken as happening consecutively is seen from the chronology. Between 1: 2 and 8: 1 are only 413 days, or 443, if it was a leap year of 13 months.

Once we realize that a completely literal interpretation of 4: 1-5: 4 is impossible, and link this fact with Ezekiel's extreme symbolism, we shall be prepared to recognize a metaphorical or symbolical element in the language used. Ezekiel's dumbness may mean no more than the absence of any prophetic message for considerable periods of time. The actions of 4: 1-5: 4 need only have been carried out at such times as he had visitors, or may even, though less likely, have been lived out purely in the prophet's mind. On the other hand, the extremely vivid trance-visions may point to some abnormality in Ezekiel's make-up.

The use of dried cow's dung (4: 15) for fuel is common in countries where other forms of fuel are scarce.

*The Coming Doom of Jerusalem (Chs. 4-7).*

These acted prophecies date about four and a half years before the final siege of Jerusalem began, and indeed before Zedekiah's fatal rebellion.

The figure in 4: 9 suggests that there were only 390 days in all for Ezekiel to lie on his side, the 40 for Judah being coalesced with the 390 for Israel. It seems impossible to find any adequate interpretation for the figures. To "bear their iniquity" means to bear the punishment for their iniquity. But in spite of 29: 11-14, it cannot be maintained that Ezekiel placed the duration of the exile at forty years. Jer. 29: 10, written earlier, would have prevented that. Perhaps the forty years are merely symbolic, reminiscent of the forty years in the wilderness. It has been pointed out that if we subtract the forty years from the 390, the remaining 350 are in round numbers the period from the disruption of the kingdom under Rehoboam to the time of Ezekiel. We do not, however, put these suggestions forward with any degree of confidence. The difficulty here should serve as a warning against any overconfidence in the interpretation of Ezekiel's symbolism.

Since it was forbidden to sow a field with more than one kind of grain (Lev. 19: 19; Deut. 22: 9) it may be that bread made from a mixture of grain was also unclean (4: 9).

The explanation of the symbolic actions follows in 5: 5-17. Note at this stage the vagueness about the sins involved, and that they are summed-up in the defilement of the sanctuary (5: 11). Ezekiel can wax indignant about social wrongs, but as a priest he sees the sins of the people particularly from the ritual angle.

The thought is continued in ch. 6, a prophecy against the idolatrous high places (the mountains) of Israel, *i.e.* especially Judah. Note that here it is the mere fact of idolatry rather than its consequences that is being condemned.

The section closes with a dirge (ch. 7) over the land of Israel, *i.e.* the kingdom of Judah.

*The Desecration of the Temple (Ch. 8).*

The second group of prophecies begins with a long trance-vision (chs. 8-11). The presence of the elders (ver. 1) suggests that whatever the original opposition to Ezekiel as prophet, it had rapidly passed, at least among the leaders of the people. It is probably in this respect, paid perhaps more to the priest than the prophet, that made it possible for Ezekiel's prophecies to assume a much longer and more rounded form than did those of his predecessors.

The significance of their presence is that they are able to

vouch for the reality of Ezekiel's trance. It may be that as the vision developed Ezekiel described aloud what he was seeing.

In ver. 2 we should read with the LXX "a likeness as the appearance of a man." Ezekiel's symbolism comes out once more in ver. 3 by the mention of the form of a hand, for his transportation is by virtue of the spirit. There are certainly symbolic elements in what follows as well. Ezekiel sees four forms of idolatry which implicitly cover the whole people.

(a) The image which made Jehovah jealous (ver. 3ff), placed at the north, or popular entrance to the inner court. This probably was an image of Jehovah Himself, and represented that popular Canaanization of Jehovah-worship that was the curse of Israel from the time of the Judges on (see p. 36ff). The making of such pictorial representations is one of the things that moved Jehovah to jealousy (Exod. 20: 4f; Deut. 4: 23f; 5: 8f). The image is purely symbolic here.

(b) A multitude of heathen idols, mostly foreign (vers. 6-12). This is probably entirely symbolic (see vers. 8, 12) and speaks of the aping of heathen religion, probably mainly Egyptian and Babylonian, by the leaders of the people, the elders (ver. 11, R.V., R.S.V.).

(c) The Canaanite fertility cult (ver. 14f), which appealed particularly to the women (cf. Jer. 7: 18; 44: 15-19). Tammuz (the Greek Adonis) was one of the most popular gods of this fertility cult, having different names and characteristics at different times and in different countries. Here he is the god of vegetation, killed off by the drought and heat of summer. So Ezekiel sees him being mourned in August.

(d) Sun worship (vers. 15-18) by the priests—because the worshippers stand between the temple and the altar (ver. 16). The offence is the worse because they stand with their backs to the sanctuary. They have added to all their social iniquity this blatant challenge to Jehovah (ver. 17), and even "thrust their branch into My face" (lit., nose)—the present Hebrew text "their nose" is according to valid rabbinic tradition a scribal alteration out of respect to God.

#### *The Divine Judgment* (9: 1-11: 13):

Chs. 9 and 10, and possibly even 11: 13, are symbolically prophetic, for the rebellion against Nebuchadnezzar had not even broken out yet. The instruments of judgment are obviously angels, though always called men. That the apostasy was not universal is shown by the marking of the faithful on their foreheads (9: 4). The Hebrew for "mark" is *tav*, the name of the last letter of the alphabet, which in the old script was a cross.

Then follows the slaying of the unmarked (9: 5-11), which

the intercession of the prophet is powerless to avert. God makes it clear that it is not so much the idolatry that brings the judgment, as the social iniquity, bloodshed and injustice (9: 9, R.S.V.), based on the belief that Nebuchadnezzar's success meant that Jehovah had forsaken the land (R.S.V.). Then the coals of divine wrath from the altar on the chariot-throne of God are scattered on the doomed city (ch. 10), though the prophet does not see their effect.

Special judgment is pronounced on the men who were plotting rebellion against Babylon, and the death of one of them (almost certainly real, not symbolic) prefigures the fate of all (11: 1-13). They were daring and cynical men, with their metaphor "this city is the caldron, and we be the flesh." They meant that though their course of action would make things hot for them, the fortifications of the city would save them from the flames of destruction. God tells them that the only flesh left in the city will be corpses; they themselves will be dragged out and executed by the Chaldeans.

*God's Grace to the Exiles* (11: 14-25).

We have already referred to the attitude of those left in the land to the exiles (see p. 91). Here it comes out again in a cruel and blatant form (ver. 15). They pictured the exiles as far from Jehovah, but He would be to them a sanctuary (*i.e.* a temple) for a little while (ver. 16, R.V.),<sup>1</sup> and would then bring them back to the land. The fruit of the exile should be changed natures. For "one heart" (ver. 19) we should almost certainly read "another heart" with the LXX, or "a new heart" with the Syriac and 18: 31; 36: 26. In either case the change in Hebrew is small. N.E.B. follows LXX.

The glory of God had been gradually leaving the defiled temple and city, cf. 8: 4; 9: 3; 10: 19. Now (ver. 23) it leaves the city altogether. The fact that it leaves the city eastward may well suggest that it was going to lodge among the exiles (cf. ver. 16).

*Zedekiah's Fate* (12: 1-20).

We are now back in Tel-Abib, and the prophet by two symbolic actions (vers. 3-7, 17f) foreshadows the fate both of the prince, *i.e.* Zedekiah, and of the people.

The title "prince" (*nasi*) is outside Ezekiel only applied to Solomon among kings, and the passage (I Kings 11: 34) gives the clue to its use here; Solomon had forfeited his right to be king. For Ezekiel, the Judaeian kingship had ended with Jehoiachin's exile. For the use of "prince" in the closing chapters of Ezekiel, see below.

The symbolic action is in itself deliberately absurd, so as to

<sup>1</sup> Better, "a sanctuary in small measure (R.S.V. mg.)", cf. my *Ezekiel*, p. 48.

catch the attention of the people. Ezekiel was to carry out of his house the little bundle of goods a man would take with him into exile (ver. 4, R.V. mg., R.S.V.). Then in the evening he was to take it back into the house, dig through the wall (built as always in Babylonia of sun-dried bricks), bring out his bundle, wrap his face up so that he could not see, and stagger off with his bundle. The application (vers. 10-13) is clear in the light of its fulfilment; Zedekiah's flight by night (II Kings 25: 4), his capture, blinding and leading into exile (II Kings 25: 5ff).

The second symbolic action, in which Ezekiel eats his meals, carefully weighing the quantities and in great fear, is little more than an extension of 4: 9-17.

#### *On Prophecy and the Prophets (12: 21-13: 23).*

Though a large part of his predecessors' prophecies had gone into fulfilment, enough still remained unfulfilled to create the same attitude in men's hearts that we find in II Pet. 3: 4. To them Ezekiel has to make clear that the storm will break in their day (12: 21-28) and that it will sweep away the false prophets (12: 24).

Ezekiel then turns on the false prophets. He condemns them first (13: 1-9) for following "their own spirit, and things which they have not seen" (ver. 3, R.V., mg.). Then (13: 10-16) he charges them with whitewashing, *i.e.* giving their approbation to the jerry-built walls of man's making (see R.V., mg. ver. 10). Finally, he condemns the prophetesses (13: 17-23). It is impossible now to know with certainty what the rigmaroles of these women meant. This in turn makes our rendering of the Hebrew uncertain. This passage is important as showing the danger of arguing from silence. If we did not have it, we might assume that the prophetess, whether good or bad, was a rare phenomenon in Israel.

#### *The Inevitable Penalty of Idolatry (Chs. 14-16).*

These chapters are introduced by certain of the leaders of the exiles coming to Ezekiel for prophetic guidance (14: 1ff). God refuses them an answer, because they are idolaters, except the answer of destruction (14: 4-8). Should any other answer come, it is because the prophet has allowed himself to be enticed by the idolaters, and he will suffer the same fate (14: 9ff). So terrible is idolatry that the presence of righteous men means only that they themselves will be saved (14: 12-23). For Daniel see p. 142; note that the spelling of the name in Hebrew here and in 28: 3 is not the same as in the book of Daniel.

The warning is reinforced by the example of the vine (ch. 15) which has value only as it produces grapes. From the

time of Isaiah (Isa. 5: 1-7); if not before, the vine had been used as a symbol for Israel. The only fruit it had produced was wild grapes, and now both ends had been burnt and the middle had been charred (so R.S.V., N.E.B., ver. 4), so there was no future for it but to be burnt up.

Ezekiel then gives the spiritual history of Israel in a powerful allegory of the foundling child who becomes the faithless wife of her benefactor (ch. 16). Lack of space makes any effort to expound the superabundant symbolism impossible. Of outstanding importance, however, are the closing thoughts of the chapter (vers. 46-63). Jerusalem's sins are much greater than those of Sodom and Samaria (cf. Jer. 3: 6-13). Since there is to be a restoration of Jerusalem, how much more of rebellious Samaria, and heathen Sodom, symbolizing probably the small heathen nations round Israel.

It should be noted that there are really two allegories; the foundling child (16: 1-43), and the two sisters (16: 44-52). We then have the restoration of the sisters (16: 53-59) and final reconciliations (16: 60-63).

#### *The Folly and Treachery of Zedekiah (Ch. 17).*

God evidently revealed to Ezekiel Zedekiah's first moves that were to lead to his open rebellion against Babylon. Ezekiel tells a parable that is a riddle in its obscurity (vers. 1-10). In its interpretation he especially stresses the evil of Zedekiah's broken oath (vers. 13f, 16). This prophecy concludes with the parabolic promise (ver. 22ff) that from the descendants of those transported to Babylon with Jehoiachin there will be a restoration. The language of ver. 22f seems Messianic,<sup>1</sup> but in the light of Jer. 22: 29f we must be cautious. Our Lord was only officially a descendant of Jehoiachin (Matt. 1: 2-16).

#### *The Citizen Basis of the Restored Community (Ch. 18).*

Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel lived in a time when men were reaping the whirlwind of the storm their ancestors had sown. There seemed no point in individual effort, for a man's fate would be the same whether he fought against the current or swam with the tide. Their pessimism was summed up in the proverb, "The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are blunted" (Jer. 31: 29; Ezek. 18: 2). As they look to the future, both the prophets see a time when a man's relationship to God will be essentially an individual one, not to be influenced by either the goodness or badness of his people. Jeremiah thinks more of the individual's standing with God; Ezekiel, more of the reward or punishment of his actions.

This chapter has suffered grievously at the hand of those

<sup>1</sup> For a more careful discussion see my *Ezekiel*, p. 69f.

that have wished to interpret it against the background of the New Testament. It is not in contradiction to the Gospel, because Ezekiel is standing on the foundation of the Law. But he is shifting the operation of the Law from the nation and family to the individual. Quite typical of Ezekiel is the mixture of religious, ethical and ceremonial in his list of sins and virtues (vers. 6-9).

The section ends with a lament over the kings of Judah: Jehoahaz (19: 1-4), Jehoiakim-Jehoiachin, probably considered as one (19: 5-9), Zedekiah (19: 10-14).

### *The Deeper Meaning of the Sin* (Chs. 20-23).

These chapters, which cover the period between the open breach of Zedekiah with Babylon and the appearing of the Chaldean army under the walls of Jerusalem, in many ways parallel much of the previous main section. But we feel the prophetic voice probing deeper. In ch. 22 the sins of Jerusalem are seen more clearly and in darker colours. Then ch. 20 is one of the most important in the Old Testament for its estimate of Israelite history as a whole, with its contrast between Israel's consistent disobedience from the beginning, and Jehovah acting throughout for His name's sake.

20: 25f has an historical interest. It was used by the early Hebrew-Christians, and by some Gentile Christians, in their controversy with the Synagogue, to prove that the sacrificial system was not God-given. However, in the light of chs. 40-48 any such interpretation would seem self-contradictory. The obvious interpretation of ver. 26 is that the statutes referred to human sacrifice (cf. Jer. 7: 31). But it is out of the question that Ezekiel should attribute such sacrifices to God. So the most reasonable interpretation is that God deliberately worded His law in such a way that the rebellious and unspiritual misunderstood it.

### *Imminent Judgment* (Ch. 24).

On the very day (ver. 1f; II Kings 25: 1) that the Chaldean armies appeared before the walls of Jerusalem, Ezekiel received his final message of doom in which he saw Jerusalem as a great corroded cauldron (N.E.B.) in which the contents are boiled up and thrown out, and then the cauldron is burnt out in the flames.

Later at an unspecified time, but quite possibly on the day when Jerusalem fell, God tells Ezekiel that his wife is to die, but he is not to mourn her (ver. 15ff). When she dies the same evening the people ask Ezekiel why he does not mourn. He tells them that this is but a picture of what will happen when the news of Jerusalem's fall comes to them.

*Prophecies Against the Nations (Chs. 25-32).*

These prophecies have the same general purpose as those against the nations in Isaiah and Jeremiah, the setting of God's judgments on Israel against the general background of God's judgments on the world. There is probably a symbolic element here as well, Tyre being chosen as representing godless commerce, and indirectly Babylon, and Egypt for the grossness of its idolatry (cf. 16: 26, which cannot be taken literally). This element may perhaps partly explain the suspended fulfilments we referred to in ch. I.

In certain circles it is accepted as axiomatic that 28: 11-19 refers to Satan and his fall. However attractive this view, we would point out that it makes no attempt to explain the setting of the oracle; it takes it out of its context. In addition it should be noted that the rabbis never so understood it, so it is not so obvious as some think. The question is further complicated by many textual and linguistic problems in the passage. It is generally overlooked that this view tacitly attributes to cherub (28: 14) a meaning that is not readily discoverable in other Scripture references. In spite of all the difficulties involved, we believe that the prophecy does refer to the king of Tyre, though we believe that as a picture of human pride it may be used like Isa. 14: 4-21 as a type of Satan.

Advocates of soul sleep are given to using 32: 17-32 as a proof that in the Old Testament *Sheol* is in all respects equivalent to the grave. Those who have tried to grapple with the problems of Ezekiel's symbolism are not likely to take this unique passage literally. A doctrine needs a more positive basis than a passage like this will afford.

*The Prophet's Recommissioning (Ch. 33).*

As Ezekiel waited for the certain fulfilment of his prophecy of doom on Jerusalem, God recommissioned him as watchman over the House of Israel (vers. 1-9; cf. 3: 16-21). Though we are not so told, it is likely that it was accompanied by a vision of the chariot-throne of God. God's charge is accompanied by a message (vers. 10-20) very reminiscent of ch. 18. In its setting, however, it seems to stress above all that the exiles were facing a new beginning, when each had to make his individual choice, whether he would do the will of God or not.

Jerusalem fell on the ninth day of the fourth month in Zedekiah's eleventh year (Jer. 39: 2), and the temple was burnt on the seventh day of the following month (II Kings 25: 8f). About six months later rumours in Tel-Abib were silenced by the arrival of one of the survivors (ver. 21). [The Hebrew text says that it was about eighteen months later, but this is

intrinsically absurd. Some MSS. as well as the Syriac translation have "in the eleventh year," which is obviously correct.]

Ezekiel had been prepared for the fugitive's coming by the removal of his dumbness (ver. 22), which if our earlier explanation is correct, means that from now on he was able at all times to proclaim and explain the will of God. With his changed task came also the realization that the remnant in Judaea had not been changed even by the destruction of Jerusalem (vers. 23-29, cf. Jer. 40-45); he was also reminded that his increasing popularity was no evidence that the majority of the people were willing to accept his message (vers. 30-33). No account is given us of the details of Ezekiel's later work, and no indication is given as to when the following chapters were spoken, or to what extent they are a summary of years of teaching.

#### *Rulers past and future (Ch. 34).*

For the correct understanding of this chapter it must be remembered that metaphorically the shepherd always means the king, whether it is used of God or man. Our understanding of this has been obscured by the religious connotation given to "pastor" in the Christian Church. Elders in the Church are under-shepherds, for they bear rule as the Spirit-appointed delegates of Jesus Christ, "the Chief Shepherd," and "the good Shepherd," the Ruler and King of the Church (I Pet. 5: 1-4). What the implications of true rule are, this chapter shows (vers. 11-22).

Ezekiel clearly implies that the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile do not mark a merely temporary interruption in the rule of the Davidic house. For an indeterminate period Israel is to have no other king than Jehovah Himself (ver. 11. *seq.*). Only then will the Davidic line be restored in the person of the Messianic king (ver. 23). In contrast to chs. 12: 10; 19: 1; 21: 25 no stress may be laid on the fact that he is called "prince" (*nasi*, ver. 24), for in 37: 24 he is called king. Rather the title is used to underline that the return to the Davidic kingship will not obscure the kingship of Jehovah.

Ver. 17 should be rendered: "Behold, I judge between sheep and sheep, even the rams and the he-goats." The rams and the he-goats explain the second "sheep." They are the rich and the strong who took advantage of bad and selfish kingship to oppress the poor and weak.

#### *The Restored Land (Chs. 35, 36).*

Though Ezekiel is undoubtedly speaking about the land in a literal sense, it should be obvious that he uses it symbolically as well. Jehovah's ownership of the mountains of Israel is

stressed, for His attitude toward them symbolizes His attitude toward all that is peculiarly His.

First, God's punishment on Edom is announced (ch. 35). Edom symbolizes all who hate (vers. 5, 11; cf. Amos 1: 11; Obad. 10-12; Ps. 137: 7) that which is God's. Edom's sin was the worse because, unlike Assyria (Isa. 10: 5f), and Babylon (Isa. 47: 6), he had never been commissioned by Jehovah to act against Israel. So we can easily see why Edom is singled out (cf. Isa. 34, p. 53). Then Ezekiel proclaims the complete freeing of the land from intrusive nations (36: 1-7), and its restoration to the fruitfulness which had been God's original purpose for it (36: 8-15).

Entirely in line with Isaiah's use of the transformation of nature, it is then made clear (36: 16-38) that even as the desolation of the land was due to the sins of its inhabitants, so its restoration involves their transformation. In what is the climax of his prophecy (vers. 24-27) Ezekiel makes clear the implications of Jer. 31: 31-34). God's new people must be one inwardly transformed. As in Jeremiah, great stress is laid on its being God's action done purely in grace.

#### *The Restored People (Ch. 37).*

Though the language of the vision (vers. 1-14) presupposes a belief in resurrection, it should be clear that it is not the resurrection of dead Israelites that is here under consideration, but the revival of the nation. This is borne out by the gradual reconstruction and resuscitation of the dead bodies. The mention of the opening of their graves (ver. 12f) is explained by "I will bring you into the land of Israel." An application to a national revival of Israel, which will at the same time be a spiritual one, seems inescapable. While dogmatism is out of place, he would be a bold man who would categorically deny that we are seeing the beginnings of fulfilment to-day.

The English obscures the fact that the Hebrew uses the same word for "breath" (vers. 5, 6, 8, 9, 10) and "wind" (ver. 9), while in either case it could be rendered by "spirit."

National revival presupposes national unity, and in vers. 15-28 this is represented symbolically. The translation "stick" (ver. 16), though linguistically justifiable, misses the meaning. It is the ruler's staff or rod that is meant. The uniting of the rods means that there will be only one king over them (ver. 22).

Though "the children of Israel" (which includes Judah) in ver. 21 seems to suggest that Ezekiel is thinking primarily of those from the Northern Kingdom that had gone into exile, the possibility cannot be ruled out that he is referring to those

left in the land (cf. ch. XI on Jer. 2: 1-4: 4). This raises a matter which can only be mentioned, but not discussed, here. There are a number of prophetic passages which foretell the restoration of the Northern tribes, e.g. Hos. 3: 4f; 14; Isa. 11: 13; Jer. 31: 1-9, etc. While we personally are convinced that the Jews of to-day contain within their number representatives of all the tribes, yet we equally do not feel that this can be regarded in any way as an adequate fulfilment of such prophecies. Unfortunately the topic is normally dealt with either by what seems to us hardly legitimate treatment of both the Scriptures and history, or is virtually ignored. May it be that the conditional element enters in here too? Did Judah in exile make the response God demanded, while the older exiles of the North refused? It may be, for the topic hardly seems to find a mention in the New Testament. This uncertainty shows, however, that much dogmatism on far more abstruse matters is hard to justify.

### *The Last Enemies* (Chs. 38, 39).

Instead of letting themselves be guided by Rev. 20: 7ff, many prophetic expositors have been misled by the apparent relationship of these chapters to ch. 40 *seq.*, and have placed ch. 38f first in time. Between 33: 21 and 40: 1 over twelve or thirteen years elapse (see above on ch. 33). If Josephus is to be trusted, chs. 40-48 may very well originally have appeared as a separate book. It is therefore much wiser to see in ch. 38f the great final rebellion against God foretold in Rev. 20: 7ff. This seems to be borne out by verses like 38: 8, 11, 12, 14, 17.

We do not intend to discuss the various identifications of the names in these chapters. It seems, however, most in keeping both with the general language of these chapters, and with the symbolic nature of the book in general, to look upon them not so much as a definite prophecy of identifiable nations, but rather as symbolic names for the nations at the ends of the earth.

39: 25 is not necessarily in conflict with the above tentative explanation. "I will bring again the captivity of Jacob" has no linguistic connexion with "went into captivity" (39: 23). A far more probable translation is: "I will restore the fortunes of Jacob" (R.S.V., N.E.B.).

Contrary to popular exegesis, Sheba, Dedan, and the merchants of Tarshish, so far from opposing the unprovoked assault, seem to be eager to share in the spoils (38: 13).

Ezekiel's vision of the restored community ends with the Spirit of God on the House of Israel (39: 29), which is therefore a transformed community.

*The People at Peace* (Chs. 40-48).

Reference has already been made to the possibility that these chapters may originally have been published by themselves. Certainly they form a unique unit within Ezekiel. Though the usual view is that they should be taken literally—this is irrespective of whether a fulfilment is expected—there are serious grounds for questioning it. No one who takes them literally doubts that we are dealing with a Millennial scene.<sup>1</sup> But the whole concept of a Millennial temple of this type raises serious difficulties. At the present moment there is no spot preferable to another for prayer and worship. To us it seems incredible that the Millennium would mean a spiritually retrograde step. This applies, too, to the confinement of priesthood to a group chosen by birth.

From the literalist side no satisfactory explanation has ever been given for the reintroduction of sacrifices, and the difficulty becomes particularly acute when we find the sin offering (43: 19-25; 45: 17, 18-25—note that the prince has to bring a sin-offering, 45: 22). The suggestion that they are mere memorial sacrifices looking back to the Cross is without support in the section itself, and fails to meet the objection that, if bread and wine suffice now, how much less should the sacrifice of animals be necessary then. The prince (44: 3; 45: 7f, 16f, 22-25; 46: 2-12, 16ff)—he is never called king—is little more than a superintendent of the services, and bears no resemblance to the Messianic king of prophecy.

Finally, it seems imperative to regard the river of 47: 1-12 as symbolic. Quite apart from the fact that it flows out of the peak of a very high mountain (40: 2; 47: 1), it deepens miraculously. No appeal may be made to tributaries, for the whole point is that this is holy water. Much the same must be said of the division of the land.

Once we grasp that there is symbolism in these chapters, we should not be daunted by our inability to understand much of it (cf. the opening vision), but should be rather prepared to see the whole as primarily symbolic. A redeemed people, among whom Jehovah dwells (43: 2-5; 48: 35), cannot be organized haphazardly. In even the smallest details of life and organization the will of God must be done; this is the message of these chapters.

Naturally, Ezekiel is thinking of a restored Israel, a rebuilt temple, and a perfectly kept law. But in the prophet's vision the type loses itself in the fulfilment, the shadow in the substance, the earthly in the heavenly. Both the present and the

<sup>1</sup> Those who see in these chapters Ezekiel's blue prints for the restored community hold that Ezekiel saw in the promised restoration the setting up of the kingdom of God.

Millennium, the Israel of God and the Church of God, the earthly and the heavenly Jerusalem, the law written on tablets of stone and on men's hearts, blend together in a unique combination of literalism and symbolism. While the future will never see a purely literal fulfilment, the present witnesses, partially, the spiritual fulfilment.

*Prophecy and Apocalyptic.*

As the Hebrew prophet looks further and further into the future, the clear-cut lines of his picture become blurred. This may be by the background becoming hazy, or even virtually vanishing. This is particularly the case in Messianic prophecy—note especially the timeless background of the Servant Songs in Isaiah (see p. 58). On the other hand, the whole picture may lose its sharp outlines; Isa. 24–27 is an excellent example of this. Again, we find the use of stock expressions, verging on the symbolic, or even passing over into it; Ezek. 38f, is a good example of this.

In Ezek. 40–48, however, we are introduced to a new form of prophecy. The first peculiarity is that it is *entirely* in vision form. Then, the personal rôle of the prophet is, apparently at least, diminished. He becomes the recorder of what he sees and of the explanations given him. What is yet more important is that the prophet's guide and mentor is an angelic being, and not directly God. When we add to this the symbolic nature of much of the vision, if not of all, we shall realize that this is something new.

Zech. 1–8 are mixed, but on the whole they carry the tendencies of the closing chapters of Ezekiel even further. But it is in Dan. 7–12 that this form of prophecy reaches its Old Testament climax. Here the application is taken out of the prophet's own time, for the vision is for the time of the end, and until then the words are to be shut up and sealed (Dan. 8: 26; 12: 4, 9). To distinguish this form of prophecy from that usually found in the prophetic books, it is normally called apocalyptic.

Daniel was a prophet (Matt. 24: 15), but prophecy stretches from a prophet's concern with the daily details of life (cf. I Sam. 9: 6; I Kings 14: 1ff; etc.) through the proclamation of the eternal principles of the unchanging God to the mysterious foretelling of the distant future. Just as the first only receives casual mention, so the last, as represented by Daniel, quite understandably and correctly, finds its place in the Hebrew canon in the Writings and not in the Prophets.

The place of Daniel in the Jewish canon is widely used as evidence that it must have been written after 200 B.C. "when the canon of the Prophets was closed." This argument overlooks

the fact that the Jewish rabbi was just as capable of distinguishing between apocalyptic and normal prophecy as the modern scholar. Then, the fact that the place of Ezekiel in the canon was challenged as late as the end of the first century A.D. shows that "the closing" of the prophetic canon by 200 B.C. is merely a statement of historic fact, and not of a theory of prophetic inspiration. (Ezekiel was challenged because it seemed to be in contradiction to the Law—a difficulty resolved by Chananiah ben Hezekiah after burning 300 measures of midnight oil—and because it seemed to give a handle to certain gnostic speculations.)