

# The Evangelical Quarterly

*A Theological Review, International in Scope and Outlook, in Defence of the Historic Christian Faith*

Editor : F. F. BRUCE, D.D.

Vol. XXX

JULY-SEPTEMBER, 1958

No. 3

## THE FISHERS AND THE HUNTERS

by G. Ch. AALDERS

**D**R AALDERS, Emeritus Professor of Old Testament in the Free University of Amsterdam, is one of the oldest friends of the QUARTERLY. He became an Associate Editor in 1930, and he has remained an editorial correspondent and an occasional contributor ever since. We welcome this fresh study of Jer. 16: 16.

**J**ER. 16: 16 is an interesting text ; it reads like this: "Behold, I will send for many fishers, saith the Lord, and they shall fish them ; and after will I send for many hunters, and they shall hunt them from every mountain, and from every hill, and out of the holes of the rocks." It must strike us, that this verse immediately follows after what is said in the preceding verses: "Therefore, behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that it shall no more be said, The Lord liveth, that brought up the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt ; but, The Lord liveth, that brought up the children of Israel from the land of the north, and from all the lands whither he had driven them: and I will bring them again into their land that I gave unto their fathers" (vv. 14, 15). Even formally there is a kind of parallelism between the two announcements: both start with "behold", and in both we find added the well-known "saith the Lord" ; which may give occasion to assume some material connection as well. The *Scofield Reference Bible* does not hesitate to qualify the three verses together as "promises"; and indeed the words "and I will bring them again into their land that I gave unto their fathers" undoubtedly bear a promissory character. But the metaphorical language of v. 16 seems scarcely to tally with the idea of a promise. It sounds more menacing than promising, and so we are confronted with the question: what about these fishers and hunters ? Can they perhaps be understood, as a former fellow-student suggested, from forced measures and violent actions to drive the people of Israel back to their country?

One can't be mistaken if he is convinced that it must be worth while to examine the verse most thoroughly, to investigate the use of the employed words, in order to inquire into its real meaning. Let us therefore make an attempt to do this.

First of all then we have to state that the figurative use of fishing and hunting is not uncommon in the Old Testament. So we may point to Isa. 51: 20 where the fate of the sons of Jerusalem is compared with that of "a wild bull (or, as the Revised Version has, an antelope) in a net"; or to Ezek. 12: 13 where the word of the Lord runs with respect to the prince, the king Zedekiah: "my net also will I spread upon him, and he shall be taken in my snare, and I will bring him to Babylon, to the land of the Chaldeans; yet shall he not see it, though he shall die there". A similar verdict is pronounced upon the Pharaoh, the king of Egypt (Ezek. 29: 4): "But I will put hooks in thy jaws, and I will cause the fish of thy rivers to stick unto thy scales, and I will bring thee up out of the midst of thy rivers, and all the fish of thy rivers shall stick unto thy scales". Again the prophet Amos says unto the "kine of Bashan, that are in the mountains of Samaria", the grandees of the kingdom of the Ten Tribes: "The Lord God hath sworn by his holiness, that, lo, the days shall come upon you, that he will take you away with hooks, and your posterity with fish-hooks" (Amos 4: 2); and Habakkuk pictures the activities of the Chaldeans in this manner: "They take up all of them [i.e., other nations] with the angle, they catch them in their net, and gather them in their drag; therefore they rejoice and are glad" (Hab. 1: 15). At a first glance over these texts it is to be observed, that the metaphorical use of fishing and hunting always has an unfavourable sense, it indicates evil which is brought upon those who are the objects of the action. This does not prove with necessity that hunting and fishing in Jer. 16: 16 must have the same tendency; the sense might possibly hold an exceptional position. But it certainly is a warning not to be too rash in understanding the verse as a promise.

Now we turn to the words which are employed. The substantive noun "fishers" in the Hebrew of the Old Testament, apart from Jer. 16: 16 where it has a figurative sense, is only found in Ezek. 47: 10 in the visionary scene of the temple-river, in the literal sense of "fishermen"; the same sense has the word in Isa. 19: 18 (in a slightly varied form, which according to the *Qere* may likewise be read in Jer. 16: 16). With regard to the verb "to fish" we have to state that our verse is the only place where it occurs. According to the Lexicon of Köhler and the Oxford Lexicon it can be defined as "catch" (fishes). This may not be too helpful to determine the exact signification of the metaphorical use, but we surely may observe that, as the "fisher" in the literal sense of the word

generally has not in view the benefit of the fishes, but tries to catch them for his own benefit, there is a trend for the figurative application rather in an unfavourable than in a favourable direction, as far as the object is concerned.

The substantive noun "hunter" occurs nowhere else than in Jer. 16: 16; but we meet with the verb "hunt" quite a number of times; in the literal sense (and always to an unfavourable effect in reference to the object): Gen. 27: 3, 5, 33 (Isaac calls upon his son Esau to take his weapons and go out to the field and take him some venison), Lev. 17: 13 (a legal provision with respect to catching any beast or fowl that may be eaten), Job 38: 39 ("wilt thou hunt the prey for the lion?"); figuratively: Ps. 140: 11 ("evil shall hunt the violent man to overthrow him"), Prov. 6: 26 ("the adulteress will hunt for the precious life"), Job 10: 16 (the sufferer complains to God, "Thou huntest me as a fierce lion"), Lam. 3: 52 ("thine enemies chased me sore, like a bird, without cause"), Lam. 4: 18 (the people of Zion of their foes, "They hunt our steps, that we cannot go in our streets"), Mic. 7: 2 ("they hunt every man his brother with a net"). In Ezek. 13: 18, 20 the *Po'el* of the verb is used of the women that "hunt souls". In all these cases the unfavourable tenor is indisputable: the "hunting" is an attempt to do harm to those who are said to be "hunted". And this points very strongly in the direction that Jer. 16: 16 cannot be interpreted otherwise than that the "hunters" who "hunt" the people of Israel so obstinately and persistently "from every mountain and from every hill" and even "out of the holes of the rocks" must be regarded as their enemies who are pursuing their calamity. These "hunters" are instruments in the hands of the Lord to bring his severe punishment upon his people.

And what we have found thus as the result of our inquiry into the signification of the words according to the Hebrew idiom, is fully confirmed by the next verse, v. 17, which is a causal sentence, throwing a clear light upon v. 16. Why will the people of Israel be "fished" and "hunted"? "For", as the Lord says, "mine eyes are upon all their ways: they are not hid from my face, neither is their iniquity hid from mine eyes". Their sins are perfectly well known to the Lord, and therefore he will send the "fishers" and "hunters", his instruments to execute his judgment upon them. So it is established: Jer. 16: 16 is a menace, not a promise; it is a verdict passed upon Israel on account of the mischief the people had done, which has not escaped the knowledge of the Lord.

But now then, how is the threat of v. 16 to be combined with the manifest promise of the preceding verses 14 and 15? The two elements, promise and menace, seem to be utterly incompatible; the one seems to exclude the other. Therefore a number of critical commentators think it necessary and justifiable to delete the promise. They are of the opinion that the verses 14 and 15 which reappear in Jer. 23: 7, 8, have been wrongly introduced here; they are—so they argue—absolutely contrary to the context, they are inconsistent with the announcement of v. 13 (“Therefore will I cast you out of this land into a land that ye know not . . . and there shall ye serve other gods day and night, where I will not shew you favour”) as well as with the threat of v. 16, and therefore they are entirely out of place. But this is certainly not the way to solve the problem which shows up here. From the viewpoint of textual criticism there is not the slightest motive to regard the verses 14 and 15 as not belonging to the original text. They appear in the Septuagint and other ancient versions as well as in the Hebrew text. And to delete them on account of the difficulty which presents itself to us is a hypercritical procedure, which is more like cutting the Gordian knot than making a serious attempt to disentangle it. I on the contrary will make an endeavour here to bring the problem to a solution. But beforehand I think I may present an argument from the text which makes it highly plausible that the disputed verses really form an incontestable element of it. In v. 11 the prophet is instructed to convey a divine message unto his people, and in this message which runs through the verses 11-13 the people continually is addressed in the second person, and in vv. 16-18 the third person is used, which is caused by the fact that in vv. 14 and 15 we meet with a citation of a standing expression “the Lord liveth, that brought up the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt”, which is predicted to be changed into a similar but varied standing expression in connection with the fate which will be brought upon the people. Because in these standing expressions the phrase “children of Israel” is employed, the verses 16-18 pass on to the third person. If we think away the verses 14 and 15, the transition from the second person in the verses 11-13 to the third person in vv. 16-18 is exceedingly strange, but through the medium of the verses 14 and 15 it is very natural.

Now, in looking for a solution of the problem we are faced with, I wish to make the remark that a close connection of promise and threat in prophecy is not so contrary to reason as a number of scholars suppose. At any rate in the prophecy of Jeremiah it is

not at all unusual. I point to Jer. 4: 27: “For thus hath the Lord said, The whole land shall be desolate; yet will I not make a full end”; these last words indicate that the Lord’s judgment will not be carried on unto total annihilation: a ray of hope gleams through the dark prospect. Similarly in Jer. 5: 10 the announced enemies are commanded, “Go ye up upon her walls, and destroy; but make not a full end”. And in Jer. 30: 7 the prophet has to cry out, “Alas! for that day is great, so that none is like it; it is even the time of Jacob’s trouble”; but he is allowed to add, “he shall be saved out of it”. Even in Jer. 16: 14 f. itself one observes a combination of promise and threat; it is impossible to understand these verses as mere promise: in the announcement: “the days come that it shall be said, The Lord liveth, that brought up the children of Israel from the land of the north, and from all the lands whither he had driven them” we most definitely discern the divine threat, that the children of Israel will be carried away from their land to the land of the north and to other lands, though the ray of hope is not lacking: the Lord shall bring them back from this land of the north and the other lands to their ancestral home.

Moreover, in Jer. 16: 14 f. the idea of the threat is the most prominent. The direct tendency of the announcement is to warn the people that an expatriation into foreign lands is imminent; therefore it associates itself with what the Lord says in v. 13, “I will cast you out of this land into a land that ye know not, neither ye nor your fathers”. This exile is not to be everlasting, just as in Jer. 4: 27 and 5: 10 there is said not to be “a full end”. But if they return—and that there will be a return is said purposely: “I will bring them again into their land that I gave unto their fathers”—then the memory of the exile will penetrate much deeper than that of the Egyptian bondage, and so the common expression which mentions the bringing up of the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt will make place for a varied saying, which mentions the bringing up from the land of the north, and from all the lands whither they have been driven. As we notice, this reference to the two analogous expressions primarily has in view to picture the terribleness of the coming exile; it will be worse than the bondage of Egypt, it will make a deeper impression upon the people than the former. And so we can sufficiently understand how the verses 14 and 15 have an essential place in the thrilling sermon the prophet has to preach unto his people.

Finally it may be of interest to answer the question: what is the land of the north, where the people of Israel will be driven to, and

who are the fishers and hunters indicated in Jer. 16: 16? The "land of the north" is mentioned by Jeremiah time and again as the land from where the "evil shall break forth upon all the inhabitants of the land" (Jer. 1: 14), cf. also 4: 6; 6: 1, 22; 10: 22; in Jer. 25: 9 this is more accurately specified: "Behold, I will send and take all the families of the north, saith the Lord, and Nebuchadrezzar the king of Babylon, my servant, and will bring them against this land, and against the inhabitants thereof". Doubtless therefore the "fishers" and the "hunters" must be regarded as the soldiers of Nebuchadrezzar; they will perform their task in an extraordinarily thorough manner, they will pursue the fleeing children of Israel from every mountain and from every hill, even out of the holes of the rocks—there will be no escape whatever. But, what to think of the addition, "all the lands whither he had driven them"? Does this addition point to other inimical powers which will succeed the action of Nebuchadrezzar? And is this idea of succeeding foes included in the word "after" which is employed in v. 16? A clear and decisive answer to this question is presented by the younger contemporary prophet Ezekiel, living in exile in the land of Babel, after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., as he recalls the memory of what has happened with this catastrophe. He has to convey to his fellow-exiles the word of the Lord, saying: "Son of man, when the house of Israel dwelt in their own land, they defiled it by their own way and by their doings: their way was before me as the uncleanness of a removed woman. Wherefore I poured my fury upon them for the blood that they had shed upon the land, and for their idols wherewith they had polluted it, and I scattered them among the heathen, and they were dispersed through the countries; according to their way and according to their doings I judged them" (Ezek. 36: 16-19). From this divine word it is manifest that the expression "all the lands", which is employed in Jer. 16: 15, and likewise in a number of similar announcements of the fall of Jerusalem, e.g., Jer. 9: 16; Ezek. 12: 15, does not refer to other inimical activities, but simply to the overpowering of Israel by Nebuchadrezzar, the king of the Chaldees. We notice that exactly the same kind of expression is used to denote what *has happened* as to prophesy what is *going to happen*; and therefore we have an authoritative interpretation. Consequently we shall have to understand the "fishers" and the "hunters" as referring to the same single sport. Though "fishing" is a quite different activity from "hunting", in the metaphorical language these two words point to the same fact,

the single fact of Israel's overthrow by Babylon, and the figure tends to indicate how thorough and ineluctable this overthrow will be. So the word "after" has not to be pressed, it belongs to the imagery; the fate of Israel will be so radical, as if a crowd of fishers, followed by a multitude of hunters, had cleared the whole country of fish and game. Of course, the question may be put, for what reason the proceedings of Nebuchadrezzar are so constantly characterized in adding expressions as "all the lands" etc.? Well, this may be explained from the fact that such a mighty empire as that of Babylon was formed by a conglomerate of a number of countries and nations. Next to this we have to remember how part of the people who were not carried away to Babel took refuge in Egypt (Jer. 43: 4-7). And finally we also have to keep in mind how in the ancient world prisoners of war were sold as slaves into lands which did not belong to the great empires, cf. Joel 3: 6.

But, however complete the dispersion of Israel by Nebuchadrezzar may be, the Lord says: "the days come that it shall be said, The Lord liveth, that brought up the children of Israel from the land of the north, and from all the lands whither he had driven them"; and this did come to pass in the days of Cyrus, the king of Persia, as the book of Ezra informs us: "that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying, Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, the Lord God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Who is there among you of all his people? his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the Lord God of Israel (he is the God) which is in Jerusalem" (Ezra 1: 1-3). And so the children of Israel, that were fished by many fishers and hunted by many hunters, were brought back again into their land that the Lord had given unto their fathers.

*Heemstede, The Netherlands.*