

The Babylonian Element in Ezekiel.

BY PROF. C. H. TOY, D. D.

§ I. EZEKIEL'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS BABYLON.

1. The almost complete silence of the earlier prophets, down to the end of the 7th century, B. C., in respect to the Babylonian kingdom; is what we should expect from the political relations of the time, and the method of the prophetic exhortations. The prophets were practical preachers and statesmen, who dealt with foreign nations only as these came into actual contact with Israel, and from the time of Amos to that of Jeremiah Babylon was merely a restless, hardly-managed dependency of Assyria, with no important independent political power, not formidable as an enemy, or valuable as a friend. After various revolts and wars it was finally completely subdued B. C., 710 by Sargon, who took the title of King of Babylon, and held his court in the city probably for several years; and it seems to be just at this time that Micah declared (ch. iv. 10) that Judah should be carried away out of the city into the country and as far as Babylon. It was not long after the destructive expedition of Sargon into southern Palestine, which filled the land with dismay (B. C. 712 or 711), and was not improbably connected with the embassy of Marduk-bal-iddin (Isa. xxxix.), who before his last, ill-fated struggle for independence, may have wished to gain the friendship of the petty kings of Palestine. The genuineness of the prediction ascribed to the prophet Isaiah in Isa. xxxix., 2 Kings xx. may fairly be regarded as doubtful, seeing that this whole historical insertion (chs. xxxvi.-xxxix.) bears the marks of a later date, and the book of Kings belongs to the period of the exile. The mention of Babylon in Micah, then, the only one certainly earlier than Jeremiah, is nothing but a consequence of the temporary position of the King of Assyria in that city, and has nothing to do with a kingdom of Babylon. The sole mention of this last is found in the prediction of Isaiah, if this be genuine.

2. In B. C. 625 the Assyrian empire fell before the attack of the Medes and Babylonians, who divided its territory between them, Palestine naturally falling to the latter; Josiah, King of Judah, became a vassal of Babylon and lost his life in an attempt to prevent Pharaoh Necho from marching against his suzerain. The prophet Jeremiah assumed the same friendly attitude towards Babylon, opposed with all his might alliance with Egypt and rebellion against Nebuchadrezzar, wrote to the captives to make themselves at home in the land of their exile, and carried his advocacy of the Babylonian supremacy so far as to incur the suspicion of treachery to his own country, and the hearty hatred of the national party. He spoke no word against Babylon, but predicted a speedy return of Israel to their own land.

3. On this point Ezekiel is completely at one with Jeremiah—while he looks to his people's restoration to Canaan, he is thoroughly friendly to Babylon. He sides with Nebuchadrezzar against Egypt and Tyre—promises to the Babylonian King the spoil of the latter (xxvi. 7-14), and when his attack had failed* gives him Egypt in compensation (xxix. 18-20). In portraying the attack of Gog on Israel, the allies whom he assigns to the northern horde are nearly identical with the allies of Tyre the enemy of Nebuchadrezzar. He has no word of blame or reproof for the King of Babylon—he does not denounce him for holding Israel in captivity—when the tidings of the fall of Jerusalem come, it is not against the conqueror but against Israel that he lifts up his voice (xxxiii. 21-29)—the judgment of God on Ammon, Moab, Edom and Philistia is announced for their hostility to Israel, but there is no word of judgment on Babylon. This forbearance is extended to the Babylonian religion. The idolatry of Israel is denounced, the idols of Egypt are to be destroyed, but Bel and Nebo and Marduk, Nebuchadrezzar's special god are unmentioned.

4. All this is in striking contrast with the tone of later prophecies, as Jer. l. li.; Isa. xiii., xiv., xlvi. xlvii, in which Babylon is treated as the enemy of Israel, and therefore to be punished with destruction.

5. The difference of tone is explained by the difference of the historical circumstances. To Jeremiah and Ezekiel Babylon was the supreme political power of the world, victorious over all enemies, firmly established, and therefore the safest guardian of Israel. They saw that it would be madness in a petty kingdom in Palestine to set itself

*Whether Nebuchadrezzar took Tyre or not (on which point Josephus' citation of authorities seems to me to amount to little), still the prophet says that neither he nor his army had wages for his service against Tyre.

up against this overwhelming force. They believed that God's providence now pointed to submission; that, as he used the Babylonian King to chastise sinful Israel, so he had his own plans for the restoration of his people to national dignity and righteous prosperity, and that those plans could be carried out only by yielding to the superior strength of Babylon, repenting of sin, turning to Yahwe and husbanding the national resources for the future.

The aspect of things naturally changed when Cyrus entered on his conquering career, and approached the Euphrates. The prophets looked on him as the agent of the glorious deliverance that God had in store for Israel. Babylon, on the other hand, was now regarded as the oppressive power that held the chosen people back from the enjoyment of its rights—this power must be crushed in order that Israel may be restored. In the second Isaiah and Jer. l. and li. there is no friendly feeling for Babylon, nothing but bitter reproach for its pride, sarcasm for its religion, and exultation over its approaching downfall.

This prophetic point of view is not ethical or religious, but national. The Babylon of Ezekiel was not less proud, oppressive and idolatrous than that of the second Isaiah. There is no indication that the policy of Nabunahid, who surrendered to Cyrus, was different from that of Nebuchadrezzar who destroyed Jerusalem. The Babylonian treatment of the Jewish exiles appears to have been humane and liberal throughout. But in the days of Ezekiel Israel's hope was in keeping quiet and maintaining friendly relations with Babylon, and the prophet has no word to say against its moral and religious character; in the days of Cyrus the hope of Israel was in Babylon's overthrow, and the prophets of the time freely denounce it on ethical and religious grounds. They were single-minded in their devotion to their people—they held up for them the standard of holiness of life as the condition of Yahwe's favor—nevertheless their judgment of foreign nations was determined by the political relation of these to Israel.

6. Ezekiel, then, is definitely on the side of Babylon. He sees no hope of present independence for Israel, and his utterances consist almost entirely of castigation of his people's sins, and elaboration of a plan of national life for the restoration. It does not appear that his sympathy with Babylon brought him into disfavor with the people. They were deaf, indeed, to his exhortations (xxxiii. 32), but the elders came to inquire of Yahwe through him (xx. 1), and he seems to have been uniformly treated with respect.

§ II. BABYLONIAN IDEAS.

1. Ezekiel's position would naturally bring him into contact with Babylonian ideas, and his friendly attitude towards the country would predispose him to accept them in so far as this was not inconsistent with his loyalty to his own people and religion. How far the books of the public libraries at Babylon and elsewhere would be accessible to him we have no means of knowing; but a residence of thirty years must have taught him much. It is to be regretted that he says so little of Babylonian customs and ideas; the reports of such an observer would have been of the highest value for us. As it is, we have only one or two general hints besides the history of the Garden of Eden.

2. The belomancy described in xxi. 26 f. (Eng. Vers. 21 f.) was a common practice in Babylon and elsewhere. It is referred to nowhere else in the Old Testament, but is natural in the mouth of Ezekiel, who might have seen the ceremony performed, as we now have it figured on Assyrian and Babylonian monuments (see Lenormant, *La Divination*, ch. II.)

The first date of the beginning of Ezekiel's ministry (chap. i. 1) seems also to be reckoned from the era of Nabopalassar B. C. 625, from which to 534 would be about thirty years. The only other supposition that has any plausibility, namely, that the prophet gives the year of his own life, is rendered improbable by the phraseology, which is in the manner of reckoning from a chronological epoch; nowhere else is such a mode of giving a man's age found. This date (verse 1) seems to be from the prophet himself; the second date (verse 2), which gives the Jewish reckoning, is from the hand of an editor, who speaks of Ezekiel in the third person. It would appear, therefore, that Ezekiel had adopted the Babylonian mode of reckoning time, an indication that he had not held himself aloof from the life of the nation in whose midst his lot was cast.

3. Another apparent point of contact between Ezekiel and Babylon, I mean his use of Eden and the cherub, requires more careful consideration.

Let us first look at the occurrence of those words in the books of the Old Testament whose date can be fixed with some approach to exactness.

Outside of the Pentateuch Eden, as the name of the primeval paradise, is found only twice in other books than Ezekiel. Isa. li. 3 mentions it simply as the "garden of Yahwe," a type of fertility and gladness; I hold this passage to belong to about B. C. 540. With this may be compared Gen. xiii. 10, where the plain of the Jordan is

similarly compared to the "Garden of Yahwe"; in Gen. ii., iii., the name is the "garden of Eden," or simply the "garden." In Joel ii. 3 this fuller phrase also occurs: the land is likened to the "garden of Eden." The prophecy of Joel seems to me to be post-exilian. It is not my purpose here to go into a discussion of the date of Isa. xl.-lxvi. and Joel. In regard to the latter I will only say that the reference to the temple as existing (i. 14) and to the people as being partly in captivity (iv. 1, 2), the mention of Tyre and Sidon and Philistia as principal enemies of Israel (iv. 4-6) together with Edom and Egypt, the silence respecting a King of Judah, and the general religious phraseology appears to me to point to a time not long after the building of the second temple. If this view is correct, reference to Eden outside of the Pentateuch does not occur before Ezekiel. If Joel be put just before the exile or even in the beginning of the eighth century B. C., there is still nothing more than a bare mention of Eden except in Ezekiel and the Pentateuch.

A similar remark may be made of the cherub. Leaving out the general reference in the post-exilian psalm civ. 3, 4, we find outside of Ezekiel and the Pentateuch only Ps. xviii. 11, where the cherub is a personification of the thunder-cloud or a symbolical creature, its form not described, which somehow stands in connection with this phenomenon. There is the related conception of the seraph in Isa. vi. Both of these appear to belong to the popular idea of the Israelites, and may date from the beginning of their history.

When we turn to Ezekiel we find the pictures of Eden and the cherub drawn with remarkable fulness of detail. First his references to Eden: "Thou hast been in Eden the garden of God; every precious stone was thy covering . . . the workmanship of thy tabrets and of thy pipes (or, jewel-settings) was prepared for thee in the day that thou wast created . . . thou wast perfect in thy ways from the day that thou wast created till iniquity was found in thee" (xxviii. 13, 15) "The cedars in the Garden of God could not hide him; the cypresses were not like his boughs, and the plane-trees were not like his branches" (xxxii. 8). The resemblance of this picture to that in Genesis and its greater elaborateness in certain respects lie on the surface. And Ezekiel recurs to it again and again. The great prominence that he gives to it and the fulness of detail into which he enters indicate special interest in the story on his part and special sources of information. Where could he have got the information except from Babylonia? And, remembering the silence of all Old Testament writers before him on these points, does it not become probable that it is now for the first time that the Eden history takes shape among

the Israelites, and that it was incorporated into the prepatriarchal narrative after the exile?

Ezekiel has three different representations of the cherub: 1. xxviii. 14, which seems to be derived from the figure in Solomon's temple—the epithet “covering” being suggested by the fact that the cherubim “covered” the mercy-seat with their wings (1 K. viii. 7; Ex. xxv. 20), the “anointed” either referring solely to the king, or a general epithet of the cherub as a part of the sanctuary which was consecrated by anointing (Ex. xl. 9)—the “holy mountain of God” may be the temple-hill, or it may be specially a designation of the altar with its burning coals or “stones of fire” (cp. Isa. vi. 6); in xlii. 15 the altar is called “mountain of God” (הַר־אֱלֹהִים) and “hearth of God” (מִזְבֵּחַ אֱלֹהִים) as being the center and essence of the sacrificial service; in the midst of this hearth the cherub is said to walk as the representative of God himself or of his ideally perfect creature and minister. It does not appear what the form of this cherub was except that it was winged, and the Babylonian monuments present nothing similar to it. I pass it by, therefore, with the single remark that, as a Phœnician was the designer of Solomon's temple, it is not likely that its cherub-figure came from Egypt, it was more probably Babylonian in its origin, though we are unable to give proofs of such an origin, and that, as to the cherub of Exodus in the Tabernacle, our opinion of its form will depend on our view of the date and historical value of the descriptions of that book. 2. In Ezekiel's opening vision the cherub-face is identified in one place (x. 14) with that of the ox, though in the same connection the name cherub is given to the complex living creature with its four faces of ox, man, lion and eagle (ver. 1, 3, &c.)—the feet were those of a calf, but the general appearance was human. 3. In the description of the temple (xli. 18, 19) the cherub carved on the walls had only two faces, lion and human, and this is all that is said of it. It may be assumed that these last two forms were of Babylonian origin; Lenormant gives satisfactory proof of this in his “Origines de l'histoire,” ch. iii. It is not necessarily true that the cherub-forms were bodily copies of Babylonian figures—the prophet may have got from these only the suggestion of composite creatures, and fashioned his material to suit the symbolism he had in mind. But the whole conception of this symbolism seems to be Babylonian in form, though the lofty moral and religious ideas attached to it by the prophet are the product of Israelitish thought.

4. One other point may be suggested—whether Ezekiel got a hint or impulse towards a more completely organized religious cultus and ritual from the Babylonians. There is extant no codification of the

priestly ritual before the exile—we are left to gather its details from the rare and brief statements of the historical books and the psalms. While in the book of Deuteronomy we have the Tora as it was conceived by the prophets in the early part of Josiah's reign or perhaps a half-century before, and in Leviticus the fully developed priestly ritual of the time of Ezra and Nehemiah and later, we find only in Ezekiel any formal statement of temple-ritual in the times preceding Ezra's visit to Jerusalem from Babylon. That there was such a ritual we may take it for granted, and we may be equally sure that Ezekiel's sketch was not inferior in fulness of elaboration to what existed before him. What led him to draw up this complete scheme of temple-service, found in chs. xliii.—xlvi. of his book? Jeremiah, in whom, however, the priest seems to have been sunk in the prophet, thought of nothing of this sort. Hilkiah, who was high-priest under Josiah when the book of the Tora was found in the temple, attempted no codification—this was left to the priest-prophet of the Babylonian exile.

Now there was undoubtedly a good deal in the circumstances of the time to force on Ezekiel's attention the necessity of some such rigid ritual scheme of national life as he gives in the last chapters of his book. The nation seemed to him going to pieces politically, and morally and religiously; the main reason of this was their faithlessness to their God, their neglect of his worship, and this worship would be secured by a strict temple-law. The restored nation must be guided by a more definite rule of service than had hitherto existed.

This is true. Yet it is worth while to ask whether the idea of presenting this better defined scheme was not fostered and brought to maturity by the ecclesiastical system of the people among whom he was living. We have already seen reason to believe that he was in somewhat close contact with them, that he had opportunity of knowing their customs, that he possibly admired and honored this nation whose dread king was so potent an instrument in the hands of the God of Israel for carrying out his designs. The Jews were never in these early times, as they have never since been, averse to getting suggestions from their neighbors. In Ezekiel's time the Babylonian cultus was not only elaborate, but was recorded in books. The numerous and splendid ceremonies, the offerings, the interpretation of omens, the celebration of feast-days of deities required the constant care of a host of priests, who were supported by the gifts of the worshipers and from the property attached to the temples. It was a religious organization far in advance of that which existed in Israel, and it would not be strange if acquaintance with so well arranged a

system suggested to the prophet the desirability of something like it for his own people.

There are not data for a detailed comparison between Ezekiel's scheme and the Babylonian temple-organization, nor is it likely that he took from the latter much more than the general idea. The materials were already at hand in existing customs, which he had merely to develop and systematize. The provision that would most naturally suggest a borrowing is the assignment of land near the temple to the priests—an arrangement that then existed in Babylon, but seems not to have existed in Israel up to that time.

So far as appears, the movement for a stricter ritual, which culminated in Ezra's visit to Jerusalem, originated with Ezekiel. Its influence on the succeeding history of the Jews is familiar—it gathered up the formal elements of the nation's religious life into a mass, and carried it on to the point that called for the prophetic protest of John the Baptist, and the completion of Israel's spiritual development in Jesus Christ.

It is hardly necessary to remark that such a borrowing as this in no wise detracts from the true religious originality of Israel. The nation cast the materials thus gained from other peoples into the crucible of its own thought, and thence produced ideas, whose superiority to those of the Babylonians is demonstrated by the history of the world. To trace the genesis of Jewish religious forms and ideas is to follow the guidance of God by which the Jews became the religious teachers of the world and prepared the way for Jesus of Nazareth. Whatever the seed, and whatever the soil into which it was cast, the fruit was no less the creation of the Divine maker of all things, in whose hands all the experiences of Israel were fashioned into a form destined to be one of the great educating influences of the race.