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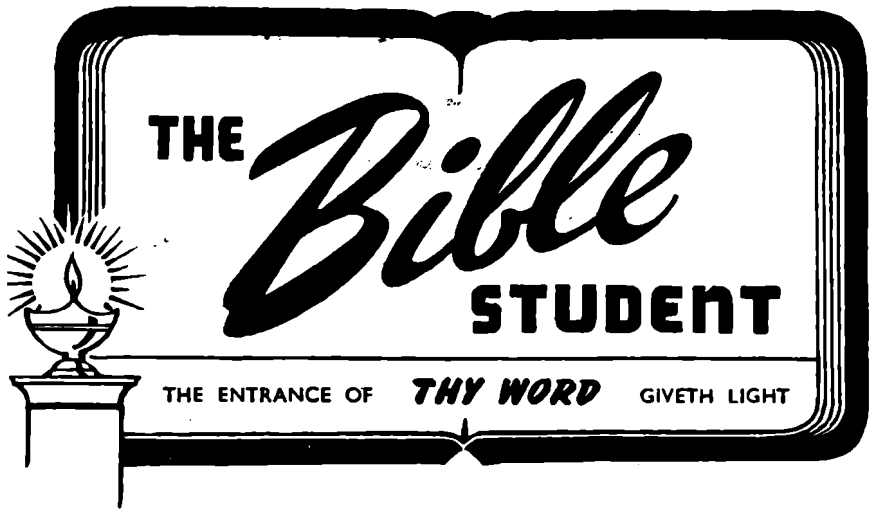
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Editor: A. McDONALD REDWOOD

THE PROPHECY OF EZEKIEL

H. L. ELLISON, B.A., B.D.

The Absolute Justice of Jerusalem's Punishment (14: 12-23)

Before passing on to a long series of oracles foretelling and motivating the doom of Jerusalem and of the royal house, Ezekiel had first to deal with any false hopes that might weaken the effect of his message. We have already seen how he dealt with the optimistic oracles of the false prophets (Vol. XXV. No. 1, p. 1-6). There yet remained that last hope that springs eternal in the human breast, the hope that somehow, it might be out of the kindness of God's heart, it might be because of one's link with some godly man, God might make some form of exception in one's favour. It is this hope that Ezekiel now demolishes.

To appreciate the full weight of the oracle we must remind ourselves how Ezekiel had already stressed the evil of Jerusalem, especially in the long vision 8:1-11:25 (Vol. XXIV, p. 115-121, 154-158), and how he had made clear that the future of the nation lay with the exiles under Jehoiachin (11:14-20). But some may have snatched at the mention of those that bore God's mark (9:4) and have said that they at least might involve others in their own safety. God's blunt answer is that, if they were even the most righteous of men, they could not do this.

No entirely satisfactory reason has ever been given why precisely Noah, Daniel and Job are mentioned. Cooke can write (I.C.C.), 'The prophet names three typically righteous men, who, on account of their righteousness, were enabled to achieve a work of deliverance: Noah delivered his family, Gen. 6:8; 7: 1; Daniel his companions, Dan. 1:6-20; Job his friends, Job 42:7-10: but the righteousness of all three together could not deliver the present generation.' While true enough of Noah, it hardly carries conviction for Job and Daniel. Furthermore, it must be looked on as extremely doubtful whether the well-known Daniel is intended at all. His name, as indeed that of the other two Daniels of Scripture, was spelled *Daniyye'l*, but Ezekiel spells it *Dani'el*, or more likely *Dan'el*. He would seem to be referring to a figure of hoar antiquity probably mentioned in tablets discovered at Ras Shamra dating from before 1400 B.C. A scribal error on Ezekiel's

part is most unlikely. If so, we know too little to form any opinion as to why he was mentioned.

On the other hand it should be noted that Job's righteousness was not able to save even his own property and family, and Noah only saved those animals and persons expressly designated by God. So it seems more likely that Ezekiel is stressing not the little they had been able to save, but that they had not been able to save. This would explain why Abraham, who would be far more suitable on the ordinary view, is in fact not named, or for that matter Moses.

The fact that God is bringing on Jerusalem all four—four with the suggestion of completeness—of His major scourges (v. 21) shows the greatness of Jerusalem's sin and the resultant hopelessness that any should escape, except those few marked by God (9:4). *Yet, if there should be left in it any survivors to lead out sons and daughters* (v. 22 R.S.V.; the A.V. and R.V. have missed the point), it would be purely for the sake of the exiles, not for the good of those that escape.

Ezekiel works out the principle underlying this oracle in more detail in ch. 18. Here it will suffice to point out that God's judgments are not on actions as such, but on actions as indicative of character. I may do another's stint of duty as well as my own, but I do not change his character by so doing. Behind Abraham's pleading for Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18) lay the hope that the righteous might yet turn the wicked from their way. When he stopped at ten righteous, it was not from lack of faith in God's mercy, but from his keen understanding that if Lot had not been able to exercise that much influence, there was no hope that he would ever be able to turn the Cities of the Plain from their evil ways. He who does not let himself be influenced by the righteous, cannot expect to be able to profit from the 'merits' of the righteous in the day of judgment.

The Parable of the Vine (15: 1-8)

The comparison of Israel to a vine was an old one, probably as early as Gen. 49:22 (so most modern commentaries), but it was normally used to stress the lack of the fruit desired by God, cf.

Dt. 32:32, Hos. 10:1, Is. 5:1-7, Jer. 2:21. Ezekiel takes this reiterated picture for granted and compares not the cultivated vine of the vineyard, but the wild vine in the forest (i.e. Israel merely as a nation among nations) with other trees and asks what superiority it has (v. 2). The answer is that it obviously has none, but that it is rather inferior in every respect (v. 3). Now, however, that Israel had been charred (R.S.V.) at both ends and in the middle by the exile of Jehoiachin and his companions (v. 4) it was completely useless (v. 5) and there only remained for what was left to be burned up (v. 6 f.). In other words the deportation of Jehoiachin had shown that the time for fruit-bearing was finally past, and therefore only the logical fate of destruction remained for those that were left.

An Allegory of Jerusalem (16: 1-63)

This is, with the probable exception of ch. 40-48, Ezekiel's most elaborate allegory. The fact that it ill accords with modern tastes is no ground for passing over it quickly, for it stresses some of his basic concepts. It may be too that, if we had not developed a false modesty, we should not have so much pernicious sexual description in many a modern novel. Of course the imagery is ugly and unattractive, but it only matches the even more ugly sin it represents.

The chapter falls naturally into four divisions, v. 1-43, 44-52, 53-59 and 60-63. There is every reason for thinking that the first and second division represent distinct but related oracles, while for reasons given in their right place the last two divisions are probably later than the destruction of Jerusalem.

The use of Jerusalem is purely symbolic. It has no reference to the city as such, but to the southern kingdom, which in the first division, as is usually the case in Ezekiel, represents all Israel. No reference of any kind is intended to the pre-Israelite past of the city. Many would see in *the Amorite was thy father, and thy mother was a Hittite* (v. 3, 45) a historic note about the origin of Jerusalem,¹ but it is extremely improbable that this is meant. It

¹ E.g. F.F. Bruce: *The Hittites*.

is far more likely that the Amalekite and the Hittite stand for the Semitic and non-Semitic elements that made up the Canaanite scene.

The Foundling Child God's Bride (16: 1-14)

Ezekiel is far too skilful an artist to make the common mistake of those that deal in allegories. He makes no effort to make the *details* of his story tie up with the details of the Patriarchal period. He is concerned to give a general spiritual picture, not the outward historical one. Two things are stressed, the foundling's completely weak and unwanted position, and her positive and negative ignorance of God.

The former is stressed in v. 4-6. The careful reader of the Patriarchal stories may well notice an apparent inner contradiction running through them, a contradiction which has been used by many modern scholars to strengthen their theories that we need attribute little historical value to them. Sometimes the Patriarchs seem to be rich and powerful, sometimes they seem weak and relatively poor. Though we are not yet able to give a certain explanation, the discoveries of recent archaeology suggest that it may well lie in the conditions of the time, one of great folk-movements that wrought great changes on the face of the Near-East.

Now in Gen. 14:13 we find the title 'the Hebrew' attached to the name Abram. Two meanings for it have normally been offered, either 'descendant of Eber' (cf. Gen. 10:24 f.), or 'the man from the other side', i.e., 'the immigrant', but neither interpretation is supported by the other uses of 'Hebrew', or by the apparently cognate forms discovered by archaeology. An example is its use in Gen. 40:15, for it is impossible to suppose that the descendants of Abraham had grown so powerful in Canaan, or one of its districts, that it had become known to the Egyptians as their land. Equally a different sense seems demanded in Gen. 43:32. The concordance will show that Hebrew is not Israel's name for itself.

Archaeology has established an almost certain link between Hebrew and Habiru (Akkadian), Apiru (Egyptian) and 'prm (Ras Shamra; vowels uncertain), who are found in inscriptions ranging from the 19th to the 12th centuries B.C. It is obviously not a national name; they are 'landless soldiers, raiders, captives and

slaves of miscellaneous ethnic origins'.¹ Some form of poverty, landlessness or lower social standing seems implicit in the name, whatever its actual meaning may be, and so we can best understand it in Ex. 21:2, Dt. 15:12, Jer. 34:9, 14.

If then we bear in mind the almost certain social stigma implied in 'Abram the Hebrew' and that, as the story of Joseph shows, the name clung to his descendants, and if we add the degradation of the slavery in Egypt that followed, it becomes very much easier to understand Ezekiel's very strong picture in v. 4-6.

Far worse, however, is the ignorance of God implied. Whatever the precise implication of *I thoroughly washed away thy blood from thee* (v. 9), we cannot reasonably disassociate it from v. 6, which is best rendered *In thy blood live* (I.C.C.). The pollution of Israel's birth remained until the time of Jehovah's marriage with her (v. 8-10), viz., at Sinai. However high the faith of the leading patriarchs, the beliefs of Abraham's old home had lived on among the people until at least the time of Joshua (Josh. 24:14 f.) We have it also implied in Gen. 35:2, for the action there described was of course merely external, and in the story of the golden calf (Ex. 32), which is best explained by Semitic and not by Egyptian parallels. We have no grounds for thinking Gen. 38:1-6 to be in any way exceptional, and it is a fair supposition that virtually all Jacob's daughters-in-law were drawn from heathen stock, thus largely explaining v. 3. Then 23:3 makes explicit what is here implicit, that Egypt strengthened the root of heathenism in Israel. This is also implied by v. 7 rightly understood. The Hebrew, *I made thee a myriad* (A. V. mg., R.V. mg.,), obviously contradicts the allegory, and the same is true of the A.V. and R.V. text. We should render with LXX and Syriac, *Grow up like a plant of the field* (R.S.V.). In other words the foundling was left to grow up a young savage, by the light of nature, naked! This is probably the main reason why Moses and not Abraham is always looked back to as the founder of Israel's religion.

The *badgers' skin* (v. 10—R.V. *sealskin*) should be simply *leather* (R.S.V.) and so also in Ex. 25:5, etc.

¹ W.F. Albright: *From the Stone Age to Christianity*, p. 182

The Harlot (16: 15-34)

This section covers the spiritual history of the people from the Conquest to the prophet's own time. He speaks of a harlot, and of whoredom or fornication rather than of adultery and of an adulteress, for it is not so much the disloyalty of Israel that is being stressed, as so often, but rather her unnatural and irresponsible wantonness. The adulteress may by some be excused by the strength of passion and blind love, but for a harlot there is no excuse except that of stark necessity. But for Israel there is not even this excuse. She has not been paid by her lovers, but has paid those that have taken their pleasure of her (v. 31, 33 f.).

The first stage in the downward path is in v. 15-22. Here the amalgamation of Jehovah worship with the religion of the Canaanites, which was the besetting religious sin of Israel, is described (see Vol. XXIV, p. 117, or in more detail my *Men Spake from God*, p. 36 f.). This religion, though considered Jehovah worship by the people, was point blank called Baal worship by the prophets without the least qualification. Its climax was human sacrifice (v. 20 f.). There are no reasons for thinking that it was practised after the period of the Judges (and then only exceptionally, Judg. 11:31, 39) until the times of Ahaz and Manasseh (2 Kings 16:3; 21:6, Micah 6:7). But it was always the logical conclusion of bringing Jehovah down to the level of a nature god, for as Jer. 7:31 makes quite clear, it was to Jehovah that these sacrifices were offered. *Molech* (2 Kings 23:10) is only Jehovah's title as king (*melech*) with the rabbinically added vowels of *bosheth* (shame).

The second stage of the downward path is given in v. 23-34, that of open apostasy and idolatry, again a natural consequence of debased religion. The meaning of v. 24 is far from certain. The Greek, Syriac and Latin versions all understood a reference to brothels and their signs, and it is quite likely that Ezekiel is referring to the high places in this way. Since, specially in the northern kingdom, they were centres of immorality in the name of religion, the picture would be apposite.

The truly allegorical nature of Ezekiel's oracle may be seen in his reference to Egypt. So far as we can judge, Egyptian religion, apart from the cult of Isis, who came to be identified with Ashtoreth

or Astarte, was seldom exported, and we have no direct Biblical record of the worship of Egyptian gods, not even in 1 King 11:4-7, where it might have been expected (cf. Vol. XXIV, p. 117). The worship referred to in v. 26 was the constant turning to Egypt for help against Assyria, a practice so strongly condemned by Hosea and Isaiah. To look to Egypt for help implied a recognition of the power of Egypt's gods, even though they might receive no formal worship. Ezekiel's epithet *great of flesh* applied to Egypt (cf. 23:19-21) shows partly Ezekiel's deep repugnance for all things Egyptian, partly the bitter lesson that Israel was so slow to learn from experience that the apparent strength of Egypt was only flabby fat.

The only effect of turning to Egypt in the time of Hezekiah had been the cutting short of Judean territory by Sennacherib, who handed over many of the cities he had captured to the Philistine kings who had remained loyal to him.¹

Ezekiel then passes over to Assyria (v. 28) and Chaldea, i.e., Babylonia named after the ruling people in it (v. 29). For the latter before the rise of Babylon to world power see 2 Kings 20:12-19. The sense has been missed in v. 29; we should render *with the trading land of Chaldea* (R.S.V., cf. R.V. mg.). The Canaanites, particularly in their Phoenician branch, were great traders, and so 'Canaan', 'Canaanite' are used in the sense of trade and trader, e.g., 17:4, Hos. 12:8, Zeph. 1:11, Zech. 14:21, Prov. 31:24. In the case of Assyria the recognition of the power of its gods was actively expressed by the worship of 'the host of heaven' from the time of Ahaz and Manasseh to Josiah's reformation.

It should be specially noticed that he makes not the slightest mention of the many attempts at reformation in the history of Israel. One and all they had been external for all but a handful of people, and the heart of the people had remained unchanged, even if the outward forms of worship had been altered. It has been one of the worst features of traditional exegesis of the Old Testament that it has normally ignored the plain teaching of Ezekiel and of other prophets and has tried to whitewash many of

¹ See Pritchard: *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, p. 288a.

the Old Testament characters and has deliberately placed many incidents in far too favourable a light.

The Judgment on the Harlot (16: 35-43)

Provided we do not try unduly to stress the allegory the main picture is correct. It was the unfaithfulness of Jehoiakim and Zedekiah (see especially 17:13 f., 16) that led to Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of Jerusalem. Though obviously there was no joining together as such of her lovers (v. 37) to destroy her, yet Israel had been progressively weakened by all the peoples she had come into contact with, when she was unfaithful to Jehovah, and in this way they had prepared her for her final doom.

The Allegory of the Sisters (16: 44-52)

A new allegory begins with v. 44, but though it is not the continuation of the preceding one, it is obviously closely linked with it in thought, and no doubt in time too. In the former, Jerusalem, though strictly symbolizing only Judah, obviously refers to the history of Israel as a whole. In the latter Jerusalem stands for the Southern Kingdom only, while Samaria represents the Northern. But what of Sodom?

Sodom is depicted as dwelling *at thy right hand* (v. 46), i.e., south of Jerusalem. The cities of the Plain probably lay at the north end of the Dead Sea¹; i.e., due east of Jerusalem; but since this is an allegory, and Sodom is pictured as balancing Samaria to the north—*at thy left hand*—this is not sufficient evidence on which to hold that a literal Sodom is not intended. But even though *elder* and *younger* (v. 46) mean more and less powerful than Jerusalem (Samaria was a very recent city compared to Jerusalem; 1 King 16:24), it is hardly likely that Ezekiel is joining together two capitals and a mere provincial town. In addition we must remember that there is no parallel in Scripture to the promise of the restoration of Sodom in v. 53, 55. Since the promise to Samaria and Jerusalem in v. 53 is obviously literal, we have no right to spiritualize that to Sodom. Furthermore it is not a restoration of cities that is meant, but of their rightful inhabitants. Samaria had never ceased to

¹ For a different view see *The Westminster Historical Atlas to the Bible*, p. 65 f.

be a city. Sargon immediately after its capture claims, 'The town I rebuilt better than it was before and settled therein people from countries which I myself had conquered'.¹ So it seems reasonable remembering that this is an allegory, and there were no Sodomites to restore, to see in Sodom the small heathen states and cities left round Israel. Since the essential link of the Israelite kingdoms with Canaan is stressed (v. 45), there seem to be no valid grounds for not seeing in Sodom all that had survived of the Canaanites and their culture. After all, most had been smashed by Sennacherib and the remnant were to share in the coming destruction, cf. ch. 25.

The *daughters* of the three sisters are presumably, as so often, the dependent towns and villages of the main cities (cf. Vol. XXV, p. 29).

It is impossible to set out in mathematical terms wherein Jerusalem's sin was greater than that of her sisters. God's standard of judgement takes factors into consideration which can only tentatively be used by men. Sodom's sin was not unnatural, as was that of the harlot Jerusalem; it was the working out of the inherent weakness of Canaanite religion. It should not be forgotten, and it is of outstanding importance for the interpretation of this allegory, that the destruction of Sodom by God was only the first act in His judgement on Canaan that should have been completed by the Israelites at the conquest, but which was in fact carried out very half-heartedly. Israel knew that the religion of Canaan was under the judgement of God, so all copying of it made them more guilty than those whom they copied.

It is doubtless true that the Northern Kingdom never shewed such religious corruption as did Judah in the reign of Manasseh, but it is not here that we have to seek the greater sin of Jerusalem as compared with Samaria. It is rather that Judah refused to learn the lesson of the downfall of the Northern Kingdom (23:11, Jer. 3:6-13).

If I am right in holding that v. 53-59 are a later addition (see below), then the lesson of this allegory is that since Sodom and Samaria rightly went to their doom, there can be no hope at all for Jerusalem, for her sins are even blacker.

¹ See Pritchard: *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, p. 284 b.

The Restoration of the Sisters (16: 53-59)

There are two reasons why we should look on these verses as Ezekiel's later ending to his allegory. The shame he foretells for Jerusalem, which is the main point here, would turn away the hearers' thought from the original lesson of the allegory, which was the certain destruction of Jerusalem. In addition, and more important, until judgement has fallen on Jerusalem, Ezekiel holds out hope for the exiles brought to Babylonia with Jehoiachin, but not for the doomed city. It would be quite inconsistent with the ever darkening gloom of his oracles to give even this qualified word of hope.

All prophecy is contingent (Jer. 18:7-10), and so the promise of restoration to Sodom and Samaria is conditional on their repentance, even though that is not mentioned. But though, largely thanks to the work of Ezekiel, Judah was restored and Israel was not, except in so far as it amalgamated with Judah, the prophecy had a remarkable fulfilment. It was not until the 2nd century B.C. under the Hashmoneans that Jerusalem began to win back something of its old splendour. For long it was outshone by Samaria and other cities of the land.

Reconciliation (16: 60-63)

Here in these verses we have both the conclusion of the allegory of the unfaithful wife and of that of the sisters. The marriage had been broken beyond hope of repair (Jer. 3:1, R.V. mg.) and the full punishment of God had to fall on the sinful people. But, for all that, God would in free grace once again pick them up, once again make a covenant with them, once again take them as His bride. The details of the promise must wait until we come to ch. 36, where they are developed in full, but for the present let us remember Jeremiah's great promise, which will lie behind Ezekiel's message: Behold the days come, saith Jehovah, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah; not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers . . . forasmuch as they brake My covenant, and I had to lord it over them . . . I will put My law in their inward parts, and in their heart will I write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people . . .

I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin will I remember no more (Jer. 31:31-34).

In the light of such an act of grace Jerusalem can be restored to her pre-eminence once more, but there is ever to remain the memory of the path of shame she had trodden. God would blot out the past, but the very memory of it would keep Jerusalem faithful to Him.

(To be continued)

[NOTE: Mr. Ellison's studies on 'Biblical Hebrew Words' are unavoidably held over but will be resumed in next issue (July).—Editor]

‘THE HEIGHTS OF THE HILLS ARE HIS’

A. NAISMITH, M.A.

II. THE MOUNT OF OLIVES

East of the city of Jerusalem there rises a bare, rocky ridge sloping up from an unrepossessing valley and towering somewhat higher than the capital of Israeli, which stands some 2,500 feet above sea level. It is separated from Jerusalem by the Brook Kedron and the Valley of Jehoshaphat, and stretches from North to South commanding a noble view of the city. That eminence is the Mount of Olives. At sunrise the light breaks over the ancient city from above the crest of Olivet, flooding the highest buildings with crimson glory. This elevation has sometimes been designated ‘The Hill of the Prophets’, but, from its associations with the Davidic dynasty, we might justly call it ‘The Mountain of the great King’. From this vantage point our Lord looked toward Jerusalem and wept over it; and from it He also predicted its destruction in that wonderful eschatological utterance familiarly known as ‘the Olivet discourse’. On that occasion He had come from one great mountain within the city’s precincts—Moriah, the place of sacrificial giving—to another outside the city—Olivet, the place of the departing glory. How eloquently significant were His movements on that occasion of all that His first advent was to mean to Him and to His earthly people Israel! The Shechinah glory—in Ezekiel’s prophecy—had halted there: our Lord Himself stood on its summit on His way from the cross to the glory, as He had