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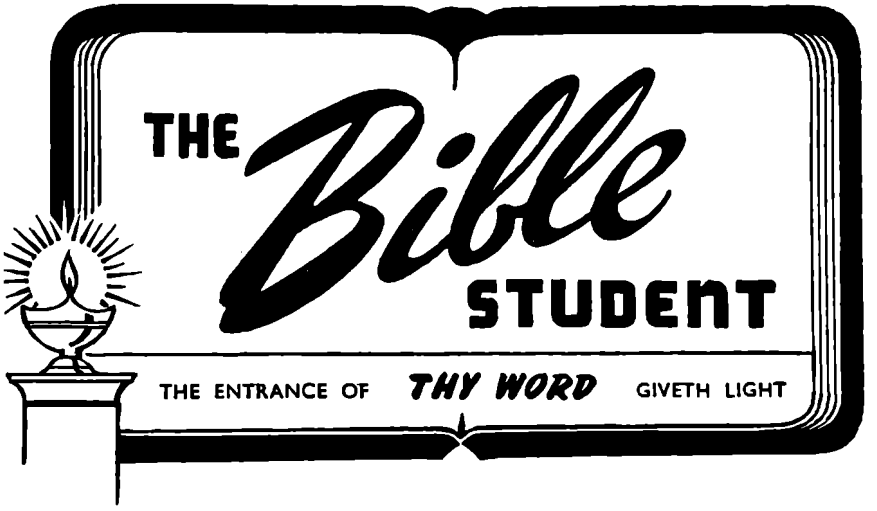

New Series
Vol. XXVI. No. 1

JANUARY
1955

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memories of faithlessness and defeat, of suffering shirked, of self-will and disloyalty, of pride and covetousness, of following the Lord afar off, of having a name to live yet in ways bordering on spiritual death? Or shall it be, in the grace, wisdom and power of God, a *New Year*, a different kind of year, a year dominated by *a purpose to walk with the Lord and to be well-pleasing unto him?*

THE PROPHECY OF EZEKIEL

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The Bloody City (22: 1-16)

The word 'blood' occurs no less than seven times in these sixteen verses. One gets the impression that in the vision accompanying the words Ezekiel saw the city he knew so well through a shimmer of blood.

Because of that concreteness in Hebrew outlook which made it natural for one factor to be considered at a time, as though it were the whole of the truth, many Western expositors have been misled into thinking that verses like Lev. 17:11, Gen. 9:4, etc., teach that the life principle is peculiarly in the blood. But as a fundamental passage like Gen. 2:7 clearly implies, the Old Testament equally recognizes the role of breath, or spirit, in giving and preserving life.

But while a man's breath symbolized above all man's life being lived, e.g., Is. 2:22, Job 27:3; 33:4, for it is from a man's breathing that we best know him to be alive, and the more vigorous that life the deeper the breathing, his blood symbolized above all his life taken by violence*. God is the giver of life, which is outside man's power to bestow. For that reason the taking of life, symbolically expressed by 'the shedding of blood', except by God's permission or command was supremely an insult to Him.

* There is an excellent treatment of this subject in Stibbs: *The Meaning of the Word 'Blood' in Scripture* (Tyndale Press).

This explains the to us rather enigmatic legislation of Dt. 19:1-13. It has no typical meaning that I have been able to discover, and it can only imperfectly be explained as a means for curbing the traditional blood feud. By freeing the unintentional manslayer from civil punishment, but by submitting him to extreme civil inconvenience, possibly for the rest of his life, it is intended to stress what the taking of life means to *God.* The modern indifference to deaths on the road is doubtless a major pointer to the extent to which we have lost the Biblical outlook on life. This reverence for life as God's gift is in part the motivation for the legislation of Lev. 17:1-7, for its abrogation in Dt. 12:20-25 is only permissive; the ideal was still that an animal killed for food should be brought as a peace offering.

It is from this standpoint that we have to understand the list of sins with which Jerusalem is charged in this section. It is called 'the bloody city' (v. 2), not because murder was so frequent, or because it was the worst of its sins, but because all the sins with which it is charged are sins against the true life of man and so infallibly destroy the society in which they are tolerated. This explains the linking with it of the general charge of idolatry (v. 3). The form of idolatry to which Israel was most prone was the reducing of Jehovah to the level of a nature god (see Vol. XXIV p. 117, XXV p. 66). Death is as much a feature of nature as birth, so nature religions have no place for reverence for life as such. The apparent exceptions of higher Hinduism and of Buddhism are due to other reasons; in them it is no question of reverence for life as God's gift.

The first group of sins includes judicial murder (v. 6), doubtless for allegedly high purposes of state, and the perversion of justice by bribery and false witness (v. 7, 9, 12). The princes (*nasi'*) may refer to the heads of the great families, but in the light of the use of the word in 12:12 (see Vol. XXIV p. 159 f) it more likely refers to the corrupter kings.

It would be dangerous anywhere in the Old Testament to demand a purely literal interpretation of v. 9 a and 12 a, and this is particularly the case in Ezekiel. If we may at all judge from passages like Amos 2:6 f, Is. 5:8, Mic. 2:2 (and cf. 1 Kings 21), the

driving motive behind most judicial unrighteousness in Israel was the desire to obtain land. But the landless man was virtually an outcast, with little other possibility of keeping alive than by selling himself into slavery, from which there would be no release, for Jer. 34:8-22 shows that the law of Ex. 21:2, Dt. 15:12 was seldom observed at this period. But even if he did manage to eke out a living as a free man, the very vehemence of Naboth in his refusal to sell his vineyard (1 Kings 21: 3) shows that separated from his patrimony a man lost an essential part of his dignity and standing.

The same principle holds good for v. 7 b, c. Apart from the constant stress in the prophets on God's demand for justice for the stranger, orphan and widow, we have the explicit commands in Dt. 24:17; 27:19, and above all and most strikingly Ex. 22:21-24. The stranger (*ger*, not *nokri* or *zar*) is not a foreigner passing through the country, but one permitted to live in it, i.e., one separated from his natural protectors and dependent on the justice of those in whose midst he lives. For that reason the verb *gur* can be used of the Levite (Dt. 18:6, Jdg. 17:7; 19:1) and even of an Israelite living outside his own tribe (Jdg. 19:16). The orphan and the widow refer not primarily to those that have lost their natural protectors, but to those who in addition have none to take their place. So the maladministration of justice is seen through the shimmer of blood, for those that suffered from it were driven to the bitter straits so graphically described in Job 24:4-12; 30:2-7.

The same holds good of usury (v. 12). In an agricultural community subject to frequent droughts, locust swarms, etc., many were chronically undernourished, and very few had adequate reserves. So any major loan, even if there was no interest to pay, was an almost unsupportable burden, hence the legislation of Dt. 15:1 f. To add interest however small—and it was frequently large—was both to break the Divine law and the debtor.

In the deepest spiritual sense the other sins enumerated also lead to 'bloodshed', for they lead to an inevitable collapse of society. Little more than their enumeration is needed. There is in v. 7 the treating of parents with contempt (RSV), treated as a capital

offence bringing God's curse with it in Ex. 21:17, Lev. 20:9, Dt. 27:16. With this is quite naturally linked a contempt of God's requirements (v. 8). Finally we have a group of sexual sins (v. 9b-11) which cannot find any cloak or excuse in the strength of fallen man's passions, and which destroy the very pillars of society. The eating upon the mountains (v. 9) refers to the orgiastic feasts in the semi-Canaanized high places in which sexual promiscuity played a large part. Sexual promiscuity is always a tremendous evil. Blake was hardly exaggerating when he wrote,

'The Harlot's cry from Street to Street
Shall weave Old England's winding Sheet.'

But when as among the Canaanites—this was 'the iniquity of the Amorite' (Gen. 15:16)—it receives the blessing of religion, there is no deadlier danger to the individual and society. Nothing need be added about the various forms of incest. What needs to be stressed is that Ezekiel sees in offences against the natural modesties of sex (v. 10b) and in adultery (v. 11a) evils as great and deadly as incest and promiscuity of the worst sort. We need not then be surprised that today, when adultery finds many an apologist, unnatural vice is steadily increasing.

For v. 2a see the note on 20:4. 'I have smitten mine hand' (13)—I strike my hands together (RSV)—a gesture of scorn, cf. 6:11, 21:14, 17. 'I will consume thy filthiness out of thee' (v. 15): the following section, though perhaps originally a separate prophecy, explains the implications of this somewhat enigmatic threat. 'Thou shalt be profaned in thyself' (v. 16, RV, AV mg.—the AV text is impossible) is hard to explain; RSV is probably correct in following LXX, Syriac and Vulgate in rendering 'I shall be profaned through you' (so I.C.C., Cam. B., *New Bible Commentary*). The profanation was not so much through the evil life of the survivors of the sack of Jerusalem as through the nations believing that Jehovah had not been able to protect His own people and temple.

Jerusalem the Smelter's Furnace (22:17-22)

This oracle is reminiscent of Jer. 6:27-30. Ezekiel is not concerned, as is Zech. 13:9, Mal. 3.2 f, with God's purifying and

refining of His people, but with demonstrating that there is nothing there to be refined. This gives the true meaning to the threat in v. 15. Such a purification meant the blotting out of the survivors, for there was only filthiness in them. In the meantime this was to be demonstrated in Jerusalem's last agony.

The Corruption of the People (22:23-31)

This oracle is addressed to Jerusalem, the 'her' of v. 24. Cooke argues in I.C.C. that the phrase 'in the day of indignation' (v. 24) refers to the destruction of Jerusalem, and so this is an oracle looking back and explaining God's action. Though I have no objection in principle to such a view, as may be seen from my treatment of 16:53-63 (Vol. XXV p. 70), I consider it unnecessary here. 'The day of indignation' for Judah began when Josiah fell in 609 at Megiddo. This is one of the main thoughts of Jeremiah, and Ezekiel is trying to hammer it home all the time. The yet future destruction of the city was something inevitable, the mere conclusion of a process begun a generation earlier. The past tenses of this section are not referring to the last anguished years of Jerusalem in particular, but to the whole century and a half of decline from Ahaz on, a decline only temporarily held up by the outward reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah. Though it is hardly necessary, the tenses of v. 31 can be explained as prophetic perfects (see note in Vol. XXV p. 175).

Though we might compare v. 25 with Mic. 3:5, there is no real similarity, and the verse stands without any true parallel. There seems little doubt that we should read 'princes' (*nesi'im* for *nebi'im*) with LXX, RSV, I.C.C., Cam. B., *New Bible Commentary* and interpret the word as in v. 6. The princes (*sarim*) of v. 27 are the great men of the land; the translation prince—208 times, captain 125 times, 12 other renderings 84 times—is in so far misleading that no blood connection with the royal house is implied, though those we call princes might well be numbered among the *sarim*.

We must not imagine that when Ezekiel condemns the priests (v. 26), he is suggesting that their ritual neglects are in the same category of iniquity as the outrages on justice by the kings and

their great men. His willingness to place the moral and the ritual side by side in this way has been the cause of the most frequent misunderstanding of his message. It is not the people but the priests he is condemning. He has no interest in seeing unrighteous princes keeping the ritual laws of purity. But the priests by their indifference to and neglect of that portion of the Divine law which only they could expound, showed their lack of respect for God and thereby lost their ability to restrain the unrighteousness of the mighty. The prophets have been sufficiently dealt with in the notes on 13:7, 10 (Vol. XXV p. 5 f).

The people of the land (v. 29) are here almost certainly 'the free, property-owning, full citizens of Judah'*. The phrase, *'am ha-'aretz*, changed its meaning down the centuries, but it was probably always used in a technical sense, and here it will have the same meaning as in 2 Kings 11:14, 18; 21:24; 23:30, 35; 25:19. These free farmers were zealots for the old order as against the court circles in Jerusalem, but their zeal did not extend to doing the will of God. Fanaticism and righteousness seldom find themselves bed-fellows.

I.C.C. interprets v. 30 of the lack of a prophet. While the language suits the interpretation, the historical situation does not. If ever a single prophetic figure could have turned away the wrath of God, it would have been Jeremiah, but he was not even able to postpone the judgment on Jerusalem. It is far more likely that Ezekiel is thinking of the kings. The downward course of Judah began in earnest after the death of Jehoshaphat. In the long story of decline the names of Hezekiah and Josiah stand out as apparent factors for good. But when we see them through the eyes of Isaiah and Jeremiah, we find that however saintly and earnest they may have been in their private lives, they were quite incapable of leading their reformations from the external to the internal, and indeed there is no indication that they saw any necessity for it. Ezekiel seems to suggest that this failure was one of character, and with it Jerusalem was doomed.

* von Rad: *Studies in Deuteronomy*, p. 63; see also *New Bible Commentary*, p. 323 b.

Oholah and Oholibah (ch. 23)

It is often assumed that this chapter is merely a variant of the theme of ch. 16, in which the grossness of detail is heightened to bring out the enormity of Israel's sin. In fact the main thought in the two chapters is quite dissimilar. In the former it was the corruption of Israel's religion and its descent into idolatry that was under consideration. Here it is the unfaithfulness of Israel as revealed in its relation to other nations that is being condemned.

Contrary to the view that used to be so popular a short time ago, it is now realized that the gods of the heathen neighbours of Israel were considered to be rulers of the whole world. Though their sway, so far as their functions in nature were concerned, was universal, they had divided out their earthly domain among themselves, thus explaining why a certain god or goddess was in a special way the god of a city or country. Though the gods acted together to prevent the re-entrance of chaos, and one of their number was recognized as their king, yet they had their family quarrels and fights in which even the kingship could pass from one god to another. Wars on the earth were the earthly reflection of these struggles in heaven, and the making of peace and alliances inevitably involved gods as well as men.

This is why all alliances made by Israel were anathema to the prophets, especially when they were made with great powers. The humble status of the ambassadors of Israel as they stood before the great kings of Egypt or Assyria, or Nebuchadnezzar was in the eyes of the world only the earthly counterpart of Jehovah's lowly status as He begged Amon, or Ashur, or Marduk for help. It is not to be understood that the prophets thought that anything of the sort happened; the gods of the nations had no real existence for them. But they judged the actions of their contemporaries, as so often in the Bible, by what they meant to those that did them. In Israel, as in the Church, to turn to any outside power for help meant that there were other powers beside Jehovah, and that He was not able to win the victory by Himself. Hence all such alliances are unfaithfulness of the worst type, or in the language of the allegory sheer harlotry.

Unlike the allegory in ch. 16 both kingdoms are introduced in detail, because, while the religious declension took somewhat different forms in the two kingdoms, and hence it might be argued that Israel was not really a warning to Judah—but see Jer. 3:6-13, where the picture of the two wives of Jehovah is used to underline the guilt of Judah's corrupted religion—as there was no difference in their foreign policy, there was no excuse for Judah's not learning from the fate of Israel.

The mention of Egypt must surely be understood in much the same way as it was interpreted in 20:7 f, cf. also 16:6, 9 (Vol. XXV p. 65). The earliest political alliance of any kind we know between Israel and Egypt was that created by Solomon's marriage to Pharaoh's daughter (1 Kings 3:1), but that cannot possibly be meant here. Just as in ch. 20 Ezekiel implies that amid the great uniformities of nature in Egypt Israel came to doubt Jehovah's power to control nature (cf. Vol. XXV p. 178 ff), so in the highly organized state of Egypt Israel was so impressed by its organized power that it doubted Jehovah's ability to triumph without human order and power to succour Him. This lies behind the cry, 'Make us a king to judge us *like all the nations*' (1 Sam. 8:5), and Solomon's bolstering up of his kingdom by marriage alliances with neighbouring states.

Oholah's *voluntary* association with the Assyrians (v. 5) refers probably to Jehu's payment of tribute to Shalmaneser III in 841 B.C.* This was almost certainly an act of discretion rather than of necessity. Then Israel's temporary rise in power under Jehoash (2 King 13:25) and Jeroboam II (2 Kings 14:25, 28) was quite possibly helped by alliance with Assyria. Oholibah's association with Assyria (v. 12) refers of course to Ahaz' placing of Judah under the protection of Tiglath-pileser III (2 Kings 16:7-10) in spite of the pleading of Isaiah (Isa. 7:3-17). Her association with the Chaldeans (v. 14-16) does not refer to events in the lifetime of Ezekiel, but to the episode of Merodach Baladan in the days of Hezekiah (2 Kings 20:12-19, Isaiah 39). True enough we are left

* An event not recorded in the Bible. Evidence for it is found on the black obelisk of Shalmaneser III now in the British Museum. For details see any work on Biblical archaeology.

to infer that the first overtures came from Merodach Baladan, but they would hardly have been risked, if there had not been good grounds for thinking that they would be welcome. We must never minimize the doom pronounced by Isaiah (2 Kings 20:17 f, Is. 39:6 f); Hezekiah's act was a far more serious one than the superficial reader might imagine.*

Four threats are uttered against Oholibah:

(i) In v. 22-27 her Chaldean 'lovers' come to judge her, with their conquered vassals in their train, Pekod, Shoa, Koa and Assyria.

(ii) We find in v. 28-31 an explanation why her 'lovers' should thus deal with her. They have become those 'whom thou hatest'. Oholibah had not even the excuse of adulterous passion in her disloyalty to Jehovah. Her overtures to the Chaldeans had been merely the calculated self-interest of the harlot. And so we pass over to another thought: calculated disloyalty leads to idolatry (v. 30).

(iii) The cup of God's wrath (v. 32-34); this idea is to be found in Jer. 25:15-31; 49:12, Lam. 4:21, Hab. 2:16, Obad. 16, Is. 51: 17, 22 f, Ps. 75:8. Though the concept may not be quite the same in all these cases, it is clear that the effect of drinking the wine of God's wrath is above all to cause madness and ruin. It seems to symbolize above all God's forcing man to partake of the full harvest of his deeds; the wine of God's wrath is pressed from the vines of man's own planting and cultivation.

(iv) The final threat in v. 35 is by its very brevity the worst. Oholibah is to be left to herself. Greater punishment for the sinner does not exist.

The concluding portion of the chapter v. 36-49 is an independent prophecy which serves as a sort of appendix. It is not easy to

* The Chaldeans were a tribe living in the marshy country at the head of the Persian Gulf. Owing to the difficulty of the terrain the Assyrians probably never completely subdued them. On a number of occasions they were able to gain control of Babylon and resist Assyria from there. Nabopolassar, the father of Nebuchadnezzar, who finally freed Babylon and then in alliance with the Medes destroyed Nineveh, was a Chaldean. Hence the Chaldeans are sometimes equated with Babylon, sometimes distinguished from it.

interpret, and I.C.C. may be correct in suggesting that it may have been called forth by some particular incident in the last desperate straits of the city. In our ignorance of these circumstances the oracle ceases to be luminous. It clearly stresses, however, that the outcome of political entanglements and faithlessness to Jehovah is idolatry and the worst forms of pagan worship. Why both the sisters should appear here does not seem to be clear.

Some have found difficulty in two sisters being depicted as Jehovah's wives, for this was prohibited in the law (Lev. 18:18). But we have the same picture in Jer. 3:6 ff. The simple answer seems to be that when the Israelite used metaphor and simile of God and His relations to His people, they were never carried away by them and always remembered that they were no more than convenient approximations to the truth. That Israel was Jehovah's bride was a common prophetic picture from Hosea onward. Since both Israel and Judah were His, it was looked on as natural to speak of both of them as God's wife. But behind the picture of the dual marriage was the firm knowledge that it was only as part of 'all Israel' that either kingdom could claim any such relationship to Jehovah. In other words this allegory chooses a picture to serve a purpose, but it makes no claim that this picutre is in all respects a theologically true one. We may never in Old or New Testament stress the *subsidiary* points of allegory or parable.

(To be continued)

WAS THE WORD MERELY DIVINE?

(John 1:1)

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A flagrant specimen of biassed translation meets our eye in Moffatt's rendering of the last clause of the opening sentence of John's Gospel: 'The Logos was *divine*'. It is the more wanton because (*Theos*) God here stands in the most prominent relief, placed first and foremost in the clause. Moreover, some of the best Greek writers have themselves carefully discriminated between the substantive *THEOS* and its derivative *THEIOS*. Plato has drawn that distinction in His *Philebus* and *Sophist*, and Plutarch in a passage in his

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