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THE PROPHECY OF EZEKIEL

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The Doom of those that hate Israel (ch. 35)

It is usually taken for granted that we have here merely one more prophecy against Edom, but a little thought will show us that, as so often, the apparently obvious can do with reconsideration. The punishment of Edom was already announced in 25:12-14, its natural position, and in 36:5 Edom receives special mention among the lands coveting the soil of Israel. Unless we assume, in spite of the lack of any positive evidence, that Edom had already begun its infiltration into the Negeb that was to bring it as far as Hebron by the time of Judah's return, there seems no adequate spiritual motivation for this added denunciation. We have, however, seen that the prophecies against Egypt and Tyre (cf. Vol. XXVI p. 73) have a deeper purpose than the superficial and obvious one, and we may well examine whether the same is not true here.

The first thing that should strike us is the unusual name, Mount Seir, which Ezekiel uses for Edom. It is found nowhere else in his prophecies—it was pointed out in Vol. XXVI p. 74 that the not completely parallel 'Seir' in 25:8 is probably due to textual corruption—its use in the Old Testament is comparatively rare, and except in this chapter it is a purely geographical expression. Since it is Ezekiel we are studying, we cannot go far wrong if we look for a symbolic meaning.

Esau's 'blessing' was: 'Away from the fatness of the earth shall be thy dwelling, and away from the dew of heaven from above' (Gen. 27:39, RV. mg., RSV, etc.), and nothing symbolized this better than Mt. Seir. G. A. Smith describes it: 'Few territories of this size cover such a range of soils. In parts well-watered, in others with a precarious agriculture, the most is unproductive. . . . Mount Esau (i.e., Mt. Seir) attains a general elevation of 4,000 to 5,000 feet above sea-level, far higher than that of Hauran, Gilead, or Moab . . . the variety of Mount Esau is thus greater than that of the Range to the north. Besides the cool stony plateaus, which it has like the latter but lifts higher, its west

flank is a series of ridges, shelves and strips of valley, mazes of peaks, cliffs, and chasms that form some of the wildest rock scenery in the world. In the sandstone above the Arabah are the Siks (shafts), clefts or corridors between perpendicular rocks. Springs emerge between the porous upper strata of limestone and at the contact of the latter with the sandstone. On the limestone plateau devoid of springs cisterns preserve some of the winter rain, and at various periods dams and reservoirs have caught the surface waters in both the shallow and deep wadies*.

Mt. Seir may indeed act as a symbol of the lot of all those who despise their birthright and set as their goal 'the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the vainglory of life'. Their achievement may at first sight excite admiration and even envy, but at its latter end it is sterile.

From the time of Amos Edom is charged with implacable hatred against Israel (Am. 1:11; Ezek. 25:12, 35:5; Obad. 10; Ps. 137:7). The fact that we can so easily understand this hatred in no way diminishes their sin. The long periods of subjection to Judah, and the cruelty of Joab (1 King 11:15 f), in itself probably a reply to treachery, may palliate their hatred but do not excuse it in God's eyes. None hate the people of God, be it the Church or be it Israel, more than those that have despised God's giving in grace and have seen their own achievements prove sterile and empty. It was a true instinct that made the rabbis apply the name Edom to Rome with all its pomp and spiritual emptiness.

So before Ezekiel turns to the accomplishment of God's purpose with His land and people, he solemnly foretells judgment on all those, who having gone their own way like Edom, hate the people of God and seek to deprive them of what is theirs by God's giving.

Note v. 10. Though Jehovah had abandoned His land (11:23), that was something merely apparent and external. What has been chosen in God's election remains eternally His (cf. Rom. 11:1 f, 28 f).

* *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land*, 25th edit., p. 561-565.

Restoration: Outward and Inward (ch. 36)

Ezekiel's message of restoration began with the monarchy (ch. 34), for without leadership chosen by God and well-pleasing to Him the people cannot prosper. After a digression dealing with those that hate God's people, Ezekiel turns not, as we might expect, to a transformed people, but to their transformed land. Since we are dealing here with a concept strange to the modern man, we will do well to examine it more closely.

The Transformed Land (36:1-15)

For the average modern man a juxtaposition of land and people in a spiritual setting is meaningless. As a result this section is normally spiritualized away or used as yet another example of the material and inferior character of the Old Covenant. We shall see that though this attitude is not altogether unjustified, it fails to do justice to Scripture and exposes those that adopt it to very real spiritual danger.

For the Bible man is essentially material. He is *'adam*, for he is made of the dust of the *'adamah*. The solidarity of mankind lies not, as in Greek thought, in his being partaker of one spirit but of one body-stuff. It is his individuality that is guaranteed by the spirit breathed into him, which makes him personally answerable to God. So a man and the land on which he lives and from which he draws his nourishment are linked, and he by his sin can bring a curse on it, cf. 36:17; Jer. 3:1, 9; Ps. 106:38, 107:34. The Old Testament ideal is that a man should have his ancestral portion of land, which thanks to the law of Jubilee could not be permanently alienated (Lev. 25). Passages like Dt. 8:7-9, 11:10-12 hardly imply that Palestine is the fairest of lands, but rather that it is the land of God's perfect choice for Israel.

The New Testament neither denies nor abrogates this basic truth about man's being. It does not preach a pale internationalism of the type so popular in socialist movements today, but it lifts the Christian, not mankind, to a new level. 'Our citizenship is in heaven' (Phil. 3:20 RV—Moffatt expresses the sense excellently

by, 'We are a colony of heaven'), where in a spiritual sense we already are (Col. 3:1; Eph. 1:3, 2:6); we draw our sustenance from the body and blood of the new Adam, who is not earthy but is 'the Lord from heaven'. Therefore we have been lifted above questions of Jew and Gentile to become the Church of God (1 Cor. 10:32). It is only in measure as the Church and the individual Christian are lifted to a truly supernatural and spiritual plane that it can ignore the great basic varieties of human nature. Much of the greatest tragedy in the Church comes, when its members living on a more or less material and natural plane attempt that which only the spiritual can do in fear and trembling.

There is a growing understanding in widening circles today that much of our modern malaise is due to man's divorce from the land and to the artificial conditions of city life. Modern man in his pride constantly wishes to defy the laws of his being, but nature always has the last word.

The Church cannot hope for perfection until our Lord Jesus comes from heaven as a Saviour to take it there; equally the transformation of Israel on the earthly level must be preceded by the transformation of the land.

In ch. 6 Ezekiel had denounced the mountains of Israel because of the idolatry that had been carried out on them and which had defiled them. For that reason the message of transformation is addressed to them too. But there is a further complex of ideas why they are singled out for mention. Though the whole land had been given Israel by God, fear of the walled towns and the iron chariots had delayed the capture of the plains; the Philistine lands in the south of the Coastal Plain became tributary in the time of David, but already under Solomon they had once again become independent not again to come under Israelite rule until the time of the Hashmonean kings. It is very possible for men so to fail to possess their spiritual possessions that in the end they make excuses for not possessing them and persuade themselves that they are not intended to have them. It is a commonplace among Christians, for example, to deny the possibility of true holiness in this life, or to affirm that certain gifts of the Holy Spirit were only intended for the first days of the Church.

In Ezek. 47:13-20 it is clear that God's original giving holds good, but here Ezekiel speaks in terms of that to which men had grown familiar. We can, however, legitimately consider the plains of Palestine to be included in the language of Ezek. 36. Whether one stands in the Coastal Plain or in Esdraelon, one is more conscious of the hills than of the plain; it is they that set the predominant note, hence the description in Dt. 11:11.

For the right understanding of v. 4-6 we must bear in mind that Ezekiel is not speaking of Judah only but of Israel as well, where strangers had ruled for over a century and a half. The clear implication of v. 9-11 is that the new settlers had been unable to derive full profit from the soil. There are many natural explanations, all of which are superficially valid, why Palestine has never been a truly fertile land for long ever since Israel was driven out. God uses natural means for accomplishing His purposes. The wit of man may do what it will, but God sees to it that the land of His choice does not show its true riches until it is once again linked to the people of His choice. In the last analysis Dt. 11:12 remains true—Palestine will always be what God makes it, not what man tries to make.

The translation 'high places' (v. 2) is misleading; RSV 'the ancient heights' is preferable; the prophet uses *bamot* in its non-technical sense, but allows the hearer to remember the misuse of the hill-tops as sanctuaries.

Already in the story of the spies (Num. 13:32) we are told that Canaan is 'a land that eateth up the inhabitants thereof'. We are presumably to understand this in a double sense. The position of Palestine is such that it has at all times been exposed to invasion both from major powers in the Near East and from the constant inroads and infiltration of the nomad tribes in the east. The traditional lists of pre-Israelite peoples (Gen. 15:19 ff, etc.) shows how from the earliest times this process was going on. Then too it has always been a land where the risk of inadequate rainfall, locust swarms, pestilence from Egypt and other natural catastrophes has made life precarious. Now all this is to be no more (v. 12 ff); Jehovah's presence (48:35) will preserve from both dangers.

The Transformed People (36:16-38)

It needs no proof that the centre of this prophecy, v. 24-28, is based on and is an expansion of the great promise of the New Covenant in Jer. 31:31-34. For the modern man it seems strange that although the prophets repeatedly betray a knowledge of the words of their predecessors and contemporaries and sometimes carry their message farther, yet they never suggest this nor mention them by name—the non-mention of Jeremiah by Ezekiel is particularly striking. We must not assume that they were indifferent to plagiarism; it is expressly condemned by Jeremiah (23:30). It is rather that they were so conscious of being Jehovah's spokesmen that they were not sufficiently concerned with the sundry ways and diverse manners by which Jehovah had spoken before them to underscore and stress them. That would have been to stress the means by which the message had come, when the message was what really mattered.

It is doubtful whether Ezekiel really tells us more than Jeremiah. The latter concentrates on the spiritual work, the former, consistently with his whole outlook, sees it as the gracious action of God in all its details. That is perhaps why it is Jeremiah rather than Ezekiel who is quoted in the New Testament in *Hebrews*, in which we see the ritual passing away.

It is doubtful whether Ezekiel wishes to convey any clear-cut idea by clean water (v. 26); to equate it with baptism is to forget that this is a mere symbol also. In v. 25 he is thinking of defilement rather than of guilt and so he uses the picture not of the sacrifices but of the ceremonial cleansings in the Levitical law. He knows that there both blood and water only function through the grace of God. He had not, like Isaiah, been given the vision of the Servant of Jehovah, from whose side should flow both blood and water, and so he is looking through the symbols of the Law to the grace behind them.

Already in 11:19 we have had the promise of the changed heart (cf. Vol. XXIV p. 157). It is far from easy to translate Hebrew psychology into that of the modern man in the street, for where the latter tends to divide and separate, the Hebrew always thought primarily of man in his wholeness. Probably

the best translation here is 'will', provided we do not think of it as some independent entity in man. For the Hebrew the heart is the will as the expression of his complete character. His heart is a heart of stone because all parts of his being have been in revolt against God, so his will could not respond to His voice. The consequence was that Israel was made incapable of responding to God, except in part (Is. 6:9 f; John 12:39; Rom. 11:25)—it is hardly necessary to add that this is true of all men (Rom. 9:15 f), except as the grace of God is in operation. For linguistic reasons beyond the scope of this study flesh in the Old Testament does not have the connotations it has in the New.* Here, since a heart of stone is something contrary to nature, a heart of flesh is a natural heart, a will as God designed it to be.

Spirit (*ruach*), when spoken of as part of a man, tends to mean his dominant disposition, even as overmastering inclination.† Here, obviously the new spirit is God's spirit, which is to become the dominating factor in transformed Israel. Hence there will be the desire and urge to do God's will.

(To be continued)

* There is an interesting discussion in J. A. T. Robinson: *The Body*.

† See especially Snaith: *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament*, ch. vii.

(Concluded from p. 83)

(c) *A needed injunction*. But these are to be related to the one great fact which dominates all the believer's life; i.e., 'to the Lord'. Both the discipline and the admonition are said to be 'of the Lord', i.e., such as belong to Him and would be exercised by Him and so would pursue the ends which He would set before us to achieve. The recognition of the Lordship of Christ is thus found as the regulating factor in home life as in Assembly life, yea, in all that concerns the life of the believer.

3. *Expostulation* (Tit. 3:10). Heretical teachers are to be admonished once, or twice, but when such admonition is not heeded, they are to be refused. It is to be noted that not only are the heretical teachings to be refused, but the man who is heretical also. But this only after reproof has been made. Here, obviously, the admonition is by word and is intended to bring about a purposed end, i.e., the rectification of teachings held, and guidance into the way of truth.