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THE PROPHECY OF EZEKIEL

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Problems of Interpretation (ch. 40-48)

Our main difficulty in approaching ch. 40-48 is that the average reader, whether or not they are well known to him, assumes that he already knows the general line of interpretation to be adopted. 'Of course', says one, 'these are Ezekiel's plans for the worship of the post-exilic community.' 'No', says another, 'obviously we have the plans for the Millennial Temple'. 'But stay', says another, 'quite definitely . . .'

When we add to all this the fact that the upholders of one view will equate the holding of it with scholarship, and the upholders of another with orthodoxy, the task of the expositor becomes peculiarly difficult. To deal with the subject adequately would need a book in itself. I have made two assumptions. In taking for granted that these chapters are genuine revelation, I have ruled out all interpretations which regard the vision form as a mere literary convention or the trance confirmation of theories already formed. In applying 2 Tim. 3:16 to all Old Testament Scriptures and in regarding the Revelation of John as authoritative in the interpretation of Old Testament symbolism I have virtually ruled out any purely literal interpretation. The interpretation I offer is no *a priori* one forced on Ezekiel, but it has forced itself on me as a result of my reading of the prophecy.

We must free ourselves from the assumption made by so many that we may read from 39:29 to 40:1 without a break. Our study of the book should have showed us that, except in the prophecies against the nations, the dates marked, as it were, new chapters in the development of Ezekiel's message. Surely that must be the case here, for, to us at least, the date has no discoverable historical significance.

Josephus (*Ant. X. v. 1*) says, 'Ezekiel . . . left behind him in writing two books concerning these events'. Quite apart from the fact that we know of no apocryphal or pseudepigraphic book of Ezekiel, he is obviously referring to canonical Scripture. He can only mean that in his time (1st cent. A.D.) part of Ezekiel

circulated separately, or that the prophecy was regarded as consisting of two books. Young suggests that the second book was ch. 33-48,* but to me this is most unlikely. Ch. 33-39 need ch. 1-32 for their understanding and are in turn necessary to balance the opening chapters. In addition 39:25-29 would make a fitting conclusion to the first book, which ch. 32 would not.

Above all ch. 40-48 are in large part not prophecy, in the normal biblical sense, but 'apocalyptic'. For much of the time Ezekiel is no longer the hearer and assimilator of God's message, but the mere transmitter of a vision explained by an angel guide. We shall examine the reason for this later, but for the moment it is sufficient to note that these chapters seem to be an independent entity, dependent in some measure on the earlier prophecies but not necessarily directly continuing them.

The Prophecy is Millennial

We should take the fact seriously that the prophecy is millennial. The Temple, and presumably the city, are on top of a very high mountain (40:2, 43:12). This links at once with prophecies like Is. 2:2-4, Mic. 4:1-4, Zech. 14:10. Though there are those that take this literally, I feel convinced that this is only due to ignorance of the Oriental thought of the Bible. The meaning of the symbol is suggested by Dan. 2:34 f., 44 f., and it is ultimately derived from the age-old belief that the gods lived on inaccessible mountain peaks.

But if the vision is millennial, we ought seriously to ask ourselves why it was given to Ezekiel. Can we really say, 'It need hardly be said that Ezekiel has here advanced plans which he expected to be carried out to the letter'?† Prophet after prophet has given us pictures of what is to follow the Day of the LORD, and one and all are driven to metaphor and symbol. Are we seriously to believe that Ezekiel alone among them is to be taken quite literally, and that he lays down the plans and rules of the new Temple just to save the generation of its builders the task of discovering the Divine will? Or are we even to believe, as some seem to do, that there is spiritual gain in reconstructing in plan

* *An Introduction to the Old Testament* p. 234

† NBC p. 663b

and model what Ezekiel saw? In connection with ch. 28 I pointed out the danger of ignoring Jewish exposition. So far from taking these chapters literally of the distant future the rabbis found themselves under compulsion to explain away the differences between them and the Law. We are told that Rabbi Hananiah ben Hezekiah (1st cent. A.D.) bought 300 measures of oil for his lamp, but before they were used up he was able to explain the deviations and so rehabilitate the book.

The answer is surely given by the New Testament counterpart, John's vision of the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21). There have been those so devoid of understanding of the symbolic, that the figures of Rev. 21:16 f. have merely acted as a challenge to them for mathematical and architectural calculation. Surely they are but part of the wonder and the glory of the vision which draws the heart of the Christian with longing:

Jerusalem the golden
 With milk and honey blest
 Beneath thy contemplation
 Sink heart and voice oppress . . .

For thee, O dear, dear country
 Mine eyes their vigils keep :
 For very love, beholding
 Thy happy name, they weep.

Or as Bunyan says with such touching brevity, when he has seen Christian and Hopeful safely into the Celestial City, 'I wished myself among them'.

Should we put Ezekiel's vision on a lower level for him and his friends? Our anti-sacerdotalism and unfamiliarity with anything that could suggest the Temple and its worship render us probably incapable of understanding the spiritual satisfaction of the exile priest as he sees the ideal Temple ideally served.

The Prophecy is Symbolic

We should also ask ourselves whether the vision is meant to be taken literally at all. There must be very many who will hesitate to demand this of 'the very high mountain' (40:2), or of an

absolutely square city about $1\frac{1}{4}$ mile each way (48:16)—incidentally the literalist may like to explain why the future world capital is so small—or of tribal portions divided by dead straight lines running east and west and ignoring all the facts of geography (48:1-29), for the boundaries of the prairie states in America are hardly a good analogy.

But what are we to say of the river in 47:1-12? At the very top of the highest peak the waters issue out in the sanctuary (v. 1). After flowing across the court it trickles (v. 2, R.V. mg., ICC.) under the eastern gate. A little more than a quarter of a mile eastwards the waters have become a stream ankle deep (v. 3). In the next half mile or so it deepens first to the knees and then to the waist (v. 4). Little more than another quarter of a mile suffices to make it a deep river which can only be crossed by swimming (v. 5). Unless we are to assume a unique and gratuitous miracle, this is a river such as the human eye has never seen nor will ever see. I grant that a friend, whose knowledge of Scripture and wise judgment I deeply respect, once wrote saying 'Have you never heard of tributaries?'. But that is to overlook that the river is water of life, water from the Sanctuary of God; there can be no adding of common water.

To me it seems indubitable that the river of Ezek. 47 is the river of Rev. 22:1 f. Ezekiel saw the throne of God against the background of the Babylonian plain (1:3) and of an earthly temple (8:4), John saw it in heaven (Rev. 4:2), but it was the same throne. Even so Ezekiel saw the river of water of life against the background of the parched and thirsty Wilderness of Judea, while John saw it in the new earth, but it is the same river, a river which already flows (cf. John 7:37 f.), for the believer's body is a sanctuary of the Holy Ghost (1 Cor. 6:19, R.V. mg.).

For me the fact that both the setting of the vision and one of its most important parts are symbolic is sufficient to show that the whole is to be taken as symbolic. There are few so prosaic that they will object to the use of metaphor and simile in a matter of fact description. But we are much slower to realize that one who is dealing in avowed symbolism is capable of using the most concrete descriptions in a symbolic sense. The bread and wine

set out on the Lord's Table are capable of description in the exactest physical terms, but even the believer in Transubstantiation will hasten to say that these are accidents and that the true use of the elements is symbolic.

Animal Sacrifice

For those that take this section seriously as a Divine revelation and not merely as Ezekiel's programme for the future clothed in vision form, the sacrifices provide the real crux in its interpretation. Make the sacrifices symbolic and the Temple becomes symbolic too; take the Temple literally and we have to agree that there will be animal sacrifices in the Millennium. I have no difficulty in a vision of sacrifice in a symbolic temple, for it was the guarantee to Ezekiel that the great principles of Divine redemption remained good to the end of time, but I require stronger evidence than this vision to accept against all the weight of New Testament evidence that the Levitical sacrifices will be reintroduced.

The paradox of *Hebrews*, 'Apart from shedding of blood there is no remission' (9:22), and 'It is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins' (10:4) is already latent in the Old Testament. Already in Num. 15:30f. we have a major limitation on the efficacy of animal sacrifice, for they are there declared unavailing for deliberate sin; there is, however, nowhere in the Old Testament any suggestion that those who commit deliberate sin are finally cut off from Divine forgiveness. Whether it be in the cry of Psalm 51:1-17, with its express disclaimer of sacrifice in v. 16, or in the reiterated prophetic appeal to repentance (cf. especially Ezek. 18), there is the clear vision of Jehovah, 'a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin. . .' (Ex. 34:6f., RSV), which is basic to the whole Old Testament revelation. The sacrifices stand as a perpetual mysterious reminder that forgiveness is dependent on more than God's grace, but this something does not begin to be truly revealed until Is. 52:13-53:12.

Ezekiel's vision underlines the promise of Jer. 3:16f. for there is no ark and mercy seat in the new temple. Why should

we think that Ezekiel failed to rise to the level of his prophetic predecessors, who, though they did not reject sacrifices, as an earlier generation of scholars thought, yet relegated them to a purely secondary place of no real or vital importance? Indeed, one of the most remarkable features of this book is its virtual ignoring of sacrifices until this section, and even here there is relatively little said about them. The explanation given above as to why they are mentioned at all is surely sufficient.

Presumably all who regard the Temple as millennial and take the sacrifices literally would subscribe to the statement in the *Schofield Bible* (p. 890), 'Doubtless these offerings will be memorials, looking back to the cross, as the offerings under the old covenant were anticipatory, looking forward to the cross. In neither case have animal sacrifices power to put away sin (Heb. 10:4, Rom. 3:25).'* Though I fully recognize their sincerity, I must beg them to realize that those who cannot follow with them are no despisers of the Scriptures. They read *Hebrews* to mean that the abolition of the Aaronic priesthood and of the Levitical sacrifices is final and for ever. In addition they cannot see why, when water, bread and wine have met the symbolic needs of nearly a thousand generations of Christians, the Millennium will need more. The King has returned and the curse on nature has been lifted; why should the animal creation still lay down its life?

The fact is that the ultra-dispensationalist is apt so to divide up the revelation of God that he fails to see it in its completeness. Above all he fails to realize that while human response to the Divine revelation may ebb and flow, the revelation itself never turns back but always deepens. There is presumably more privilege in this dispensation for the predestinated member of the Church, but in the Millennium, as the temporal prepares itself for the eternal there will be neither less knowledge nor blessing. Indeed I find it hard to believe that it is meant seriously, when I am told that our present freedom for all to worship equally in all places will be replaced by a position in which man's privilege of worship will depend in measure on his geographical relationship to an

* For a strong defence of this view see Sauer: *From Eternity to Eternity*, ch. XXXIV.

earthly Jerusalem. The suggestions of super-sonic aircraft bringing pilgrims to Jerusalem and of others sharing in the Temple services by television are tragi-comic.

Present Foruture?

Those who see in these chapters above all blue-prints for the post-exilic community point to passages like 43:7 f. 44:6-16 and ask whether they can possibly refer to any other time than the prophet's own and that of the return from exile. They are quite right. The vision of the perfect Temple led to a rebuke of the failings of the past. But this is precisely paralleled by Rev. 21:1-22:15. Here too the basis is a vision with an angel guide; here too the voice of God breaks through the vision from time to time, and here too are passages, e.g., 21:6ff. 27, 22:6f. 11-15, whose chief applicability is to this present age. A vision of the future that does not change the present has failed in its main purpose.

Expositors have signally failed to agree whether in Rev. 21f. we have a vision of the eternal state, of the Millennium, or even of the Church here and now (that the New Jerusalem is the Church is clear from Rev. 21:9f.). But we should not be surprised at this. The Millennium is the antechamber of and the preparation for the eternal state. Its glories are less than those of eternity, but they are of the same nature. Even now the Church is with its Lord in the heavenlies, and those whom God has called He has already glorified (Rom. 8:29 f.), at least in His sight.

Equally it would be unwise to tie down Ezekiel's vision in time. He sees the generation of the Return, 'the holy seed' (Ezr. 9:2), not as man sees them, but as they were in God's purpose. More obviously it is Israel, when the promise of the new covenant, of the new heart and new spirit is fulfilled. They are symbolized by the small but perfect temple. Since they are 'a Kingdom of priests and an holy nation' (Ex. 19:6) the secular power is symbolized by the prince (*nasi*)—he will not call him king, lest the rule of God be obscured—who is seen only in a secondary role. For the literalist the identity of the prince must be a major problem, for he cannot be the King who has returned, Jesus the Messiah.

But I believe Ezekiel saw further. The city has had only casual

mention (45:6, 48:15), but at the close of the vision it suddenly fills the eye, and it is of the city that the closing words are spoken, 'the LORD is there'. The Shekinah glory has moved from Temple to city (cf. Jer. 3:17), and if so, where is the need of a temple any longer? So in Rev. 21 the Temple has vanished and we see only the city. But since it is no longer the restored remnant of Israel, but the Church from every nation and tongue and kindred, in which the old and the new are united—the gates bear the names of the twelve tribes of Israel (Rev. 21:12; Ezek. 48:31-34) and the foundations the names of the apostles of the Lamb (Rev. 21:14)—the city has increased from a square of $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles a side to one of 1,500 miles a side (Rev. 21:16). Further it has become the mountain itself, for it is as high as it is broad. Many speak of the New Jerusalem as a cube and think of the Holy of Holies. They forget that though this may serve as a verbal symbol, it will hardly make sense as a visual one. The New Jerusalem is the mountain of God that fills the earth.

In Rev. 4 we find the imagery of the *merkabah* from Ezek. 1 taken up and expanded on a more glorious scale. Even so Ezek. 40-48 is taken up and expanded in Rev. 21, 22, and 'the LORD is there' finds its fulfilment in, 'I saw no temple therein: for the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb, are the temple thereof'. Here too is the explanation of why Ezekiel passed from normal prophecy to apocalyptic. Again and again as we have read his prophecies we have faced the element of the contingent, but here we deal with the certainties of the Divine purpose. 'The zeal of the LORD of hosts shall perform this.' The City of God, the Church of the Living God, is foreknown and predestinated before the foundation of the world. There can be no peradventure and no improvisation in God's victory and the fulfilment of His purpose. Hence Ezekiel, like John after him, sees the vision of what already is in the mind and purpose of God. The measurements, though they have their elements of fairly transparent symbolism, serve above all to stress that the final structure has conformed in all points to the architect's will and purpose. The day is surely coming, when all shall see that God's purpose with Israel, with the Church and with the nations has been altogether perfect and successful.