

CHAPTER XI

THE MIDNIGHT HOUR

THE BLOW FALLS (24: 1-27)

IN January 588 B.C., when Jehoiachin's captivity had lasted almost ten years (v. 1), Zedekiah's plots and treacheries had their reward, and Nebuchadnezzar's army ringed Jerusalem for its last agony. The iron ring was to relax for a few weeks to deal with the relieving army of Pharaoh Apries (Jer. 34: 21f.; 37: 5, 11), but it is doubtful whether it even waited for a battle. Certainly the Egyptians were soon back over their frontier (Jer. 37: 7), and they did not stir again to save their Judean allies from their fate.

On the very day that Jerusalem was invested—cf. v. 1 with II Kings 25: 1; Jer. 39: 1—God revealed the fact to Ezekiel and ordered him to make a special note of the date. It is not likely that this was to enhance Ezekiel's reputation as a prophet. It was rather to anticipate and prevent any later suggestion that the siege and capture of Jerusalem could have been due to some passing inattention and carelessness on Jehovah's part (cf. I Kings 18: 27).

It is impossible to be sure whether the remainder of the chapter is to be looked on as happening on the day on which the siege began and on the next, or whether it extends over some time. We have earlier seen that the dates prefixed to the sections of the prophecy need only apply to the first oracle in the section; the remainder may extend up to the next recorded date. In view, however, of the general impression given, it is probably best to assume that the whole chapter is to be dated on the tenth and eleventh days of the tenth month.

THE PARABLE OF THE POT (24: 3-14)

Though it is not necessary, it is probable that we should picture Ezekiel acting out his words, for the pot of the parable is a common cooking pot, in which a whole lamb could easily be cooked. "Take the choicest one of the flock" (v. 5, RSV) is the correct rendering; it should be obvious that we should continue, "Pile the logs under it" (RSV). This is demanded by common

sense and v. 10; the error is due to dittography in the Hebrew, i.e. a letter has been written twice instead of only once.

The message in vv. 3-5 is a complete one, for it graphically depicts the extreme straits of the besieged. In v. 6 we pass over to Jerusalem itself, symbolized by the cooking pot. The fate of the besieged is glanced at in v. 6b; RSV seems to get the meaning, when it renders the final words "without making any choice." If we assume that Ezekiel has been acting out his message, then the rust-marks on the cooking pot (the AV "scum" should be ignored) remind him of blood-stains, and we are back in thought in ch. 22: 1-16. By v. 7 Ezekiel is stressing Jerusalem's completely callous and casual attitude towards murder, however brought about. Lev. 17: 13 is sufficient comment on v. 7c. In fact it was a very widespread belief that blood that had not been covered cried aloud for vengeance, cf. Job 16: 18, and in part Gen. 4: 10; Isa. 26: 21.

God now (v. 9) returns to the original thought of the prophecy, but pictures Himself as making up the fire. As a result the contents, apparently, are not merely well cooked and unceremoniously dealt with, but actually destroyed. The best translation of the difficult Hebrew of v. 10 would seem to be, "Multiply the logs, kindle the fire, make an end of the flesh, and empty out the broth, and let the bones be burned up." Once the contents are destroyed the empty pot is replaced on the flames until it melts as the only way of getting rid of the rust (v. 11). It is difficult to interpret v. 12; RV mg. and RSV are superior to RV tx. and AV, but they are probably only approximations to the meaning.

THE DEATH OF EZEKIEL'S WIFE (24: 15-24)

If the suggestion made above is correct, the revelation of his wife's coming death will have come to Ezekiel, while the people were still gathered round him listening to the parable of the pot. God prohibited all the normal outward forms of mourning to Ezekiel (vv. 16f.). "The bread of men" means ordinary bread, i.e. the bread that mourners were accustomed to eat. So the RSV "the bread of mourners" is justified.

It is easy enough to motivate God's prohibition, so far as Ezekiel is concerned. The loss of his wife was but a trifle compared to the coming destruction of the sanctuary (v. 21), and if we wished, we could find a loose parallel in Jer. 16: 1-9. But this does not explain why the exiles will not mourn, when the news of the destruction of Jerusalem is received. The explanation in NBC that this is a Divine prohibition of mourning is

quite impossible. The suggestion of ICC and Cam. B. that the shock will be too stunning for tears will hardly bear investigation, and in the light of Ezekiel's continued warnings and of the occasional rumour that must have filtered through, it is questionable whether the shock will really have been so great. There is, however, an explanation which is reasonable in itself and which really establishes the parallel between Ezekiel and the exiles.

Zedekiah's revolt must have meant a very considerable aggravation in the position of the Judean exiles. They will all automatically have come under suspicion as potential rebels, cf. the drastic treatment some years earlier of Ahab and Zedekiah (Jer. 29: 21f.) for prophecy which was probably only by inference treasonable (cf. p. 31). Any outward manifestation of grief over the chastisement of rebels against whom Nebuchadnezzar felt especially strongly could only have received the worst interpretation. In other words there will have been the implicit official prohibition of mourning which is parallel to God's explicit prohibition to Ezekiel. Just as the noting of the day on which the siege began was an implicit stress on the working of God, so the realization that the deprivation of the right of outward mourning had been foreseen and acted out would bring a consciousness that the destruction of city and sanctuary was an act of the sovereignty of God. But the realization of the sovereignty of God is the first step to a new hope (v. 24).

THE END OF EZEKIEL'S DUMBNESS (24: 25-27)

On p. 31 I discussed Ezekiel's "dumbness" in the context of 3: 26 without coming to any really certain conclusion. I did, however, consider that it was probably a symbolic dumbness, i.e. Ezekiel could speak normally, but refrained from doing so, except when he had a message to give from God. There is nothing in the explanation that does not fit the present context. "That day" (vv. 26f.) must not be stressed; it was not until six months after the destruction that a fugitive arrived with the news (see note on 33: 21, p. 118).