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THE PROPHECY OF EZEKIEL

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

A Prophet Restrained (Ch. 3: 22-27)

To our surprise we find that almost immediately after his commissioning—the interval between 1:2 and 8:1 interpreted in the light of 4:5 f. will only permit of a very brief time—Ezekiel is instructed to shut himself up at home, which he either is not to leave, or will not be able to; in addition he is either not to speak, or will not be able to (v. 26). Unless we are, as does the R.S.V., to follow the LXX in v. 25 and read 'and cords will be placed upon you' (cf. 4:8), we have here the probable reason.

'They shall lay bands upon thee' should hardly be taken literally; it represents rather the extreme and bitter opposition of his fellow-exiles to his prophesying. This was probably due to the incident described in Jer. 29:21-23. It should be obvious that Nebuchadnezzar's drastic punishment was not inflicted on Ahab and Zedekiah for their immorality, even though that is why God caused it to be inflicted. They had prophesied the early return of Jehoiachin and the exiles to Jerusalem, which to Nebuchadnezzar meant a prophecy of his own collapse; not unreasonably he treated it as an incitement to rebellion and as high treason. The false prophets' execution will have been associated with real peril for others of the exiles, so we have an adequate explanation for the bitter hostility that greeted the appearance of a new prophet.

The immediate result was another trance vision (v. 22 f.) in which God commanded Ezekiel to refrain from public ministry. He would match restraint (v. 25) with restraint (4:8) and unwillingness to hear with silence (v. 26), though from time to time he would be able to speak (v. 27).

This is a suitable point for considering a major problem of interpretation in the earlier chapters of Ezekiel: are we to take certain statements literally, or are we to consider them as metaphors and symbols? Ezekiel's dumbness is mentioned again 24:27; 29:21; 33:22, but in other passages he is shown as speaking normally, e.g., 14:4; 17:2 f., 12; 19:1; 20:3, and many others. It could be urged that in all these cases God had suspended the dumbness as promised in 3:27. But in fact there is never any hint that this was the case. Passages like 8:1; 14:1-4; 20:1 suggest that the elders expected him to be able to speak.

In ch. 4 Ezekiel is described as lying on his side for 390 days—for this figure see next section—bound with cords (v. 8), which may mean some form of paralysis, but all the time pressing the siege of Jerusalem with his model (4:1-3) and doing a number of actions (4:9-5:4) which seem to be physically incompatible with his lying on his side. Every form of dogmatism is out of place here, but once we are forced to realize that 4:1-5:4 cannot be interpreted literally in all its details, it is not unreasonable to remember Ezekiel's extreme use of symbolism, and to allow for a metaphorical or symbolical element in the language used. So far as 4:1-5:4 are concerned we leave the application of our principle to the next section. It seems probable that Ezekiel's dumbness was no actual inability to speak, but a refusal to speak on ordinary matters with those who had refused to hear him as God's messenger, combined with a relative rarity in Divine revelations. In addition, of course, those who had refused to listen to Ezekiel, when he came to them, had now to eat humble pie and go to him, if they wished to hear the Divine message.

Preaching by Symbols (4: 1-5: 4)

It would seem that the use of symbolic actions by prophets goes right back to the early days of prophecy. A few examples from prophets true and false are 1 Sam. 15:27 f.; 1 Kings 11:29 ff.; 22:11; 2 Kings 13:14-19. Behind these actions lie the deep convictions of more primitive men that words and actions are significant, and that by doing something similar to what you prophesy, you are helping forward the fulfilment and making it more certain. I am not suggesting that the true prophets believed this, but that they knew that such symbolic actions made their words the more impressive. When we come to the written prophets there seems to be a change in the reason for symbolism. The false prophets still kept it up for the old reasons, e.g., Jer. 28:10 f., but men like Isaiah and Jeremiah used it when they could no longer obtain a hearing for the spoken word, e.g., Isa. 20:2 f., Jer. 19:1 f., 10 f. Such actions not merely tickled men's curiosity, but filled them with a sense of awe as they superstitiously believed that the prophet was doing things that would bring evil on men.

We can easily understand then the excitement in Tel-Abib as the news went round that Ezekiel, who had not been seen outside his house for days was acting in a way calculated to bring disaster

on Jerusalem. Daily the group inside the door of the house watching the silent prophet lying on the floor with his model would grow, until they were ready to hear the Divine explanation of his actions (5:5-7:27).

Between 1:2 and 8:1 are exactly a year and two months. The Jewish year is a lunar year of 354 days, the months being alternately 30 and 29 days in length. So we are dealing with a period of 413 days. If it was a leap year, which today comes round about twice in five years, and which is formed by the insertion of an extra 29-day month, we can extend the period to 442 days. It is therefore clear that, if it were an ordinary year, the figures of 4:5 f. must be looked on as not consecutive but concurrent. Even if we assume a leap-year we must allow for the seven days of 3:16 and the unspecified period of 3:22 as well as the day or two that Ezekiel would have needed to make his preparations. This just barely allows the 390 days for Israel and the 40 for Judah to be consecutive, so in the light of 4:9 we shall probably be safe in assuming that in either case the 390 days and the 40 days are to be taken as concurrent.

If this is so, all element of the completely literal vanishes. We can picture Ezekiel at one time lying on his left side, at another on his right, at another making his strange bread, at another shaving his head and dealing with the hair. Indeed at night, when no inquisitive visitors were to be expected, he may have slept like any normal mortal.

The tile (4:1—R.S.V. brick) is obviously a freshly made Babylonian clay brick, on which a sketch of Jerusalem could easily be cut. Whether the siege works were to be cut in the clay as well, or whether they were to be separate clay models, the Hebrew does not really make clear. On the whole the latter seems more probable, for it was obviously intended to be clearly understood by any chance visitor without any explanation on Ezekiel's part. Indeed 'thou shalt lay siege against it' (4:3—R.S.V. press the siege) may well indicate the gradual moving of the models nearer and nearer to the doomed city.

The symbolism of Ezekiel lying on his side presents no particular difficulty. The left side is chosen for Israel, for one standing facing East in Palestine had Israel to the North, i.e. to the left and Judah to the right. The immobility and cords (4:8) symbolize the conditions of exile. 'To bear the iniquity of' means to bear the punishment of. But so far as I know no certain sense has

ever been made of the figures. We need have no difficulty that they are to be concurrent, i.e. that the last 40 of the 390 were to be on his right side, for the two kingdoms were now in exile together. But why 40 and 390?

It is claimed on the basis of 29:11-14 that Ezekiel thought that the exile would last 40 years. Even assuming that that is a correct interpretation of the passage, we must not forget that the prophecy against Egypt is dated over five years later. If the two passages are legitimately to be brought together, it would only mean that 40 is no more than a round number. There is no intrinsic objection to this, but it seems impossible so to interpret 390. In addition there can be no doubt that Ezekiel knew Jeremiah's prophecies (25:12 and 29:10). Since the same figure of 70 years is used on two occasions some years apart, when looking forward to the same event, it is clear that it is meant to be a round figure, but as we might expect it is an accurate one. From the victory at Carchemish (605 B.C.), when Babylonian rule over the West began, to the capture of Babylon by Cyrus (538 B.C.) is 67 years. The actual captivity of those taken away with Jehoiachin was 59 years, and of those that stayed in Jerusalem until its capture (586 B.C.) 48 years.

It may be that the LXX preserves the original reading in vv. 5, 9, i.e. 190. This would represent in round figures the 185 years from the destruction of Samaria (723 B.C.) to the fall of Babylon. Since there is no simple way in which the change of reading could have come about, and there are two, not merely one, verses involved, it is far more likely that the Greek was deliberately changed to suit the apparently obvious meaning of the passage.

More likely is that the figure 40 was chosen by God as being less than the total of Babylonian lordship, and being at the same time reminiscent of the 40 years in the wilderness. If we subtract the 40 from the 390, for the last period was shared by both kingdoms equally, 350 represents in round numbers the period from Jeroboam, son of Nebat, when Israel split from Judah, down to Ezekiel's own time. I put forward this suggestion with diffidence, but it does suit the thoroughly symbolic setting.

Ezekiel's diet during this period contains a double picture. The confining of his food to about 12 ozs. of 'bread' and his drink to about 1¾ pints of water a day is a grim picture of siege conditions. The actual nature of the food, however, not merely reproduces

siege conditions but points to the impurity of the exile that is to follow (4:13). Instead of the normal fuel of the East, cow's dung, man's dung, impure and defiling (cf. Deut. 23:12 ff.), must be used, though here God has pity on the frailty of His prophet. The mixture of grains and seeds not merely vividly expresses the necessity of the besieged to eat what they could get, but also was almost certainly defiling, at least for those like Ezekiel, who took ceremonial purity seriously. We can infer this from commandments like Lev. 19:19, Deut. 22:9 ff.

Finally, doubtless when the 390 days were drawing to an end, Ezekiel startled the group of onlookers by shaving head and beard with a sword. Shaving of the head, though forbidden in the Law (Lev. 19:27 f.; 21:5; Deut. 14:1), was a universal sign of mourning practised widely in Israel (Isa. 3:24; 22:12; Mic. 1:16; Jer. 16:6, etc.). Ezekiel's use of a sword as razor left no doubt in the onlookers' minds what the reason of the mourning was. The weighing and dividing of the hair looks to prophecies like Jer. 15:2 and cf. Ezek. 5:12; 6:12, and stresses the Divine supervision of the doom.

5:2 ff. describe Ezekiel's actions when the 390 days are past. One-third of the hair is to be burnt on the brick that served as the model of Jerusalem; one-third is to be chopped small; one-third is to be thrown to the winds. It was the message of both Jeremiah (24:8 ff.) and Ezekiel that those left in Jerusalem with Zedekiah were the worst of the people. That probably explains the difficult words (5:4): 'therefrom (R.V.) shall a fire come forth into all the house of Israel'. Those few who managed to escape and link up with the exiles already in Babylonia would only prove a curse to them.

It should not be forgotten that these symbolic prophecies of Ezekiel were not the foretelling of the end of a siege already begun. They were given about four years before Zedekiah's revolt ever broke out. They are a preparation of the exiles for the final tragedy that was yet to come.

The Coming Doom of Jerusalem (5: 5—7: 27)

It is of little or no importance whether we think of these prophecies being given during the later part of the time of the symbolic actions, or whether they were given afterwards. In any case by his methods Ezekiel had won the interest of the exiles, and he seems to have been treated with respect from then on, cf. 8:1; 14:1; 20:1.

The prophecy in 5:5-17 is little more than a commentary on the symbolic actions. Note that the judgment is coming more for the past wickedness of the people than for the sin of those in Jerusalem at the time. This is a note we find repeatedly, cf. 2 Kings 24:3 f.; Jer. 15:4, etc. Josiah's reformation had come too late. It only served to show that the rot had gone too deep. Since God had already removed the good figs (Jer. 24), only judgment dire and absolute could await the remainder.

The second of the prophecies (ch. 6) is an explanation of the preceding. It explains that the sin that was bringing destruction on Jerusalem was above all a religious one, the worship of Jehovah as though He had been but a nature god, with all the appurtenances and ritual of nature worship, a worship which the prophets quite simply call idolatry and Baal worship. It had come into Israel in the period of the Judges and had never been eradicated. It had been checked by men like Samuel, David, Asa and Hezekiah. But Manasseh in his long 55-year reign had deliberately opened every door to it, and now only the fires of exile could burn it out. The prophecy is addressed specially to the mountains of Israel, for it was especially the hill-tops that had housed the semi-pagan sanctuaries.

It is almost certain that in v. 9 in place of 'I have been broken' we should read with some of the old versions (and so R.V. mg., R.S.V.): 'when I have broken their whorish heart'. To clap one's hands and stamp one's feet (v. 11) is a sign of deep emotion and rejoicing (cf. 25:6); so instead of 'alas!' we should render the Hebrew 'Ha!' Ezekiel is called on to rejoice that the accumulated evil of centuries is to be swept away. In v. 14 we have probably a case of one of the commonest of all scribal errors in the Old Testament, the confounding of D and R; render, 'from the wilderness to Riblah' (R.S.V.), i.e. from South to North (cf. Num. 34:11).

This section ends (ch. 7) with a dirge over the land for the coming destruction. The language is broken and difficult, but the general sense is clear. On the analogy of other passages it is very likely that the silver and gold in v. 19 does not refer so much to the inability of their riches to help them, but rather to the helplessness of their idols of silver and gold. Note 'doom' (R.V.), not 'morning', in v. 7.

(To be continued)