

CHAPTER IX

THE FAILURE OF ISRAEL

THE SPIRITUAL HISTORY OF ISRAEL (20: 1-44)

WITH ch. 20 we enter a new section of the book. In chs. 8-19 Ezekiel has been describing the sin of Jerusalem, but in chs. 20-23, which cover the period between the final drift into revolt (590 B.C.) and the appearing of the Babylonian armies before the walls of Jerusalem (24: 1-588 B.C.), while traversing much of the ground again, he goes deeper and seeks to lay bare the deeper reasons for Jerusalem's sin.

Ch. 20 is peculiarly important. Because the traditional interpretation of Israel's religion has with few exceptions consistently ignored it, it has failed to understand much in the prophetic books. This in turn opened the door to last century's destructive criticism, which was in other directions a travesty of the truth, even though it rescued much that traditionalism had lost. The general thought of the chapter was prepared for by ch. 16, but as Ezekiel is here unhampered by allegory, he is able to go far deeper and into more detail. For all that there is a certain curtain of verbal expression through which one has to win one's way before the meaning is clear. The chief difference between Ezekiel and traditional interpretation is briefly as follows. For tradition the idolatry and social unrighteousness of Israel that loom so large in the Old Testament were, until near the end, the exception; for Ezekiel a true knowledge of God and a true keeping of His law were so exceptional that he can ignore them.

ISRAEL CUT OFF FROM GOD (20: 1-4)

In certain aspects this section is reminiscent of 14: 1-11. There, however, God's refusal to answer the elders who enquire of Him is motivated by their sin; here God refuses to answer because they are the heirs of their ancestors (but see comments on vv. 30-32 below). The question (v. 4) has the force of an imperative, heightened by the repetition. The judging is carried out by rehearsing God's verdict on the past, cf. 22: 2 and especially 23: 36.

ISRAEL IN EGYPT (20: 5-9)

Ezekiel begins with the moment, when Moses returned to Egypt with the gracious message of Jehovah (Ex. 4: 29-31). In the light of Ezekiel it becomes easier to understand Moses' unwillingness to return and his expectation that his message would be refused (Ex. 4: 1). But Ezekiel's words need closer attention.

Though archaeology has shown sporadic signs of Egyptian religious influence among the Israelites, it has shown clearly enough that it was never strong (cf. pp. 42 and 64). Nor does any passage of Scripture outside Ezekiel make any such suggestion. For Joshua the twin dangers were the gods of the Canaanites and the old traditional gods the Patriarchs had known beyond the Euphrates (Joshua 24: 14f.). Further, if we are to take the command in v. 7 literally, it seems strange that it is unmentioned in the story of the Exodus. The "idols of Egypt" are not the actual gods worshipped in Egypt, but the great uniformities of nature and human life they represented.

The plagues on Egypt are popularly interpreted as God's punishment, but such an explanation leaves many unsatisfied. They know that Pharaoh hardened his heart as well as having it hardened by God, but they cannot forget that God's threat of hardening was pronounced before Moses ever stood before Pharaoh (Ex. 4: 21; 7: 3). In addition the plagues seem excessive. But, though we cannot exclude the element of punishment, this was not the main intention of the plagues; they were demonstrations of Jehovah's power—see especially Ex. 9: 14ff., RV, and Paul's use of the passage in Rom. 9: 14-18—in particular over Egypt's gods (Ex. 12: 12). It should be reasonably obvious that this demonstration of Jehovah's power was for the good of the Israelites above all and in the first place.

Our conception of God has been so humanized and personalized by His revelation in Christ Jesus, that for the most part we fail to grasp the true nature of idolatry. The gods of the heathen were always forces of nature more or less thinly personified. In old Rome before the advent of Greek influence it is doubtful whether they had been personified at all. Even where we find figures like the Vedic Brihaspati, the "lord of prayer," the personified and deified sacrificial formula, or the Egyptian Thoth, the god of wisdom (and other things as well), they personify forces as real to the worshipper, even if less tangible, as the physical forces of nature.

There is probably no part of the world where nature presents a greater uniformity than in Egypt. Whether the rise of the

Nile was great or small, it occurred so regularly that it led the Egyptians to the making of what may have been the world's first regular calendar.¹ The sun and the river, life and death, these were the great facts to which man had to bow.

To us the three signs given to Moses (Ex. 4: 1-9) may seem too reminiscent of the conjurer's repertoire, and it is probably no accident that the Egyptian magicians were able to imitate two of them (Ex. 7: 11ff., 22). But to the Israelites, for whom they were intended, they were to proclaim that Jehovah controlled the uniformities of nature and was not controlled by them. This is even truer of the plagues. It has often been remarked that they were also blows at leading Egyptian gods (e.g. NBC, p. 112a), but this has hardly any meaning until we remember that the gods were the real power behind nature. Various unconvincing explanations have been given why Moses led the Israelites to the apparent trap facing the Sea of Reeds (English versions, "Red Sea"), but the obvious reason is that for Israel's sake it had to be crossed in a miraculous manner. In Semitic thought the sea was the type of chaos (the Babylonian Tiamat), the ancient enemy of the gods of cosmic order. The Israelites had to learn in this way that Jehovah was Lord of cosmos and chaos alike.

There is no evidence that the Israelites in Egypt ever questioned the existence of Jehovah or His call of the Patriarchs. It was rather that they doubted His power in the midst of the great uniformities of life. After the first flush of enthusiasm on Moses' return (Ex. 4: 31) their true feelings were revealed once the relentless pressure of daily life was felt again (Ex. 5: 21; 6: 9) or a new peril was faced (Ex. 14: 11f.). It is an interesting study, but outside the scope of this book, to see how this doubt of Jehovah's power dogged Israel throughout the Biblical period.

The typical orthodox Christian lays great stress on correct doctrine about God, but Israel's ancient sin is all too often his as well. It is not so difficult to trust, when all the old landmarks disappear and chaos seems to be resuming its sway, for then even the unbeliever is forced to throw himself on God, if he is to survive. It is amid the great uniformities of life, hemmed in by the great gods of "Egypt," the state, public opinion and economic pressure, that we find it hardest not to make concessions to the world.

Ezekiel stresses that the "natural" action of God would have been to punish Israel and finish with him then and there (v. 8). "I said" is far better rendered "I thought" (RSV), and so also

¹ Breasted: *Ancient Times*, p. 58f., suggests that the Egyptian calendar started in 4236 B.C., but this is far from enjoying universal acceptance.

in vv. 13, 21. The Bible never hesitates to use anthropomorphic language about God. His action (v. 9) based purely on His character and for His glory represents His unchanging purpose; His "thought" is what men would have considered natural, right and proper, had He done it.

ISRAEL IN THE WILDERNESS (20: 10-26)

Ezekiel divides the wilderness period into two. In vv. 10-17 he is concerned with those who came out of Egypt and had sentence of death passed on them at Kadesh Barnea (v. 15); vv. 18-26 take up the fortunes of their children.

Of Israelite idolatry in the wilderness we know little. Joshua 24: 14f., is evidence enough that it must have been widespread enough, even if secret, and Lev. 17: 7 shows one form it took—the placating of the desert demons. Psa. 81: 12 and Acts 7: 42 point to its existence, as does indeed the warning of Deut. 4: 15-19—Acts 7: 43 has no bearing on this period, for it is a free quotation of the LXX of Amos 5: 26, where a reference to the RV mg. or RSV will show that it is referring to the prophet's own time.¹

Ezekiel's references to the Sabbath show that he was in possession of information that has not been preserved for us in the Pentateuch. It need not surprise us, however. The drastic and public punishment of the man who collected sticks on the Sabbath (Num. 15: 32-36) suggests that a public example was needed.

The modern tendency is to explain Ezekiel's stress on the Sabbath by the peculiar needs of the exile, for Sabbath-keeping, circumcision and the eating of "clean" food were among the few outward elements of their religion that the exiles were able to observe. This seems to be a mistake. No prophet rejected the ritual and the external as whole-heartedly as did Jeremiah, but we find the same stress on the Sabbath with him, and this before the exile (Jer. 17: 19-27). We are so accustomed to a weekly day of rest that probably only those that have lived in pagan lands can grasp what life without it means, or what an immense innovation it represented. In spite of strong arguments to the contrary, it seems conclusive from this chapter and Neh. 9: 14 that the Sabbath is part of the Sinai revelation

¹ Some might challenge this opinion on the basis of Num. 23: 21. But Balaam is not painting a picture of Israel as he is, but as God in His grace regards him. In Deut. 32, the Song of Moses, all from v. 13 is prophetic, much in the prophetic perfect, so vv. 16f. do not refer to wilderness idolatry; on the other hand "There was no strange god with him" (v. 12b) means that Jehovah had no other god to help Him.

and does not date from Eden. Certainly all efforts to find a trace of a weekly rest-day elsewhere in the ancient world have conspicuously failed. It is easy enough to keep the Sabbath in a legalistic way, but once it is correctly understood, it becomes a very real test of a man's faith. Only where the Lord is recognized as controller over the great powers of nature can one go beyond a legalistic cessation of work and turn heart and mind away from all the clamant claims of the world.

The reference in v. 23 is to Deut. 28: 15-68 (note especially v. 64). Just as the lack of faith and obedience in Egypt led inevitably to the disaster of the golden calf at Sinai and of Kadesh Barnea, so the failure of the second generation in the wilderness led inescapably to the exile of Israel and Judah. When Joshua said, "Ye cannot serve Jehovah" (Joshua 24: 19), he was basing himself on his knowledge of his hearers.

The Ebionite Christians of the first and second centuries A.D. used v. 25 in their polemic against the Jewish sacrificial system. They interpreted the verse to mean that much of the sacrificial law was a later, falsified addition.¹ We can hardly make the words bear this meaning, but equally they can hardly be interpreted literally. The vast bulk of the Mosaic legislation was given before the tragedy of Kadesh Barnea, and therefore could not be considered in any way a punishment of the younger wilderness generation and their descendants. In fact none of the legislation given after Kadesh Barnea can be said to have made any major modification in the Sinai legislation. We can only understand Ezekiel to mean that much of the law is so phrased and worded that only those with a true faith in and understanding of God would understand it aright. This seems, at least in part, to be the thought in Rom. 5: 20; Gal. 3: 19. Taken all in all we get the impression that the prophetic message was for most of its hearers sheer folly. They seem to have been as convinced that they were doing God's will by a formal keeping of the law as were the bulk of the Jews in our Lord's day. Ezekiel does not say that human sacrifice marked Israel's religion down through its history, but rather that it was the natural climax of its downward path (see p. 63), and therefore an indication of the essential wrongness of all that had gone before. But the very degradation brought about by their lack of understanding was to drive them back to God (v. 26). As Paul says, "The law was like a strict governess in charge of us until we went to the school of Christ and learned to be justified by faith in Him" (Gal. 3: 24).²

¹ Schoeps: *Theologie und Geschichte des Judenchristentums*, pp. 151, 221.

² Phillips: *Letters to Young Churches*.

It may well be asked how this gloomy judgment can be reconciled with the idyllic picture of Hos. 2: 15; 9: 10a; Jer. 2: 2f.; Ezek. 16: 8-14. Compared to what Israel was to become, the prophets could well look back to the wilderness period, in spite of all its faults, as the happiest time in Israel's history. But when the prophet had to trace the poison root that led to the bitter fruit, he had to show it there right at the beginning. Incidentally, how often do we think of the Wilderness Wanderings as the happiest time in Israel's history?

ISRAEL IN THE LAND (20: 27-29)

This section of the prophecy is kept short because all the false religion of the time of the Judges and under the monarchy was merely the natural outcome of what had gone before. Ezekiel had already described it in 16: 15-34 (cf. p. 63). Now Ezekiel dismisses the whole of this man-made perversion by a pun (v. 29a) based apparently on popular etymology (v. 29b). He links *Bamah*—consistently and conveniently, but not quite adequately rendered “high place”¹—with “*mah* (what) is *ha-Bamah* (the high place) whereunto *ha-ba'im* (ye go)?” In other words he suggests that the very popular etymology showed that men recognized that the *bamah* and all it symbolized was merely a place of human choice and not of Divine ordaining.

EZEKIEL'S OWN GENERATION (20: 30-32)

Seeing we lack confirmatory evidence, we should not infer from v. 31 that human sacrifices were brought in again after the death of Josiah. Note that it is not included among the abominations of Jerusalem in ch. 8. We may rather compare it with a saying like that of Matt. 23: 29-35; Luke 11: 47-51. Josiah's reformation had not meant any real break with the past, and given the opportunity the sins of the past would lift their heads again. The real temptation for Ezekiel's contemporaries was dully to acquiesce in that which had happened and to adopt the idolatry of the places of their exile (v. 32). Their very misunderstanding of the nature and will of Jehovah would make such a step easy.

JEHOVAH'S TRIUMPH (20: 33-44)

The whole of the chapter up till now has been seeking to establish one point: once God chose Israel for His own purposes,

¹ See note on I Kings 3: 2 in ICC or NBC, or more fully in Albright: *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel*, p. 105ff.

nothing that Israel could do could thwart Him in working out His final will, however much He might have to discard generation after generation on the way. Now Ezekiel proclaims that the last act of the strange drama was to be played out.

Jeremiah had already said that Israel's history had been worked out under a broken covenant: "Behold, the days come, saith Jehovah, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah: not according to the covenant I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; forasmuch as they broke My covenant and I had to lord it over them (*ba'alti bam*)" Jer. 31: 31f., so essentially RV mg. Now He would be king over them in judgment (vv. 33f.). As once before, there would be a testing in the wilderness—of the exile (v. 35)—and a judgment that would separate His true people from the idolaters. We can best render v. 39: "Go, serve each his idols, and afterwards, if ye do not obey Me—!" (ICC). Many of the exiles must have adopted the idolatry around them, but they vanished without trace. It is not easy to decide whether we should follow the Hebrew in v. 37, "the bond of the covenant," or the LXX, "by number" (RSV).

As we have previously noticed (p. 73), Ezekiel's vision of the future is foreshortened, and centuries and a yet greater exile in "the wilderness of the peoples" would have to elapse before God's purpose with Israel would be fulfilled. For all that vv. 40-44 have had a striking partial fulfilment. The remnant that returned under Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel, and Joshua had learnt certain aspects of Ezekiel's teaching well, and it was reinforced about a century later by the work of Ezra. Even though it was often not according to knowledge, there was a real zeal for God. The Judaism of the return provided the setting in which the Christ could come and the Church be born, while the amazingly rapid spread of Christianity in the first century of its existence was in large measure due to the manner in which the Synagogue had prepared the way for it among the Gentiles. This partial fulfilment gives us confidence to look forward to the day when "all Israel shall be saved" (cf. p. 129).