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A table of contents for *The Bible Student* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bible-student_01.php

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THE PROPHECY OF EZEKIEL*

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The Vision of God (1: 8-2: 2)

The effect of the vision of God was that Ezekiel fell on his face (1:28). Though it is not expressly stated, it seems clear enough that the vision had a paralysing effect on him, robbing him of all strength (cf. especially Dan. 8:17 f; 10:9 ff, 15-19; Rev. 1:17). He needed Divine power and energy before he could look on the glory—'the spirit' (2:2) means the Spirit of God, but, as normally in the Old Testament, He is referred to impersonally, not personally, as normally in the New Testament.

It must be stressed that, however symbolic the vision, it was a real vision of God. It was not a vision of the chariot-throne, or of the cherubim, but of God. They all, in their manifold symbolism, are ultimately a revelation of God, for in the state He keeps we glimpse something of Him. To try and understand them as an end in itself is a misunderstanding of the purpose of the vision, and will bring little or no spiritual benefit.

It is quite common in popular piety to speak of seeing Christ. In its origin the phrase is probably a combination of certain passages of Scripture with the language of mysticism watered down to mean very little in particular. While it is undoubtedly granted to some children of God to have a vision of the risen Lord, such a vision is always a rare experience, which is bound to have the deepest imaginable effect on him who receives it. The hymn-writer was not sentimentalizing, when he wrote:

* This new series of studies by Mr Ellison commenced in the October issue 1952. It should also be stated that the promised series on *Biblical Hebrew Words* referred to in the last issue (p.149) will start with the *July issue* (in all probability).

'Show me Thy face—one transient gleam
 Of loveliness Divine,
 And I shall never think or dream
 Of other love save Thine.

All lesser light will darken quite,
 All lower glories wane;
 The beautiful of earth will scarce
 Seem beautiful again.'

However popular the expression 'seeing Christ' may have become with some to express a spiritual awareness of His presence, we would do well to reserve it for experiences comparable with those described in the Bible. Above all it should not be used for the ability some possess of summoning up a mental picture of *their own creating* of our Lord. To see God means to be transformed.

It should be noted and pondered that, so far as we have any record, it is not to man prostrate and weak before Him that God gives His prophetic message, but to man standing on his feet and strengthened by the Spirit. There are times and seasons, when the child of God will be found prostrate before the Lord, but when he is to be God's 'fellow-worker', he is to stand upon his feet. 'It is man erect, man in his manhood, with whom God will have fellowship and with whom He will speak' (A. B. Davidson). God's service is a willing and rational service, not the service of automata.

Ezekiel's Commissioning (2: 3-3: 14)

Ezekiel is addressed as 'Son of man'. This cannot be linguistically equated with the title 'The Son of Man', which our Lord used of Himself. Something of the meaning of the former may be in the latter, but the latter far transcends it. A more idiomatic rendering of Son of man would be 'child of man'; it really means no more than 'man'; it stresses his insignificance compared to the glory he has just seen, but it is in no way depreciatory, for man, in spite of his fall, is and remains the climax of God's creating.

The story of the actual commissioning gives the impression of being spread over a period of time. In a trance-vision 'time' takes on a meaning rather different to that which it generally bears; it is no longer 'clock time', open to human measurement. But

however the passage of time is to be measured, God, as always, instructs His servant step by step. 'The whole burden, the whole message, does not become his at once. He has to adapt himself and assimilate before the message is continued. Why, even the explanation of the special form of his prophetic activity is delayed to a slightly later season (3:15-21). This is always God's way, though in normal experience the learning is spread over a 'longer' time.

In 2:3-7 Ezekiel is introduced to those to whom he was to prophesy, 'nations that are rebellious' (v. 3, R.V.), i.e., both Judah and Israel. The term 'Judah' is very seldom used in Ezekiel, and where it is, apart perhaps from 8:17, it means the Southern Kingdom as distinct from the Northern, or the tribe of Judah as distinct from the other tribes. Normally, as the context shows again and again, 'the House of Israel' and 'the children of Israel' refer in the first place to the citizens of the Southern Kingdom, whether in exile or in Judaea; when it is otherwise the context makes it clear. This choice of name is due to two obvious reasons. In exile the captives who were removed with Jehoiachin will to some extent—how far we do not know—have come into contact with the descendants of captives from the North, and the message was intended for them as well. Then Ezekiel, like Jeremiah, was of the tribe of Levi, and so the use of Israel was the more natural for both of them.* God's opening charge did not fully reveal how Ezekiel's message would be revealed, but it was made clear enough that great difficulties were to be expected.

There follows a symbolic picture of the source of Ezekiel's message and inspiration (2:8-3:3). No such picture is to be found in the earlier prophets, for it would have ill-fitted the relationship in which they knew themselves to be with God, but for all that Ezekiel's picture fits all prophecy. It may have been Ezekiel's priestly outlook that made him more conscious of the distance between him and God, and hence made this symbolic picture more suited to him. It strikingly illustrates the union of the Divine and human in the prophetic message. The message is clearly Divine, from God, for the roll is already written, and that

* Though Israel in Jeremiah normally means or includes the Southern Kingdom, there are passages where it must either mean those left in the area of the Northern Kingdom, or the descendants of those who had gone into exile from Samaria.

'within and without', i.e., there is no room for any additions by the prophet himself. But the prophet does not merely take it with him to Tel-Abib and read it to the exiles. He has to eat it, to assimilate it, to make it a living part of himself; this is the human part of the message. The effect of the assimilation is interestingly indicated in 3:3, 14. First the word of Jehovah is received and is very sweet. But as it is assimilated and becomes part of the prophet, it dominates him and makes him share on a human level Jehovah's attitude towards a sinful people (cf. Jer. 6:11, especially the punctuation in R.S.V.). The roll contained only 'lamentations, mourning and woe' because Ezekiel received a virtual re-commissioning (33:1-20) before he began his work of building up and comforting.

Once Ezekiel receives God's message, it is made clear to him that it will be refused, and that deliberately and without excuse, though presumably 3:11 held out some hope that some might accept. Though Ezekiel's message was to the exiles in general, it was to be spoken particularly to those among whom he lived (3:11), and this was underlined by the Spirit's returning him to his home (3:12-15).

'The spirit lifted me up' might be interpreted in a purely natural sense, were it not for 8:3. The two passages must surely be interpreted identically, and a purely natural interpretation is excluded in the latter. We shall deal with the deeper implications of the 'levitation' when discussing ch. 4. For the moment it is sufficient to say that since few, if any, will argue for a literal physical levitation, we were justified in using the term *trance* for the whole experience of 1:3-3:14.

Ezekiel the Watchman (3: 15-21)

It is often said that 'God's appointing is God's enabling'. This is true enough, but life is not as simple as all that. The application of God's words to human sin and need is more than 'and it was in my mouth as honey for sweetness', or 'in bitterness, in the heat of my spirit'. When Ezekiel returns to his familiar surroundings and looks on them with new eyes, he sits astonished (R.V.; R.S.V. 'overwhelmed') for seven days. He needs time to get adjusted to the new circumstances.

In the seven days symbolism breaks through again. Seven days were the time of mourning for the dead (cf. Gen. 50:10;

Num. 19:11; Job 2:13); Ezekiel is a new man, for the Spirit has entered into him, but the week of impurity for the corpse of the old must pass before he begins his work. Seven days were the period of consecration for the priest (Lev. 8:33). Ezekiel is to carry out his priestly work as a prophet, so before his work begins the week of consecration must elapse.

When the period of waiting ended, God made his commission clearer to Ezekiel. He was to be especially a watchman. This was not an entirely new name for a prophet. Watchman may be so used in Is. 21:6; 62:6; and Hab. 2:1, though such an interpretation is not necessary and at least in one case improbable. It is rather more likely in Is. 52:10, and virtually certain in Jer. 6:17. But the very paucity of references is evidence enough that it was neither a normal name or function for the prophet. But in Ezekiel we find it both at the beginning of the prophet's activity and at his re-commissioning (33:1-9). Evidently it expressed a feature of his work that either did not appear or was not prominent in that of his predecessors.

In the old dispensation a most important part of the priest's work, though we often forget it, was that of 'pastoral oversight'. It was the priest's task to try and see that the Law was known and kept (cf. Lev. 10:11; Dt. 24:8; Mal. 2:7; 2 Ch. 17:7 ff). Ezekiel is not to be merely God's spokesman to the people in general; he is to be God's messenger to the individual in particular. The use of the singular in this passage is not merely an example of the vivid concreteness of Hebrew, but does definitely envisage Ezekiel's speaking to individuals as he sees their personal work. The fact that only his public ministry has been preserved for us does not nullify this conclusion.

It has been said epigrammatically, 'Jeremiah was a prophet who happened to be a priest; Ezekiel was a priest who happened to be a prophet'. If we allow for the inevitable exaggeration of epigrams, this is very true. Though Ezekiel is a genuine prophet, yet he is carrying out his priestly functions by so acting; he is above all the pastoral prophet caring for the souls of the individuals. This explains why the call should have come just when he was thirty (1:1).

To whom did Ezekiel Prophesy?

The foregoing and all that follows take for granted that Ezekiel's prophetic activity was confined to the exiles, and that there

is no evidence that he ever moved far from Tel-Abib. This has, however, been very strongly challenged in recent years. Many, including a few conservatives, maintain that chs. 4-24, either in whole or in major part, were spoken in Jerusalem, not in Babylonia, and that it is only from ch. 33 onwards that we have Ezekiel's prophecies to the exiles.

The main reason for this view is superficially a valid one. If we except the prophecies against the nations, which in most cases were probably not communicated, except perhaps indirectly, to the nations concerned, we have no evidence for prophecy *about* persons rather than *to* them. There are cases where the prophetic message had to be sent by letter, e.g., 2 Ch. 21:12-15; Jer. 29, but there is no evidence that the message was first given orally to others. It is therefore at first sight strange enough that Ezekiel should act and speak a whole series of denunciations against Jerusalem to the exiles in Tel-Abib.

It should be noted that there is no suggestion that the prophecies were to be written down and sent to Jerusalem. The time needed speaks against it. It took six months for certain news of the destruction of Jerusalem to reach Tel-Abib (33:21—see later note on this passage). Ezra under the most favourable conditions ('according to the good hand of his God upon him', Ezra 7:9) needed three and a half months for the journey (Ezra 7:9; 8:31). The length of Nehemiah's journey is not given, but the indications are again that it will have lasted about the same time as Ezra's, even though he had a royal escort and special papers.

Further, if Ezekiel had indeed sent his prophecies to Jerusalem, it seems strange that he did not seek to strengthen the hands of lonely old Jeremiah there, or again that Jeremiah does not even suggest that any such supporting prophecies ever arrived from the far-distant exiles.

Cooke, who held the usual view that Ezekiel remained in Babylonia, wrote recently in the *International Critical Commentary*, 'No doubt we find it difficult to adjust ourselves to the position of a prophet in Babylonia hurling his denunciations at the inhabitants of Jerusalem across 700 miles of desert.' I agree; it is not only difficult, but also rather absurd.

When we examine the other arguments in favour of Ezekiel's having prophesied in Jerusalem, we find them either very weak, or quite capable of another explanation. Against the view is that,

as generally propounded, it involves alterations in the order of the text, and makes Ezekiel a very clumsy writer who has led generations of readers to false conclusions.

There is, however, an entirely satisfactory explanation of the difficulty. Ezekiel was in fact prophesying *of* but not *to* Jerusalem. As Jer. 24 shows us, when Jehoiachin and his companions were led away captive, those left in Jerusalem put it down to the peculiar sinfulness of the exiles. These probably looked on it in the same light. The message of Jeremiah that the exile was an act of grace on the part of God, and that the real sinners had been left in Jerusalem, for dire punishment was one that was hard to accept both in Jerusalem and in Babylonia. Until the exiles grasped that God had really brought them into exile that He might make them the beginnings of a renewed people, Ezekiel could not begin his task of preparing them for the future. So during the last dark years of Jerusalem, before Nebuchadnezzar executed God's punishment to the full on the city, Ezekiel had to explain to the exiles the inner meaning of the agony that was going on in their fatherland. His message was not for those that were left in the city, because, as Jeremiah had to say, there was no hope left for them. But such was the effect of Ezekiel's work, that when temple and city went to the ground, and the end of Judah seemed to have come for all time, some at least of the exiles were willing to listen to Ezekiel and learn of him as he prepared a new generation for the return that God had promised when the seventy years had run their course.

In God's inspired record not merely the blessings of the righteous but also the fate of the sinner are recorded that we may learn both from the one and the other.

(To be continued)

THE TENDERNESS OF GOD

- As a father pitieth.—Ps. 103: 13.
- As a mother comforteth.—Isa. 66: 13.
- As a hen gathereth.—Matt. 23: 27.
- As a bridegroom rejoiceth.—Isa. 62: 5.
- As a refiner sitteth.—Mal. 3: 3.
- As an eagle fluttereth.—Deut. 32: 11.
- As a nurse cherisheth.—1 Thess. 2: 7.
- As a shepherd seeketh.—Ezek. 34: 12.