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# THE PROPHECY OF EZEKIEL

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

## The Doom of Sidon (28:20-23)

Sidon was almost certainly an older city than Tyre, indeed it was probably the oldest of the South Phoenician cities, cf. Gen. 10:15. So, though by the time of David Tyre had become their chief city, the Phoenicians are called Zidonians, i.e., Sidonians, in the Old Testament, e.g., Jdg. 10:12; 18:7; 1 Kings 11:1, 5; 16:31; 1 Chr. 22:4; Ezek. 32:30. Tyre was so severely mauled by Nebuchadnezzar that under the Persians Sidon once more became the more important. This is probably the point of the oracle. Tyre had not come under the doom of God that others should profit by continuing in her ways. Sidon might seek to inherit Tyre's glory but would only share in her doom. Today Saida, as it is now called, is only a small port of purely local importance. 'They shall know' (v. 22, 23) hardly refers to the inhabitants of Sidon, but rather to the survivors of Israel.

## The Restoration of Israel (28:24-26)

Though Egypt was technically the neighbour of Israel, the sand-sea between them was a very effective barrier. Since the invasion of Shishak (1 Kings 14:25 f) and Zerah (1 Chr. 14:9-12)\* Egypt had played little part in Judah's history beyond using her as a cat's-paw to protect herself against Assyria and Babylon. Both Isaiah (Is. 30:7) and the Rabshakeh (2 Kings 18:21) had mocked her ineffective show of strength. So before turning to the old crocodile of the Nile Ezekiel here sums up God's condemnation of Israel's true neighbours, big and little, that had harmed her. He indicates clearly that all are covered, whether they have been mentioned by name or not. This short oracle is a preparation for ch. 33-39.

It is worth noting that God will bring Israel to know Him along a twofold road. 'Ye (they) shall know that I am Jehovah' occurs in slightly variant forms 54 times in Ezekiel. It never

\* If he was an Egyptian; see *New Bible Commentary*, p. 537 b.

refers to any subjective, intuitive or mystic knowledge of God, but to the learning of His character by His works of judgment. But these works of judgment are equally on apostate Judah and on the God-defying nations; on the nations they are purely judgment, but on His people their ultimate object is grace.

### The Prophecies against Egypt (chs. 29-32)

We have here a group of seven prophecies: 29:1-16 is dated about January 587 B.C., some seven months before the fall of Jerusalem; there is every reason for thinking that 30:1-19 is from approximately the same time; 30:20-26 is dated about April 587 B.C. and 31:1-18 is two months later, little over a month before the fall of the city; 32:1-16 and 32:17-32 were spoken within a fortnight of one another early in 585 B.C., i.e., after the fall of Jerusalem; finally 29:17-21, the latest dated prophecy in the book, comes on New Year's Day, 571 B.C.—its position is explained by its being in some measure an expansion of 29:1-16.

That numbers are used symbolically in Scripture, and especially in a book like Ezekiel, is obvious, and none is more often so used than seven. Yet here only preconceived ideas are likely to find any symbolical significance in the seven prophecies. The more we become acquainted with the revelation of God, the more we gain the impression of supreme common-sense, if we may reverently use this term of God. The Scriptures obstinately refuse to fit into any human prefabricated mould, and repeatedly the obvious and simple interpretation is the correct one.

### The Doom of Egypt (29:1-16)

We have here an allegorical poem (v. 3 ff, cf. RSV) and its prose interpretation. Pharaoh is compared to a water monster (*tannin*), i.e., a crocodile. There is nothing to be said for the traditional rendering 'dragon'. There is a deeper meaning as well. *Tannin* is used as a parallel to Leviathan in Is. 27:1 and to Rahab—used of Egypt in Is. 30:7 RV—in Is. 51:9. The comparison is not only with the ugly, complacent head of the crocodile protruding from the waters of the Nile, but also with the old rebellious chaos powers that Semitic mythology spoke of. Pharaoh's subjects are compared to the fish of the Nile.

Two reasons are given for Pharaoh's punishment, but it is likely that both ultimately go back to the same cause.

The lesser is his completely callous use of Israel as a cat's-paw (v. 6f). This was clearly seen by the Rabshakeh (2 Kings 18:21), and it lies behind Isaiah's condemnation of every approach to and entanglement with Egypt (see also Vol. XXV, p. 67). Behind the Pharaoh's willingness to use others without any thought of their welfare lay not only the natural selfishness of man but even more the belief that he was a god incarnate. It is always a very evil thing when a man persuades himself that for any reason he is not subject to the normal limitations of man; he will always end by falling lower than the normal level of mankind.

The greater cause of punishment was Pharaoh's pride, a pride that will have gone back to the same origin. His claim, 'My Nile is my own; I have made it' (v. 3 RSV) was peculiarly foolish. The Nile is the life of Egypt; on its mysterious rise and fall depends the fertility and life of the land. One could almost say that the Nile is Egypt. But whether Egypt's southern frontier was the normal one of the First Cataract at Syene (Aswan), or whether at the height of Egypt's power it was moved a thousand miles up-stream to the Sixth Cataract south of Meroe the sources of the Nile and the mystery of its flooding that meant life for Egypt remained unknown, as Herodotus bears testimony. Then and now man's ability to use the forces of nature leads him to believe that he is lord of nature and that he can dispense with its true Lord.

The punishment of Egypt is conquest (a sword, v. 8), for it had callously given up others to conquest, and the failure of the Nile floods (an utter waste and desolation, v. 10, 30:12) from the Delta to the First Cataract—from Migdol to Syene, v. 10, RV. Mg., RSV. Though the complete desolation for forty years has seen no literal fulfilment, nor is there the slightest reason to think that it will, Egypt has seen repeated conquest, famine and humiliation. Modern Egypt dreams of a renewal of past glories, but we may be sure that any apparent satisfaction will be of short duration.

### Egypt's humiliation (29:17-32:16)

In God's wisdom, whatever blows Egypt may have suffered from Nebuchadnezzar, and however far he may have penetrated across the frontier, he was not the executor of God's wrath. It may be that there were spiritual reasons in Egypt; it may be that it was Nebuchadnezzar's pride, so graphically described in Daniel, that deprived him of this conquest, which was reserved for Cambyses, the son of Cyrus (525 B.C.). It would have been more merciful for Egypt had Persia been able to keep a firm grip on the land. It was ruined by constant fighting and brutal extortion, so that the conquest by Alexander the Great in 332 B.C. was hailed with joy. There followed the long line of fifteen Ptolemys, Greeks by blood, culture and outlook. Under them Egypt became, at least in its cities, and to some measure even in the countryside, Hellenized. The alien royal house degenerated more and more until after the battle of Actium it dropped like a ripe plum into the hands of the Romans in 30 B.C.

Since then it has been ruled by Arab and Turk, Fatimid and Saracen, Mamluk, Ottoman Turk and Albanian. Misrule, extortion and plague have kept the land poor. Even its language has disappeared, displaced first by Greek and then by Arabic, leaving only 'the mere jargon'\* of ecclesiastical Coptic. Even were Egypt to rise once again to the rank of a first-class state, it would be no more a true descendant of the Egypt that once was than is modern Italy of ancient Rome, or Greece of Athens and Sparta.

In his valuable study of ch. 27.† Prof. Sidney Smith suggests that the reason why Nebuchadnezzar gained no wealth, when he finally captured Tyre (29:18), was that as he could not invest it by sea, its riches were shipped off, either for necessities or safety, during the siege, and he explains 27:27-34, in this way. *Every head was made bald, and every shoulder was peeled* (rubbed bare, RSV) in Nebuchadnezzar's army (29:18) by the constant wearing of helmets and the carrying of burdens for the siege works.

\* *Chamber's Encyclopaedia*, Vol. V, p. 32 b.

† *The Ship Tyre in Palestine Exploration Fund Quarterly*, 1953, p. 97 seq.

### Egypt in Sheol (32: 17-32)

As this section is appealed to by various smaller sects as a justification for their views on 'life' after death, it calls for somewhat closer attention.

It is clear that v. 19-21 are a funeral dirge over Egypt; whether v. 22-32 are also in poetry or only in rhythmic prose must with our present knowledge remain doubtful. The doubt arises, as in certain other poetic passages in Ezekiel, from the uncertain state of the text. In either case, however, we are dealing, as in Is. 14:4-21 with poetic language and imagery, and it is inadvisable to take all the details literally.

Ezekiel is called to seal Pharaoh's fate by taking up the funeral dirge (v. 18, cf. 27:2; 28:12) in which he is to be joined by representatives of the nations—read, 'send them down with a lament, you and the women of the mighty nations' (Moffatt). The Versions bear testimony to the uncertainty of the text in v. 20. The RSV, 'They shall fall amid those who are slain by the sword, and with her shall lie all her multitudes', is attractive but not certain. Just as in Is. 14:10 the great chiefs among the dead in Sheol greet the dead Pharaoh (v. 19, 21).

Ezekiel then pictures Pharaoh touring Sheol. He sees each nation with its own portion. Assyria, Elam, etc., represent in each case the king and around him lie the bodies of his warriors. On the basis of this it has been claimed that Sheol is no more than a poetic name for the grave; it should be clear, however, that here we are dealing entirely with poetic and semi-symbolic imagery. In the first place the kings of each nation are represented by one typical figure, possibly in the setting the last of his line. Then his warriors are buried around him as they never were in fact, especially when their kingdom went down in fire and storm. The weapons in v. 27 are as much shadow weapons as everything else in Sheol. The fact is that Sheol is so much a shadow land, that so far as reality for the living is concerned, it matters not whether its inhabitants are pictured as rising to greet the newcomer in irony, or whether they are seen tidily taking their rest, each in his appointed place.

Already in 28:10 we had the death of the uncircumcised as a mark of shame; here it is virtually a refrain. In the setting Moffatt's 'a shameful death' seems to bring out the meaning best.

One of the vexed questions in the Old Testament is whether it recognizes any difference of position among the dead, any divisions of Sheol. Terms like 'the uttermost parts of the pit' (v. 23) can hardly be made to bear any such construction by themselves, and the general impression we gain is that there is no discrimination in Sheol. But what are we to make of v. 27? It certainly suggests discrimination and difference. On the whole, however, though neither Moffatt nor RSV agree, it seems best to follow LXX and Syriac with most modern commentaries and omit the negative. No reason seems to be given or suggested for differentiating between Meshech-Tubal and the mighty men of old (so RSV, Moffatt following the Versions), and probably none is intended. Equally we should probably follow recent commentators, and also RSV, Moffatt, in the conjectural reading involving a very small consonantal change 'whose shields are upon their bones' instead of 'their iniquities are upon their bones'.

Meshech-Tubal, as the concord 'her' shows, is a compound name (as against RSV and Moffatt). Though the commentators think of tribes in Asia Minor, as is indeed the case in 27:13, it seems unlikely here. There is no evidence that the difficulties the Muski created for the Assyrians through the centuries had made any great mark on Judah's memory, nor does the interpretation explain the compound name, which many commentators seek to avoid by omitting Tubal. It seems far more likely that the names are used as in 39:1 (*q.v.*) of the wild tribes that periodically broke into the Fertile Crescent, coming no one knew from where. The most recent example had been the Scythians, who had appeared suddenly round the end of the Caucasus, had rocked Assyria to its foundations and had been virtually exterminated by the Medes.

Though the Edomites and the Phoenicians had not yet gone down to Sheol, the word of the Lord had gone out against them, and so with prophetic certainty they are included in the picture. 'The princes of the north' are the petty kings of Northern Syria.

So Pharaoh is left with the cold comfort (v. 31) that as is the doom of all nations that forget God—for Ezekiel's hearers there was the further message, clear even if unexpressed that as Egypt had gone, so would Babylon go in the day of God's choice. It is hard to imagine a more dramatic close to Ezekiel's prophecies against the nations. He now turns to the future of Israel; the destruction of Jerusalem can be followed by national resurrection, but there is no future for the nations of the world as they go down into silence.

## WHO ARE THE OVERCOMERS?\*

(Revelation 2 and 3)

W. HOSTE, B.A.

Who then are the overcomers? I think they are those in each church who prove themselves real Christians by continuing to the end, and that for four reasons: (1) The character of the promises; (2) the distinction between the promises and 'crowns' mentioned to two of the churches; (3) the solemn contrast in chap. 20: 7, 8, between 'overcoming' and being finally lost; and (4) the conditions for 'overcoming' laid down in other Scriptures.

1. *If the promises to Overcomers are to extraordinary Christians alone, what is left for the ordinary?*

There are fourteen promises in the seven messages, and all, I believe, can be shewn to be parts of the great salvation which God has by grace provided for His redeemed, and which legalism, if it cannot deny, seeks to minimize, but which, though 'eye hath not seen nor ear heard', nor mind conceived, yet 'God hath prepared for them that love Him'.

It may be difficult to believe that all these promises are for *all* the people of God, but even if only one could be *proved* to be the common property of all believers, that alone would prove my thesis.

The promises of Philadelphia are peculiarly rich, and it will be questioned by some whether all Christians could hope to be

\* Concluded from last issue.