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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](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bible-student_01.php)

# THE PROPHECY OF EZEKIEL

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

## The Prophet's Re-commissioning (33:1-20)

While Ezekiel waited anxiously for news from besieged Jerusalem, news that he knew could only be of destruction, God re-commissioned him, for now a new phase of work was to begin. Whereas he had previously been primarily a messenger of doom, he was now to be the builder of a new community.

Whether there was a new vision of the chariot-throne we are not told. It does not matter, but probably there was not. Visions and ecstatic experiences belong mostly to the beginnings of communion with God. There are those that measure spirituality by such measuring rods, but in fact they are very often God's compensation for its lack. When a man has walked with God for six years, as had Ezekiel, he does not need visions to guarantee the source and authority of the voice that spoke to him.

Vs. 2-9 are essentially the same as 3:17-21 (see 'B.S.', Vol. XXIV, p. 4), but with two important differences. The parallel between Ezekiel and a watchman is more fully drawn (v. 2-6). This reflects Ezekiel's changed status in the community. As the storm clouds gathered over Jerusalem he had increasingly been winning the ear and the regard of the exiles; when his message was vindicated by the fall of Jerusalem, he would become an undisputed spiritual leader. So we are given both the human and the divine side of his appointing.

On the other hand the danger to the righteous is not mentioned (cf. 3:20 f). This had been above all despondency, lack of trust and a following of those false voices that had whispered spurious hopes of speedy return from exile and a restoration of the glories of Zion. If in spite of all they had listened to and believed Ezekiel's message, its fulfilment would remove their chief danger. On the other hand, the wicked, for whom the pull of the surrounding heathendom was perhaps the chief danger, would feel themselves drawn by it the more now that the Temple was no more and the enemies of Jehovah seemed to have triumphed.

The second part of the commissioning (v. 10-20) is a summary of ch. 18 (see Vol. XXV, p. 107-111), though again with a shift of emphasis. Then the temptation had been for the exiles to see themselves so caught up by the entail of the past that effort on their part was useless. Now, as with dull foreboding they waited for the end of all hope, their fate seemed so evil that the doing of God's will seemed to offer no hope of improving it.

Earlier Ezekiel had to bring home to the exiles that their very exile was an act of God's grace; now he had to make them see that their share in the future, their living, would depend entirely on their loyalty to God. They could not lift the burden of exile, nor does Ezekiel suggest that it might be ameliorated. But under a harsh and capricious government their very survival was in itself a guarantee of a fulfilment of the promises of return.

The Church has known its Babylonian Captivity, and those that pass through it are tempted to conformity with the corrupt systems around it. But whether in the dark night of mediaeval superstition or in the shorter persecutions of later days God has always preserved a handful of the faithful; their very living has been the best guarantee that the truth would some day triumph again.

### 'The City is Smitten!' (33:21-33)

Some six months after the fall of Jerusalem (cf. v. 21 with 2 Kings 25:3) the long expected news came. It is imperative to read 'eleventh' in v. 21 with eight Hebrew MSS, some MSS of LXX and the Syriac, unless we assume, as does ICC (*ad loc.*), that a double system of time-reckoning is involved. In any case it must be August 586 B.C. that is intended, for while the fugitive could indeed have met many difficulties and delays on the road, Nebuchadnezzar's official dispatch must have been known in Babylon long before the year was out, and the gloating of minor officials and insolent neighbours would have brought them the news, even if it had not been conveyed officially.

The day before Ezekiel had known it already (v. 22), and with the knowledge came the release from his dumbness. If my explanation of this is correct (Vol. XXIV, p. 64), it means that Ezekiel was now free to act as a normal teacher among the people

and to enter into all the details of their lives. This seems supported by the impression given by ch. 34-39 that they are merely a summary of a much fuller teaching.

But before we are given the new message we have a double picture of the people that are left. In v. 24-29 we have a glimpse of the unrepentant remnant in Judea. Jer. 40-43 gives us a fuller picture of them and shows at least part of the fulfilment of the prophecy. There is a religious fanaticism that nothing can shake. We saw in Ezekiel's earlier prophecies the blind confidence of the men who believed that the Temple could not be destroyed (Jer. 7:4) and that it would guarantee their safety. Now they had switched their confidence from the Temple to their origin (v. 24). In a time of anarchy their behaviour had only deteriorated (v. 25 f) —'ye stand upon your sword', i.e., you live by violence.

As for the exiles (v. 30-33), Ezekiel had now become the topic of general conversation—the AV 'against thee' (v. 30, see Mg.) is particularly unfortunate. He was the popular preacher and the craze for the moment (v. 31). With the disappearance of Jerusalem as a centre of possible rebellion the position of the exiles improved greatly. The new possibilities of gain (v. 31, RV, RSV) were so filling their thoughts that the message of restoration had little attraction for them and it would need the fulfilment of Ezekiel's new message before they would take him really seriously in his new role (v. 33).

### Rulers Past and Future (ch. 34)

In a day when monarchy is a convenience and a nostalgic inheritance from the past, we find it very hard to understand the role of the king in the Bible. Throughout the Bible lands monarchy was a divine institution; the king was the gods' supreme representative, himself a god in Egypt, a man capable of achieving deity elsewhere—chief ruler, chief priest, chief prophet. Though in Israel this union of offices was dissolved, a psalm like 110 shows that men looked for the Messianic king that would reunite them\*. It followed that a people who were living out the will of Jehovah would have to have a head who truly represented Him. So in his

\* See my *The Centrality of the Messianic Idea for the Old Testament*.

picture of restored Israel Ezekiel begins with a picture of the king, though, as the prophecy develops, a deeper reason for this becomes apparent.

One of the disadvantages of fallen man is his very great difficulty, if not incapability, in picturing the ideal and perfect described purely in terms of itself. It is only when we see it against the background of the imperfect that we can really appreciate it. Hence Ezekiel begins with a picture of the kings as they had been (v. 2:8).

Ezekiel uses the metaphorical name 'shepherd'. It cannot be too emphatically stressed that whenever shepherd is used metaphorically it means king, except in the comparatively rare cases where the context makes it clear that the highest princes of the land are intended. The term is used especially by writers round the exilic period, e.g., Jeremiah and Zechariah, and was probably chosen to rule out the illegitimate religious connotations that had become attached to 'king' (*melek*).

At the same time it was peculiarly suited to stress the royal duty of enforcing social righteousness. ICC considers that Josiah's successors are here intended, but I think that the whole monarchy is under condemnation. Ezekiel's eye can see the rottenness under the surface, where we may be dazzled by superficial appearances, cf. his root and branch condemnation of Israel's religious history (ch. 20). Already in our study of 22:30 (Vol. XXVI, p. 9) we had reason to find a far-reaching condemnation of the kings. It is by examining the social record of the better kings that we can best see how little the monarchy had provided true shepherds for God's people.

1 Sa. 8:11-18 gives a prophetic preview of the social effects of the monarchy. We know too little of Saul's reign to be able to say how far he conformed to the pattern, though there are indications, e.g., 1 Sa. 22:2; 25:10 that the process had begun. 2 Sa. 20:24 shows that David had already begun the hated system of 'forced labour' (RSV; levy, RV. Mg.), how hated may be seen from 1 King 12: 18. The cry for less taxation and forced labour (1 King 12:4) shows there was a side to Solomon's glory we often tend to forget. The evidence heaps up when we come to the written

prophets. Is. 5:8-25 can be dated with reasonable certainty in the reign of Jotham (cf. 2 Kings 15:34) and Micah. 2:1-11; 3:1-12 in that of Hezekiah (cf. Jer. 26:18). Equally certainly Jer. 5 and Hab. 1:2-4 belong to Josiah's reign *after* his reformation. It is noteworthy that the fullest picture of the Messianic king (Is. 11:1-9) stresses virtually only that he is the creator and maintainer of social righteousness.

We need not doubt that the religiously better kings were also socially better, but all of them failed to see that they were trying to make the best of a fundamentally evil system. There is no evidence that they ever even considered the possibility of placing the monarchy on any other basis than that foretold by Samuel.

The past rises so vividly before Ezekiel's eyes that he can speak of the vanished kings in the present tense (v. 2 ff); in v. 5 f we have a reference to the exile. Then in v. 7-10 he tells the royal family that restoration of national life will not bring the restoration of their privileged position with it. This is more than merely barring Jehoiachin's descendants from the throne. This had already been done by Jeremiah (22:30). Ezekiel goes further. Instead of announcing the accession of a collateral branch of the Davidic family, or even of a new dynasty, he proclaims that for the time being Jehovah Himself would be their king with no man as His representative (v. 11-16).

How remarkable the fulfilment has been. Under the long centuries of Persian and Greek rule (538-142 B.C.) there was no official head of the Jewish people, although increasingly the high priest was looked on as such, but his position was one of respect rather than of right. When in 140 B.C. the people regularized the existing position, they gave to Simon the Hashmonaeon the position of 'leader and high-priest for ever, until there should arise a faithful prophet; and that he should be captain over them, and should take charge of the sanctuary, to set them over their works, and over the country, and over the arms, and over the strongholds . . .' (1 Macc. 14:41f). Apparently no king from the house of David was proposed, but on the other hand the title king was carefully withheld from Simon, for the people knew they had no right to bestow it.

When Simon's son, John Hyrcanus, assumed the royal title\*, it meant a bitter breach between him and the Pharisees. The Hashmonaean priest-kings fell in 63 B.C. only to be followed by the half Edomite Herods, whose only claim to the throne was the power of the Roman sword behind them. It was mere hatred of the Herodian family that prompted the embassy of Jewish notables to Rome after the death of Herod the Great (4 B.C.) asking that Palestine might be incorporated in the Roman province of Syria instead of a new king being appointed over them†. They had accepted the principle that only a king of God's appointing could really be a blessing to them.

The object of Jehovah's shepherding was to be the reformation of His people (v. 17-22). The meaning will become clearer, if we substitute 'sheep' for 'cattle' in v. 17, 20, 22; the rams and the he-goats are, of course, the rich and powerful among the people. All those who abuse the power of rank and wealth are to experience the judgment of God. We are apt to overlook the reality of God's working in Israel through the long centuries of his hardening in part. We doubt that any other nation can parallel the Jews' centuries' long rule by the wisest, by spiritual leaders. Probably no other people in the world today has a truer understanding of democracy or has less real class distinction. By centuries of suffering they have largely learnt the limitations of purely physical power, and the well-known generosity of the Jew shows that he has often understood the true purpose of wealth. Obviously there are many Jews that do not live up to their national ideals, and there are faults they are prone to which may be less common among the peoples in whose midst they live. For all that the objection of the Jew to the Church—quite apart from the way he has been treated by it—that he finds more understanding for social righteousness in the Synagogue than in the Church is, alas, all too often justified.

When Jehovah's purpose with His flock is accomplished, He appoints His 'servant David' king over them (v. 23-31). It is

\* Josephus (*Ant.* XIII. xi. 1) affirms that Aristobulus, Hyrcanus' son, was the first to assume the royal title, but modern scholars are in agreement that Hyrcanus must already have done so.

† Josephus: *Ant.* XVII. xi. 2.

true he is called prince (*nasi*), but, as 37:24f show, this is not intended to deny that he is king. This is not the usage of 12:10 and 21:25 (see Vol. XXV, p. 194). Here, and in 44:3; 45:7; 46:2 the use of *nasi* is meant to stress that God's king will not obscure the kingship of God; he will represent, not misrepresent Him. 'My servant David' implies both the fulfilment of the promises of God to David and also that 'Great David's greater Son' would truly be a man after God's own heart. There is general agreement that we should read with LXX in v. 31, 'You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture'.

(To be continued)

## THE PROLOGUE TO THE FOURTH GOSPEL\*

(A Study of John 1: 1-18)

C. F. HOGG

What is the relation between the first eighteen verses of the Gospel according to John and the body of the book? The question may be answered in one of two ways: either that John wrote his story first and then, by way of introduction to it, deduced certain doctrinal conclusions therefrom, or, that he first wrote these conclusions, the fruit of long years of meditation on what he declares in a covering letter to be 'that which we have seen with our eyes, that which we beheld, and our hands handled, concerning the Word of Life' (1 Epistle 1:1), and thereafter, by relating certain words and actions of the Lord, justified what he had said concerning Him.

There is no essential difference between the two answers, nor is it possible to say which represents the order in which the Prologue and the Gospel were written. Nor does it matter, indeed, so long as it is recognized that a relationship does exist. One line of attack upon the authenticity of the Gospel is to assert

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