

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

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

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

THE
CHURCHMAN

FEBRUARY, 1903.

ART. I.—EZEKIEL ON THE EARLY HISTORY OF
RELIGION IN ISRAEL.—CH. XX.

IN view of the active reconstruction of the early history of Israel which has lately been going on, attention may well be called to the abstract of it given by Ezekiel in the twentieth chapter of his book. It is short, being limited to the religious history and to the lesson which it is his purpose to impress; but it is an important record for the following reasons:

1. Its authenticity. No one questions that we have it as Ezekiel wrote it.

2. Its authority, as the word of a priest and prophet well known to us: a priest educated in the traditional learning of his Order; a prophet who sees visions of God, and marks the days when the word of the Lord comes to him; a prophet also in the sense of moral insight and command, a preacher of individual responsibility, commending himself to men's conscience in the sight of God.

3. Its date, at the beginning of the exile, in the first decade of the captivity of Judah, anterior to the times in which it is now contended that literary labours gave us the first books of the Bible as we have them.

Ezekiel had lived in changing times, in boyhood while Josiah still ruled and Jeremiah began to prophesy, then under Jehoiakim, when the heathen party recovered power. About the age of seventeen he had seen the first prelude of captivity, when Jerusalem submitted to the conqueror, and selected youths, who must have been his own companions, "of the seed royal and of the nobles" (Daniel one of them), were carried to Babylon for the service of the King. Eight years later intrigue and rebellion brought their punishment. The city was broken up; the young King Jehoiachin, after a

three months' reign, went into lifelong captivity, and with him the flower of the nation, "the chief of the land, all the men of might ten thousand," and all the skilled artificers, leaving only "the poorest sort of the people" under the vassal King Zedekiah. Eleven years later his falseness and folly brought on the final blow in the destruction of the city and temple, the dispersion of the population, and desolation of the land. So, according to Jeremiah's vision, the good figs were carried to Babylon and the evil figs remained. That first captivity, with all its anguish of heart and its natural inclination to sit down and weep by the waters of Babylon, was yet a vigorous stock, and struck roots where it was. They followed the wise counsel of Jeremiah's letter, and as colonists in the land of exile came to realize, as they had never done at home, their national religion and character. That was the purpose of the dispensation; but it did not look hopeful at first. Imbued with the inveterate poison of idolatry and spirit of self-will, they needed a stern and resolute ministry, and in God's mercy they had it. Ezekiel, in the thirtieth year, which would have qualified him as a priest, found himself called to be a prophet. In the fifth year of the captivity he saw visions of God, and was sent to the rebellious house. It is a trying commission; but the signs of a prophet are recognised, and in the first year of his ministry "the elders of Judah," his fellow-captives, "sit before him," as if to hear what he may have to say; and he has a vision of the manifold provocations of God going on at that very time in distant Jerusalem. After this we hear no more of "elders of Judah." In the second year—and after—the prophet's visitors are "the elders of Israel." The tribal name is dropped; the national name succeeds. It was natural that, as far as circumstances made it possible, the exiled branches of the same race should gravitate towards each other. So on the occasion before us (chap. xx.)—

"It came to pass in the seventh year, in the fifth month, on the tenth day of the month, that certain of the elders of Israel came to enquire of the Lord, and sat before me."

The answer is decisive—"I will not be enquired of by them." It had been given before (chap. xiv.), with a penetrating indictment of their double mind and cherished sin. It is given again, as to persons who now showed a better disposition, with lessons from the early history of their race.

"Wilt Thou judge them, Son of Man; wilt Thou judge them? Cause them to know the abominations of their fathers!"

But why should they be judged by the deeds of their fathers? In his last public teaching the prophet had insisted on the

limitation of personal responsibility. "The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son. The soul that sinneth, it shall die." Yet national life is one, and the past leaves consequences to be inherited and lessons to be remembered, especially in Israel, which always carried the consciousness of its origin through all deflections from it. If they cannot evade personal responsibility because of the sins of their fathers, much more must they acknowledge it when they make their fathers' sins their own. If they think that the privilege of Israel is a right to inquire of the Lord, they must know that the sins of Israel cancel it, and that participation in idolatries abrogates participation in promises.

The story of the past is one of election on the one side and apostasy on the other, of calls of God and choice of idols, and is given in three divisions, in Egypt, in the Wilderness, and in the Land—three stages in the life of the people—and is interesting as showing an independent tradition, touching ground which is passed over in the Pentateuchal narrative.

1. The story in Egypt is given (vers. 5-9) and represents the people as one, called by their ancestral name and receiving communications from God, which marked His choice of them and their separation from the people among whom they sojourned. It speaks of

"The day when I chose Israel and lifted up My hand to the seed of the house of Jacob, and made Myself known unto them in the land of Egypt, saying, I am the Lord your God . . . Cast ye away every man the abominations of his eyes, and defile not yourselves with the idols of Egypt. I am the Lord your God. But they rebelled against Me; and would not hearken unto Me. They did not cast away every man the abominations of his eyes, neither did they forsake the idols of Egypt."

It might have followed "that I should pour out my fury upon them to accomplish my anger against them in the midst of the land of Egypt." But the sentence was revoked, and changed into a bringing them out in the sight of the nations.

It will be seen that this passage falls in with the narrative while containing supplementary information. At the end of Genesis Israel has come down into Egypt with a certain knowledge of the true God derived from their fathers, and with traditions of His communications and promises. At the beginning of Exodus that knowledge is supposed to exist, however faintly, and those traditions to survive. They are the inheritance of Moses, the basis of his mission and the ground of his appeal to Israel. What has been their state meantime? They have multiplied rapidly, and at the end have been oppressed and enslaved. But what of their religious

state? Ezekiel's tradition supplies the information. It was one in which testimony from their God was given and was disregarded. This testimony to the election and religion of their race, by whatever means and through whatever persons it came, was such as could be described as a "lifting up of the hand" of the Lord in attestation and command. Doubtless, as in all later history, the testimony found response in obedient hearts, and was always an element in reserve, but to the people in general it was given in vain. With their natural tendency to idolatry, and having before them its imposing and mysterious forms, they readily adopted the superstitions of their neighbours and masters, and did not hearken to the voice which recalled them to the God of their fathers. "They did not cast away every man the abominations of his eyes or forsake the idols of Egypt."

Here we have a plain statement of the case. This adoption of the idols of Egypt is not, as recent historical critics tell us, a step upwards from fetishism to a higher level of religion. It is to Ezekiel a fall, and a grievous fall, from the better to the worse, a sin against light, an evil choice deserving the judgment of destruction, which mercy changes into a removal from the temptation and a new stage of probation.

2. This takes place in the life in the wilderness (vers. 10-27), the record being (like that of Israel in Egypt) in harmony with the narrative of the Pentateuch, yet with tokens of an independent tradition. It is divided into two parts, the first (vers. 10-18) concerning the people who came out of Egypt, the second (vers. 19-27) dealing with "their children in the wilderness."

1. The delivery of the Law is affirmed as the first act after the departure from Egypt.

"I caused them to go forth out of the land of Egypt, and brought them into the wilderness. And I gave them My statutes and showed them My judgments, which if a man do he shall live in them. Moreover, also I gave them My sabbaths to be a sign between Me and them, that they might know that I am the Lord that sanctify them" (chap. xx. 11, 12).

How much is contained in these few words! There was Divine legislation by definite act of God. "I gave them My statutes." These are not only national laws, but such as go straight to the individual conscience and fasten on practical conduct. It is the *man* who is to *do* them. "Which if a man do he shall live in them," in that deeper, longer sense of "life" which belongs not to its surface but to its truth and essence, and which is a conspicuous feature of Ezekiel's thought, pervading his whole prophecy. It draws nearer than ever before to the yet unspoken word "eternal life." More prophet than priest, he urges the spiritual and ethical

nature of the Law; of positive ordinances, naming only the Sabbath, in its highest meaning and function, as expressed Exod. xxxi. 13—"a sign between me and them that I am the Lord which sanctify them." No doubt there was need to impress the obligation on sojourners among the heathen. In the wilderness there was again the same story of rebellion, ending in the sentence: "That I would not bring them into the land which I had promised them. Nevertheless" (it is added) "Mine eye spared them from destroying them, neither did I make a full end of them in the wilderness." So it was with the generation that came out of Egypt, as Exodus relates and Ezekiel testifies.

Then with their children there is the like record of admonition and rebellion, and of a sentence suspended over them.

"I lifted up My hand to them in the wilderness, that I would scatter them among the nations and disperse them through the countries. Moreover, I gave them (delivered them over to) statutes that were not good and judgments whereby they should not live (viz., the wretched rites and pollutions of the heathen), that I might make them desolate, to the end that they might know that I am the Lord."

This is the record of those untold thirty-eight years, in which one generation died out and another succeeded, before the reassembling of "the children of Israel, even the whole congregation" (Numb. xx. 1). The story told in these general terms by Ezekiel is given by an earlier prophet with more particularity in respect both of the sin and the threat.

"Did ye bring unto Me sacrifices and offerings in the wilderness forty years, O house of Israel? Yea, ye have taken up Succoth your king (R. V., or, as the LXX. readers, the tabernacle of your Moloch), and Chiun your images, the star of your God, which ye made to yourselves. Therefore will I cause you to go into captivity beyond Damascus, saith the Lord, the God of Hosts is His name" (Amos v. 25-27).

As they had adopted idols of Egypt when sojourning there, so in their nomad life they took up the idolatries with which they came in contact, and were threatened with captivity in the furthest regions of which they then had knowledge. It is Ezekiel's account, only in fuller form, and with a more detailed tradition of the spiritual apostasy in the forty years.

3. On the third indictment, that which Ezekiel draws against Israel in their land, it is unnecessary to dwell, because the narrative in the historical books is on the whole unquestioned, and it is considered that, in the evolution of opinion with the aid of prophets, there was an approximation to a higher character of religion sufficient to make the contemporaneous idolatries truly abominations.

It is in regard to the first two stages of the national life that the testimony of Ezekiel is important, because it contra-

venes the recent theory of the origin of the religion of Israel, and harmonizes with the Pentateuchal narrative. The theory is one of natural evolution, the narrative is one of Divine interventions. It asserts a definite and manifest intervention of God, in the call of Abraham, in the communications which followed, and the promises to his seed and to mankind, which he receives by faith and transmits to his descendants. Thus are created relations with the one living and true God which are renewed through the history of the patriarchs, and are the possession of the family when they go down into Egypt. When they there become a nation, these interventions take place, first, as here stated, in smaller measure, then on a greater scale in the mission of Moses and the laws of Sinai.

The evolution theory supposes that these things did not happen, that these relations with God did not exist, and that the recorded expressions of more intelligent faith, higher moral law, and purer piety were impossible to that rudimentary stage of undeveloped religious capacity, and, therefore, that the account of them is an imaginative transfer to traditional ancestors of the ideas of the age in which the stories were finally written. Ezekiel's testimony on the origin of the religion of Israel is *for* the narrative and *against* the theory; it stands for intervention, not for evolution, in other respects, and *most* expressly in regard to the giving of the Law. That was natural, it may be said, in a priest whose successors produced the "Priest's Code," and gave it an introduction in legendary and imaginative pictures of Abraham and Moses—pictures in that remote stage of religious evolution, as our critics say, "unthinkable." They feel themselves much at liberty with these writers or their representative editor whom they know as P., but who cannot be identified or located or provided with a name. The impersonal letter cannot defend itself against criticisms, inferences, and suppositions. It is a different matter to deal with a man like Ezekiel, a strong personality, a conspicuous figure moving in the midst of undoubted history, and speaking of what is undoubted history to him and to the elders of Israel who sit before him. He is an authority on the religious history of his people, and his witness bears directly on the present question—that between the narrative which asserts direct intervention, and the theory which allows only for gradual evolution.

We reach the verge of a question which cannot be discussed here. Properly speaking, the thesis should be not evolution *or* intervention, but evolution *and* intervention. Evolution, development of one condition into another, is a law of the universe, therefore of the realm of thought, as a

part of the universe, therefore of religion as a province of the realm of thought. It has had full scope and varied field of action in all the religions of the world, Eastern and Western. What was achieved? Did any one of these religions issue in a knowledge of the one living and true God, in reconciliation and communion with Him, meeting the wants of the conscience and the soul? All are failures. In one race alone such relations of man with God are initiated, exemplified, and in a preliminary measure attained. The religion of Israel stands apart from all the rest—a phenomenon to be accounted for. It accounted for itself by a history of Divine intervention, definite acts of God, which broke in upon the natural evolution of thought, as being for this purpose incapable, and gave it in the way of grace new material and new direction. It is sought to get rid of these facts, and the sacred narrative is to be admired as imagination and discredited as history. Abraham with his call and promises, Moses with his revelation and mission, Sinai with its law and covenant, are to be taken as drama and romance, not origins of thought, but results of it. Yet is this religion of Israel recognised by all as the foundation and introduction of Christianity, which proclaims as its origin a stupendous intervention. One cannot but observe with some wonder that preachers of the Gospel of the Incarnation and Resurrection should seem to think they gain an important point if they can disallow the interventions of God which Scripture makes the origin of the first stage of revelation, and should speak with evident complacency while they assure us that the history of religion in Israel was, after all, much like the history of all other religions.

It has been enough now to observe that Ezekiel did not think so. In his view God who chose that people had again and again "lifted up His hand" in attestations, commands, and warnings, which made their rebellions and idolatries sins against the light. In the words of Job (xxiv. 13): "These are of them which rebel against the light. They know not the ways thereof, nor abide in the paths thereof." But the light was not extinguished by their rebellions; it shone on elect souls amid the encircling gloom and led them on. It grew clearer, and flashed brighter in the prophets. In the Captivity it broke upon the Elders of Israel and dispelled for ever the dark shadow of idolatry. In the Restoration it accompanied the Remnant who returned, and after that diffused itself more widely through long, silent hours of twilight. Then the sun rose, and the day was come.

T. D. BERNARD.