CHAPTER VI

WOE TO THE PROPHETS

The Fate of King and People (12: 1–20)

Ezekiel had told the exiles his vision of the destruction of Jerusalem (11: 25). But then he had to reinforce his message by undermining their other sources of self-confidence. The vision of ch. 8–11 was concerned mainly with the temple. Now he turns to the other appointments of God, the king and the prophets. His prophecy about Zedekiah is especially interesting for the enigmatic way in which his fate is foretold, but how literally his actions and words were fulfilled! Note that this prophetic action took place in 591 or 590 B.C. (cf. 20: 1 with 8: 1), but Zedekiah's revolt did not break out till 588 B.C.

The need for the prophecy is given by the term "a rebellious house" applied to the exiles (vv. 2, 3, 9). They were obviously still hoping for an early return to Jerusalem, and so they had no eyes for Ezekiel's vision of destruction. So the prophet revived one of the saddest moments of the exiles' lives by making a little bundle of necessities such as a man would carry as he went into exile and trudging with it over his shoulder to another part of Tel-Abib—"Son of man, prepare for yourself an exile's baggage, and go into exile by day in their sight . . ." (v. 3, RSV, cf. RV mg. to vv. 3, 4). Having awakened the exiles' curiosity, in the evening (v. 4) he carried the bundle home. Before the wondering crowd (v. 5) he dug through the house wall (built of sun-dried bricks, as the poorer houses always were in Babylonia), brought out his bundle, wrapped his face up so that he could not see, and staggered off in the darkness with his bundle.

In the explanation (vv. 10–16) Ezekiel was told that he had acted out the special fate of Zedekiah in the general exile. It looked forward to his flight by night through the breached city wall (II Kings 25: 4), his capture, blinding and leading into exile (II Kings 25: 5ff.). Note that Jehovah is pictured as Himself snaring Zedekiah and bringing him to his doom (v. 13).

In v. 10 we apparently have the same play on the two meanings of *massa'* (cf. RV tx. and mg.) as we have in Jer. 23: 33 (RV mg.). The root meaning of the word is "to lift up," and so it can equally mean a burden, or an oracle lifted up over

someone. The RSV ". . . all the house of Israel who are in it" is probably correct.

In our study of ch. 34 we shall see why the Messianic king is called "prince" (*nasi'*) in the prophecy of the restoration, but Ezekiel's reason for using *nasi'* of Zedekiah is another. He never calls him king (*melek*) as he does Jehoiachin (17: 12), cf. 21: 25, for the general description in 7: 27 can hardly be regarded as an exception to this statement.

The clue is given by the only other use of *nasi'* for a reigning king, viz. I Kings 11: 34, where it is applied to Solomon. Clearly the implication there is that Solomon had forfeited his right to be king by reason of his sin. Ezekiel regarded Jehoiachin as the true king (cf. p. 16 and 17: 13); the Judæan kingship had ended with his exile and therefore the exiles could not put any hope on him. This is the attitude of the Chronicler as well, as may be deduced from the way he dismisses Zedekiah's reign (II Chron. 36:11ff.). Ezekiel may well have been influenced too by his foreknowledge of Zedekiah's broken oath (see notes on ch. 17).

The acted fate of Zedekiah was followed by the acting out of the fate of the people (vv. 17–20); this section is largely a repetition of 4: 9–12. But while there the stress was on the small quantities carefully measured, here it is on the dismay and anxiety with which his rations were eaten. We are not told how Ezekiel expressed these emotions, but he was doubtless able to communicate them vividly.

The Problem of Prophets and of Prophecy (12:21 – 14:11)

There is nothing easier than being wise after the event, but we generally take to ourselves unmerited credit for being it. It is in that spirit that we are apt to be unsparing in our condemnation of the Israelites of old for their rejection of the prophetic message. We normally forget that for the average man things were not quite so simple as we imagine. We picture men like Jeremiah and Ezekiel as isolated, lonely, unique, but to their contemporaries they were merely eccentric members of the fairly large company of the prophets. That which distinguished them in public thought from the other prophets was mainly that they had a message of unrelieved doom, whereas the others preached hope and peace.

It is most important that we should realize this. The phrase "false prophets" is one of the New Testament, not of the Old. They are never presented to us as just deliberate frauds, and

the sole definite marks given us by which we may recognize the true prophet are of a nature which demand a truly spiritual man to use them aright.

When Micaiah Ben-Imlah faced Ahab's four hundred prophets (I Kings 22: 19–28), he did not state that they were false prophets, but that Jehovah had deliberately caused them to be led into error. We may reasonably assume that Micaiah considered that normally they were reliable communicators of God's will. A very similar statement is made, as we shall see, by Ezekiel (14: 9f.). The same thought is found in an early prophecy of Jeremiah (4: 10), but here it is not far-fetched to see Jeremiah himself misled for a time by the message of the deceived prophets. Did the false prophets wear a "hairy mantle" (Zech. 13: 4 RV), so did at least Elijah (II Kings 1: 8 RV mg.) and John the Baptist (Matt. 3: 4). Did the "false prophets" do their acted signs, e.g. I Kings 22: 11; Jer. 28: 10, so did at least Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Did the "false prophets" dream dreams and see visions, so did probably all the true prophets as well. When Jeremiah was challenged and contradicted by Hananiah Ben-Azzur (Jer. 28: 1–4), he did not denounce him as a false prophet, he merely maintained that the balance of probability was that he was right and Hananiah was wrong (Jer. 28: 5–9).

Even the apparently clear test of Deut. 18: 22, i.e. the fulfilment of the prophetic message, was not always adequate. Deut. 13: 1f. clearly envisages that the sign given by the prophet might come to pass, even though his object was to seduce the people to follow other gods. In practice it must have been exceptionally difficult to apply this test. That the "false prophets" must very often have been correct in their predictions is obvious enough—however we may explain it—for otherwise they would not have retained public esteem for long. On the other hand the element of contingency in most prophecy made many a prediction of the true prophet *seem* to be falsified. The principle is clearly expressed in Jer. 18: 7–12, and the non-fulfilment of Jonah 3: 4 at the time foretold (though it was fulfilled later) the most obvious example of its application. We shall later find other outstanding examples in Ezekiel's prophecies against Tyre and Egypt, and we may be certain that minor examples were frequent (see especially p. 102). So the remarkable fulfilment of some prophecies—though most of those we consider most remarkable had their fulfilment still future in the earlier part of Ezekiel's prophesying—was offset in the popular mind by the apparent non-fulfilment of others. The strongest influence, however, had been worked by the very

long-suffering of God. His postponement of complete doom had been taken to mean that the prophecies of Isaiah and Micah would not go into effect at all (Ezek. 12: 21–28), or at some time in the dim and distant future that did not concern the contemporaries of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and this in turn prevented the renewed prophecies of doom from being taken very seriously.

The simple fact seems to have been that the "false prophets" could not be classified under any one heading. Some were quite simply mad (cf. Jer. 29: 26); some will have been clever frauds; some were doubtless, to use modern terms, psychic mediums with powers and knowledge more than can be explained by common human experience, whatever may be their source; yet others were godly men who either wished themselves into the body of the prophets instead of awaiting God's call, or having been truly called by God found it easier to compromise with men than to give God's message in all its stark unattractiveness. The last named in particular will have been good and attractive persons whose whole influence seemed placed on God's side, but because it was man's version of God's will that they were proclaiming, they will ultimately have done more harm than the pure deceivers.

We today would for the most part set doctrinal tests for the false prophet, but nothing could be more foolish. Orthodoxy is often nothing more than a sign of spiritual inertia, and the deceiver will always be prepared to say "shibboleth" if he thinks it financially rewarding. In speaking of false prophets the Bible is not concerned with their theological soundness or unsoundness but with their fruits. "By their fruits ye shall know them" said the Lord (Matt. 7: 16), and Jer. 23: 9–40 seems a prophetic commentary on the words. First immorality of life is condemned (vv. 9–14); today too there is far too great a proneness to overlook laxity of living, when a preacher combines orthodoxy in doctrine and great eloquence in preaching. Secondly the prophetic message is condemned which has no bearing on the spiritual needs of the hearers and so reveals that it has not been learnt from God (vv. 15–24). Judged by this standard all too many sermons today fall into the same condemnation. Thirdly the message of unworthy derivation is rejected (vv. 25–29); dreams are not an adequate way in which to learn the message of Almighty God. If some modern preachers were as frank as to the origin of some of their sermons as were the prophets of Israel, we could well pass a similar comment. Then come those that could not even pretend to have received a message from God (vv. 30–32),

but either borrowed it from someone else, or simply invented something to suit. These shortcomings are not unknown today also. The problem of the prophet of old was only the problem of the preacher today in a somewhat different setting.

This explains why Ezekiel, before he went further with his message of condemnation, had to try and teach the exiles how God looked on the prophets whose reiterated message had so fatally blunted the spiritual receptivity of those that had put their trust in them.

The Despising of Prophecy (12: 21–28)

Quite apart from the effect of the "false prophets," there were two interrelated obstacles in the minds of his hearers, one quite general, one linked with Ezekiel himself, that prevented his message being taken seriously.

The former was one that the exiles had been familiar with before they had been taken from their homes—"in the land of Israel" (v. 22); the RSV, though linguistically justifiable, misses the point—and which was equally current in Jerusalem and Tel-Abib. It was assumed that because past prophecies of doom had not gone into fulfilment, they had been annulled, not merely suspended (v. 22). This attitude of mind can easily be understood and is reflected in II Pet. 3: 4. Micah and Isaiah had spoken as though the Assyrian invasions of Judah were the judgments of the Day of Jehovah instead of their foreshadowing, even as the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 was a foreshadowing of the second coming of Christ in judgment. Instead of recognizing that the grace of God had caused a postponement of the worst, they believed that the worst had come and had proved much easier than expected. In extenuation let us remember that Sennacherib did reduce Judah to a shade of its former self, so that Hezekiah could venture to use the word 'remnant' (cf. Isaiah's teaching on the remnant) for those that remained (II Kings 19: 4). When prophets like Huldah (II Kings 22: 14–17), Zephaniah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel arose, the bulk of the people just did not take them seriously. Many doubtless expected punishment for the evil days of Manasseh, and saw it in the premature death of Josiah and the exile of Jehoiachin, yet they would not believe that matters could go any further. Ezekiel assured them that not only his prophecies but also all the postponed prophecies were about to be fulfilled (v. 23). In addition all those prophecies of hope that had falsely buoyed them up (v. 24) would come to an end as well.

The destruction of the temple so discredited the false prophets that they did in fact die out—cf. Zech. 13: 2–6 for a picture of them after the exile.

The second obstacle was one that Ezekiel personally met in the presumably more receptive section of the exiles (vv. 26–28). Their experience had been such as to make them willing to believe his message, but whatever the reason they considered that he was speaking of a future outside their own life-span. To them too came the assurance that all the evils that Ezekiel had foretold were on the verge of fulfilment.

The Foolish Prophets (13: 1–16)

This section faces us with several difficulties. One is the surprising fluctuation between the second and the third person. Though we shall not follow out the thought, there is much to be said for the suggestion of ICC *ad loc.* that we have here Ezekiel's interweaving of two prophecies, one in the second person against the prophets in the Babylonian exile (cf. Jer. 29: 8, 15, 21–23, 32), and a second later prophecy against the prophets who had shared in the final fate of Jerusalem. Then there are considerable variations between the Hebrew and the old versions, with the probability that in many cases the versions are correct; certainly the rendering of RSV in vv. 2, 6, 10, 11 is in each case to be preferred.

Ezekiel calls the prophets "foolish"; the word *nabal* is the strongest of the words translated "fool." Where the context calls for it, it means a mental and spiritual obtuseness that borders on atheism; "as applied to the prophets, *nabal* would mean insensible to Jahveh's benefits, as in Deut. 32: 6 (of Israel)" (ICC *ad loc.*). There is no sin in using one's reason; to do so, instead of listening to God, when one is one of God's spokesmen, shows, however, extreme spiritual obtuseness. They prophesied "out of their own heart," i.e. mind (RSV), but they were not just vulgar deceivers. They followed "their own spirit" (v. 3). Spirit (*ruach*) in such a context is something powerful and dominating. Instead of letting themselves be dominated by the Spirit of God, they were dominated by their own desires and motives. It is not the worldly or "unsound" teacher and preacher who is the real danger to the Church, but the man who allows himself so to be dominated by his own deepest desires that he is preaching them, although he has convinced himself that it is the Word of God he is preaching.

Ezekiel compares the prophets to the foxes that live among

ruins (v. 4, RSV),[1] thinking probably mainly of their destructiveness. In the day of trouble they have neither defended the "breaches" nor built up the "wall" (v. 5, RSV). They have had their visions all right (vv. 6, 7), but since they were the expression of their own desires they were vanity and lies. Self-deceived they "expect" Jehovah "to fulfil their word" (v. 6, RSV correctly, cf. RV mg.). When the emptiness of their message is discovered, they will suffer a threefold punishment (v. 9): they will lose their honoured place in the councils of the people, they will be struck out of the citizen-roll of true Israelites, and they will not return from exile to the land of Israel again.

One of the main causes of false prophecy is laid bare in vv. 10–16, viz. the instinctive desire to swim with the stream. Those who denounce traditionalism but for all that are normally its slaves very often fail to realize that only the willingness to put truth before everything else and unflinching surrender of the whole of one's being to the Holy Spirit can keep a man from proclaiming what he is expected to. The prophets are pictured as saying, "All is well"—the implication of "Peace" —and as whitewashing (RSV) the jerrybuilt wall the people have put up. The very approval (whitewashing) by the prophets prevented the people seeing how flimsy was their structure until the storm of judgment came and swept it all away.

The False Prophetesses (13: 17–23)

This section is most instructive. Apart from it we know only of Miriam, Deborah, Huldah and Noadiah as prophetesses, and the usual tendency has been to regard these four as rare exceptions. But here we see that the prophetess was no uncommon phenomenon, and it would be unjustified to assume that all, apart from the four already named, were of the type here described. It is one more proof of how very dangerous the argument from silence is, when it is applied to the Bible.

It is clear that the women here described would be termed sorceresses rather than prophetesses today, and Ezekiel shows his contempt for them by using the *hithpael* of the verb "to prophesy" of them in v. 17, rather than the *niphal* he uses elsewhere in the chapter (*ha-mitnabbe'oth* compared with *ha-nibba'im*), a real distinction hardly representable in English. Seeing, however, that no more doom is pronounced on them than the complete loss of their influence (v. 23), it is clear that their sin is less in God's sight than that of the prophets. Those

[1] Not jackals, as held by many.

who are very fond of quoting I Tim. 2: 11–14 in order to keep their sisters in Christ in their right place normally overlook that while the nature of Eve's fall is a reason why the woman should not be a teacher in the Church, the fact that Adam "was not deceived" makes his sin the greater, for he sinned open-eyed. So too in Old Testament times the relatively underprivileged position of women made them largely the maintainers of the age-old superstitions of the Near East. For that little blame rested on them compared to that incurred by the prophets who spoke from their own hearts instead of allowing God to speak through them.

It is only comparatively recently that archaeological research has made it possible for us to understand the details of the magic described (for particulars see ICC; there seems no purpose in discussing them here). Hence both the AV and RV are defective in their renderings. In addition the Jews after the return from exile soon forgot what was intended, and so a number of scribal errors crept in. RSV is useful for getting the correct rendering, though it is probably incorrect in v. 19 along with other English versions. The handfuls of barley and crumbs of bread were probably not their pay, but some of their instruments of divination. The hunting of souls refers probably to the power that a sorceress will so often gain over those that consult her.

A passage like this is a needed reminder how far short popular religion fell of the teaching of the prophets. It should be clear too that those that resorted to magic arts and divination would not be likely to have an ear for the spiritual message of the prophets.

The Idolater and the Prophet (14: 1–11)

Before Ezekiel can leave the "false prophets," there is yet another aspect of the problem to be dealt with. A generation normally had the prophets it wanted, just as a church normally has the ministry it secretly wants. So here we have a picture of the men who were largely responsible for the flourishing of the "false prophets."

They are called "elders of Israel" (cf. 20: 1); it is not likely that any difference between them and "the elders of Judah" (8: 1) is intended. They are said to "have taken their idols into their heart," which probably means that they had set their affections on them. They are spoken of as typifying the people generally (vv. 4, 7), and so there is no reason for inferring that they were particularly guilty themselves. On the other hand,

since apart from this passage there is no evidence for idolatry among the exiles, it may well be that Ezekiel is referring not merely to the visible forms of idolatry as described in ch. 8 but also and with equal stress to all the false gods of the heart that separate a man's allegiance from Jehovah.

No greater insult can be offered to God than for the man who offers Him no allegiance, or at best a divided one, which He will not accept, to come to His prophet and to ask to know His will, which he will only do, if it suits him. He may do it to seem respectable in the eyes of man, or out of superstition, or just because it is customary. In any case, the prophet will be silent and "I the Lord will answer him Myself" (RSV, vv. 4 (!), 7). The answer will be one of such judgment that it will "seize the house of Israel by their heart" (v. 5, ICC). The prophet will be silent, not because he has seen through the man's hypocrisy, but because God has given him no answer, and the true prophet does not speak unless he has a word from God. This does not exclude the possibility of the man's doom being declared by the prophet.

What of the false prophet? The true prophet, who looked only to God, could afford to be silent, but not so the false prophet. His reputation depended on his being able to give an acceptable answer, whenever it was wanted. Faced by the Divine silence, when the idolater asked Jehovah's will, he would be enticed (v. 9, RV mg.) and give the type of answer that would give most satisfaction. All unknown to him, however, God would be behind the answer, using it to the destruction of both the enquirer and the prophet. The false prophet does not create a generation that does not know God, but is created by it, and he is one of God's instruments of judgment on that generation.

The Absolute Justice of Jerusalem's Punishment (14: 12–23)

Before passing on to a long series of oracles foretelling and motivating the doom of Jerusalem and of the royal house, Ezekiel had first to deal with any false hopes that might weaken the effect of his message. We have already seen how he dealt with the optimistic oracles of the false prophets. There yet remained that last hope that springs eternal in the human breast, the hope that somehow, it might be out of the kindness of God's heart, it might be because of one's link with some godly man, God might make some form of exception in one's favour. It is this hope that Ezekiel now demolishes.

To appreciate the full weight of the oracle we must remind ourselves how Ezekiel had already stressed the evil of Jerusalem, especially in the long vision 8: 1–11: 25, and how he had made clear that the future of the nation lay with the exiles under Jehoiachin (11: 14–20). But some may have snatched at the mention of those that bore God's mark (9: 4) and have said that they at least might involve others in their own safety. God's blunt answer is that, if they were even the most righteous of men, they could not do this.

No entirely satisfactory reason has ever been given why precisely Noah, Daniel and Job are mentioned. ICC (p. 153) says, "The prophet names three typically righteous men, who, on account of their righteousness, were enabled to achieve a work of deliverance: Noah delivered his family, Gen. 6: 8; 7: 1; Daniel his companions, Dan. 1: 6–20; Job his friends, Job 42: 7–10; but the righteousness of all three together could not deliver the present generation." While true enough of Noah, it hardly carries conviction for Job and Daniel. Furthermore, it must be looked on as extremely doubtful whether the well-known Daniel is intended at all. His name, as indeed that of the other two Daniels of Scripture, was spelled *Daniyye'l*, but Ezekiel spells it *Dani'el*, or more likely *Dan'el*. He would seem to be referring to a figure of hoar antiquity probably mentioned in tablets discovered at Ras Shamra dating from before 1400 B.C. A scribal error on Ezekiel's part is most unlikely. If so, we know too little to form any opinion as to why he was mentioned.

On the other hand it should be noted that Job's righteousness was not able to save even his own property and family, and Noah only saved those animals and persons expressly designated by God. So it seems more likely that Ezekiel is stressing not the little they had been able to save, but that they had not been able to save. This would explain why Abraham, who would be far more suitable on the ordinary view, is in fact not named, or for that matter Moses.

The fact that God is bringing on Jerusalem all four—four with the suggestion of completeness—of His major scourges (v. 21) shows the greatness of Jerusalem's sin and the resultant hopelessness that any should escape, except those few marked by God (9: 4). "Yet, if there should be left in it any survivors to lead out sons and daughters" (v. 22 RSV; AV and RV have missed the point), it would be purely for the sake of the exiles in Babylonia, not for the good of those that escape.

Ezekiel works out the principle underlying this oracle in more detail in ch. 18. Here it will suffice to point out that God's

judgments are not on actions as such, but on actions as indicative of character. I may do another's stint of duty as well as my own, but I do not change his character by so doing. Behind Abraham's pleading for Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18) lay the hope that the righteous might yet turn the wicked from their way. When he stopped at ten righteous, it was not from lack of faith in God's mercy, but from his keen understanding that if Lot had not been able to exercise that much influence, there was no hope that he would ever be able to turn the Cities of the Plain from their evil ways. He who does not let himself be influenced by the righteous, cannot expect to be able to profit from the "merits" of the righteous in the day of judgment.

The Parable of the Vine (15: 1–8)

The comparison of Israel to a vine was an old one, probably as early as Gen. 49: 22 (so most modern commentaries), but it was normally used to stress the lack of the fruit desired by God, cf. Deut. 32: 32; Hos. 10: 1; Isa. 5: 1–7; Jer. 2: 21. Ezekiel takes this reiterated picture for granted and compares not the cultivated vine of the vineyard, but the wild vine in the forest (i.e. Israel merely as a nation among nations) with other trees and asks what superiority it has (v. 2). The answer is that it obviously has none, but that it is rather inferior in every respect (v. 3). Now, however, that Israel had been charred (RSV) at both ends and in the middle by the exile of Jehoiachin and his companions (v. 4) it was completely useless (v. 5) and there only remained for what was left to be burned up (v. 6f.). In other words the deportation of Jehoiachin had shown that the time for fruit-bearing was finally past, and therefore only the logical fate of destruction remained for those that were left.