Ezekiel - Commentaries by Alfred Henry Burton

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A MOST interesting section now lies before us (Ezek. 20:32-44). The opening part of the chapter records the sorrowful story of Israel's long-continued sin. Many a time was judgment about to fall, but Jehovah's eye spared His people, and time after time He withdrew the hand that was outstretched to destroy them.

His gifts and calling were without repentance (Rom. 11:29), that is to say, they were without change of mind on His part; His promises to the fathers He must fulfill for His own name's sake. But what stubborn unbelief is shown in verse 32! A determination had even come into their minds — it was not a mere fall in an unguarded moment, but a positive choice of their wicked hearts, when they said, "We will be as the heathen, as the families of the countries, to serve wood and stone."

But Jehovah would not allow it, "As I live, saith the Lord,... will I rule over you." This is what God will bring about in the end for His people; but His ways in government must take their course.

In this passage we have specially to do with the judgment in the last days of the ten tribes in contrast with Judah. As may be seen by the dates in the margin of our Bibles, about 150 years before Ezekiel's prophecy the ten tribes had been carried away by the King of Assyria (2 Kings 17); this judgment upon them was in fulfillment of God's solemn warning through Moses (see Leviticus 26, Deut. 32) 750 years before that again: "For so it was, that the children of Israel had sinned against the Lord their God, which had brought them out of the land of Egypt, from under the hand of Pharaoh, King of Egypt, and had feared other gods" (2 Kings 17:7). The heinousness of their sin was seen in the light of the great deliverance God had wrought on their behalf. "The children of Israel did secretly those things that were not right against the Lord their God;" they set them up idols, and burned incense before them, as the heathen had done whom God had driven out before them. Would God tolerate in His people wickedness for which He had already judged the heathen? Surely not. "You only have I known of all the families of the earth: therefore will I punish you for all your iniquities" (Amos 3:2).

But in the passage we are now considering, God is seen coming in and dealing for the ultimate and permanent blessing of His people in a day yet to come, though possibly not far distant.

As we have said, the future restoration of the ten tribes is here in question, and not the special dealings with Judah. It was a remnant of Judah and Benjamin, along with the priests and the Levites (Ezra 1:5), that responded to the proclamation of Cyrus inviting them to return to Jerusalem, and there build the house of the Lord. It was to this remnant that the Messiah was presented; and at their door lay the terrible guilt of betraying Him, and putting Him to death. On them, therefore, a special judgment must fall, and from various prophetic portions of the Word of God it is clear that they will pass through this time of terrible tribulation in the land of Palestine (see Zech. 13:8, 9).

But in the case of the ten tribes, sometimes called Ephraim in contrast to Judah, the case is different. Through all the centuries of their dispersion, lost to the eye of their brethren of Judah, and scattered amongst the nations of the earth, they are nevertheless watched over by Jehovah, and kept separate in spite of themselves. When all God's plans for the glory of Christ are ripe, He who scattered them will gather them "with a mighty hand, and with a stretched out arm, and with fury poured out" (vs. 34).

He will bring them, not into the land, but "into the wilderness of the people." The history of His early dealings with them when brought out of Egypt will be repeated: "Like as I pleaded with your fathers in the wilderness of the land of Egypt, so will I plead with you, saith the Lord God" (vs. 36).

Nothing can be plainer than what is here stated in reference to those ten tribes: "I will cause you to pass under the rod, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant. And I will purge out from among you the rebels, and them that transgress against Me: I will bring them forth out of the country where they sojourn, and THEY SHALL NOT ENTER INTO THE LAND OF ISRAEL: and ye shall know that I am the Lord" (vers. 37-39). Judah's future judgment will take place in the land — that of the ten tribes, on the way to the land.

It would appear that verse 39 refers to Israel's past history of idolatry. In their rebelliousness they said, "We will be as the heathen... to serve wood and stone" (vs. 32). Jehovah then takes them at their word, and says to them, "Go ye, serve ye every one his idols, and hereafter also, if ye will not hearken unto Me: but pollute ye My holy name no more with your gifts, and with your idols" (vs. 39). In other words, the Lord would no longer tolerate this unholy mingling of idolatry with the worship that was due to Himself alone. As He had said through Elijah before, "How long hall ye between two opinions? If the Lord be God, follow Him: but if Baal, then follow him" (1 Kings 18:21).

Though the special subject of this prophecy is that which will befall the ten tribes in the latter day, both in the way of judgment and blessing, yet without doubt Judah is included in verse 40. "For in Mine holy mountain, in the mountain of the height of Israel, saith the Lord God, there shall all the house of Israel, all of them in the land, serve Me." Has this ever yet been accomplished? Since the days of the Babylonian captivity, at which date Ezekiel was uttering this prediction, never has the whole house of Israel, ALL OF THEM, been in their land. Only a remnant of Judah and Benjamin1 went back in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah (Ezra 1:5), but in the days that are yet to come, the whole nation, no longer divided into the two separate portions of the ten tribes and the two, will be found there. And when restored to their — land what a change will come over their whole position. "I will accept you with your sweet savor," says Jehovah; "I will be sanctified in you before the heathen. And ye shall know that I am the Lord, when I shall bring you into the land of Israel... and there shall ye remember your ways, and all your doings... and ye shall loathe yourselves in your own sight for all your evils that ye have committed. And ye shall know that I am the Lord, when I have wrought with you for My name's sake, not according to your corrupt doings, O ye house of Israel, saith the Lord God."

Elsewhere in the prophetic Word do we find allusions to the restoration of Israel nationally. We cannot do more here than refer the reader to such passages as Isaiah 43:1-7, 49:5-24; Jeremiah 31:1-14.

A few words may be added with reference to the passage in Isaiah 49, a passage of transcendent interest. It was the responsibility of Israel to be the testimony for God on the earth amidst the nations, “Thou art My servant, O Israel, in whom I will be glorified (vs. 3). But Israel turned to idolatry and utterly failed. Then Christ, the Messiah, comes into the world, and has to say in reference to His earthly people, “I have labored in vain,” &c. (vs. 5), for He came to His own, and His own received Him not. But now Christ Himself takes the place of guilty Israel. Jehovah’s answer to the lament of verse 4. is found in the verses that follow. Christ Himself should be glorious as Jehovah’s servant, thus taking the place of Israel as the true servant, Israel having failed. He should raise up the tribes of Jacob, and restore the preserved of Israel, that is the remnant of the people; and not only this, He should be a light to the Gentiles, and salvation to the ends of the earth.

Through the gospel this is now receiving a partial fulfillment, but the true interpretation of the passage carries us on to the future millennial day, when He who was despised of man, and abhorred of the nation (Israel), will yet be worshipped and adored by earthly rulers, princes and kings.

Connected with that day will be the restoration of Israel to their own land. The scattered people, hidden as prisoners in darkness amongst the nations, will hear the words, “Go forth and show yourselves.” Then a mighty movement will take place. “I will make all My mountains a way, and My highways shall be exalted. Behold, these shall come from far: and, lo, these from the north and from the west; and these from the land of Sinim (China?).”

Then earth and heaven are called to rejoice, and to break forth into singing, for the Lord hath comforted His afflicted people. Here, we believe, the tribulation of the two tribes in the land is in view. Zion, well-nigh overwhelmed with sorrows, says, “The Lord hath forsaken me,” &c. Most touchingly Jehovah replies that He could no more forget Jerusalem than could a woman forget her sucking child. “Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of My hands: thy walls are continually before Me” (vers. 13-17). Deliverance is at hand, Jerusalem’s destroyers, and those that made her waste, shall go forth of her.

Now follows (vers. 18-24) the description of the return of the ten tribes, after Zion’s tribulation and deliverance. “Lift up thine eyes round about, and behold: all these gather themselves together, and come to thee.” And again, 67:2

“The children which thou shalt have, after thou hast lost the other (that is, after the cutting off the two parts in the land, Zechariah 13:8, 9), shall say again in thine ears, The place is too straight for me: give place to me that I may dwell.”

The whole passage is of the deepest interest; the wonder with which Zion will behold the return of her long-lost children is most vividly described. “As I live, saith the Lord, thou shalt surely clothe thee with them all. But “where had they been?” Zion will exclaim. And until Jehovah’s time has come for their restoration, vain is it for man to attempt to say. When His time comes the whole world will be set in motion to accomplish His counsels on their behalf.

Christian's Library: Volume 7, Hints on Ezekiel.

THIRD PROPHETIC VISION. chapters 20-23

THE IDOLS OF EGYPT — chapters 20:1-31

THE portion which now lies before us (chs. 20-23) with its various subdivisions contains much that is morally instructive as well as dispensationally interesting.

In the seventh year of Jehoiachin’s captivity “certain of the elders of Israel came to inquire of the Lord, and sat before” Ezekiel. This seemed sincerity on their part, but the Lord that searches the heart detected an utter lack of conscience. “As I live, saith the Lord, I will not be inquired of by you” (vers. 3:31). The Spirit of God has here in view Israel as a nation, and not Judah only, as in chapter 8.

The actual condition of Israel is viewed in the light of their past history, and with special reference to that evil spirit of idolatry which was always their special snare.

Even in Egypt, before the mighty hand of God had interposed on their behalf to bring them from under Pharaoh’s iron bondage, they had defiled themselves with their idols: “Then said I unto them, 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” (vs. 7). But in vain: “They rebelled against Me, and would not hearken unto Me: they did not every man cast away the abominations of their eyes, neither did they forsake the idols of Egypt.” God then threatened them with judgment in the land of Egypt: “Then said I, I will pour out My fury upon them, to accomplish My anger against them in the midst of the land of Egypt.”

But God wrought for His own name’s sake. Israel was His people in spite of all their faithlessness, and what would the heathen say, in whose sight He had made Himself known in bringing His people forth out of the land of Egypt, if now He cast them off? (vers. 5-10).

So He brought them into the wilderness, and there He gave them His statutes and His judgments: there, too, He gave them the Sabbath to be “a sign between Me and them, that they might know that I am the Lord that sanctify them.” But Israel’s heart remained as rebellious as ever; they walked not in His statutes, they despised His judgments, and they polluted His Sabbaths. There, too, in the wilderness God was going to pour out His fury upon the guilty people, and consume them. But again He wrought for His name’s sake, lest it should be polluted before the heathen, in whose sight He had brought them out (vers. 10-14).

But the heart of Israel still turned away from Jehovah: “Their heart went after their idols;” so that God lifted up His hand to them in the wilderness that He would not bring them into the land flowing with milk and honey, the glory of all lands. “Nevertheless Mine eye spared them from destroying them, neither did I make an end of them in the wilderness” (vers. 15-17).

The fathers were incorrigible. God now deals with the children: “I said unto their children in the wilderness, Walk ye not in the statutes of your fathers, neither observe their judgments, nor defile yourselves with their idols: I am the Lord your God; walk in My statutes, and keep My judgments, and do them; and hallow My Sabbaths,” &c. But, alas! the children were no better than the fathers; the same persistent course of disobedience and idolatry characterized them. Whether in Egypt or the wilderness, whether the fathers or the children, nothing but rebellion and stiff-nakedness on the part of Israel, nothing but patience and long-suffering on the part of the Lord. And is it not the same with us today? And that in spite of higher blessings and greater privileges!

Many a time would God have destroyed the idolatrous people, but He remembered His covenant with Abraham, and wrought for His own glory; this alone prevented the execution of His just and righteous vengeance. But if He spared, He must chastise; otherwise it would but prove indifference to the evil: “Wherefore I gave them also statutes that were not good, and judgments whereby they should not live” (vs. 25). These, it need hardly be said, were not those contained in the law of Moses. That law was “holy, and just, and good,” as we are told in Romans 7. The statutes referred to in verse 25 were the idolatrous and degrading practices of the heathen nations described in verse 26, into which the favored nation had fallen, so low was the pit into which they had sunk (vers. 13-26).

Was their conduct any better in the land of Canaan? Their captivity in Babylon was the answer. “Even unto this day” it was the same story; and yet in utter deadness of conscience they came to inquire of the Lord as though all were right between them and Him. “As I live, saith the Lord God, I will not be inquired of by you.”

A great moral principle lies here. To enter God’s presence in prayer is always good, but we must remember that to be real it is into His presence that we must get, and there our hearts are searched: “Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts; and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Psa. 139:23, 24). Had the elders of Israel drawn near to the Lord in this spirit, He would have hearkened to their cry, and wrought a mighty deliverance on their behalf, in spite of their continued and persistent course of disobedience. His arm was not shortened that it could not save.

And is it not so with us to-day? How much prayer seems to go for nothing! Is it not because the Spirit of God is often grieved by our carelessness and worldliness, both individually and collectively? “Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God. And whatsoever we ask we receive of Him, because we keep His commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in His sight” (1 John 3:21, 22). Oh for hearts set on keeping His word and pleasing Him!

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