

## A PROBLEM OF UNFULFILLED PROPHECY IN EZEKIEL: A RESPONSE

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The quality of Dr. David L. Thompson's paper<sup>1</sup> is such that there are no major criticisms to be offered in response. I can only offer a few minor observations and then move on to suggest a further consideration as an alternative solution to the problem. For the most part then, this response will speak to a basic assumption in Dr. Thompson's paper which I would question, and using this as a point of departure, move in a new direction and to a different conclusion.

There are but two minor observations concerning items within Dr. Thompson's paper. The first one concerns the syntax problem in the Masoretic Text (MT) of Ezekiel 26:12 where there is a sudden shift from the singular pronouns to the plural pronoun. Attention is called to the fact that the LXX retains the singular pronouns throughout this section and the suggestion is made that this is possibly an example of textual corruption in the MT. But this witness of the LXX must not be elevated over against the MT plus the other ancient versions which agree with the MT. Since the witness of the LXX stands alone on this point, its witness must not be given undue weight. However, I concur with Dr. Thompson's final conclusion that the tentative nature of Old Testament criticism makes it difficult to decide confidently.

The second observation is one of agreement with Dr. Thompson's criticism of Payne, Feinberg, et al, in their extreme concern to demonstrate the absolute accuracy of prophetic utterances. Dr. Thompson refers to the well-known biblical test referring to the fulfillment of prophecy as a criterion of its genuineness (Deut. 18:22). In Deut. 13:1-3, the test is carried further and is relevant to our understanding of the problem of nonfulfillment. "If a prophet arises among you . . . and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder which he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, 'Let us go after other gods' . . . you shall not listen to the words of that prophet...." As R. B. Y. Scott observes, "... failure of a prediction may serve as a negative test, but its fulfillment is no guarantee of genuineness if the substance of the prophetic message departs

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16

The basic assumption and major thesis of Dr. Thompson's paper is that Ezekiel 26:7-14 is a prediction by Ezekiel that Nebuchadnezzar would utterly annihilate the city of Tyre. His assumption that this overthrow of Tyre was in terms of a literal and exact understanding of Ezekiel 26:7-14 is reflected throughout the paper as he speaks of "utter destruction";<sup>3</sup> "thoroughly destructive conquest";<sup>4</sup> "conclusion that Ezekiel envisioned the complete destruction of Tyre at the hands of the Babylonian 'King of kings'"<sup>5</sup> "the prophet earlier saw the Babylonian himself as conquering Tyre, looting her costly wares and valuable real estate, and sweeping her remains into the sea";<sup>6</sup> and "If . . . the island stronghold was taken with anything approximating the fierceness and finality which Ezekiel predicted."<sup>7</sup>

Also indicative of his approach to Ezekiel 26:7-14 is the introductory statement that "We will consider the type of prediction which appears to have expected literal fulfillment."<sup>8</sup> Here is a presumption followed consistently and logically throughout the paper that the literal interpretation of Ezekiel 26:7-14 is the only possibility. It is only on this basis that Dr. Thompson can see Ezekiel 29:18-19 as the prophet's response to nonfulfillment of his earlier prediction. But I would propose another way of viewing the initial prophecy which then of necessity changes the relationship between the two pericopes of Ezekiel under consideration.

Dr. Thompson quotes with approval from John Bright that a negotiated surrender of Tyre to Babylon probably followed the thirteen year seige, with the survival of the city as a semi-independent state. This, of course, sets up the problem of non-fulfillment, but only if one insists on a literal interpretation of the prophecy. But if the passage may be given another interpretation, it would then harmonize with the known historical facts and the problem of non-fulfillment would have become non-existent.

The basic problem we are faced with stems from our attempt to interpret Old Testament prophetic, poetic language. It is universally accepted that the O. T. Oriental mind is far different from the 20<sup>th</sup>

Century Occidental mind. Accordingly, we stumble over the symbolism and poetic references which the Hebrew could take in stride. This problem is seen in the extreme when we observe the mangling process utilized by some in their approach to apocalyptic writing. Herein every symbol, figure and number is scrutinized, analyzed, categorized, and compartmentalized with investigative, scientific niceties worthy of a watchmaker's craft. The end result is often a paralysis of analysis and an overlooking of the main truth of the passage. An example of this approach from another area of biblical studies is the methodology frequently employed in the International Critical Commentary, where the emphasis is so often placed on minute details of textual criticism that the great truths of Scripture are ignored and lost to sight.

We need then to recognize in Ezekiel 26:7-14 the presence of symbolism and hyperbole, and allow this to influence our interpretation of this passage. Eichrodt identifies the character of this passage in these words referring to verses 10-12:

... a full-length description of a thundering attack by war chariots through the breaches made in the city wall, and the

17

subsequent thorough plundering and destruction of the city. This is quite regardless of the fact that Tyre's position on an island made all such events hardly conceivable.<sup>9</sup>

Such hyperbolic language then is not to be regarded literally. W. F. Lofthouse reminds us that the form of this prophecy is almost entirely poetical,<sup>10</sup> and Eichrodt says of vv. 9-11, "It may be correct to conjecture that vv. 9-11 quote an old battle song, and are not without some poetic power."<sup>11</sup>

This same scholar refers to the entire passage of Ezekiel 26:7-14 as a "war-song."<sup>12</sup> Thus, I suggest that we are not to take literally the description of Nebuchadnezzar's capture of Tyre as related in Ezekiel 26:7-14. The siege of thirteen years did bring Tyre under Babylonian domination, but it was without the usual repayment of rich booty from a city that was violently and suddenly overthrown. Ezekiel simply employs typical prophetic description of the fall of a city in O. T. times. This use of vivid imagery, symbolism, and hyperbole is well known in prophetic predictions. The classic illustration is the prophecy on Pentecost found in Joel 2 which includes unusual phenomena occurring in nature (blood, fire, columns of smoke, a darkened sun, a moon turned to blood), all of which are included in Peter's quotation of this passage in Acts 2:19-20. As a good Jew, with a Hebraic mind capable of taking such symbolic language in stride, he does not stumble over it.

Prophetic statements of judgment and doom, such as we have in Ezekiel 26:7-14, are subject to moral conditioning and response on the part of those involved. R. B. Y. Scott claims that on this basis "we may see how some prophetic predictions could remain unfulfilled, while others were fulfilled in essence though not literally."<sup>13</sup> To illustrate this, he then cites several examples in Scripture, including our two passages in Ezekiel, which, as Dr. Thompson has rightly suggested, do not fit this category since there is no suggestion of a moral change or response on

the part of Tyre. However, Scott goes on to mention that another point to be remembered is that these predictions just mentioned are usually clothed in the language of poetic imagery and hyperbole which only the most prosaic liberalist could insist on taking as exact description.<sup>14</sup> If, then, we recognize Ezekiel 26:7-14 as fitting into this category of poetic imagery and hyperbole, the exegete is relieved of the necessity of a literal interpretation and assignment of this description of Tyre's demise to either the time of the Babylonian excursion or the conquest of Alexander. The prophetic intention of this passage is simply to announce the divine purpose to bring down Tyre as an expression of divine judgment.

Not only is it important to be guided in our interpretation of prophetic utterances by the recognition of poetic symbolism and hyperbole, but we also need to bear in mind a more general consideration of the nature and purpose of prophecy. Von Orelli has observed:

The prophet in general spoke to his hearers in such a way as could be understood by them and could be impressed on them. It is therefore not correct to demand a fulfillment pedantically exact in the form of the historical garb of the prophecy. The main thing is that the Divine thought contained in the prophecy be entirely and completely realized.<sup>15</sup>

18

That the literal interpretation of Ezekiel 26:7-14 is not necessary to the truth of the historical situation described must be given full recognition. This does not negate the position taken by Dr. Thompson, that the passage refers exclusively to Nebuchadnezzar; it only points out that we need not think that Ezekiel predicts a complete devastation of Tyre at the hands of the Babylonians. In this light, the prophecy was not literally fulfilled, nor was it expected to be as witnessed by the fact that in 29:17-20, Ezekiel offers no apology or correction. Some have been offended that a literal fulfillment of the original prediction did not take place, as reported by Eichrodt concerning Van den Born who sees the transference of the threat to Egypt (29:17-20) which was not fulfilled upon Tyre (26:7-14) as a "cynical performance unworthy of Ezekiel."<sup>16</sup> But this is to miss the basic and fundamental truth inherent in all O. T. prophecy—that it is the pronouncement of the will of God who is active in the affairs of men to bring to pass His will and purpose. Eichrodt speaks of this general objective of prophecy in reference to Ezekiel 29:17-20 and states:

We find here a decision with regard to a problem of really crucial importance: the uncertainty whether a prophecy ought to be regarded as an infallible disclosure of divine truth, if it falls short of being literally fulfilled. It is plain that Ezekiel is far from indulging in any anxious effort at reappraisal. His predictions have another objective than that of anticipating beforehand the exact details of the course history is going to take, since like all other prophetic utterances they are subordinated to their general objective. This is to make his contemporaries aware ... of the Lord of all history's unshakable will to reign.... The prophets look up and out to the central fact of God's revealing act, which is the accomplishment of his lordship and in describing the road to it they make use of the means available in their time and in their world.... He carries his plans home and attains his objective with all the freedom of the Creator; so while prediction can make statements clarifying the plan and assuring us of its existence, it can never determine the exact line it will take or calculate before its individual stages.... It remains true that the Lord is on the march to set up his kingdom throughout the whole world, to humble the powers of this world, and prepare his salvation for the believing people of God.<sup>17</sup>

Since the literal sense of Ezekiel 26:7-14 did not come to pass, are we not forced to choose between two alternatives: 1) non-fulfillment of the literal sense, and 2) re-interpretation of the passage in a non-literal, more general manner? I opt for the latter. Thus, we are suggesting a more general view of the nature of prophecy overall, and for Ezekiel 26:7-14 in particular much the same as Eichrodt's suggestion. Accordingly, the second passage from Ezekiel 29:17-20 is, as Dr. Thompson suggests, simply a comment upon the fact that Nebuchadnezzar's arduous labors in the thirteen years siege of Tyre were ill-repaid.

A. B. Davidson notes in his commentary that Ezekiel 26:7-14 was not literally fulfilled, but that this is

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19

In this particular instance, the humiliation of Tyre by Babylon was morally as good as its ruin, and thus is the fulfillment of the moral consideration of prophecy. He also claims that prophecy is ideal in expressing particular details. Speaking of predictions of both redemption and calamity he states:

. . . it must be maintained that the prophets imagined the fulfillment as they describe it. This however, is part of their idealism; the moral element is always the main thing in their prophecies. What they predict is the exhibition of Jehovah's moral rule of the world; the form in which they clothe this exhibition may not be quite that given in history.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, we conclude that the Kingdom of God, which is the ultimate goal of God's activity among men, and is the central focal point of prophecy, comes not only by grace, but also by judgment-and this is illustrated in Ezekiel's pronouncement concerning Tyre. What we have tried to suggest is a more general view of the nature of prophecy in the light of God's total purpose for the world, and not the completely literal interpretation of specific passages. Such a hermeneutic is in keeping with the approach hinted at by Dr. Thompson in the conclusion of his paper.

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**Notes**

- 1David L. Thompson, "A Problem of Unfulfilled Prophecy in Ezekiel: The Destruction of Tyre," Wesleyan Theological Journal, 16:1 (Spring 1981), pp. 93-106.
- 2R. B. Y. Scott, *The Relevance of the Prophets* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1968), p. 12.
- 3Thompson, "A Problem," p. 97.
- 4Thompson, "A Problem," p. 97.
- 5Thompson, "A Problem," p. 99.
- 6Thompson, "A Problem," p. 99.
- 7Thompson, "A Problem," p. 95.
- 8Thompson, "A Problem," p. 93.
- 9Walter Eichrodt, *Ezekiel: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970), p. 371.
- 10W. F. Lofthouse, *The Book of Ezekiel in The Century Bible*, ed. W. F. Adeny (Edinburgh: T. C. and E. C. Jack, 1907), p. 212.
- 11Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, p. 371.
- 12Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, p. 370.
- 13Scott, *Relevance*, p. 11.
- 14Scott, *Relevance*, p. 11.
- 15C. von Orelli, "Prophecy," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, James Orr, General Editor, Vol. IV (1915).
- 16Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, p. 409.
- 17Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, pp. 410-11.
- 18A. B. Davidson, *The Book of the Prophet Ezekiel in The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*, A. F. Kirkpatrick, General Editor (Cambridge: The University Press, 1916), p. 208.