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# The doctrine of individualism in Ezekiel

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SENIOR THESIS

by

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The DOCTRINE of INDIVIDUALISM

in EZEKIEL.

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B I B L I O G R A P H Y .

- Beacon Lights of Prophecy. Knudson.
- Theology of the Old Testament. Davidson.
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## THE DOCTRINE of INDIVIDUALISM.

### Introduction

The human mind is so constituted that years of training are necessary before certain truths could be born, and grow, and become effective vehicles in lifting man to a consciousness of himself and to a consciousness of God.

The God of the Hebrew was not simple one who stood as a mighty judge over his people passing judgment on the one and the other, he was not simply one whose transcendence was beyond man's reach or grasp, he was not one that was far away but he was one whose energy was operative in all the relational life of his people. He was not only operative in nature but he was the guiding hand directing the course of human history and human destiny. And we find through a process of progressive revelation great truths bursting upon the human consciousness which have furnished the link in uniting him with his God.

Israel like all other peoples had to come out of darkness into light. Her great truths as we see them today in her history, prophecy, and poetry could not have come spontaneously or suddenly but rather

through a long process of growth and development. Her religion had to be polytheistic before it became monotheistic, her conception of the operation of God in the Universe had to be nationalistic before it became universalistic, her conception of the individual's relation to God had to be nationalistic before it became individualistic. And thus we note gradual changes, from polytheism to monotheism, from nationalism to universalism, national solidarity to individual responsibility.

This gradual merging was effected through the work of the priests and the prophets. The former were the teachers and the guardians of the law, while the latter dealt with the application of the principles of the law to practical life. It was not sufficient, to have, a knowledge of the law, if that knowledge does not link the human soul with God; and does not bring about civic righteousness and purity. The simple teaching, then, of the law by the priests, could not have effected the result for which God had intended it. It would have come as in some cases it did to dry formalism, without any rational or moral content, Had it not been for the prophets who spirit-

ualized it and gave it moral worth the legal teaching would have been of no avail. This enabling Judaism when assailed on every hand by heathen influence to stand as firmly and as impregnable as Gibraltar. Had it not been for this Judaism would have vanished under the tidal wave of Grecian naturalism. This above everything else stemmed the tide which threatened to engulf Jehovah worship. The prophets were not simply doomed predictors, they were not simply dealing with eschatological ideas, but they were rather dealing with life and its betterment. In other words they may be called moral reformers, men who fully apprehended the present, and saw that a continuation in such a present would inevitably lead to a future of punishment and captivity, and through several centuries we find them in a continuous succession warning the people of approaching doom. A doom that can be stayed by no external power. A doom that can be averted by nothing material. It was useless to trust in the men of Egypt, for they were only men and not God. It was useless to trust in their horses for their horses were flesh and not spirit. This doom, then, can only be averted by a change of the

heart of the nation, and the complete trust in the power of an infinite God. But did Israel realize the gravity of the situation; did she heed the words of her prophets? Ah, no. She called light darkness and darkness light, and in her delusion was taken captive, her pride humbled, her temples broken and trodden under.

Along with the element of doom we find an underlying idea of a possibility of a certain number being saved from the humiliation of the captivity. We find this notably in Isaiah, and it is out of this idea of the remnant that the doctrine of Individualism had its birth. It was no more the salvation of the nation in its entirety but it was a remnant that would ultimately be restored. Do we not see clearly in this a foregleam of that which was to be the most powerful agency in the development of religion? The step toward individualism was a decidedly new departure, it came at a time when the nation was in captivity, a time when the power and justice of God were called in question. If Jehovah were their God, if he were the All-powerful One, why does he allow his people to suffer? The prophets answered this readily by saying

they were being punished because they had sinned. But were all the people sinful; did they all bow down to Baal? It is hardly 'conceivable' that they were not at least a few who had not forsaken Jehavah. This, then being so the question naturally arise why should the innocent suffer with the guilty?

Then again, the Jews always thought that they had a divine mission to the world. How was this mission to be carried out when they were all being destroyed? Isaiah saw no other way out of it but saying a remnant shall be saved, and out of this remnant shall spring the tree that is to bud, and blossom, and bring forth fruits to fulfil the destined mission of Israel. But still a farther step had to be taken. The doctrine of the Remnant of Isaiah was only a foregleam, <sup>of that</sup> which was to become a doctrine in Ezekiel.

We find it a fact that all great movements center around some personality, and although the doctrine of Individualism may be found in germ in other writings than Ezekiel (Gen. 18:25; Amos 9:9,10), yet it is around the personality of Ezekiel that the development of the doctrine centers. And as we cannot come to a full understanding of any movement apart from the one

around whom the movement centers and apart from the conditions under which the movement sprang, we shall consider Ezekial and his times.

Ezekiel's life like that of many of the other prophets is hidden in obscurity, and very little is known of him prior to his active prophetic period. He was the son of a priest. He was carried into captivity with Jehoiachin in B.C. 597. He settled at Tel-Abib on the banks of the river Chebar, probably a canal connecting Babylon with Nippur. He was married and occupied his own house (Ezek. 24:18; 3:14; 12:3; 8:1; 14:1; 20:1) where he had been frequently visited by the elders. His wife died suddenly, shortly after the fall of Jerusalem which he used as a symbol to enforce his message of doom.

Ezekiel's call to the prophetic office came in the fifth year of his captivity, B.C. 592. It came as with the other prophets in the form of a vision, strikingly different, however, is the vision of Ezekiel. In Ezekiel we have an elaborate detail describing the minutest features of the vision. We find this not only in chapter one but also in chapters eight and eleven. The prophet has a wonderful capacity for

grand and impressive conceptions coupled with a singular interest in mathematical calculations and minuteness of detail. Victor Hugo places Ezekiel along with Homer and Aeschylus in the avenue of the immortal giants of the human mind. This estimation, however, will not be universally shared for some think that Ezekiel's habit of detailed elaboration interferes with the correctness of his thought. It complicates his images so that the general conceptions that lie back of them are often lost from view.

Before discussing Ezekiel as a prophet, it may be well to look into his priestly life and connection as ~~is~~<sup>this</sup> intended in some way to determine his attitude to the institutions and observances of his day. Not only was he the son of a priest as was Jeremiah, but by training and native endowment he had the tastes and interests of a priest. In his book, therefore, we find no such polemic against ceremonialism as in the other prophets. Ezekiel following in the wake of the author of Deuteronomy saw that the best way to promote the interests of true religion was not to repudiate the sacrificial cult altogether but to moralize it and to make it a medium for the expression of

religious truth. In this aspect of Ezekiel's work some see a decline from the heights of earlier prophetic teaching. This in part is true, "but it must be born in mind," says Prof. Knudson, "that there are many non-essential <sup>things</sup> in religion that are essential to make religion effective in the world." Ezekiel saw clearly the value of ritualism and ceremonialism; and it is an evidence of true religious statesmanship on his part to be able to single them out and make them the efficient means of religious culture. So convinced was he of the value of ritualism and ceremonialism that he himself formulated a code which was carried on by Ezra and Nehemiah. The work, then, of Ezekiel in moralizing and universalizing the religious law of the land makes him the father of Judaism.

It was the giving of moral content to the law that enabled Judaism when faced with the two great crises of her life. First the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. when the belief of the Jews in the inviolability of their holy city was shattered with the fall of that City, the popular faith in the power of Jehovah was threatened. To their minds the victory of other nations over what they called holy meant the overthrow

of their God and the establishment of the supremacy of the God or gods of the conquerors. But through the work of the men of God who declared that the destruction was due to the retributive justice of Jehovah and not his enemies they saw, then, nothing in the Fall of Jerusalem that need weaken faith in Jehovah but rather the event to their minds should furnish new ground for trust in Him. Through the spiritual insight of these men Israelitic religion survived its own nation's downfall, the only instance of the kind in the history of the world. Then, too, when the second crisis arose through the disintegrating influence of Greek culture, when Hellenism threatened to dissolve away everything that was characteristic of Hebrew belief, and an influence to which all the religions of Southwestern Asia succumbed, had it not been for the impregnable armor of legalism in which Ezekiel and Ezra had incased her, which made her religion as hard as steel and as strong as iron, she would have vanished under the tidal wave of naturalism. Ezekiel then, holds a unique place in the religious life not only of his people but of the world.

We shall now pass to Ezekiel as Prophet. In this position Ezekiel stands alone in his sudden break from the thought of his day. Not alone was the content of his message different, but his field of labor is distinct from the earlier prophets. The field of his labor was away from the land of his birth, and his message was addressed not to a people who were sitting at ease in Zion as Amos found them, not a people whose civic life was corrupt and who were trusting in a God who through his covenant with them will not cause any harm to befall them. But rather he was addressing himself to a people who were being oppressed, whose national honor and pride had been crushed by their captors, a people who were suffering and paying the penalty of sin. And as the prophet was a man of practical affairs he had necessarily to address himself to the conditions as they were and to employ ways and means whereby they could be interpreted.

We find lacking<sup>al</sup> though not wholly the element of stringent doom in Ezekiel. The element that we find, however, was not in content the same as other prophets but had a special significance for the exile. "It meant", says Dr. Knudson, "that they must give up their

hope of a speedy return to their native land, and also the end of their old religious nationalism."

To a large extent visions played a large part in Ezekiel's life more so than in the life of any other prophet. We have recorded elaborate visions in Chapters 8 to 11 and 40 to 48, which the prophet describes in a vivid and impressive manner. These visions according to the prophet's own words came upon him through the hand of Jehovah, that was upon him (8:1; 37:1; 40:1). All of these point to some extraordinary psychological experience and as it was the direct influence of God upon the prophet who dares not doubt that these visions were not actual, even after leaving sufficient <sup>ground</sup> for the prophet's individuality to assert itself. Doubtless, there must have been some elaboration of these visions by Ezekiel yet to my mind the content of these visions through the vivid way in which the prophet relates them must have had some place in his own experience.

There are some who contend that Ezekiel suffered from some mental disorder or nervous trouble based on 3:15, 24:24-27 and other references. Ezekiel during a very long period was said to have been dumb, and some

interpret this dumbness in a physical sense as a case of aphasia. But chapters 4 to 24 make it impossible that the prophet could have been silent during this long period. Consequently we are told that he was subject simply to occasional attacks of aphasia, but Dr. Knudson sees in the dumbness nothing physical but an actual retiring of the prophet from activity not through physical ailments but rather through the unbelief of <sup>his</sup> auditors who denied flatly the truth of his message of doom. After the capture of Jerusalem, however, he met with no such opposition. His mouth was open and he spoke henceforth, without fear of contradiction.

A question here may well be asked as to whether the symbolical actions in Ezekiel were actually performed or not, 4:4-8, 21:18-23. In endeavoring to decide whether these emblem prophecies were carried out or not. It should be first noted that one of them is explicitly declared to have been a parable, 24:3. It should also be noted that there is a symbolical action in one of the visions, 2:8,3:3. Neither of these was actually performed. The same is true of many other symbols. It is clear then that symbolical actions

were at times employed by the prophet as a mere literary form. This is true not only of Ezekiel but also of Jeremiah and other prophets. Some of them were, however, carried out.

Having now settled upon the physical construction of Ezekiel and the place symbolism played in his ministry, we are better prepared to discuss him in relation to his people. Ezekiel stood in vital relation to his people. He was commissioned at the outset of his ministry to be a prophet to the exiles, to speak the words of Jehovah to them, and we find the elders coming to see him, 8:1; 14:1, and the people gathering to hear him. We find him meeting the objections of the exiles when they questioned the justice of God in treating them as he was for the sins of their fathers. They could not see how their present condition could have been brought about, <sup>except</sup> through a gross injustice on the part of Jehovah and, indeed, they were right in their conclusions if we <sup>are to</sup> accept their premises. And it is here that Ezekiel breaks away from the accepted order of things. It is here that he breaks with tradition. It is here that he denies national solidarity and asserts individual responsibility, and this

is the kernel of his teachings. With this irresistible declaration he explains the condition of his people. It was not because of their fathers' sins that they were carried away into exile but rather it was because of their own sins, sins of social injustice, and of religious perversion. God, according to Ezekiel, desired not only a perfunctory performance of ceremony but rather a pure heart. God looked upon the individual not in the light of the sins of his fathers but in the light of his own sins, and so we find Ezekiel declaring a truth that was to take concrete and permanent form in the doctrine of the Man of Calvary, "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God."

Ezekiel's teaching was admirably adapted to the practical needs of the exiles. It cut from under them forever all grounds of complaint against the Divine justice. But is the individual after all free from his past; is the individual independent of others; do we not rarely inherit <sup>not only</sup> the physical characteristics, but do we not also inherit some of the tendencies of our parents, and do not these very inherited tendencies direct and determine our future, can we cut our-

selves absolutely away from the past? We must admit that as we inherit physical characteristics we also inherit moral and religious tendencies. But is there not a power in man which can free him from his past? Ezekiel probably conceived it and evidently thought that God would make provision for such inherited tendencies. But as Dr. Knudson would contend, "Ezekiel was writing from a transcendent or eschatological point of view. What he is considering is the soul in its relation to God; which he thinks will be finally settled at the great day of Jehovah which is not far distant." Ezekiel probably never thought of inherited tendencies and their probably effect upon the individual. What he wanted to show was that the individual and he alone stood in direct relation with God, a relation that cannot be hampered by past conditions. What he wanted to show was that the destiny of each individual is determined by his own character.

We shall consider the causes which gave rise to the doctrine of Individualism and we quote from Davidson the following: "First there was the isolation of the prophet. He felt himself especially in opposition to the false prophets, the only true man in the state.

This isolation combined with his singular tendency to introspection and self-analysis enables us to see his mind better than we see that of any other prophet.

It was perhaps his isolation that compelled him to practice intropsection; it required him to analyze his own mind and to bring clearly before himself his relation to Jehovah, and perceive wherein the essence of that relation lay. And all this being the case of an individual, it established the position once for all

"Secondly another thing which led to the same result was the prophet's conception of Jehovah. Jehovah is to him a purely ethical being, and consequently his relation to the subject, infellowship with him, is a purely inward one. It must, therefore, be a relation to the individual mind and conversely the service rendered must be a service of the mind."

Ezekiel like many of the other prophets took the experiences of his life and applied them to the nation, and out of his own desire to bring his own soul into vital touch with God he came to a recognition of the independence and the possibility of the individual. He evidently had come to a personal knowledge of God, he evidently had to purify himself in order to be the

instrument to convey divine truth and out of his own personal experience he saw the solution of the problem of the people's suffering. To them their suffering was not compatible with divine justice for they were being punished for the sins of their fathers.

But they were looking through eyes which were blurred with the idea of national solidarity. The life and integrity of the nation had shut out altogether that of the individual which naturally led to a loose state of affairs, morally and otherwise. Consider the state of affairs that would exist today if such were the case. Why, if men were not held personally responsible for their sins, morality and religion would crumble to the dust. Religion and morality could never be at their best until the life of the individual and its possibilities are realized. This Ezekiel clearly saw and with the whole passion of his soul he proclaimed the doctrine of Individualism, an individualism with a moral and ethical content, an individualism that would destroy formalism and ceremonialism, an individualism that would once for all banish national solidarity and would make clear the road for the individual to reach his God, whose face could only be seen through the purity of his heart.

In his subjectivity Ezekiel is like Jeremíah who made religion a thing of the heart, who made religion as incurable as the Ethopian's skin or the Leopard's spots.

Ezekiel's contribution to religion transcends that of any other prophet. It transeends the moral law of Amos, sublime as that may have been. It surpasses in its intimate relation with God the conjugal love of Hosea. Farreaching, sublimé and strengthening though may have been the faith of Isaiah, yet by the crushing of that faith by the destruction of Jerusalem, individualism stands supreme, for it was in this doctrine that an adequate interpretation was found, an interpretatinn which made the crooked ways straight and the rough' ways smooth.

Little did Ezekiel know that he was laying the foundation upon which that colòssal structure was to be built by Jesus, who came proclaiming individual salvation.

We shall now sumrarrize the <sup>value of</sup> doctrine of Individualism to religion. First, it takes religion out of ceremonialism and makes it a vital issue, a thing of the heart, and secondly, it places religion in the hand

of the individual and by doing this it cuts away that barrier that was raised by wiley priests between God and man, and like the death of Christ which broke away the wall or inner partition of the Temple, so that man could have free access to him in whom he lives, moves and has his being, individualism shattered and made clear to man that he, and he alone, must work out his own salvation. Thirdly, individualism showed to the world that God was an ethical being with whom fellowship is possible only through ethical living. It was not sufficient to observe the faast days, it was not enough to offer sacrifices, although with Ezekiel these had their places, but the Lord required as Micah would tell us, "to do justly, to have mercy and to walk humbly with thy God." In making the object worshipped ethical, and in demanding an ethical life on the part of the worshipper religion took a decided turn. This ethical conception keeps not only the individual within the bounds of ethical living but also keeps the God worshipped. And we find after Ezekiel the idea of the righteousness of God having a<sup>different</sup> altogether content, in II Isaiah righteousness is used in a sense making God the most obligated being in the world.

In this conception of the obligation of God we see the necessity of the Atonement. It was not the act of appeasing any power that the atonement was made necessary but rather it was simply in harmony with divine righteousness. God could not allow man whom he had made in his own image and likeness to be forever anathematised, to be forever shut out from his presence. In this ethical conception of the righteousness of God Israelitic religion reached its high-water mark, for religion could have no higher mode of expression than in its power to produce ethical living. Fourthly, individualism showed to man his infinite possibilities. To my mind self-development, and self-expansion are absolutely impossible in a state where the life of the individual is obscured. Where there is no individual consciousness manhood cannot assert itself, for it is only when the individual feels that what he does he does it to his own merit or demerit, that he will do or refuse not to do. Lastly individualism revealed to man that he alone could bring justification or condemnation to his soul by accepting or rejecting the divine provisions made for him. All men are created free and equal in religion as in

politics, no man is bound to the past of his political persuasion so individualism showed clearly that his present and future life were not bound up with his past. In this, Ezekiel strikes a responsive chord that we hear resounding through succeeding ages, for was it not the same sound which Luther heard when climbing the steps at Rome, a sound that gave him a glimpse of his possibilities and the possibilities of all those who were held under the delusive spell of the Poman hierarchy, which prompted him to announce that he stood condemned or justified in the sight of God either by his own merit or demerit. He and he alone must answer for his sins and that to God. Luther saw like Ezekiel that the just shall live by faith and by a personal faith that which links the individual with his God.