A NOTE ON EZEKIEL XVII 1-10 AND 22-24

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Ezekiel xvii 1-10 is the well-known allegory of the Two Eagles (or Vultures), and the passage, in conjunction with verses 22-24, raises several problems, both textual and exegetical.

The traditional interpretation is to take verses 3-4 as referring to the young king Jehoiakim, and the events of 597 B.C. (2 Kings xxiv 8 ff.), and verses 5-10 as referring to the period of Zedekiah's rule. Although appointed to the throne by Babylon, Zedekiah began to seek independence of Babylon with the aid of Egypt, and this course of action led to the eventual capture of Jerusalem and the end of the Jewish State in 586 B.C.

An examination of the text supports this traditional view in the main, though the way has first to be cleared, as it were.

William Irwin ¹) argues that xvii 1-10 is a conflate text, that verses 3, 4 and 5 are an alternative form of verses 7 and 8. There was, Irwin upholds, only one eagle in the original poem. He thus prefers the reading הנק in the Massoretic Text to הנק which has the support of the LXX, Old Latin, Syriac and Vulgate Versions. It is true that the Greek ἐτεοχ is a possible rendering of הנק, but the translation another is required by the allegory as a whole, as will be seen.

Verses 3 and 7 are integral parts of the poem, and they are continued in verse 8b; verse 8a is a gloss probably on verse 10a.

Irwin also draws attention to the 'horticultural' difficulties of verses 5 and 6. The poem begins with a cedar (הנק), and then in verse 5 the seed of the land is planted in a fertile field; he set it as a willow tree (?) (Ẽפף) that it might sprout and become a vine (לך). Irwin's conclusion is that in the original poem there was only one species of tree, the cedar. The vine, to which no reference is made in verses 22-24 (commentator's notes, according to Irwin) "has been introduced

through some error of text or exegesis”¹. The author of verses 22-24, however, has a clear and definite reason for making use only of the figure of the cedar ². Likewise in verses 1-10 there is an adequate reason for the acceptance of both the cedar and the vine in the original poem: two regimes are intended, that of Jehoiakin and that of Zedekiah.

The word נֶפֶשׁ in verse 5 is a difficulty. In post-Biblical Hebrew it does bear the meaning of a kind of willow, but this is out of place in the present context. Various attempts have been made to find a satisfactory solution ³, but it seems best to follow the LXX and Old Latin here ⁴ and to read simply נֶפֶשׁ.

What of the extent of the original poem? Richard Kraetzschmar ⁵ suggests that verses 8-9 and 10 are parallels. On the other hand, Dr. T. H. Robinson ⁶ believes that the original poem extended to, and included verse 8; verses 9 and 10 comprising a separate oracle. G. A. Cooke ⁷ includes both verses in his reconstruction, but reverses the order. It is probable that verse 10 is the original, with its particularly apt reference to 'the east wind': verse 9b is a gloss, and verse 9a has every appearance of an editorial comment.

Thus with certain other changes in the text, to which reference is given below, it is possible to reconstruct the original poem in this way:

²) See below.
⁴) The LXX has ἐπιβλέπομενον and the Old Latin ut resiperetur. The Greek ἐπιβλέπομενον would appear to have the force of the Classical ἔπιβλεπτόν; and the Hebrew niph’al participle also has gerundive force (cp. A. B. Davidson, Hebrew Grammar (24th Edition) p. 90, note 4). The root in this case is נֶפֶשׁ.
⁶) T. H. Robinson, Prolegomena to the Higher Criticism of Ezekiel (A paper read before the Oxford Society of Historical Theology in 1949. The present writer was privileged to see this in an unpublished form some years ago).