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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“DECEIVING OR
DECEIVED PROPHETS
EZEKIEL 14:9 AND 20:25–27”

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DECEIVING OR DECEIVED PROPHETS

EZEKIEL 14:9 AND 20:25–27

EZEKIEL 14:9

וְהַנְּבִיא כִּי־יִפְתָּה וּדְבַר דָּבַר
אֲנִי יְהוָה פְּתִיתִי אֶת הַנְּבִיא הַהוּא
וְנָשִׂיתִי אֶת־יָדֵי עָלָיו וְהִשְׁמַדְתִּיו
מִתּוֹךְ עַמִּי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

And if the prophet be deceived and speak a word,
I, the LORD, have deceived that prophet,
and I will stretch out my hand against him,
and will destroy him from the midst of my people Israel.

(RSV)¹

Like the two verbs פְּתִיתִנִּי and וְנָשִׂיתִנִּי in Jer 20:7, the verbs יִפְתָּה and פְּתִיתִי in Ezek 14:9 have been read as a simple repetition of פָּתָה “to deceive.” The following quotations are typical of traditional interpretations of Ezekiel’s reporting God’s acknowledgment that he deliberately deceived some of Israel’s prophets. Cooke (1936: 151) stated

Ez[ekiel] here goes deeper into the causes of false prophecy. Not merely self-delusion (13^{3,6}), and the influence of idolatrous clients (v.⁷), may lead a prophet to utter false oracles, but the divine will itself: *I Jahveh have deceived that prophet*. Such a statement is only intelligible when we remember that ancient habits of thought overlooked secondary causes, and attributed events direct to the action of God; see Am 3⁶, Is 45⁷.

Several decades later Eichrodt (1970: 183) concluded

The only explanation is that it [the lapse of a prophet] is a blindness caused by God himself. . . . Deuteronomy 13.3 shows a similar outlook. It explains that if a miraculous sign takes place, by which a prophet tries to win people's faith when he is leading them into idolatry, then that sign has been brought about by God himself to test [מִנְסֶה] or tempt his own people.

A few years later Zimmerli (1978: 308, 309) asserted

That people knew of the possibility of a prophet being deceived (פְּתוּדָה) is shown by the narrative of the prophetic school in 1 Kings 13. With Ezekiel it undergoes a grim heightening in the statement that what at first appears to be an occasion of human guilt may be a serious involvement in divine punishment (cf. 1 Kings 22). . . . God kills in order to save. In his judgment he is zealous for his people. The choice of language of the sacral law brings to expression this will for the purity of the people—and this will is a zeal full of compassion.

Greenberg, more recently, (1983: 253–254) concluded

For Ezekiel, the illegitimate prophet is himself a victim and sign of God's fury. This goes further than Deut 13:2ff., which interprets the confirmatory signs of a subversive prophet as a test of the people's loyalty to YHWH; further also than 1 Kings 22:20ff., in which a "lying spirit" is commissioned to enter Ahab's prophets in order to assure his death in battle (we are not told that those prophets suffered any penalty, human or divine). Our passage ascribes the error of a prophet in responding to inquiry to divine misguidance. The obtuseness of the Israelites, including prophets, is culpable, and God punishes it by corrupting the spring of inspiration, leading inquirer and respondent alike to destruction.

Greenberg found a parallel in Ezekiel 20, where “in order to punish the guilty Israelites God gave them (misled them with) bad and fatal laws ‘so that I might desolate them (vss. 25f).’” It is important to note that Greenberg (1983: 368–369) did not comment on Ezek 20:30–31, which he translated as

Say, then to the house of Israel: Thus said Lord YHWH: You defile yourselves in the manner of your fathers, you go whoring after loathsome things; you defile yourselves by the offer of your gifts by delivering up your sons to the fire—your idolatries of all sorts—to this day; shall I then respond to your inquiry, house of Israel? By my life, declares Lord YHWH, I will not respond to your inquiry!

The repeated statement of Yahweh in Ezek 20:30, “you defile yourselves” (אַתֶּם נִטְמָאִים)² and the assurance given in Ezek 20:11

וַאֲתַן לָהֶם אֶת־חֻקֹּתַי
וַאֲתִמְשֶׁפֶטִי הוֹרַעְתִּי אוֹתָם
אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה אוֹתָם הָאָדָם וַחֵי בָהֶם

I [Yahweh] gave them my statutes
and showed them my ordinances,
by whose observance man shall live,

are difficult to reconcile with Ezek 20:25–26, as traditionally translated below.

EZEKIEL 20:25–26

וְגַם־אֲנִי נִתְחִי לָהֶם חֻקִּים לֹא טוֹבִים
וּמְשַׁפְּטִים לֹא יִחִיו בָּהֶם
וְאֲטָמָא אוֹתָם בְּמִתְנֹותָם
בְּהַעֲבִיר כָּל־פֶּטֶר רָחִם
לְמַעַן אֲשַׁמֶּם
לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר יִדְעוּ אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי יְהוָה

Moreover I gave them statutes that were not good and
ordinances by which they could not have life.

And I defiled them through their very gifts
in making them offer by fire all their first-born,
that I might horrify them;

I did it that they might know that I am the Yahweh

The statement in Ezek 20:25, as translated and interpreted
above, obviously contradicts the promise in Lev 18:5

וּשְׁמֵרְתֶם אֶת־חֻקֹּתַי וְאֶת־מִשְׁפָּטַי
אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה אִתְּם הָאָדָם וְחַי בָּהֶם

You shall therefore keep my statutes and my ordinances,
by doing which a man shall live.

The difficulties raised by these contradictory verses has
been well expressed by Block (1997: 636).

One can see how radical this notion [that Yahweh *defiled* his
people] is in that nowhere else in the OT does Yahweh appear
as the subject of the *verb* *ṭimmē*^o (Piel). . . . But in v. 26
Yahweh declares his intentions explicitly: *so that I might
devastate them* (*lěma^oan^o ṭāšimmēn*). Interpreted at face value,
these verses create horrifying and intolerable theological
problems. How could Yahweh, the gracious covenant God, be
portrayed as granting his people “bad” laws that would not
result in life? Even more unconscionable, how could he defile
the nation by demanding of them their firstborn, offered up as
child sacrifices, so he could destroy them? Students of Scrip-
ture have struggled with these problems through the centuries.

But according to van der Horst (1992: 98) many centuries
went by before there was any struggling with these texts. He
noted

One looks in vain for it [a reference to Ezek 20:25–26] in all
the Jewish Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, nor does one find

any reference or allusion to, let alone quotation of, our text in Philo or Josephus or any of the other Jewish-Greek authors. In the Qumran scrolls our text is never quoted or even alluded to. In Tannaitic literature no trace of our text is to be found. It is only in the 3rd through 6th centuries that we find rabbis discussing the meaning of this passage.

The current struggle with Ezekiel's quotations about Yahweh's deceiving prophets and giving laws which would bring certain death can be resolved once several words used by Ezekiel become recognized in future lexicons of Biblical Hebrew. For example, the Hebrew פתה can be read as *either* the *Pi^cel* "to deceive, to seduce" (BDB 834; KBS 3: 984) *or* as the Hebrew cognate of the Arabic فتو (*fatawa*) "he notified the decision of the law . . . respecting the case, to give a formal legal opinion," including a death sentence (Lane 1877: 2336–2337; Wehr 1979: 815).

As a matter of fact, *both* words appear in Ezek 14:9. The *Pu^cal* יפתה "he will be deceived" needs to be repointed as the *Pi^cel* יפתה "he deceives" (and the MT ודבר "and he spoke" needs to be corrected to ידבר "he speaks").³ With these corrections to the MT the phrase והנביא כִּי־יפתה יהבר means "if the prophet deceives when he speaks a word." The apodosis which then follows contains a wordplay on the יפתה "he deceives," requiring the *Pi^cel* פתיתי "I deceive" to be repointed as the *Qal* פתיתי "I decree/I issue a sentence." Thus, Yahweh proclaimed אני יהוה פתיתי את הנביא הווא, "I am Yahweh, I have *sentenced* that prophet." Yahweh then explicitly spelled out the death sentence: ונטיתי את ידי עליו והשמדתיו מתוך עמי ישראל "and I will stretch out my hand against him and destroy him from among my people Israel."

Another word used by Ezekiel in 20:25 which has gone unrecognized by commentators is the emphatic particle **לֵא** “indeed.”⁴ This **לֵא** was always misread by the Masoretes as the negative particle **לֹא**. But for Ezekiel **לֵא טוֹבִים** would have been synonymous with **חֲקִים טוֹבִים מְאֹד** “exceedingly good statutes.”⁵

Thus, the statements in Ezekiel 20 are quite consistent in affirming the goodness of Yahweh’s law by which life is guaranteed. In 20:11 Ezekiel quoted Yahweh as saying, “I gave them my statutes and showed them my ordinances, by whose observance man shall live”; and in 20:21 Yahweh declared, “they did not observe my statutes or keep my ordinances that bring life to those who observe them” (NAB). Also in 20:25—when properly interpreted—Yahweh emphatically affirmed, “I gave them statutes that were *indeed* good and ordinances by which they could *indeed* have life,” with 20:26^c concluding, “I did it [the giving of good laws which give life] that they might acknowledge that I am Yahweh.”

When **לֵא** “indeed” and **פָּתָה** “to issue a fiat/*fatwa*” are added to Ezekiel’s active vocabulary, the problems of 20:25, per se, disappear. But different problems emerge with 20:26, where, seemingly, Yahweh admitted “I defiled them through their very gifts in making them offer by fire all their first-born, that I might horrify them.”

Thus, new contradictory statements appear. Whereas Ezekiel 20:13, 16, 21, and 24 speak of Israel’s rebellion and refusal to obey God’s ordinances, 20:26 would seem to indicate that Israel was indeed faithful in obeying Yahweh’s commands for child sacrifice. Yet in 20: 31, Yahweh declared, “When you offer your gifts and sacrifice your sons by fire, you defile yourselves with all your idols to this day.” The question becomes, “According to Ezekiel, were children sacrificed in

Israel because Yahweh—at some time or place—required it (according to 20:26), or was such sacrifice contrary to Yahweh’s will (according to 20:30–31)?⁶

Once it is recognized that the first nine of fifteen Hebrew words in 20:26 (or 28 words in KJV) are out of place, the question just raised can be dismissed. The statement in 20:26, “and I defiled them through their very gifts in making them offer by fire all their first-born, that I might horrify them” (RSV), needs to be restored to the end of 20:27. There it restores the direct quotation of the blasphemy spoken by the fathers of Israel to legitimate their sacrificing of children. The restored lines of 20: 25–27 need to be read in this sequence:

25^{a,b} וְגַם־אֲנִי נָתַתִּי לָהֶם חֻקִּים לֹא טוֹבִים
 וּמִשְׁפָּטִים לֹא יָחִיו בָּהֶם
 26^c לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר יִדְעוּ אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי יְהוָה:
 27 לְכֵן דִּבֶּר אֶל־בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל בֶּן־אָדָם
 וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵיהֶם כֹּה אָמַר אֲדֹנָי יְהוָה
 עוֹד זֹאת גִּדְּפוּ אוֹתִי אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם
 בְּמַעַלְם בִּי ⁷ מַעַלּוֹ {אָמַר}
 26^{a,b} [וְ] אֲטַמָּא אוֹתָם בְּמַתְנוֹתָם
 בְּהַעֲבִיר כָּל־פֶּטֶר רֶחֶם
 לְמַעַן אֲשָׁמִם

Moreover I gave them statutes that were *indeed* good and ordinances by which they could *indeed* have life.

I did it that they might know that I am Yahweh.
 Therefore, son of man, speak to the house of Israel and say to them, “Thus says my Lord Yahweh:
 ‘In this again your fathers blasphemed me,
 in their transgressing they transgressed against me,

{saying}

“I defile them through their very gifts
in making them offer by fire all their first-born,
that I might horrify them.””

CONCLUSION

The problems presented by Ezek 14:9 and 20:25–26 are not really theological, as Blenkinsopp (1990: 89) suggested, but scribal and lexicographical. The two minor scribal errors were the misreading of an original יִדְבַר “he speaks” as וְדַבַּר “and he spoke” and the misreading of an original מֵעַל “they transgressed” as מַעַל “a transgression.” The more significant scribal error (or editorial decision) was the relocation of the nine Hebrew word quotation of the blasphemy of the “fathers” (originally belonging at the end of 20: 27 but now found in the MT as 20:26^{a b}), so that it became an admission on the lips of Yahweh.

The lexicographical problems come from the omission, to date, of פִּתְהָ (stem II)—which is the cognate of Arabic *فتو* (*fatawa/fatwa*) “a judicial sentence [of death]”—from the lexicons of Biblical Hebrew. Although the emphatic לָא has been recognized in a number of biblical texts and is cited in some current Hebrew lexicons, it has not been recognized by past or current commentators as the significant key for interpreting these difficult verses, as proposed in this brief study.

NOTES

1. The KJV, ASV, NRS, and DRA read essentially the same as the RSV. Other translations of the MT יִפְתֶּה and פִּתְהָ in Ezek 14:9a include *seduced* (NJB), *beguiled* (NAB), *enticed* (NIV), *induced* (NKJ), *prevailed* (NAU), *befooled* (Zimmerli 1979: 302), and

misled (Greenberg (1983:253). The Vulgate has *erraverit* and *decepi* for these verbs. The Septuagint translated quite literally,

καὶ ὁ προφήτης ἔαν πλανηθῆ καὶ λαλήσῃ
 ἐγὼ κύριος πεπλάνηκα τὸν προφήτην ἐκείνον καὶ
 ἐκτενω τὴν χεῖρά μου ἐπ' αὐτὸν καὶ ἀφανισθῶ αὐτὸν
 ἐκ μέσου τοῦ λαοῦ μου Ἰσραηλ.

The Greek πλανηθῆ . . . πεπλάνηκα could be translated by any of the above words.

2. Compare Ezek 23:30, “you played the harlot with the nations, and polluted yourself with their idols,” and Ezek 36:31, “Then shall you remember your own evil ways, and your doings that were not good, and shall loathe yourselves in your own sight for your iniquities and for your abominations.”

3. On the frequent confusion of ך and ך see Delitzsch (1920) 103–105, §103^{a-c}.

4. The literature on the emphatic ל and ל continues to grow. In addition to references cited by Richardson (1966: 89), note Mc Daniel (1968) 206–208; Bloomer (1969) 31; Dahood (1975) 341–342; Whitley (1975) 202–204; and Huehnergard (1983) 569–593, especially 591.

5. Another example of the emphatic particle ל “indeed” in Ezekiel appears in 32:27, where the negative לֹא יִשְׁכְּבוּ אִתָּם “and they shall not lie with the mighty that are fallen,” appears as an affirmative in the Septuagint, καὶ ἐκοιμηθήσαν μετὰ τῶν γιγάντων τῶν πεπτωκότων, “and they are laid to rest with the fallen giants.” The affirmative statement in 32:28, “So you shall be broken and lie among the uncircumcised, with those who are slain by the sword,” supports the reading of the Septuagint and reading the ל as ל.

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6. Texts dealing with the sacrifice or redemption of the first born include Exo 13:1, 11–15, 22:28^b (MT), 34:19–20; texts speaking against child sacrifice include Lev 18:21; Deut 12:29–31, 18: 10–12; Jer 7:30–32, 19:4–6, 32:35; and Ezek 16:20–22; Micah 6:7.

7. Restoring MT מַעַל to מַעְלֵי with the Septuagint’s παρέπεσον “they transgressed.” The ו suffix of מַעְלֵי comes from the initial ו of the preceding וְאֵת־נִא in the reconstructed text.