

Problems in the Prophets

PROBLEM TEXTS (5)

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(a) *The wayfaring men . . . shall not err therein (Isa. 35:8).*

These words have traditionally been taken out of their context and applied to the simplicity and clarity of the gospel way: none can miss it. Whether it is true that 'none can miss it' is another question: our Lord said, 'few there be that find it' (*Matt. 7:14*). But what is the way in *Isa. 34:8* in which wayfaring men shall not err, and who are those wayfaring men? The way is 'the way of holiness', the highroad built in the desert (cf. *Isa. 40:3*) for the 'ransomed of the Lord' to return from exile to Zion. It is for them that it is reserved. No random traveller may trespass there; there is no place on it for fools. The word rendered 'fool' is used in the Hebrew Bible to denote moral obliquity rather than lack of intelligence: 'the way of a fool is right in his own eyes' (*Prov. 12:15*), but it has nothing in common with 'the way of holiness'.

(b) *Who is this that cometh from Edom? (Isa. 63:1).*

The meaning of the passage which opens with this question is not a great problem in itself; the problem is rather the surprising use that has been made of it as though it were a portrayal of our Lord's passion. Edom was a long-standing enemy of Israel (more particularly of Judah); Bozrah was one of its principal fortresses. If Edom here stands for the enemies of the people of God in general, it makes little difference to the sense of the six verses which form this oracle. The speaker is returning from a single-handed victory which has meted out vengeance to the enemy and brought vindication and deliverance to the people of God: he appears to be their God in his role as a warrior (cf. *Exod. 15:3*), who comes 'announcing vindication, mighty to save' (*Isa. 63:2*). The bloodstains on his clothes remind the questioners of the stains on the clothes of someone who has been trampling vigorously on the red grapes in a winepress. Similarly the rider on the white horse in *Rev. 19:11-16* (a vision which is self-evidently dependent on *Isa. 63:1-6*) is 'clothed with a vesture dipped in

blood' because he has been treading 'the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God'—he has been executing judgment, not enduring it. How this 'treading the winepress' has come to be used by hymnwriters and preachers as a metaphor for our Lord's crucifixion is not easy to understand; if those who still use it were invited to say why they do so, they would probably have to confess that they are simply repeating an outworn and inappropriate cliché.

(c) *For two thousand and three hundred evenings and mornings; then the sanctuary shall be restored to its rightful state (Dan. 8:14).*

The A.V. rendering of this verse is imprecise and may be misleading; RSV, quoted here, reproduces the wording more accurately. The angel ('holy one') is referring to Daniel's vision of the ram and the he-goat (the Persian and Macedonian empires); from one of the four horns which replace the original single horn on the he-goat's head (Alexander the Great) there sprouts a little horn, which desecrates the sanctuary in Jerusalem and abolishes the continual burnt offering presented there twice daily—once in the evening and once in the morning. One angel asks how long this desecration will last; another answers that it will last for 2300 'evenings and mornings'—that is, most probably, until 2300 burnt offerings (two oblations each day) have failed to be presented, or until 1150 days have passed. Since the sanctuary was 'restored to its rightful state' at the feast of the dedication in December, 164 B.C., one can calculate from what point this reckoning started. In all this there is no great problem. But when the mistake was made of understanding the 2300 'days' (A.V.) as 2300 years, and a reckoning from the date of Daniel's vision (*Dan. 8:1*) pointed to A.D. 1844 as the year of their termination, this gave rise both to the expectation of the second advent in that year on the part of William Miller and his followers, and also to Ellen G. White's exegesis of the text which remains influential in the Seventh Day Adventist Church.

This is a matter of some personal interest to me, as a few years ago a friend and former student of mine was deposed from the ministry of that Church because he maintained an interpretation of *Dan. 8:14* which deviated from the standard SDA interpretation. This made me glad that I don't belong to a community where a difference of interpretation of any biblical text could threaten one's good standing in the community—or is that an over-optimistic thing to say? I don't believe it is.

(d) *God came from Teman (Hab. 3:3).* I never thought of this as a problem text until the day that I gave a talk on the prophecy of Habakkuk and a lady asked me afterwards how an omnipresent God could come from Teman—or from Mount Paran, for that matter. This taught me that things in Scripture may be taken for granted by some readers which constitute problems for others. The answer is that Habakkuk is describing a vision, and in that vision he saw God approaching from the south, from the direction of Teman (in the land of Edom). In Ezekiel's vision of God the storm-cloud which enveloped the divine presence came from the north (*Ezek. 1:4*), but Ezekiel was in Babylon. Habakkuk, like Moses at the end of the wilderness wanderings (*Deut. 33:2*) and Deborah in the celebration of the victory over Sisera (*Judge. 5:4, 5*), saw God coming from the area where he had first manifested himself to the Israelites and led them to the frontier of the Promised Land. God's coming from that direction encouraged him to believe, against all appearances, that what God had done there in days of yore he was able to do for his people again, 'reviving his work' (*Hab. 3:2*).

(e) *These are the two anointed (literally, the two sons of oil) who stand by the Lord of the whole earth (Zech. 4:14).* Who are these two? I suggest, without dogmatism, that they are Joshua, the anointed high priest, and Zerubbabel of the house of David, the anointed ruler. They appear together again in the second half of *Zech. 6:13* (R.S.V.).