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The Bible Student

Editor: A. McDONALD REDWOOD

NEW SERIES

OCTOBER 1958

VOL. XXIX No. 4

THE PROPHECY OF JEREMIAH*

J. BELLEW

Jeremiah is one of the most interesting characters in the Bible. The interest which attaches to the last kings of Judah and the influence on them by surrounding kings makes his story full of activity. The effect of Egypt and then of Babylon on the kings of Judah gives Jeremiah abundance of scope for prophetic ministry.

Jeremiah was one of the most *dramatic* of the prophets. He did not merely speak in the name of the Lord. He frequently accompanied his message by action. When he took the elders of the nation to the valley of Hinnom to speak to them there, he smashed an earthenware vase to the ground in front of them and said 'So shall God smash the nation of Judah'. No other prophet so graphically illustrated his messages by actions.

Jeremiah was one of the most *feeling* of the prophets. He did not merely deliver messages—he felt everything he said. If he was called upon to tell of the doom of Jerusalem he felt it most keenly himself. If he was to condemn the sin of the nation which was to lead them into captivity he confessed their sin as his own.

He was the most *pathetic* of the prophets. It was not his to give glowing accounts of a new temple. It was his unfortunate lot to minister to the nation at the close of its existence as a separate kingdom. It was his to witness the last sieges of Jerusalem, followed by the destruction of the City and the temple.

* This is the first of a new series of articles on the Prophecy of Jeremiah, by a new contributor, Mr. J. Bellew, whom we welcome. He is a well known minister of the Word in the British Isles.

Jeremiah was the most *vital* of the prophets. He had an emphatic message for his own time and he spared no efforts to make it dynamic. He had an encouraging message for those of a later day, and Daniel many years afterwards found that message, and the discovery led to further revelations of the purposes of God. He had a message for our own day and one of the longest quotations in the New Testament comes from the book of Jeremiah.

Reasons why the book is not read

In spite of the abundance of interest which attaches to the book of Jeremiah—and there is no prophetic book with more activity in it—it is too much neglected. There are several possible reasons. One is that there is too little knowledge of the historical background of the last kings of Judah. For lack of a knowledge of these times, whole sections of the prophetic writings are neglected.

Another reason is no doubt the length of the book. Apart from the Psalms, there is only one longer book in the Old Testament—viz., Isaiah.

But perhaps the greatest reason why the book is not enjoyed is because the chapters are not in chronological order. Once a key can be found and the chapters grouped under the various kings to which they refer, the prophecies lighten up in a most illuminating way. Suggestions will be made later as to the best order in which to read the chapters.

Outside historical events

One of the great things to bear in mind in studying the book of Jeremiah is the fact that three battles made their mark in determining the history of these times.

The first was the battle of Megiddo where Josiah lost his life. The revival which took place under his leadership was outstanding and had he lived longer he might well have delayed the judgment which befell the nation and city. As it was, his death caused other events to happen and, as every successive king of Judah did evil in the eyes of the Lord, there was nothing to prevent the threatened judgment.

The second was the battle at Carchemish between the King of Babylon and the King of Egypt. With the defeat of Egypt, the king of Babylon gained the mastery of the land. To such an extent was this so that the kings of Judah who were at one time under the power of Egypt fell later under the power of Babylon.

The third was the siege and fall of Jerusalem in the reign of Zedekiah. This marked the final stage in the history of reigning monarchs in Jerusalem and was accompanied by the destruction of the walls of the city, the temple and the city itself and the taking captive of the people, only the poorest being left behind to till the land.

The Kings in whose reigns Jeremiah lived

Jeremiah lived and ministered in the reigns of the last five kings of Judah, namely, Josiah, Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin and Zedekiah. These kings were not in the relationship of father, son, grandson, etc.,. In fact it is most important to see the right relationship of these kings. Josiah's eldest son was Johanan, of whom nothing is read beyond the mention in 1 Chron. 3:15. When Josiah died at the battle of Megiddo, it was not his eldest surviving son who came to the throne but Jehoahaz. He was evidently selected by the people at the time. Within three months, however, the King of Egypt came against Jerusalem, and took Jehoahaz a prisoner to Egypt and put Jehoiakim on the throne of Judah. Such were the state of affairs and the times that Judah was under the domination of Egypt. On the death of Jehoiakim, his son Jehoiachin came to the throne but only reigned for three months when he was taken prisoner to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar then put Zedekiah on the throne and he was the youngest son of Josiah and Jehoiachin's uncle.

Comparison with Moses

Another feature of interest in Jeremiah is that he ministered to the nation during the *last* forty years of its existence as a kingdom. In this he was the opposite to Moses who ministered to the nation during its *first* forty years existence as a nation. It was Jeremiah's to point to the writings of Moses and tell the kings and the nation that, because they had transgressed the laws and com-

mandments and statutes which Moses had given, the judgments foretold by Moses would befall them. One illustration will suffice—Deut. 28:47-65.

Relation with other Books of Scripture

The times of the captivities are most interesting in providing connection with other books of Scripture. Daniel gives connection with the captivity of Jehoiakim; Ezekiel opens up in connection with the captivity under Jehoiachin. The books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther take their place. And it should not be forgotten that the captivities are referred to in the genealogy of the Lord in Matt. 1.

The Prophet Himself

We read more about Jeremiah personally in his book than about any other of the prophets in their writings. His reactions are recorded faithfully. After a given experience he breaks out in prayer or appeal to God. He is called upon to protest against prevailing idolatry but he also turns round afterwards to make confession as though he himself were guilty. After disappointment he says he will speak no more in the name of the Lord but finds that the Word just burns within him so that he is compelled to continue. And he records all these experiences. It is only Jeremiah who writes the book of Lamentations because these record his own reactions to the desolations he witnessed at the destruction of Jerusalem. Then he takes to himself the troubles and tragedy of the whole event in the language of the poignant third chapter.

What made Jeremiah a prophet? Primarily it was the call of God. In other words, he had an experience of God which made all the difference to him. Previously he had been a priest. As such he would have been trained in the law and in the temple ritual and would have had ready access to the sacred precincts. But it needed something more than this to fit him for the very special tasks which were to lie ahead of him in becoming a public figure, in speaking to kings, princes, prophets, priests and people about matters fundamental to their existence as a nation. He would have to face some acute opposition, to experience imprison-

ment and to be contradicted by false prophets. For these he needed something which only a personal experience of the living God could provide. It was that which transformed his life, introduced him to the habit of responsiveness for receiving messages to meet current situations, and enabled him to endure the many things which were to befall him in the course of a long ministry during times which became more difficult as they went on.

Spiritual things were real to Jeremiah. He felt them keenly and realised the important part they played in the practical affairs of life. Because the spiritual was neglected then the remainder was lost. It could have been urged that he was old-fashioned, but events proved that he was more up to date than those who refused his message. It could have been argued that he was too spiritual, but events showed that he was more practical than all the rest.

It must not be thought that Jeremiah enjoyed any privileges which present day preachers enjoy. It was not as though a sympathetic and appreciative company invited him to give a word of ministry or a series of addresses. It was not as though he was a popular preacher or was acceptable because of his good platform manners. Far from this. He preached because he was burdened; because he saw trouble coming, knew its cause and consequences, and because he wanted those most likely to be affected by the trouble to avoid it. He was opposed because the truth of the message was as unwelcome as it seemed unlikely. He was unwelcome because he spoke against prevailing abuses—abuses which were fundamental to men's relationship with God.

All the time he spoke from an inmost conviction, born of a deep experience of God and His ways.

Few characters in history have stronger claims on our affection or sympathy than Jeremiah. Nervous, tender, shy, with a deep rooted love of nature and of man, his temperament demanded a life of quiet domestic obscurity. His calling and his devotion to his God demanded that he should live a life of lonely publicity, always on the unpopular side, always confronted with the disaster which in the end overwhelmed his country, always conscious of sharing in responsibility for evils which he was powerless to avert

or postpone. His was a double passion, a love of his people and a love of his God: the longing of his heart was to see them validly wedded to one another: and the tragedy of his life lay in the steady drift of Israel away from Jehovah till the last blow fell in Egypt and he had to pronounce their association at an end—they were finally divorced (Jer. 44:26-29)'.

Jeremiah knew his message and delivered it fearlessly in spite of any consequences to himself. He was jealous for God's glory on whose behalf he spoke. Because he took God's point of view he spoke with the power of God. He also felt keenly for those to whom he spoke. Because he was associated with them he knew what would befall them if they refused the message he brought.

Jeremiah believed in his message and wanted to make it emphatic by dramatising it, as when he smashed the earthenware pot in the valley of Hinnom.

Jeremiah made the message part of himself as when he wore yokes and bonds as typical of the bondage awaiting his people if they did not submit to Nebuchadnezzar.

General Character of Jeremiah's Messages

In brief, they are fourfold:

(a) There are his protests against the incessant idolatry and persistent sin of the nations.

(b) There are predictions of prospective judgment in the form of captivity.

(c) There are prophecies of ultimate restoration; and

(d) There are promises of David's coming King.

These are dealt with in varying degrees as the story proceeds and the history develops.

The simplest and most satisfactory method of studying the book is to deal with Jeremiah's experience and ministry during the reign of each of the kings concerned, so far as the chapters can be identified with a particular king.

In the reign of Josiah

It speaks volumes for Josiah that a revival broke out in his reign. Both his father and grandfather had been idolators. His father, Amon, had been assassinated after a short reign of two years. His grandfather, Manasseh, had to his credit the longest reign of any king of Israel or Judah—55 years, but he took every opportunity to hinder the worship of Jehovah. The divine record is that both 'did evil in the sight of the Lord' (2 Chron. 33:2, 22). The worship of Baal had been actively encouraged. So much so, that God could protest to them saying that 'According to the number of the streets of Jerusalem have you set up altars to that shameful thing, even altars to burn incense to Baal'. In fact, because of what Manasseh had done, God said He would hasten judgment upon the nation.

It was therefore no easy thing for a boy who came to the throne at the age of eight to start seeking God at the age of 16 and to start a campaign at twenty to purge the land of idolatry.

And Josiah was thorough. He attacked fundamental evils. He did not bother about side issues. He got to the heart of the trouble and attacked the cause of departure from God. He cleared the idols out of the temple. He turned out the false priests who had worshipped Baal. He broke down the altars set up by Manasseh his grandfather. He destroyed the high places which even Solomon had erected for Ashtoreth. He broke Jeroboam's altar in Bethel which had been erected 350 years beforehand and thus fulfilled the word of the unnamed prophet of 1 Kings 13. He killed the idolatrous priests.

His activities were not only negative and destructive. They were positive and constructive. He instituted a nation-wide collection for the restoration of the temple. The original temple of Solomon was glorious. Josiah wanted to get back to that early glory. He wanted to make it easy for men to worship God.

During the cleansing of the temple, Hilkiyah the priest found a copy of the law of Moses—probably the book of Deuteronomy. The amazing thing is that they had never missed it! Immediately he recognised its authority and accepted its pronouncements.

By it he was brought into touch with Moses. He was immediately affected by it. Though he was a reformer he repented. He wanted a definite assurance from the living God and consulted the prophetess Huldah. Her reply was twofold—there was bad news regarding the kingdom (2 Chron. 34:23-25) and, because of departure from God the promised judgment would fall on the nation—but there was good news for the king (v. 26—28) who would die in peace before punishment befell the nation and city.

After the promise to himself, Josiah read the law to the people. He wanted others to know it for themselves and to be guided by it. Then he wanted to consolidate the good that had been done by making a covenant with God. He was prepared to commit himself to God and encouraged others to join with him.

As part of the revival he celebrated the Passover—one of the few occasions on which we read of such an event in the Old Testament. It was an outstanding occasion. More than 40,000 animals were sacrificed. As the Chronicler says 'there was no such passover since the days of Samuel' (2 Chron. 35:18). He restored the temple worship as David and Solomon had arranged it (35:3, 4). He celebrated the passover as Moses had commanded (v. 12). He 'walked in all the ways of David his father and turned not to the right or to the left'.

In fact Josiah earned for himself this unique testimony 'Like unto him was there no king before him that turned to the Lord with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; neither after him arose there any like him' (2 Kings 23:25).

It was during the reign of Josiah that Jeremiah received his call as a prophet. And the circumstances in which he lived and ministered during Josiah's reign were more favourable than under any of the subsequent kings.