

THE PROPHECY OF JEREMIAH

(continued)

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X. THE CLOSING YEARS OF JOSIAH

FROM the discovery of the book of the Law in 621 B.C. to Josiah's death at Megiddo in 609 B.C. some twelve years elapsed. They were a period of national and religious ferment, yet they have left but few traces on the pages of Jeremiah. Even the view maintained in these studies that 4:5 - 6:8 are oracles from the period when the shallowness of the reformation was already apparent and hence falling within these twelve years does not suggest a very intensive activity. In addition we find no reflection of the events that must have preoccupied every normal Judean. We could never infer from Jeremiah that Josiah had extended his kingdom over the whole of Mt. Ephraim and probably Eastern Galilee. Not even the world-shaking fall of Nineveh in 612 finds a mention, nor does the ominous march of Pharaoh Psamatik to the aid of Assyria in 616, which Josiah does not seem to have attempted to challenge, though it must have passed through territory he claimed as his own.

Various explanations have been sought for this. Some have thought that Jeremiah was seriously discredited by the failure of the Scythian invasion to materialize, others place his call considerably later. By some it is urged, quite reasonably, that he did not want to embarrass Josiah; yet others stress his activity among the remnants of the northern tribes—we must wait until we consider chs. 30, 31 before we can estimate how much truth there is in this view.

It is all too often overlooked that there is a close parallel to be drawn between Jeremiah and his great predecessor Isaiah. In contrast to the popular view which sees in Isaiah the councilor and friend of good king Hezekiah a closer study of his book shows him standing aside from the court and its ways. His recorded prophecies show even less awareness of Hezekiah's reformation than Jeremiah's do of Josiah's. His oracles were called forth by the deliberate flouting of Jehovah's authority in Judah's foreign policy. That Hezekiah turned to Isaiah in the hour of desperate crisis proves nothing.

It is love's labour lost to preach to the normal reformer. In his glow of inner self-righteousness it is impossible for him to believe that if his goal is right, his methods can be deeply wrong. It is not until the bitter harvest comes to be reaped that the prophet can resume his message with some hope of being heard. Jeremiah had pronounced his oracles of sure judgment; there was nothing left for him to do but to repeat them until the shadow of coming fulfilment fell across Judah.

- (6:2) Like a pleasant pasture
Is the daughter of Zion?¹
- (3) that the shepherds should come to her
with their flocks,
pitching their tents round about her,
pasturing each his portion.
- (4) "Hallow² the battle against her!
Up, let us attack at noon!
Woe is us, for the day declines,
for the shadows of evening are lengthening!
- (5) Up, let us attack by night
and destroy her fortified palaces!"
- (6) For thus says the LORD of hosts:
"Cut down her trees, and cast up
siege mounds against Jerusalem.
This is the city with the judgment passed:
'There is naught but oppression within her.'
- (7) As a spring's waters flow out,
so her evil flows out.
'Violence and spoil' men hear in her;
sickness and wounds are continually before Me.
- (8) Let yourself be admonished, Jerusalem,
lest My heart turn from you,
lest I make you a desolation,
a land not inhabited."

To Jeremiah there had not yet been revealed the instruments of God's judgment, nor how exactly the end would come to the condemned city (hence the ambiguity of vv. 4, 5, with their undertone of certain triumph by the enemy, however long it might

¹ This rendering involves a simple textual emendation going back to Cornill and Volz and accepted by most moderns.

² The 'prepare' of R.V. text, R.S.V., Moffatt ('open the campaign') is inadequate. The mention of the religious rites is not a matter of course but a stress on the serious purpose of the invaders.

take). But he could have no doubt that the end was certain. Our Lord was to say, "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh" (Matt. 12:34). Even so in spite of all reformation Jerusalem was no more able to hide and keep its evil in check than a spring can refrain from pouring out its water. The stranger that came to the city might expect to hear of 'violence and spoil' as a matter of course, whether it was from the victims of the great who oppressed them, or from the oppressors themselves. There could be only one outcome. The heart of God (Heb. *nepshesh*) would turn in revulsion from those that claimed to worship Him alone but denied its reality by the breach of His moral laws.

This is one more example of the many-sidedness of truth. Neither in the Old nor the New Testament are we given God's revelation by the mouth or pen of one man alone. We must always be prepared to create a composite picture from the testimony of more than one witness. Were we to base ourselves solely on the evidence of *Kings* and *Chronicles* we would be justified in thinking that the reign of Josiah was one of the most glorious in Judah's history; so equally the picture in *Jeremiah* might give us the impression that nothing had changed since the evils of Manasseh's reign. *Kings* and *Chronicles* see the outward respectability and prosperity, which indubitably existed; *Jeremiah* the hidden rotteness. We cannot fairly speak of "prophetic exaggeration".³ Jeremiah has given his testimony to Josiah's personal integrity elsewhere (22:15, 16), but he had come to realize that just as illicit sexual passion continued unabated, though ritual prostitution had been abolished (5:7, 8), so behind the façade of royal justice the will of the mighty for unjust gain remained unchecked.

Jeremiah the Gleaner

There must have come a moment, however, when Jeremiah grew tired of his role of unheeded and unwelcomed proclaimer of divine judgment. This is mirrored in an oracle containing a dialogue between the prophet and God (6:9-15). It seems clear that it was motivated by some unrecorded complaint by Jeremiah, for in the context God's command can hardly be anything else than His response to some prayer by the prophet.

- (9) Thus says the LORD of hosts :
 "Thoroughly glean, as a vine,

* So H. Cuncliffe-Jones, *Jeremiah* (Torch Bible Commentaries), p. 52.

- the remnant of Israel; ⁴
 turn your hand again as a grape-gatherer
 to the vineshoots.”
- (10) “To whom am I to speak and testify that they may hear?
 I have found their ear deaf ⁵
 that they cannot attend;
 I have found that for them the word of the LORD
 is a disgrace in which they take no pleasure.
- (11) But I am full of the fury of the LORD;
 I am weary with holding it in.”
 “Pour it out on the young child in the street
 and also on the fraternity of the young men;
 for both man and woman will be captured,
 the old man with him who is full of days.
- (12) Their houses will be turned over to others,
 their fields together with their womenfolk,
 for I shall stretch out My hand
 over the inhabitants of the land” — says the LORD.
- (13) “For from the smallest to the greatest
 they have all set their hearts on gain;
 and from prophet to priest
 they all act falsely,
- (14) and heal the disaster of my people superficially,
 saying ‘All is well, all is well’,
 and all is not well.
- (15) They had to be put to shame,
 for they had committed abomination;
 they are not even capable of shame,
 they do not know how to blush.
 Therefore among the fallen they shall fall,
 in the time of their visitation ⁶ they shall stagger” —
 says the LORD.

In commanding Jeremiah to glean “the remnant of Israel”, God is not using the expression in the technical sense so often found in the prophets of those that survive judgment or return from exile. It is a metaphorical use linked with the picture of

⁴ The minor textual change involved in the change from the 3rd person plural to the 2nd singular is suggested by the second half of the verse. and is universally accepted by recent writers, including R.S.V.

⁵ Literally ‘uncircumcised’.

⁶ The text of the parallel passage 8:12, which shows minor differences, has been followed.

the grape-gatherer gleaning the vine. In other words He tells Jeremiah that his apparently fruitless prophetic ministry has been in fact the grape-harvest of the vine of Israel! — it is hardly far-fetched to see in Is. 5:4, 7 a picture of the fruit, which is here taken for granted. All that was left for Jeremiah to do was to glean, i.e. make sure that there were none who had failed to hear his message. He must turn to the individual toddler playing in the dust of the street — there are no adequate reasons for making 'olal a collective or for overlooking its root meaning of 'suckling', so long as we remember that the Oriental child is kept much longer at the breast — and break in on the bands of young men gathered for their intimate and private business, for when judgment fell, it would involve all regardless of sex or age.

The judgment was to be universal, for the inner greed was universal and had caused all to shut their eyes to realities. It is not likely that in referring to 'from prophet to priest' Jeremiah is merely echoing 5:30, 31. Though the religious leaders encouraged the cry of 'All is well', they were certainly neither its sole begetters nor propagators. Rather when Jeremiah looked on the religious and civil leaders of the people, he considered the prophets the most responsible for and guilty in the prevailing circumstances (cf. Is. 9:15), and the priests the least blameworthy.

If the prophet was what he claimed to be, then he had the ability of seeing the realities hidden beneath the surface more clearly than any other. If he proclaimed 'All is well!' he was either a fraud who had no right to the name of a prophet, or he was deliberately turning from the vision God had given to him. It is improbable that Jeremiah had a soft spot in his heart for the priest because he was of priestly family himself. His mitigation of priestly weakness was more probably due to his understanding of his difficulties. We are all too apt to think of the high-priesthood of the Tabernacle and the post-exilic period when we read of the Jerusalem priesthood under the monarchy. In fact the priests were little more than state officials under the thumb of the king, who ever since the days of Saul and the massacre at Nob had learnt to walk warily. The only leader they seem to have thrown up was Jehoiada (1 Ki. 11; 2 Chr. 23), and it is perhaps significant that he was the only high priest of whom it is recorded that he was married to a princess (2 Chr. 22:11). The fear under which they stood is sufficiently underlined by Azariah's calling eighty priests to his aid, when he withstood Uzziah (2 Chr. 26: 17, 18). For all that we are left to infer that

however much they bowed to the will of apostatizing kings, they never yielded to them in their hearts, for there is never any question of the deposition of the Jerusalem priests for heathen practices (cf. also Ezek. 44:15). So while on the one hand they deserve our sympathy and even praise, they were obviously broken reeds, where it was a question of inner reformation and not of outward ritual.

If this interpretation of 6:9-12 is correct — and we shall see that it is confirmed by 6:27-30 — it shows that we need neither take Jeremiah away from Judah and make him a prophet to the North nor postulate a period of virtual silence. In one form or another he repeated the refrain of coming judgment. Ch. 6:16-26 represents only some of its later variants. Israel had reached a stage in its spiritual history when it no longer needed a new revelation of God but the will to respond to that already given. That is why Jeremiah says in verse 16 :

Thus says the LORD :

“Stand at the cross-roads and see;⁷

ask after the paths on which you went at the first,

ask which is the good way, and then walk in it;

so you will find rest for yourselves.

But they said, ‘We will not walk in it.’”

His predecessors might illumine aspects of God’s character and will which might be overlooked in the covenant revelation at Sinai; Jeremiah’s task was above all to reveal Judah’s apostasy in the deeper motives of heart and mind. It is true he was yet to hold out a new hope of a new revelation of God’s power, but that had to wait until the moral and spiritual failure of the people had been made clear beyond cavil.

Jeremiah the Assayer of his People

There is no evidence that would support a dogmatic assertion that the oracle of 6:27-30 was given at the end of Josiah’s reign. But earlier we assumed that chs. 1-6 do in fact cover Josiah’s reign, and we hope to show later that there is nothing in chs. 7-20 that need be attributed to this period. If we may for the present accept this as a working hypothesis, it will hardly be denied that this oracle is a deliberate epilogue to chs. 1-6. It

⁷ The textual emendation proposed by G. R. Driver and followed *inter alios* by Rudolph and Weiser, ‘stand on the first ways’, has very much to commend it, especially because it so strikingly improves the parallelism.

is addressed to Jeremiah himself, and there is no reason to suppose that at the first it was intended for the people as well. It will not matter then, if we cannot date it with certainty — it will hardly be earlier than 6: 9-12 — so long as we do not try to move it from the general setting in which we find it. It is textually very difficult, and though its general meaning is not in doubt, the details of the translation suggested must be accepted with reserve.⁸

- (27) "I have made you an assayer among My people;
you are to know how to test it
and to assay its ways."
- (28) "They are all completely rebellious,
going about as slanderers;
all of them are destroyers.
- (29) The bellows snort;
out of the fire comes only lead,
copper and iron.
The refiner has refined in vain;
the wicked have not been removed.
- (30) Reject silver they are called,
for the LORD has rejected them."

My use of inverted commas suggests that vv. 28-30 are in fact Jeremiah's report back to God on his task as assayer, but there will be no difference in fundamental interpretation, whether the passage is so taken, or whether it is looked on entirely as God's oracle to Jeremiah. It is amply clear that if the latter verses are Jeremiah's report to God, they are accepted by Him as the true verdict on Israel.

God looked for true silver in His people. Silver is used instead of gold (cf. also Mal. 3:3) not because there is any suggestion that God is willing to accept a slightly lower standard of value, but because silver, in contrast to gold, is practically never found as a pure metal, and refining is essential to its production in a pure state. The effect of God's refining process through His word spoken by the prophet reveals different quali-

⁸ I have in large measure followed J. A. Soggin in *Vetus Testamentum* ix (1959), pp. 95-98. He in turn bases much of his treatment on G. R. Driver's article in the *Journal of Theological Studies* vi (1955), pp. 84 ff. I prefer a certain amount of plausible emendation and rearrangement to the elimination of words and phrases as glosses, the more so, when it can be shown that they formed part of the text at the text at the earliest ascertainable date.

ties of base metal present,⁹ but whatever the value of the base metal in its right place, it is silver that God is looking for.

All this may be summed up by saying that the purpose of Jeremiah's earlier ministry was not to turn Judah back to God, but to show the people that the coming judgment was entirely justified, for the poison of Manasseh's reign had spread throughout society. In the eyes of man Jeremiah was a failure; in the eyes of God he had accomplished the purpose for which he had been called.

Many have found any such interpretation incompatible with their conception of the perfection of God. Yet it is one that has many parallels in the Old Testament and indeed in the New. In spite of Snaith's slighting remark,¹⁰ this is the reason for the deep pessimism behind the message of Amos; he never has any real hope that he will be listened to. We find the note struck in Isaiah's commission (Is. 6:9-13), and unless we recognize it, we cannot understand Ezek. 1-24. In the New Testament we meet the thought again in passages like Jn. 9:39-41; Mk. 4:11, 12. Skinner has expressed it excellently, when he says:¹¹

In the light of a fuller revelation of the character of God it is, indeed, impossible to think of His purpose except as a purpose of grace and mercy which, while respecting the independence of created personalities, and working patiently to evoke the free response of their will, genuinely seeks the salvation of all through the revelation of the truth. Yet on the other hand the moral universe is so constituted by its Maker that the sinful abuse of freedom brings its own punishment in hardening of the conscience, and a growing incapacity for fellowship with God. Thus it is true that God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world, and yet by His coming the world is condemned. 'And this is the judgment, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their works were evil' (John iii. 19). This is the permanent religious fact which underlies the stern predestinarian doctrine of the prophets, and is the basis of their assurance that the purpose of Yahwe will finally prevail in spite of the sin and unbelief of men.

In the spring of 609 B.C. Josiah, still in the prime of life —

⁹ I have followed Driver and Soggin in transposing 'copper and iron' from v. 28 to v. 29. There seems no means of explaining the words in their present setting in the Hebrew.

¹⁰ "His national feelings are supporting his religious enthusiasms in his preaching against the wickedness of the North. We take this to be the chief reason why we miss in him those pleas and tender regrets which are so pronounced a feature of the messages of Hosea and Jeremiah" (*The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament*, p. 116).

¹¹ *Prophecy and Religion*, pp. 161f.

for he was only thirty-nine years old — marched amid the prayers and plaudits of his subjects to bar the path of Pharaoh Neco at Megiddo. It is just possible that 2 Ch. 35:21,22 may point to a warning oracle by Jeremiah or another prophet. If so, the giver of the oracle will have been among the very few in Jerusalem who was not stunned by the news that soon reached the city from the battle-field.

The 'people of the land' might believe that no more was involved than a change of kings and seek to maintain the policy of Josiah (2 Ki. 23:30). As soon as Neco, however, had seen to more pressing affairs at Carchemish on the Euphrates, he demonstrated that all the pomp and glory of Judah under Josiah was no more than the sparkle and glitter of the spider's web, when the morning sun is reflected by the dew drops with which it is covered. One part of Jeremiah's message was fulfilled. He had now to step forward and proclaim that its extremer aspect in which Temple and city would go to the ground was at hand, and that the longsuffering of God was drawing near its end.

(To be continued)

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