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THE PROPHECY OF JEREMIAH

by H. L. ELLISON

XXIX. THE ORACLES AGAINST NATIONS

NO one is likely to query the assertion that the least known section of Jeremiah's prophecy is his oracles against the nations (chs. 46-51). On the purely popular side this is largely due to the virtual impossibility of applying them eschatologically or allegorically. On the scholarly side there has been the prejudice, which is not yet dead, against predictive prophecy in general. But there has been a deeper reason well expressed by H. Cunliffe-Jones: "Beyond the question of authorship lies the question, 'How far do these prophecies illuminate God's dealings with the world?' We are right to judge these prophecies by Jeremiah's own standard that the author must have stood in the council of God and that he must give a morally transforming word (23: 16-22). But when we do we see that the extent to which they illuminate God's dealing with the world is disappointingly little."¹

While there is more than a little truth in this, it should not be forgotten that a large proportion of our disappointments comes from our expecting or hoping for something alien to the position in which we find ourselves. I believe that a closer examination of the setting of these oracles will show that they are what ought to have been expected, and that when they are so understood, they contain a genuine revelation of God's manner of working.

Attention has been earlier drawn to the problem of the position of these oracles in the book as a whole.² It will suffice to say that I am convinced that 25: 15-29 was originally an introduction to these oracles against the nations; when they were separated from the introduction, this was enlarged by the addition of an eschatological section 25: 30-38. While there is no need to deny the authorship by Jeremiah, this was not its original setting. Then under the influence of the eschatological addition the list of names in vs. 19-26 was enlarged. We can in all probability use chs. 46-51 and 25: 19-26 as a mutual check.

Quite apart from the fact that he had been called to be a prophet

¹ *Jeremiah* (Torch Bible Commentaries), p. 250.

² Cf. E.Q., Vol. XXXI, No. 3, p. 148; Vol. XXXV, No. 4, p. 201.

to the nations (1: 5) Jeremiah intervened in the "foreign ministers' conference" in the fourth year of Zedekiah (27: 1-4)³ and sent a message to their rulers (27: 5-11). So there is no reason for doubting that the oracles of chs. 46: 1-49: 22 were sent to the countries concerned.⁴ On the other hand, both the analogy of other prophets and the obvious force of 36: 2, which includes the prophecies against the nations, makes it clear that these oracles were delivered primarily for the instruction of Judah.

When the news of the battle of Carchemish was received, Jeremiah proclaimed Nebuchadrezzar king of the western Fertile Crescent (25: 9). If this message was to be taken seriously, the same proclamation had to be made to the other nations concerned. If we take this fact seriously, it will lead us to realize that there is a deep-reaching difference between most of Jeremiah's foreign oracles and those in the other prophets. There is nothing of the Day of the Lord about Jeremiah's and they are not called forth primarily by the faults of the nations concerned. It is true that their past faults would influence their reaction to Nebuchadrezzar, but they are not being condemned for them. This in itself largely answers Cunliffe-Jones's criticism, for here we have God's revelation of how our past will influence us in the changes through which the world is passing round us.

DAMASCUS (49: 23-27)

Even though it stands in LXX, we can probably ignore this oracle with safety. Even the non-mention of Damascus in 25: 19-25, if there were no other grounds for doubt, would make its genuineness doubtful. But there seem to be no grounds in the history of the time for us to consider attributing it to Jeremiah. Whatever connection there may once have been between Arpad, Hamath and Damascus, when they were conquered by the Assyrians they fell into different provinces. All of them recovered their commercial prosperity, at least in part, but there is no evidence for a restorator of political importance.⁵ Furthermore there is no mention of them in the *Babylonian Chronicle* as playing any part in Nebuchadrezzar's Carchemish or immediate post-Carchemish campaigns.⁶

Even those who are disposed to accept the possibility of genuine material find it impossible to accept vs. 26, 27 as from Jeremiah.

³ Cf. E.Q., Vol. XXXVII, No. 3, p. 149.

⁴ Cf. E.Q., Vol. XXXV, No. 4, p. 201.

⁵ Cf. *New Bible Dictionary*, pp. 86b, 289a, 501a.

⁶ Cf. D. J. Wiseman in DOTT, pp. 78f.

Both Rudolph⁷ and Weiser⁸ give adequate reasons for dismissing the whole. The section is probably the torso of an oracle from an earlier prophet.

THE ORACLES AGAINST EGYPT (CH. 46)

There are two oracles in this chapter. The former, vs. 3-12, was spoken before the defeat of the Egyptians at Carchemish (note the tense in v. 10); the latter, vs. 14-24, could be at any time down to and including that of the oracles in chs. 43, 44. Most scholars prefer, almost certainly correctly, a date only shortly after the former. There is every probability that vs. 27, 28 are an editorial addition from 30: 10, 11.

We may find something offensive in the way Jeremiah stands aloof, mocking the agony of Egypt and calling its ruler, "Noisy one who lets the hour go by" (v. 17, R.S.V.).⁹ The defiance of Egypt is compared with the angry hiss of a snake taking refuge in the undergrowth (v. 22), while its papyrus swamps are mockingly compared with a forest (v. 23). Yet Jeremiah's attitude was fair enough. We expect national self-interest to dominate international politics, but it seldom goes as far as it did with Egypt. Its foreign policy had brought Israel to its doom, and now it was threatening to destroy Judah. The Rab-Shakeh's mocking description, "Egypt, that broken reed of a staff, which will pierce the hand of any man who leans on it" (2 Ki. 18: 21), had proved itself amply true.

Except when an occasional wave of madness swept over Egypt's rulers and revived in them memories of ancient greatness, their one interest in Palestine was to keep one or more buffer states between them and whatever power might be marching south through the land. In due course Egypt had reaped what it had sown at the hands of Esarhaddon and Ashur-bani-pal. When the power of Assyria began to shrivel away Egypt recovered her independence but showed that it had learnt little or nothing. Necho defeated Josiah as he marched north, ostensibly to help Assyria in its death throes, but really to act as a scavenging vulture at its death. Later, under Zedekiah, Judah was to be sacrificed as Israel had been earlier, to serve the ends of Egypt. We can be surprised at Jeremiah's self-control, and there is nothing more mocking in the name he gives Pharaoh than Isaiah's, "Rahab who sits still" (Isa. 30. 7).

⁷ *Jeremia*², p. 271.

⁸ *Das Buch des Propheten Jeremia*⁴, pp. 411f.

⁹ The exact force of the Heb. is not clear, and this rendering goes against the punctuation of the MT, but something of the kind is clearly meant; it reads better than RV, which follows the MT punctuation.

What should Jeremiah have said? A call to repentance was too late; a vision of Egypt's going down into Sheol with those it had betrayed was no consolation in the shadow of Jerusalem's coming doom. In fact Jeremiah was not interested in giving Judah any consolation. By a mocking picture of Egypt's complete collapse he might hope to make his fellow-countrymen realize the folly of resisting Nebuchadrezzar, and the even greater madness of putting any trust in Egypt.

It is specially noteworthy that Jeremiah does not even enumerate Egypt's sins. Egypt was resisting God's king and Egypt was paying the price. In a prose oracle (vs. 25, 26), where the prose is rather a sign of emphasis than of the work of a later editor, it is all summed up briefly. The whole pride of Egypt, its gods and its kings, was simply to be handed over to Nebuchadrezzar, but also "those who trust in him". Judah with its heart fixed on Egypt instead of God would simply suffer the fate of Egypt. Then comes the promise, "Afterward Egypt shall be inhabited as in the days of old." This does not stand in LXX, but this does not dispose me to question its authenticity. Pride prevented Egypt from reading the signs of the times aright and Egypt was to pay the price for this. But we are not in the end of history where the final account is made up.

In addition, however, Jeremiah had strictly limited Judah's punishment (25: 11, 12; 29: 10). Judah's sin was greater, for Judah was sinning against the light (3: 11). It was only fair then that Egypt's punishment should also be limited.

THE PHILISTINES (CH. 47)

It can easily be argued that the Philistines appear next simply because they were next as Jeremiah's eye moved round the neighbours of Judah. Though such a consideration seems obvious to us, it evidently was not obvious in Israel, as is shown by LXX order here—Elam, Egypt, Babylon, Philistines, Edom, Ammon, Arab tribes, Damascus, Moab—and the non-geographical order in Amos 1: 3-2: 3; Isa. 13-23; Ezek. 25, 26. We should at least consider the possibility of another interpretation.

Of all the failures in the period of the Conquest that of not completely capturing and holding the southern coastal plain was the most serious.¹⁰ David could only make the Philistines tributary

¹⁰ W. F. Albright, *The Biblical Period from Abraham to Ezra*, p. 36: "Among territory then held and subsequently lost must be counted in particular . . . at least part of the Plain of Sharon, seized by the Sea Peoples. As a result of these the tribes of . . . Dan . . . and Simeon were greatly reduced in power and influence."

without any effort to bring the area completely into Israelite territory. After his death they seem to have transferred their allegiance to Egypt; cf. 1 Ki. 4: 21.¹¹ This meant that they often served as a sort of Egyptian bridge-head in Palestine, and the impression we glean is that they were normally favourable to Egypt, even when they were not tributary to it.

It will hardly be queried that the LXX reading, "concerning the Philistines" is the original heading. There is as yet no definite historical information in our hands that will help us to identify the background of "before Pharaoh smote Gaza". But the mention of trouble coming "out of the north" (v. 2) makes it plain that the reference to Egyptian action is secondary; Nebuchadrezzar is clearly the enemy envisaged.

The suggestion that the Philistines are mentioned as Egypt's jackal doomed to suffer Egypt's fate seems borne out by other references. There does not seem to have been any outstanding hostility between Judah and Philistia. Amos's condemnation (Amos 1: 6-8) does not imply a crime against Judah; indeed it probably cannot. Again, Isa. 14: 28-31 does not suggest any issue between Judah and Philistia, but it does remind us that in the various Palestinian manoeuvres against Assyria the Philistines normally seem to have played a prominent part, though, let it be said in fairness, they were not always united.

Here again there is no suggestion that whatever punishment was coming to them it was final. The mention of Tyre and Sidon (v. 4) is to be explained by the Phoenician cities' having acted as the furthest outpost of Egypt during Nebuchadrezzar's campaigns.

AMMON (49: 1-6)

Rudolph¹² has shown conclusively that the prophecy against Ammon originally preceded that against Moab. If, as seems almost certain, 48: 2 shows Heshbon being used as Nebuchadrezzar's army headquarters for the attack on Moab, it must come after 49: 3, where its fall is only threatened. Then the 48: 7 really looks back to 49: 3. The order Ammon, Moab, Edom shows the route of the Babylonian invader—the order in 25: 21—Edom, Moab, Ammon—is alphabetic (in Hebrew!).

The motivation of the oracle against Ammon is clear enough, viz. its occupation of Israelite territory (v. 1). The reference is to

¹¹ Was this perhaps part of the price Solomon had to pay for his marriage alliance with Egypt?

¹² *Op. cit.*, p. 257.

at least part of Gad's territory in Gilead and also to the northern part of Reuben's portion for Heshbon (v. 3) lay in it. Reuben is not mentioned, probably because the tribe had lost all visible existence even before the conquest of Transjordan by Tiglath-pileser III (2 Ki. 15: 29). Gilead became an Assyrian province. We must assume that, when Assyria collapsed, Ammon moved into Gilead just as Josiah took over the Assyrian provinces west of the Jordan.

On what grounds can we justify the condemnation passed on Ammon? Was it not justified in taking advantage of Assyria's fall? Though we may not understand it in full, it is clear that the Near-Eastern code of national right was very different to ours and that its basis was predominantly religious.

Once Israel's conquest of Canaan had been stabilized, it is remarkable how little its frontiers changed. The most important exception was Moab's conquest of the Reubenite area north of the Arnon. Since Israel had not won this area from Moab, but from Sihon who had earlier taken it from Moab, this may well not be a genuine exception.

It seems clear that once possession of a territory had been established, another people might make it tributary, but it could not dispossess the population by extermination or other means without adequate reason; cf. Amos 1: 3, 13. Such an attempt at a justification can be found in Jdg. 11: 13, and it is based on the land's belonging to a definite deity. To realize this helps us to understand some of the less obvious facts in Israel's history. David and Solomon made no attempt to incorporate the conquered areas into Israel proper, the limits of which remained from Lebo of Hamath to the Brook of Egypt, or from Dan to Beer-sheba. The new settlers in Samaria took it for granted that they must become worshippers of the God of Israel, for He was the God of the land. Since they were living on Israelite soil, it justified John Hyrcanus giving the Idumeans and Aristobulus the Galileans the choice between circumcision and the worship of Israel's God or death.

When the Assyrian power lapsed in Gilead, the basic population remained the descendants of those Israelites who had not been deported. It was not an empty land into which the Ammonites moved. Since they were defying the God of Israel by their action, they were bound to suffer, and the judgment would come through Nebuchadrezzar, God's king, whom they were also defying. There is no suggestion, however, that they had acted with the barbarity

they had once used (Amos 1: 13-15), so the doom was a limited one (v. 6), even as Egypt's was to be (46: 26).

MOAB (CH. 48)

So far in our consideration of these oracles we have not met with any material we could not attribute to Jeremiah except 47: 1b and the oracle against Damascus. Things are very different when we come to the long oracle against Moab. It is not a unity, and certain portions are certainly from elsewhere.

In vs. 1-9 Moab is feminine, but in vs. 11-17 it is masculine. Both sections can come from Jeremiah, but hardly as a unitary oracle, the more so as there is no close link between them. If there are two separate oracles against Egypt, there is no reason why there should not be two against Moab also.

If we were correct in interpreting the reference to Heshbon (v. 2) as meaning that the council of war against Moab would be held there after the defeat of Ammon (cf. 49: 3), then vs. 1-9 are probably the oracle against Moab referred to in 25: 21, for the invader is seen coming from the North. The reason for the judgment on Moab is its trust in material things (v. 7), which, obviously, has emboldened it to defy Nebuchadrezzar, God's king.

We may be certain that v. 10 has nothing to look for in its present setting. It is obviously spoken to someone in Israel; to apply it to Nebuchadrezzar, who was quite ignorant of God's calling, would be absurd. A. S. Peake commented on the verse, "This bloodthirsty verse is surely not Jeremiah's. It was Hildebrand's favourite quotation."¹³ That Pope Gregory VII should have misused it is no indication of what it meant in its original setting. It could be by Jeremiah, but nothing much depends on the authorship. We should not forget that we are prone to leave to God the "dirty work" that we as His servants should be doing for Him.

The next oracle is presumably vs. 11-20, 28. The prose section (vs. 12, 13) does not awaken suspicion, especially because of the very telling verbal picture involved. On the other hand it is very hard to believe that the list of names in vs. 21-25 comes from Jeremiah, and vs. 26, 27 seem to have no link with the remainder of the oracle. Here Moab is shown as a land that has been able to avoid the upheavals of war for a long time (v. 11), and whose warriors assume that it must be their prowess that has kept the enemy at a distance. Fundamentally it is the same confidence in

¹³ *Jeremiah and Lamentations* (Century Bible), *ad loc.*

material things that was condemned in the former oracle.

We find in vs. 29-33 a fairly close quotation from Isa. 16: 6-10. Then vs. 34-39 seems all to be derived from Isa. 15-16, though much in these verses becomes comprehensible only when we read the section in *Isaiah*. It is a reasonable conclusion, therefore, that vs. 29-39 are not from Jeremiah. Since vs. 43, 44 are almost certainly an adaptation of Isa. 24: 17, 18, and v. 45 is an extension of vs. 43, 44, we are justified in cutting out vs. 43-45 as not by Jeremiah.

We are left with vs. 40-42, 46, 47 which arouse no suspicion and which may well be the end of the second oracle (vs. 11-20, 28). No additional charge is brought against Moab in them, but the same promise of a limited judgment, as with Egypt and Ammon is added.

Once again then we find that the oracles are concerned with a historical situation that would lead to opposition to God's king. The sins of the people do not concern Judah in particular, but in their setting were bound to bring nemesis on the Moabites. Once again too we are not facing an eschatological situation. The forgiveness that awaits Judah will show itself to Moab as well.

(To be continued)

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