THE PROPHECY OF JEREMIAH

(Continued)

by H. L. ELLISON

IX. THE SIN OF JERUSALEM

ALREADY earlier I mentioned that the oracles of ch. 5 form a deliberate intrusion into the series of prophecies about the foe from the north in order to justify the picture of certain destruction in 6:1-8. "Intrusion" is used because it is impossible to date the individual oracles, but it is probably justified. Even 5:15-19, though it may be included with the other oracles proclaiming the coming doom from the north,[1] has a different colour. If we take the chapter as a whole, we are moving in a different world of thought to that which goes before and after.

The stress laid earlier on the closeness of Anathoth to Jerusalem, and on Jeremiah's undoubted acquaintance with the capital, when he was still a lad, was partly in view of Duhm's theory that ch. 5 gives us "Jeremiah's first impressions of social conditions in Jerusalem just after he had taken up his abode there"; this theory has been widely accepted and has exercised an even wider influence. As a result, even when it is rejected, it can lead to an impossibly early dating of the oracles[2], or to a misunderstanding of their nature[3].

It must be grasped as something beyond discussion, and no chronological theories may be allowed to shake us, that in ch. 5 we are in the Jerusalem that has been spring-cleaned by Josiah's reformation. We are no longer in the atmosphere of ch. 2, for there is no suggestion of idolatry or false religious practice in any form. Jeremiah's condemnations have solely to do with morals; there is not even any suggestion that old superstitions and beliefs have gone underground. Though I might find it hard to make out a case for it, the impression created on me by the chapter as a whole is of some years after the reformation had been carried through, when the new religion had ceased to be a wonder and was accepted as a commonplace.

The suggestion of Duhm and Skinner that we have Jeremiah's

[1] So G. A. Smith, *Jeremiah*[4], pp. 121 f.; Peake, *Century Bible*, p. 131; Skinner, *Prophecy and Religion*, p. 143.

[2] So G. A. Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

[3] So Skinner, *op. cit.*, pp. 140 f.

immediate reaction to his own personal experiences must also be emphatically rejected. Such is not the nature of ethical prophecy. The prophet's message is not his flaming reaction to a new and previously unknown situation, though often enough it may be called forth by some new development. Repeatedly we find the prophet brought to a new understanding of the old and everyday by some vision or act of God. He is not merely one who puts into words what others only see; he sees what others are blind to, because God opens his eyes. He is not only God's spokesman (*nabi'*) but also a seer (*ro'eh*).

"*Find Me a Man!*"

"Go through all the streets of Jerusalem,
see and know;
search in its open spaces,
if perchance you may find one man,
if there is anyone that acts as he should,
that values faithfulness —
then I will forgive her.[4]"

God's command (5:1) is quite general and in the plural, so there is no reason why we should not regard it as a brief oracle proclaimed to the people by Jeremiah. God offers Jerusalem easier terms than He granted Sodom (Gen. 18:22), but implies that her sins are worse (cf. Ezek. 16:48). The challenge doubtless awoke only scornful smiles among those that heard it, but it drove Jeremiah to look afresh at the life around him. His report to God is found in verses 2-6.

(2) But even though they say, "As truly as the LORD lives",
surely they perjure themselves —
(3) O LORD, dost Thou not look for faithfulness? —
Thou hast smitten them, but they show no signs of sickness;
Thou hast consumed them, but they refuse to accept chastening;
they have made their faces harder than rock;
they refuse to repent.
(4) Then said I, "Surely they are ignorant men;
they act foolishly,
for they do not know the way of the LORD,
the claim of their God upon them.
(5) I will go then to the great,
that I may speak with them,

[4] There are no adequate reasons for omitting this clause as do Skinner, *op. cit.*, p. 138; G. A. Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 119; Moffatt, *ad loc.*

for *they* know the way of the LORD,
the claim of their God upon them."
But they with one accord had broken the yoke
and burst its thongs.

Our interpretation of Jeremiah's verdict will to a great extent depend on our understanding of those he describes in vv. 2-4. The traditional rendering of *dallim* (v. 4) by "poor" is obviously linguistically justified, but it can be queried. It stands in contrast to the "great" (*gedolim*) in v. 5, not to the rich, though it could be argued that in Hebrew thought these are identical. Since, however, *dallim* in addition stands in parallelism to "they act foolishly", it would seem better to understand it as poverty of knowledge.

If this is correct, we do not have here a unique instance in the Old Testament of the prophet turning to the proletariat, to the broken population of slaves and landless in which Jerusalem at the time must have been rich. Rather we have a picture of the skilled artisans and shop-keepers. In the life of the capital they will have had no influence on the court, but they will have considered themselves the backbone of society for all that even as did 'the people of the land' (*'am ha-'aretz*) in the provincial towns. In other words we are not concerned with the sins of the rabble but of the well-to-do burgesses of Jerusalem.

It is very doubtful whether Jeremiah is blaming them for lying, commercial dishonesty and hard swearing, though doubtless many of them indulged in them. It is rather naïve to see here the countryman's shock, when he first meets town life, for the country knows these things too, even though the proportions and fashions vary. If we take the passage as a whole, we see that their real sin was their insensitivity to God's chastening. The ordinary, routine vices of daily life are not mentioned by the prophets unless they are symptomatic of deeper ills.

Already in connection with 4:1, 2 we saw that "the implications of swearing 'As truly as Jehovah lives' are in fact the submission of one's life to God's scrutiny." By their insensitivity to God's judgments — it is hardly necessary to ask whether these were individual or national; probably both were involved — they showed that God was not in their thoughts or hearts, though His name was constantly on their lips.

This was the shocking and heart-breaking fact of Josiah's reformation. It had removed all the outward signs of false worship; the house was swept and garnished, but it was empty. The true religion of the citizens of Jerusalem was revealed a few years

later by their outburst of fanaticism (in which "the great" did not join!), when Jeremiah denounced blind trust in the Temple (7:4; 26:1-10). To them Jehovah had become a God concerned primarily with His temple and its purity. He would protect them because they lived in the shadow of His sanctuary, but that was all. The great had deprived them of their comfortable minor deities. However much their memory lived on, in Jerusalem it was dangerous to offer them any worship, and their sacred sites (*bamot*) had been rendered profane. The responsibility for the Temple cultus they regarded as the business of the court and the great. They were simply not interested when Jeremiah spoke to them of the claims of Jehovah.

The Inner Corruption of Idolatry

In many a modern book there has been a tendency to look on the prophetic attitude towards the Canaanized worship of Jehovah with a trifle of superior condescension. It is pointed out that there was much excuse for it, that for many it was a necessary stage in development to something higher. Indeed we are asked to believe that to the superficial observer there would not have been much difference religiously between Israel and her neighbours in the earlier days. It is a passage like this that shows the justification for the whole prophetic outlook.

The moment men are introduced, not to a god among many, a power among many competing powers, but to *the* God, unique in every respect, a twofold processs sets in. Either they are gradually lifted to Him, till He becomes the dominating factor in all action and thought, or they interpose other beings and powers between Him and them, until they lose all thought and sight of Him. He may still be regarded as the ultimate source of blessing and protection, but He has ceased to have any meaning for everyday life and conduct. So it was in the days of Josiah. Whether there was real hope of true revival of religion in the days of Hezekiah it is hard to say; now the apostasy of Manasseh had done its work all too effectively, and so there was only judgment to look forward to.

The position with the great was different. Here there was not insensitivity to God's will, but defiance of it. They are compared to a bullock which not only does not want to draw the plough, but actively rebels, breaking the yoke and bursting the thongs (cf. 2:20, R.V. mg.). This is something so unexpected after Josiah's reformation, that we might be tempted to think that in spite of all the other evidence we should date the chapter earlier.

Fortunately the next oracle (vv. 7-9), which must surely refer to the great, gives the clue to the understanding of the problem.

We find them swearing by "no gods". Entirely consistently with this in Ezek. 8:7-12 the secret, heart worship of other gods (not merely false and perverted ideas of Jehovah worship) is attributed to the totality (seventy) of the elders of the people, but not to the common man.[5] It is dangerous to dogmatize, but it would be rash to affirm that the great of Jerusalem made a habit of swearing by heathen gods, at least in public. Jeremiah is suggesting that they are entralled and dominated by them. There is nothing surprising in this. There is every indication that the extremes of Manasseh's apostasy were essentially a court cult, which had little influence on the ordinary man, except fatally to encourage him in his debasement of Jehovah worship.

To this Jeremiah adds the frequenting of harlots' houses and adultery. The language is too definite to allow us to think that idolatry is being here metaphorically described.

Neither in the New Testament nor in the Old do we find harlotry and fornication treated in the more or less "Pharisaic" manner of much Protestantism. For the New Testament they are part of the natural life of the heathen world, obvious works of the flesh, but because they are a denial of God's purpose in marriage (which is a type of the relationship of Christ to the Church !), they are in a Christian a denial of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and of the power He gives. In the Old Testament one may detect some slight element of sympathy for the harlot (not the cult prostitute) as someone who has dropped through the bottom of society, but fornication is regarded as blindness to true values and true manhood. It is merely a result of deeper evils (cf. Hos. 4:13, 14) and hence finds but little mention in contrast to the stern denunciation and punishment of adultery. (In contrast to much modern Christian practice the two are clearly differentiated.)

Whence then this sudden and apparently unprecedented rush to the harlots? There was a sexual element in religion throughout the Fertile Crescent, but "Goddesses of fertility play a much greater role among the Canaanites than they do among any other ancient people".[6] "Sacred prostitution was apparently an almost invariable concomitant of the cult of the Phoenician and Syrian

[5] The whole of Ezekiel 8 must be understood symbolically—see my *Ezekiel : The Man and his Message*, pp. 41-44.

[6] W. F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity*[2], p. 177.

goddess"[7]. This would seem to have been "the iniquity of the Amorite" (Gen. 15:16). It is impossible to say how far this custom took root in Israel, for the prophets shrank from giving details of the "Baal-worship" they denounced, and they normally referred to the *qedeshah*, the "holy woman", or temple prostitute, as a *zonah*, or profane harlot. On the whole, however, we shall probably be safe to say that cult prostitution remained marginal in Israel until Manasseh opened the gates wide to it.

We need not doubt that the great men of Jerusalem had beautiful phrases to justify their ritual fornication, Expressions about the sanctity of sex are probably not mere modern inventions for justifying sexual abuse. Josiah swept away the whole system of cultic prostitution, but it had left its fires burning behind it. It soon became clear that it had been practised not to please God but to pander to the passions of the body. Those that had begun it in the sanctuary continued it in the brothel, very possibly with the same women, who had been put out of business and lost their livelihood by the reforms.

But things did not stop here. Adultery for the Bible is one of the most grievous of all sins and in the Old Testament it is punishable with death. It is questionable whether it is primarily regarded as a sexual sin at all. It is a destruction of the covenant basis of the family, which is the basis of all society, and of the sense of property at its most intimate. Of all sins that man may commit there are few, if any, that more surely shake the pillars of ordered society. So when Jeremiah pictured the great as "well-fed lusty stallions, each neighing for his neighbour's wife" (v. 8), he depicted a crumbling society in open revolt against the fundamental laws of conscience.

The Fruit of Human Reformation

As Jeremiah searched Jerusalem for the *one* who might win forgiveness for it, he found more than the bitter heritage of the past and of its apostasy. In vv. 26-29 we find for the first time a type pictured that has since become all too common in a religious society.

In this period of Jeremiah's activity we miss entirely all condemnation of the principle that might is right. There is no echo of the fiery condemnation of the rich and ruthless rulers that we meet again and again in the eighth-century prophets. It seems clear that Josiah did not only do justice himself (22: 15, 16), but

[7] W. F. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel*[3], p. 75.

also watched over his subordinates and representatives to see that they did the same.

Those Jeremiah condemns in vv. 26-29 were not merely men who had become great by enriching themselves by deceit. The emphatic stress on their failure to plead the cause of the fatherless and needy makes it clear that they were men who were expected to do it. In the Jerusalem of the late monarchy there were not many that could do this with any real effect, and these were the rich "princes". There seems little doubt that we are dealing with the ancestors of those that devoured widows' houses and for a pretence made long prayers (see Mk. 12:40).

They had discovered that piety paid better dividends than violence. By virtue of their high position and reputation for piety the wronged and helpless thronged to them begging for help. They doubtless received fine words and some help — the word soon goes round when nothing is to be hoped for — but their patrons saw to it that most of the rewards of "justice" remained sticking to their own fingers. Indeed the language suggests that they gave their help in such a way as to gain power and control over those they aided. The details matter little. The vital matter is that under Josiah as with most man-made reforms greedy and evil men were soon able to harness religion to the chariot of gain.

Another sign of this spirit Jeremiah found in the unholy alliance between priest and prophet (vv. 30, 31). So long as the cultus was based on immemorial tradition maintained by the priests but with the king as unquestioned "head of the church", there was little scope for innovations, unless indeed they were enforced by royal authority. The impression we gain from *Kings* and *Chronicles* is that the priests of Jerusalem, at least, acted as a consistently conservative element. But now both king and priests were subject to the Book of the Law. It is immaterial with what we identify it and to what period we attriblte its composition; it did come as something new to the men of Josiah's generation — it was earlier pointed out that only a handful could have been alive that remembered the temple cultus as it had been in the days of Hezekiah — and it supplied an objective standard by which tradition could be checked, a standard known to a wide and growing circle.

Repeatedly the question must have been put, "How is this statement in the Book of the Law to be understood or applied?" In many cases tradition will have been accepted without demur, but in others the priests must have seen long-cherished privileges

threatened. This is where the prophet suddenly found himself in a position of exceptional importance. His oracle could settle for ever controversies on interpretation, and if it agreed with the previous priestly pronouncement, so much the better.

No suggestion is being made that these men were vulgar deceivers. Wherever and whenever we find a reformation of religion in which the human element is uppermost, those responsible for it will almost infallibly come to think of it as "*our* reformation". Once that stage is reached there comes the unshakable conviction that since they were used by God to begin the reformation, so only they can carry it on and build the future. However spiritual and wise a man may be, once he comes to think of himself as God's necessary instrument, there is no foreseeing to what depths self-interest may drag him down.

The highest of the Spirit's gifts is prophecy; its misuse therefore is most certain to bring disaster. For the priests their attempt to manipulate the written word of God meant exile and the destruction of the Temple. For the prophets, however, their attempt to force the voice of the Spirit was, within the life-time of many of them, to lead to the despising and rejection of the whole popular prophetic movement and to the speedy dying down of all prophecy until the Fulfilment of prophecy should come.

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What shall we say then? Was Jeremiah's answer to God's challenge true? Was there not even one whom he could find who would satisfy God's not too onerous demands?

There are those that suggest that as he came to know the life of Jerusalem better, he will have found a few, but I doubt that they are right. Ezekiel will have been no more than a lad at the time and so may be ignored. With all the other names that are suggested, we gain the impression that there was some fatal flaw of character somewhere. There is no indication that there was anyone, apart from Baruch, who was prepared to follow Jeremiah all the way in the remorseless logic of obedience to the divine will and revelation. This is not the place to discuss Baruch's character, but quite apart from the probability that he was not in Jerusalem at the time, there are not wanting indications that in spite of his loyalty to the lonely prophet, he was not able to appreciate to the full the will of God. His loyalty to God's servant enabled him to rise above weaknesses to which he would otherwise infallibly have fallen a prey.

For three and a half centuries Jerusalem had been the resting-

place of tht Ark, the place where Jehovah had willed that His glory should dwell and the capital city of the royal line of God's appointing; and at the end of it all Jeremiah looked in vain for one man. Over Jerusalem was written "Ichabod", for the glory had departed and its doom was sure. So he raised the warning cry:

> Fly for safety, you Benjamites,
> from the midst of Jerusalem;
> blow the war-horn in Tekoah,
> and raise a signal on Beth-ha-kerem;
> for trouble looms out of the north,
> and great destruction (6:1).

(To be continued)

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