THE PROPHECY OF JEREMIAH

by H. L. ELLISON

IN presenting to our readers the concluding instalment of Mr. Ellison's studies in Jeremiah, we seize the opportunity to express to him, on their behalf and our own, our warm gratitude for allowing us to publish them. The profit which we have derived over the years from Mr. Ellison's Old Testament studies, and not least from these, increases our conviction that the knowledge of God, on which the prophets insisted, is an indispensable qualification for interpreting the prophets. We hope that before long Mr. Ellison will give us these studies in Jeremiah in book form. He retires this summer from full-time academic activity as Senior Tutor of Moorlands Bible College, and we shall all be the more indebted to him if his retirement gives him the necessary leisure not only to complete this task but to publish other contributions to Biblical exegesis.

XXXI. JEREMIAH'S MESSAGE AND CHARACTER

What is to be our provisional judgment on Jeremiah, the man and his message—provisional, because he is too great to permit us to grasp him completely? Are we to agree with A. B. Davidson's dictum, which is so widely accepted today?[1]

> The book of Jeremiah does not so much teach religious truth as present a religious personality. Prophecy had already taught its truths, its last effort was to reveal itself in a life.

Or are we to go further and maintain with S. Frost?[2]

> If the eighth-century prophets were the first Protestants, then Jeremiah was the first Liberal Protestant. He has all the faults and weaknesses of the liberals in religion—he is unpractical; he preaches a religion to which the common people could never attain; he is an individualist; he does not allow sufficiently for the corporate expression of religion; he makes his own apprehension the sufficient measure of truth. But he also has their splendid virtues. He will not abide cant or hypocrisy; he will gladly recognize truth wherever he meets it; he will follow it bravely wheresoever it leads him, and he refuses to confuse it with any authoritarian boundaries, not even those of Scripture. He recognizes only the authority of God.

It should be clear enough that Jeremiah's life formed an important part of his ultimate and lasting message. I have earlier suggested[3] that one of the senses in which we can understand Jeremiah's title as prophet to the nations (1: 5) is the generally intelligible message of his life to those unacquainted with the Old

[1] HDB, Vol. II, p. 576b.

[2] *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 179.

[3] E.Q., Vol. XXXI, No. 4, p. 213.

Testament tradition and teaching. Then we can give full meaning to Jeremiah's personal complaints to God only if we recognize that the prophet himself introduced them into the record of his message as being meaningful for its understanding. Certainly Baruch would hardly have preserved an outline of the last days of Jeremiah—but why only of the last days?—had he not believed that they in themselves formed a supplement of value to the prophet's words. Our lack of knowledge whether he intended from the first to join them to the words does not vitiate the argument. This cumulative evidence might not be so convincing, were it not that we normally know so little of the lives of the prophets, and what we do know is always vital for their understanding.

To acknowledge this, however, does not justify us in immediately writing off his message as being of little value in itself. Still less does it justify our classing him with the modern Liberal Protestant.

JEREMIAH'S MESSAGE

There is a growing recognition that in a much needed reaction against modern individualism and atomization of society scholars had overstressed the corporate and the community in the Old Testament. They were never quite as absolute as has been suggested by some. Even so, thus to stress Jeremiah as an individual, if this is to be understood in our sense, is to distort the general picture.

Von Rad has underlined certain corporate concepts within Jeremiah's teaching: [4]

> The Zion tradition which was determinative for the whole of Isaiah's prophecy has no place whatsoever in Jeremiah; in contrast, what resounds there—even in the prophecies of salvation—are the Exodus, Covenant, and Conquest traditions.

I consider his explanation of this fact most questionable, as I shall underline later, but in stressing these elements he is indubitably correct. Now these are, one and all, corporate concepts. Though the Sinai covenant was made with the personal acquiescence of each member of the people, yet it was a corporate act. In his vision of the new covenant (31: 31-34; 32: 38ff.) it remains for Jeremiah a corporate act. Though it is effective for each individual, there is no suggestion of its becoming effective individual by individual.[5] In other words the promise of the new covenant,

[4] *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. II, p. 192; *The Message of the Prophets*, p. 161.

[5] It may be irrelevant, but Paul seems to regard the eschatological event "all Israel shall be saved" (Rom. 11: 26) as being of a different nature than the individual incorporation of Jews and Gentiles into the Church.

as contained in Jeremiah, cannot be considered the manifesto of the spiritual independence of the individual as demonstrated in the prophet himself. However much we may appeal to the prophet's experience in our interpretation of the promise, it is a message based on the people's past to be realized in their future.

It has often been commented on how little eschatological imagery there is in Jeremiah. Skinner can say, "In one sense Jeremiah may be said to be the least eschatological of the prophets".[6] For him salvation is essentially something to be worked out and depicted in the framework of the known and familiar, of the here and now. When salvation was promised to Ebed-melech (39: 16ff.) or to Baruch (45: 5), it is simply the guarantee of being saved from a premature death at the hand of their enemies. So national salvation, though not entirely devoid of a miraculous element, is essentially the restoration of that which was, only without its sin.

If then this restoration was to have been one in which the Temple, its cultus and officials, were to play no part, we should expect this to be expressly stated. This argument is not vitiated by the fact that in his letter to the exiles (29: 4-23) Jeremiah declared the non-essential nature of the Temple, and so inferentially of its cultus.[7] The declaration was made, after all, in the context of promised restoration (29: 10). Skinner[8] by eliminating this verse for "plausible reasons" can make Jeremiah's teaching absolute. Finally, however, he is forced to recognize, "But though the letter to the Exiles makes a clear advance along that line (to universalism), it is more than doubtful if it expresses Jeremiah's views of the final form of religion."

Jeremiah did not stress Temple, cultus or priests, but they are there in his oracles. As pointed out earlier[9] there is no justification for eliminating the last-named in 31: 14. While 31: 12 can hardly be understood except in the light of a sanctuary on Zion, this interpretation becomes compulsory in 31: 6. I base no argument on 33: 18, 21, 22 because I have no inner conviction that they are genuine words of Jeremiah.[10] All this shows that though Jeremiah had come to know God and to have fellowship with Him in ways undreamt of by his contemporaries, he was unconscious that his experiences demanded any fundamental breach with his people as a religious community or with the Sinaitic covenant. His vision of the future does not imply a breach with the past.

[6] *Prophecy and Religion*, pp. 285f.
[7] Cf. E.Q., Vol. XXXVIII, No. 1, p. 49.
[8] *Op. cit.*, pp. 287-297, especially pp. 295ff.
[9] Cf. E.Q., Vol. XXXIV, No. 1, pp. 24f.; Vol. XXXVI, No. 3, p. 153.
[10] Cf. E.Q., Vol. XXXVII, No. 2, p. 109.

Davidson, quoted earlier, balanced his statement on the importance of Jeremiah's life by a recognition of a special quality in his teaching:[11]

> But though the truths in Jeremiah are old, they all appear in him with an impress of personality which gives them novelty. He is not to be read for doctrines in their general form on God and the people, but for the *nuances* which his mind gives them. Though he might not be aware of it, we can perceive that all his thoughts are coloured by the religious relation to God of which he was himself conscious.

All this smacks rather of the obvious well dressed up. No one has a right to claim to understand the Old Testament unless he realizes that all the prophets speak "in fragmentary and varied fashion" (Heb. 1: 1, N.E.B.). Then too it is a commonplace in the study of the prophets to underline how the individuality and circumstances of the prophets come out in their oracles.

The first edition of the scroll of judgment was made for an immediate practical purpose (36: 1ff.), which throws no light on whether there was any new and lasting element in its oracles. That Jeremiah should make an enlarged second edition of the scroll (36: 32) and that Baruch should preserve it through all the desperate days of Jerusalem's agony and then carry it down with him to Egypt suggest that for these two men, at any rate, there was something in it which demanded preservation.

There is in fact at least one element in this scroll so original in itself that neither Jew nor Christian has normally grasped it. It may be largely this that Frost is referring to when he accuses Jeremiah of not being practical. I am referring to Jeremiah's teaching on repentance.

Klausner very correctly realized that Ezekiel changed the whole pattern of the Messianic salvation to come. As he says:[12]

> The Messianic prophecies of Ezekiel have one special characteristic: the *redemption* does not come in them as the result of *repentance*. The Messianic chain already known to us—sin, punishment, repentance, redemption—has been here pulled apart, therefore, and one of its links is missing . . . Israel will return to its God not *before* the redemption, but *after it*: after it has returned to its own land.

This concept is so contrary to ordinary ideas, that even today the argument is frequently heard that the present return of the Jew to Palestine, which has led to the setting up of the State of Israel, cannot be of God, because it was carried through in unbelief!

[11] *Op. cit., idem.*

[12] *The Messianic Idea in Israel*, pp. 117f.

It is always a hazardous thing to ask where an apparently new concept in prophetic thought may have come from, for it is a part of revelation, which lies in God's sovereign control. Yet there is almost always something discernible that indicates the germ from which the new concept was to spring. It seems highly probable that it was Jeremiah's virtual insistance that true repentance lay beyond man's normal grasp that led Ezekiel on to understand that repentance was, and had to be, the outcome of God's grace. It is easy to find the shadow of the failure of Josiah's reformation over much that Jeremiah said; the two passages where he challenged the popular concepts of repentance are particularly 3: 1 (R.V. mg. and R.S.V.) and 4: 3f.[13]

It may be claimed too that no prophet had a deeper understanding of the nature of true prophecy than Jeremiah, as may be seen by a study of 23: 9-40 and 18: 1-12.[14] In the former passage Jeremiah is not a pioneer, but it is doubtful whether we could deduce the truth from his predecessors. In the latter he was anticipated in a remarkable way by the experience of Jonah, but what might be regarded as exceptional there has been worked out as an all-embracing principle in the lesson of the potter's house. It is questionable whether Christian "students of prophecy" have ever really assimilated the principle here given.

For our purposes this must suffice. A discriminating rereading of Jeremiah's message may well convince us that there is even more in it in which he outstrips those who had gone before him. The over-ready acceptance of Davidson's dictum probably comes from our desire to reduce the teaching of the prophets into schemes which will fit neatly into a Religion of Israel or a Theology of the Old Testament.

JEREMIAH'S CHARACTER

It would seem that there is not merely an over-emphasis on Jeremiah's personality in contrast to his message, but that our concept of it has been twisted. Part of Kirkpatrick's judgment will illustrate this:[15]

> We mark at the outset the prophet's natural timidity of character, and reluctance to face the terrible task before him . . . Jeremiah was not the man upon whom human choice would have fallen for so difficult, nay, desperate a mission. . . .Yet we may recognise in Jeremiah's character a special fitness for his mission. That tender, shrinking, sympathetic heart could more fully feel, and more adequately express, the ineffable divine sorrow over the guilty

[13] Cf. E.Q., Vol. XXXII, No. 2, pp. 108ff.; No. 4, pp. 216ff.
[14] Cf. E.Q., Vol. XXXVII, No. 4, pp. 232-241; No. 3, pp. 153f.
[15] *The Doctrine of the Prophets*[3], pp. 301f.

> people, the eternal love which was never stronger than at the moment when it seemed to have metamorphosed into bitter wrath and implacable vengeance.

I am not particularly concerned with whether this is an accurate reading of Jeremiah's character. It may be, but I suspect that it is expressed unduly in modern Western terms and from a Western standpoint. Though by a past generation of scholars Jeremiah was conceived of as the inspirer of a certain type of psalm,[16] I suspect that a comparison between his outpourings of heart to God and a certain type of psalm of lamentation has not been made in sufficient depth.

What really concerns us is whether Jeremiah really stands apart from the other prophets in his sensitivity of character. Once we stop theorizing and get down to an examination of the records, we rapidly discover that we know very little indeed of the relationship of most of the prophets to God. We should not be surprised at this because they were not there to preach themselves and their views; they were God's spokesmen. The spokesman may not intrude himself between the one who has sent him and the one to whom the message has been sent.

Even so we repeatedly find a breaking through of human nature in the prophetic records. Was Jeremiah's hesitation at his call really greater than that of the much older Moses (Ex. 3: 9-4: 13)? Was Jeremiah's love for his people really greater than Moses', when he offered himself as a propitiation (Ex. 32: 31-33)? Was his anger against his people's sin and obstinacy, his sympathy for God as Heschel calls it,[17] really different in kind to Moses' breaking of the stone tables (Ex. 32: 19), his turning of the Levites loose on the people (Ex. 32: 26f.) or his smiting of the rock (Num. 20: 10f.)? Have we a right to drive a wedge between Elijah's despair at Horeb (1 Ki. 19: 14) and Jeremiah's under Jehoiakim (15: 15-18; 20: 7)? Is it not possible that Habakkuk in his debate with God may have understood Jeremiah better than we sometimes do? When I hear Isaiah saying, "For the Lord spoke to me with a strong hand and taught me not to walk in the way of this people" (Isa. 8: 11), I am irresistibly reminded on the one hand of Jer. 20: 7, on the other of Jeremiah's confession of being influenced by the popular prophets' message (4: 10).

Apart from the obvious dependence of Micah on Isaiah, however it is to be explained, it is very rare for one prophet to show

[16] Wellhausen even declared that without the prophetic activity and personal experiences of Jeremiah the psalms would never have been composed (*Israelitische und jüdische Geschichte*, pp. 149f.).

[17] *The Prophets*, p. 115.

direct links with his predecessors. Yet it has long been recognized that there are such connections between Hosea and Jeremiah. This is very generally explained by suggesting that Jeremiah's sympathies and traditions were Northern rather than Southern. This view, most recently expressed by von Rad,[18] I have already rejected earlier,[19] though that does not mean that I question his close knowledge of Hosea's message, which, after all is said and done, was probably recorded and preserved in Judah.

The obvious fact is that both Hosea and Jeremiah, more than any others, are the prophets of relationship. Others were concerned with the consequences of specific attributes of God or the results of certain sins of His people. But here relationship is the issue. That is why Hosea and Jeremiah stress religion more than the other prophets because religion is an outward expression of relationship. Hosea had to be shocked by his own broken marriage into grasping what the breach between God and Israel involved. With Jeremiah his own relationship to God became a dominating factor behind his message.

Gomer is the great question mark in the book of Hosea. We are given no indication of why she spurned Hosea's love, or whether she finally responded to it. So also while we are led closer to understanding God's love to Israel, we do not really grasp the reasons for Israel's unfaithfulness, nor have we any certainty whether God's gracious promises of restoration will, in fact, ever come into fulfilment. That is why the promise of the New Covenant finds no place in Hosea. The prophet himself was not spiritually ripe enough to grasp the solution to the loveless lack of response to love.

As no other prophet Jeremiah is given to understand both sides of the relationship. There is no prophet with a deeper love for his people. He remains loyal to them to the last and remains with their last pitiful remnant. He suffers in their suffering and he intercedes for them until God forbids him. He wishes:

> O that my head were waters,
> and my eyes a fountain of tears,
> that I might weep day and night
> for the slain of the daughter of my people! (9: 1).

At the same time, perhaps as no other prophet, he is given to understand the disappointed love and "jealousy" of God. He can feel a loathing and even a hatred such as is expressed in 18: 21ff.

[18] *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. II, p. 192; *The Message of the Prophets*, p. 161.

[19] E.Q., Vol. XXXI, No. 4, p. 206.

He can long to be free of them all:

> O that I were in the wilderness
> in a rest-house for wanderers,
> that I could leave my people
> and go away from them (9: 2).

In this tension he can even turn on God and berate Him. He can accuse Him of utterly deceiving the people and Jerusalem (4: 10), and suggest that His ways are hardly righteous (12: 1). He suggests that God is becoming to him "like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail" (15: 18). He can curse the day on which he was born (20: 14). Over and above all he can, to use Heschel's translation,[20] apparently blaspheme God, when he says to Him,

> O Lord, Thou has seduced me,
> and I am seduced;
> Thou has raped me
> and I am overcome (20: 7).

Seducing, rape, these are virtually contradictions. They are in the relationship of men and women, but not of God and man. God's love can do so much, but how hard it is for it to root out the last lingering traces of self-assertion, of rebellious freedom, of affirmation of the sin of the Fall. It can woo man to obedience and trust in measure, but the time comes when it must use force, if the will of God is to be done. Even in a Jeremiah this is so.

Surely then it is here that we must look for the reasons for the unbaring of Jeremiah's character and feelings. Other prophets may have felt the same, but only here do they have revelational value. To see in him the forerunner of the Liberal Protestant individualist is a strange fate for the man who was enabled to reveal what must happen, if God and man are really to meet. If Jeremiah was unpractical it was because popular religion is foolish. If he preached a religion to which the common people will not attain, it is not because it is too intellectual or even too spiritual, but because the common people and the Liberal Protestants alike all too often want to use religion as a screen to separate them from God's holy love with its inexorable demands.

Dawlish, Devon.

(concluded)

[20] *Op. cit.*, p. 113.