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THE PROPHECY OF JEREMIAH

(continued)

by H. L. ELLISON

XVI. THE PROPHET'S DESPAIR

IT is precisely in the context of Jeremiah's passionate outburst of 15: 10-21 that we are introduced to his loneliness and social isolation (16: 1-13). We may unhesitatingly retain v. 1 as against the LXX and G. A. Smith.¹ Both the subject matter and the style forbid our seeing in ch. 16 a continuance of 15: 19-21.

It seems fairly obvious that 15: 17 and 16: 8 form the link between the oracles,² but we should not look on the juxtaposition as something arbitrary. We need not question Skinner's attribution of this oracle to "the obscure middle period of his ministry",³ but it is a psychological certainty that the full force of it will have been felt by Jeremiah only as he experienced how unpopular he really was.

Unless we assume that Jeremiah was a childless widower—an improbability but not an impossibility—God's prohibition of marriage must have come very early in his prophetic activity. There is no need to think that the explanation of it must have come later, for it is implicit in the second vision at his call. Jeremiah's failure to marry must have made him a marked man, and this may have been one of the contributing factors to his family's bitter hostility to him.

On the other hand his withdrawal from normal social obligations would fit the later years of Josiah better, when the prophet had been forced to realize the failure of his call to repentance. Even today in our fragmented society weddings and funerals take precedence over most obligations, and failure to attend without adequate

¹ *Jeremiah*⁴, p. 326.

² So Rudolph, *Jeremia*², p. 101; Weiser, *Der Prophet Jeremia*, p. 143.

³ *Prophecy and Religion*, pp. 122f.; this does not involve accepting his dating of ch. 14 in the reign of Josiah.

reason may be in some cases regarded as virtually an insult. How much more will this have been the case in the time of Jeremiah. It is not likely that there will have been much change between his time and that of the rabbis, when even the study of the Torah might be interrupted in order to accompany a bridal procession or funeral.⁴ So Jeremiah could have found no more drastic method of disassociating himself from his people, unless it had been emigration. The reality of it was not decreased by his making clear that it was an acted sermon.

"It is not good that the man should be alone" was God's verdict at the beginning. Though some measure of loneliness seems to be necessary for the true ripening of character, and some find a thrill in being alone for a time, only the grace of God can save a man or woman from serious deterioration of character, if he is alone over long. Jeremiah was separated by the hand of God from his people, only to find that their separation from God was also separation from His prophet. We are very loath to learn that holiness, separation to God, must involve separation from those that are not holy, however much we may love them. The reality of holy loneliness found perhaps its most poignant expression in our Lord's words to Peter in Gethsemane, "Simon, sleepest thou? couldest thou not watch one hour?" (Mark 14: 37).

THE GRACE OF GOD

The oracles of 17: 5-9 could obviously have been uttered by Jeremiah at any time during his prophetic activity,⁵ and virtually any situation before the downfall of Zedekiah would suit them. If, however, we take them as being in approximately their chronological position they take on a much deeper meaning; they can be seen to be a message to Jeremiah himself and not merely an expression of general truth.

It is very easy to say, "Cursed is the man that puts his trust in earth-born man (*adam*), and makes flesh his arm", but, however much we genuinely believe it, it is so much easier when we have some men as well as God on our side. Equally the prosperity of the righteous (vv. 7f.) belongs to the basic affirmations of faith, but, as Job had to discover, this often seems denied by reality.

Jeremiah in his loneliness was challenged by these reaffirmations of orthodoxy. Did he really consider himself as a tree planted by the waters? Was he really satisfied in having no human arm to

⁴ *Kethuboth* 17a.

⁵ In contrast to much modern tendency Rudolph, *op. cit.*, p. 105, and Weiser, *op. cit.*, p. 151, maintain Jeremiah's authorship.

lean upon? For me it is almost certain that:

“Deceitful is the heart above all else⁶
and desperately corrupt;
who can understand it?” (17: 9)

is Jeremiah's verdict, not primarily on his contemporaries, but on himself. Like Paul in Rom. 7, he found a conflict in himself he could not fathom. On the one hand there was the glad and eager acceptance of God's revelation (cf. 15: 16), on the other there was the shrinking of some of his deepest desires and emotions from the demands of unconditional faith and obedience. If this is so, God's answer,

“I the LORD search the heart
and try its hidden depths
to give every man according to his ways,
according to the fruit of his doings” (17: 10),

is less a general statement and more a guarantee to Jeremiah that he is safe in his God's knowledge and keeping.

It is usual to interpret “kidneys” (EVV “reins”) as meaning the emotions in contrast to the rationality in the Old Testament of the heart. Hence RSV renders here “mind . . . heart”. Whether in fact the kidneys were regarded as the seat of the emotions is doubtful; in parallelism to heart there is little doubt that we are to understand the most hidden elements in man's character and personality.⁷

If I have rightly understood the sequence of thought in 17: 5-10 then the vv. 11-18 give Jeremiah's reaction to God's gracious reassurance. The comparison of the foolish rich with a silly part-ridge (v. 11) is the prophet's reaffirmation of the truth of vv. 7f. The prosperity of the wicked is merely a passing delusion. Then in vv. 12f. Jeremiah indirectly confesses his error of 15: 18 and stresses his confidence in God (v. 12) in contrast to v. 5.

Affirmations, however, and the valiant use of faith are insufficient to still the inner conflict for long. Now Jeremiah had reached the realization that his real trouble lay in himself, and so we find him praying for healing and salvation (v. 14), the latter being probably from his own storm-tossed personality rather than from his many enemies round about him. We should probably understand vv. 15f. in the light of v. 17. Jeremiah was the prophet of imminent and certain doom, but he did not welcome his message

⁶ LXX, “The heart is deep . . .” may be correct, but there seems no cogent ground for leaving M.T.

⁷ See Köhler, LVTL, p. 439b, and E.Q., Vol. XXXV, No. 1, p. 8.

or want it to go into fulfilment (v. 16). What made him certain that it would go into fulfilment was the reaction of his hearers to his message (v. 15). The implication of "Where is the word of the Lord? Let it come!" was, "Jeremiah, you've been foretelling doom for 20 years now, and nothing's happened. Make something startling happen here and now, if we are to believe you".

In the light of such mockery Jeremiah's chief fear was that he might crack, when the storm broke (v. 17), in spite of the divine promises (1: 18f. ; 15: 20f.). It will then probably be best to take v. 18 as no more than a prayer that "the day of evil" might come quickly. We need find little to wonder at in it. Once we know the storm must break, destruction must come, most of us long to get it over. Among the more knowledgeable and far-seeing in Britain in 1939 there was a strange sense of relief, when war actually came. They had known for so long—at least since the rape of Czechoslovakia—that war must come, that the reality was preferable to the waiting.

"FORGIVE THEM NOT!"

In 17: 12-18 Jeremiah was looking at his enemies primarily as God's enemies, or at least so he thought. Then, however, something happened which revealed the whole storm-tossed chaos which lay in the depths of Jeremiah's being. It is told in the simplest outline in 18: 18 ; "Then they said, 'Come, let us plot plots against Jeremiah, for Torah shall not perish from the Priest, or Counsel from the Wise, or a Word from the Prophet. Come let us smite him with the tongue and pay heed⁸ to his every word'".

That men should reject Jeremiah's message was hard for the prophet but understandable ; that they should mock and taunt him was bitter but ultimately natural. Suddenly he was brought face to face with the realization that the three groups representing religion in Jerusalem had formed a plot against him—not merely the priest and the prophet, but also the wise whose wisdom was regarded as a gift from God. They rejected him because they claimed to be in possession of the Torah, of Counsel and of the prophetic Word. No evil could come near them because they were the controllers of God's revelation.

It was not this, however, that caused Jeremiah to boil over. Pride of office has always been one of the great dangers to true religion, and we have no reason for thinking that it can have come as any very great shock to Jeremiah. After all he came from a

⁸ Omitting the negative with LXX.

priestly family himself. What broke down all barriers of self-restraint was their willingness to distort his prophetic message, God's prophetic message, in order to malign him and destroy him.

If he had been a Christian he might not have been so shocked. From the time that they twisted our Lord's words at His trial (Mark 14: 58) and attributed to Paul doctrines that were an abomination to him (Rom. 3: 8), this has been the favourite way of destroying character and reputation in the Church. There are many who care not what a man says and believes, but what he can be construed to have said. So far as we can judge, this was a refinement unknown to ancient Israel, and so Jeremiah's white-hot anger overflowed in prayer (18: 19-23).

It is the conventional thing to be shocked at his language, but should we really be? There is a form of calumny which in its malignity acts almost like vitriol on the soul. It leaves scars which probably never heal completely in this life. The immediate effect is to leave the wronged man clamouring for self-justification, vindication, and it may be revenge. Blessed is he, if he knows the restraining hand of his Lord in time, if good Christian friends can bind up his wounds and comfort him. But Jeremiah stood alone. Let us then rather read this prayer in awe-struck wonder at the test to which God was willing to submit His servant.

It is likely that we are to understand the story of the broken jar in ch. 19 as God's answer, indirect possibly, to Jeremiah's prayer. It is easy to see why Rudolph⁹ and Weiser¹⁰ in company with most moderns want to omit vv. 3-9 and 11c-13. If the breaking of the jar had been but one more acted sermon, which happened to have an exceptional outcome, the words attributed to Jeremiah would be hard to justify in this setting. The violent reaction, however, of Pashhur ben-Immer (20: 1-3) suggests that he understood far more by the scene. It seems quite inadequate to think that he was merely following up the plot of 18: 18.

Man outlives magic but slowly. Even when it is no longer respectable, we find a deep-rooted fear of it and an implicit acceptance of many of its basic presuppositions. Among the most important of these are the ideas that the right form of words and right actions can bring about a desired end.

Jeremiah collected some of the elders of the people and more important priests—that he could do so shows what a grasp he had on popular imagination—and carrying a small jar led them out to the

⁹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 115f.

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, pp. 166f.

Valley of the Son of Hinnom, where Topheth had been. There is no suggestion that it was a large water jar he carried in order to draw a crowd as he did a woman's work. There in the Valley he solemnly repeated the main thoughts of some of the worst prophecies of condemnation he had spoken earlier, thus confirming them. When he had finished, he dashed the jar to the ground, breaking it to fragments. For the superstitious this was a magic means of bringing about the break down of the state, which he had prophesied. The repetition of the message in the Temple was the last straw.

THE SOUL'S DARK NIGHT

Pashhur ben-Immer was in charge of order in the Temple (20: 1), and in any case it would seem that it was recognized that prophets came under the discipline of the high priest or his deputy (29: 25-27). So Pashhur was within his rights in flogging (this is probably how we are to understand "beat") Jeremiah and in putting him in the "stocks", probably a far crueller torture than in the English variety, though that was cruel enough. For Jeremiah the injury done to his honour will have been more painful even than his throbbing back and his twisted and cramp-racked body. Possibly worse still was the realization that his prayer for vengeance had led apparently only to this.

It may be that we should acquit Pashhur of mere brutality. If secretly he was afraid of magic, he will have known that one of the more effective ways of dealing with the magician was to display one's own superior power. At any rate he did not seem to take it very seriously, when Jeremiah, released from the stocks, drew himself up with difficulty and thundered a curse at him that should have chilled his blood (20: 3-6). Solemnly he changed his name from Pashhur to Magor-missabib (Terror-on-every-side) on behalf of God.

So little effect did this have on Pashhur that he evidently told the story as a joke to all his friends. As Jeremiah went through the streets he seems to have heard jeering voices behind him whispering "Magor-missabib" (20: 10). That God's solemn word of doom should become a joke broke the prophet's heart. In vv. 7-18 we have preserved something of his communion with God in this time. They cover evidently some little period of time, for the prophet's feelings fluctuate, but the few rays of sunshine serve only to show how deep the darkness was.

"O LORD, Thou didst make a fool of me
and I was fooled ;

Thou art stronger than I
and hast prevailed" (v. 7).

The normal English rendering "Thou hast deceived me" is in so far misleading as we generally think of the skill of the deceiver, when we hear it. The Hebrew stressed the naïve simplicity of the one deceived; in Ex. 22: 16 it is used of the seduction of a girl. Jeremiah was suggesting that when he was little more than a lad, God had talked him into becoming a prophet. He had followed the call gladly, little dreaming of what lay before him. Then, when he wished to break away from his prophetic office, he was no longer able (cf. v. 9). If we are startled by the language, we should be even more startled that Jeremiah caused it to be included in the book.

If we have ever felt and spoken as did Jeremiah, it is almost certain that we have either kept silence about it or at the most referred to it in veiled terms. The atheist may boast of having so spoken to God, but then it is easy enough to speak thus to a no-god. The religious man may try to excuse his abysmal failure by throwing the blame on God and merely succeeds in making himself mildly pathetic. But when a Jeremiah speaks like this, our first impulse is to feel awkward, to think that, if he felt like that, he should have kept it to himself. If a normal preacher were to speak like this, many in his congregation would walk out. It is spiritual bad manners.

Jeremiah, however, knew that he was part of his message. Israel could understand God's message fully only if it also knew the passion of the messenger. If we are tempted to condemn him, let us ponder that God does not. His words in 15: 18 were to some extent insolent and were treated by God accordingly. Here we are brought face to face with the desperate honesty of a breaking heart, which God in His grace respects.

Society has so changed since the days of Jeremiah, and even greater has been the change introduced by the gospel, that it is with somewhat of a shock that we realize that the main cause of Jeremiah's anguish was that he was mocked and had become a laughingstock (v. 7c). We soon discover, however, that the anguish had nobler causes than wounded personal pride. Though it would probably be wrong to dismiss this element altogether, verse 8 shows that the real reason for his anguish was that through him God was being mocked as well. That is why he would have stopped prophesying if he could have, but he could not refrain for long (v. 9).

To make matters worse the ringleaders were his "familiar friends" (v. 10). The phrase should jar on the sensitive ear; did Jeremiah at this time in his life have those whom he could reasonably call "familiar friends"? In spite of virtual unanimity among translators it may reasonably be questioned whether this is the best rendering of *'enosh shelomi*. In the parallel passages—with *'ish* instead of *'enosh*—Obad. 7, Jer. 38: 22 and Ps. 41: 9 this rendering is far from obvious in the first two passages and not necessary in the third. In all cases "the man (or men) whom I trusted, on whom my security rested", brings out the sense more closely. We may well be on most familiar terms with those on whom we depend for our security, but that is secondary. In this case the *'enosh shelomi* will probably be Jeremiah's relations and family, who should have stood by him in the extremity of his need, but instead led the pack of those that sought to hound him down. Jeremiah's use of *'enosh* here may be to underline what a broken reed they all were. Note the bitterness of "Perhaps he will be fooled". It is far more bitter to be reckoned a simpleton by kith and kin than to be treated as one by God.

After a brief gleam of hope (vv. 11ff.), which surely presupposes some passage of time, however short, Jeremiah lets the curtain fall on himself in agony and gloom. Vv. 14-18 have close literary affinities with Job 3, though it would be rash lightly to give one or the other priority in time. We cannot say for certain whether these "confessions" stood at the end of the first roll (36.4), but it seems unreasonable to doubt that they stood at the end of the second (36: 32). In other words the collection of prophecies, with scarce a gleam of light for the people, ended in a picture of the prophet in the dark. If through the sin of the people the prophet had lost his way, even though in accordance with God's word he had not been conquered and broken, how much more surely would the sinful people go into the darkness of death or exile. Only through the prophet's broken heart could God bring home to His contemporaries what sin really involved. So from afar he was allowed to foreshadow the one who bore the sin of others and knew the darkness of being forsaken of His God, with whom He had walked in perfect fellowship and obedience all His days.

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(To be continued)