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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

THE PROPHECY OF JEREMIAH

by H. L. ELLISON

XIV. JEREMIAH AND THE PROPHETS

ONE of the more striking semantic differences between the Old and the New Testament is that the former does not know the concept of the false prophet. In the New Testament, as indeed with us, the false prophets create the impression of being hypocrites of the worst type (Matt. 7: 15), and deliberate deceivers (Matt. 24: 24).¹ In the Old Testament it is not implied that they are deceivers, though they may very well be self-deceived. The question is never posed whether they are prophets—it is always assumed that they are—but whether their message comes from Yahweh.

The difference in emphasis is probably due to the complete change in the religious situation. Down to the end of the monarchy the prophets are part of the very warp and woof of Israel's religious life. Even Jeremiah does not envisage a time when the prophet should be no more. After the return from the Babylonian exile the prophets gradually faded out into disrepute (cf. Zech. 13: 2-6) and vanished. Even the Teacher of Righteousness in the Qumran community was an interpreter of prophecy rather than a prophet.² It was popularly believed that the rise of a prophet would herald the coming of the Messiah, and that is why the appearance of John the Baptist could stir Jewry to its depths. Though the beginnings of the Christian Church meant the emergence of prophecy as a most important charismatic gift, we do not gain the impression that their rôle is really comparable with that of their predecessors in Israel. If *The Shepherd* by Hermas is at all typical, and the probability is that it was above the average of the longer prophetic efforts, it is not surprising that so very little of their utterances has been preserved for us.

All this means that it has been very difficult, if not impossible, for both Church and Synagogue to understand prophecy as a phenomenon. It cannot be said that modern study has really thrown much light on it either. The most popular line of approach has been to compare it with similar manifestations in other lands.³

¹ In the context it may very well be that the prophets among the Zealots are intended.

² See especially M. Burrows, *Prophecy and the Prophets at Qumran*, in Anderson and Harrelson, *Israel's Prophetic Heritage*.

³ One of the most thoroughgoing attempts along these lines is Haldar, *Associations of Cult Prophets among the Ancient Semites*.

About the conclusions drawn from these studies Heschel has said very wisely, "These statements contain an impressive half-truth".⁴ Indeed this whole approach seems to be vitiated from the first by its failure to give due weight to Amos's claim that the gift of prophets was a special sign of God's grace to Israel (2: 11).

For over half a century it has been widely held that the concept of ecstasy, which had already been suggested much earlier, held the key to the understanding of the prophet, especially if we also called the insights of modern psychology to our aid.⁵ The more this key has been used, however, the less confidence scholars have that it fits the lock at all. In fact "ecstasy" has tended to become a protean word taking its colouring and even meaning from its immediate context. It is particularly objectionable because it leads either to an undervaluing of the canonical prophets or a driving of a wedge between them and the "popular" prophets.⁶ Had a clear-cut distinction, visible to all but the spiritually obtuse, really been there, it is hardly credible that both would have borne the name *nabi*. Surely there would have been no confusion in the mind of the hearers, no need for the prophet to justify his message or denounce that of his "popular" rival. In many moderns it is usual to argue from the early *nebi'im*, of whom we really know very little, to the later canonical prophets, of whom we know comparatively much; surely the reverse would have been much wiser. Heschel has put us in his debt with a thoroughgoing and destructive study of the theory of ecstasy.⁷

That the problem existed is indicated by Scripture itself. In Deut. 18: 20ff. we have a very early rule of thumb method for judging the prophetic message.⁸ On the one hand a prophet speaking in the name of other gods, or giving a message as from Yahweh, though he knew it was not from Him, would suffer death by the divine hand. Where, presumably, the prophet was ignorant of conscious deceit, the failure of the message to come true would be

⁴ *The Prophets*, p. 448. This is a rewritten and much enlarged version of his *Die Propheten* (1936).

⁵ So Hölscher, *Die Profeten*, 1914, and particularly T. H. Robinson in the *Theologische Rundschau* for 1931, Heft 2, pp. 75 seq. A summary of the latter's views will be found in his *Prophecy and the Prophets*², pp. 30-38.

⁶ I use the term "popular" prophets, because it is historically correct without conveying any nuance of condemnation.

⁷ *Op. cit.*, pp. 335-366.

⁸ Whatever date may be advanced for the publication of *Deuteronomy*, it seems incredible that these criteria should have been first brought forward in the time of Hezekiah or Josiah, when the principle of contingency was well understood.

a proof of its falsity. With the passage of time this test proved inadequate in two directions. Even when the historical narrative becomes detailed, there is no evidence for direct intervention by God to cut short the lying prophet's life till we come to Jer. 28: 16f., and increasingly the principle of contingency (see below, pp. 152ff.) became a major factor in prophecy. So it became an important part of Jeremiah's message, not to explain prophetic phenomena, but to make the principles of true prophecy plain.

JEREMIAH'S OWN DOUBTS

The narrowness of the outward gulf separating Jeremiah from his prophetic contemporaries is shown in the three passages 4: 9f.; 14: 13; 28: 1-16. The first of these was discussed earlier.⁹ I gave my reasons for not accepting any emendation of the Hebrew text here, and they are supported by 14: 13. If we find Jeremiah so impressed by the message of the "popular" prophets in the reign of Jehoiakim (we cannot well date the section 14: 1-15: 9 at any other time), it would have been even more natural in the reign of Josiah, in which we are equally compelled to place 4: 9f. So much is this the case that Weiser, who accepts the textual emendation in 4: 10, feels compelled, against all the evidence, to place it later than 14: 13.¹⁰

All this means that while Jeremiah was deeply conscious of the difference between his message and that of the "popular" prophets, yet he had to regard them as prophets, and he found it almost impossible to believe that they were altogether wrong.

This comes out even more clearly in his dealings with Hananiah ben-Azzur. In Zedekiah's fourth year (28: 1)¹¹ there was a kind of foreign ministers' conference in Jerusalem (27: 3). Even without divine illumination Jeremiah would have been able to guess that thoughts of concerted action against Nebuchadrezzar had brought them together. Jeremiah warned them that the king of Babylon had been made ruler over them by Yahweh and that they would revolt at their peril (27: 4-11). He wore a symbolic yoke to keep his message alive and repeated it to Zedekiah (27: 12-15) and to the people (27: 16-22). He told them in the clearest terms that

⁹ *E.Q.*, Vol. XXXII, No. 4, pp. 219 ff.

¹⁰ *Das Buch des Popheten Jeremia*, p. 125.

¹¹ The present form of 27: 1, lacking in LXX, is impossible; cf. 28: 1. The original was probably lost before LXX was made and after the making of this translation replaced by a careless scribe with 26: 1. Later the Hebrew of 28: 7 (not LXX) had "in the beginning of the reign", which contradicts "of the fourth year", inserted to reconcile it in some measure with 27: 1.

the "popular" prophets were liars, and that they would be praying for the survivors in Jerusalem, if they really were prophets.

Nothing could be more definite than this. From the fourth year of Jehoiakim on, Jeremiah had proclaimed that Nebuchadrezzar had been made ruler over Judah and her neighbours by God (cf. 25: 1, 8, 9). Apart from one serious check from Egypt he had gone his all-conquering way ever since. Jeremiah had foretold the fate of Jehoiakim, and it had come to pass. It was not merely that Jeremiah knew that he had God's message, but that it had been vindicated by events. For all that, we suddenly find him brought to a halt, half doubting his certainty of God's coming judgment.

We do not know whether Hananiah ben-Azzur carefully staged his confrontation with Jeremiah, or whether the spirit of prophecy fell on him suddenly, when they both happened to be in the Temple court at the same time (28: 1). If we could answer this question with certainty we should know a great deal more about the nature of the "popular" prophets than we do. Be that as it may, Hananiah's message was directed expressly at Jeremiah (28: 1). He repeated the oracle that Jeremiah had stigmatized as a lie, and even strengthened it. The downfall of Nebuchadrezzar was so certain and close that he used the prophetic perfect, "I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon"; he further specified the time within which the exiles and Temple vessels would be back, viz. under two years (28: 2ff.).

This was an oracle that flatly contradicted the whole tenor of Jeremiah's message during the previous twenty-eight years. It virtually charged Jeremiah with being a fraud, and yet he almost sat down under it. In a dignified manner he affirmed that he wished that Hananiah would prove correct (Jeremiah never lost his love for his people!), but he could not overlook that his message was inconsistent with the general tenor of acknowledged earlier prophecy. He must therefore wait for the outcome to be able to judge whether Hananiah had been sent by Yahweh (28: 5-9).

Hananiah's answer was to break the wooden yoke which Jeremiah was still wearing and to repeat the promise of liberation within two years. Weiser is probably correct in suggesting that he broke the yoke "in the increased strength of ecstatic divine inspiration".¹² It would have been better, however, if he had spoken of exaltation rather than ecstasy. Hananiah could be reasoned with

¹² *Op. cit.*, p. 274.

¹³ *Jeremid'*, p. 164.

by Jeremiah, and he responded with the most effective answer under the circumstances. This is not what is normally understood as ecstasy.

Here we are faced with the problem of "popular" prophets in its crassest form. Even though history had vindicated the canonical prophets of an earlier period with their message of doom as against the "popular" prophets with their message of "peace", there was nothing Jeremiah could do, when the authenticity of his message was challenged, except to say, "Wait and see!". Hananiah ben-Azzur was as much a *nabi* as was Jeremiah, and the title is not denied him even when the judgment of God had fallen on him. There was nothing in the form of their message to distinguish them, though their contents were in flat contradiction. One or the other had not been sent by God, but by popular standards there was nothing to show which, until the outcome should reveal it. This does not mean that Jeremiah did not know where the truth lay, but he could not prove it.

The position was far too serious for a two years' wait. They were to be decisive, though not in the sense that Hananiah expected. If Zedekiah, his lords and advisers continued on their course of plotting rebellion, any hope of saving Jerusalem from the wrath of Nebuchadrezzar would vanish. When God executes judgment, He always wants those who suffer it to know why they do, so He had to intervene to put an end to any genuine uncertainty that might have been created by Hananiah.

It was not long before Jeremiah received a message for Hananiah. He was told that, so far from removing the relatively "easy" yoke of wood, he and his kind had only turned Nebuchadrezzar's rule into an iron yoke of servitude (28: 13f.). Rudolph¹³ and Weiser¹⁴ are almost certainly correct in keeping the second person singular of the Massoretic text in v. 13 as against the first person singular of LXX and RSV ("I will make").

Nebuchadrezzar was, for his time, an enlightened and merciful ruler, at least when compared with the sadism of the Assyrian kings that had gone before him. In spite of Jehoiaxim's revolt he had dealt with Judah relatively lightly, and Jehoiachin and his fellow-deportees seem to have had little positive to complain about. But the outrage of Zedekiah's revolt roused him in anger to the most drastic of measures. His treatment of Zedekiah (39: 6f.) awakens a shiver of horror even today, and Miss Kenyon's recent excavations have revealed how whole-hearted was the destruction of

¹⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 248.

Jerusalem, which he ordered. Even if the neighbours of Judah had for the most part left her in the lurch, we can be sure that they had to groan under a much stricter surveillance by the Chaldeans from then on. All this was due to the refusal of the "popular" prophets to accept God's message of doom and their substituting for it one of "peace".

Jeremiah's message to Hananiah went further. It contained also God's vindication of Himself and of His prophet. "Jeremiah said to Hananiah the prophet, 'Listen to me, Hananiah. The LORD did not send you, and you have caused this people to put its trust in a falsehood. Therefore, thus says the LORD, I am on the point of sending you from off the face of the ground. This very year you will die, for you have preached rebellion against the LORD.' And Hananiah the prophet died that same year in the seventh month" (28: 15ff.).

It is remarkable but characteristic that Hananiah is given the title "prophet" to the last; he was a prophet, only God had not sent him. Now he sent him on his last journey.¹⁵ "From off the face of the ground" is doubtless a deliberate reminiscence of Gen. 4: 14. Hananiah went down to Sheol with the mark of Cain on his forehead as a forerunner of the nation he had helped to murder.

This vindication of Jeremiah by the divine hand laid on Hananiah is doubtless the explanation of Zedekiah's pathetic clinging to him during the last days of Jerusalem, even if he was not prepared to obey him and follow his advice. At the same time the desperate gamblers around him, pushing him into rebellion, now cared little whether Jeremiah or Hananiah, or even both, were prophets sent by God.

THE PRINCIPLE OF CONTINGENCY

In Hananiah's case the old Deuteronomic warning had gone into effect, and he had died at God's hand. But we are told of no similar case. The nearest approach is presumably the striking blind of Bar-Jesus or Elymas (Acts 13: 6-11). Silence is not proof, but it does suggest that examples were very rare. In fact the only proof that it was God who had smitten Hananiah was his previous rebuke and doom announced by Jeremiah.

The longer and less drastic method of waiting for the fulfilment was largely invalidated by the principle of contingency. A minor example may be found already in the story of Ahab, cf. 1 Ki. 21:

¹⁵ It is a major weakness in RSV, when, in contrast to RV, it does not preserve the double use of "send".

19-22 with 21: 29. In fact it is already in the story of David's sin (2 Sam. 12: 13). It underlies the whole prophetic denunciation of specific sins. One of its clearest expressions is in Jonah's message, "Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown" (3: 4). The prophet never really expected his threat to go into operation (4: 2). Why should he make the long journey to Nineveh, unless it was that God wished to spare the city? A striking example is found, if we compare Ezek. 29: 17-20 with 26: 1-28: 19.

The principle behind this contingency is expounded in Jer. 18: 1-10. At a divinely given impulse the prophet went down to the south-east corner of Jerusalem to where the potters did their work near the pool of Siloam. "And I went down to the potter's house, and there he was doing his work at the wheel. And as often as the vessel he was making—as happens with the clay in the potter's hand—was spoiled, he would make it again into another vessel as the potter felt it right to do" (18: 3, 4).

As Jeremiah watched the potter with the fascination his work always exercises on the uninitiated, every now and again the pot would not take on the desired shape (the Hebrew verb is frequentative). Jeremiah would not know why, and the divine message is not based on the reason. But whenever this happened the potter simply crushed the clay together and started again, often—who can read the mind of the potter?—making an entirely differently shaped vessel to the one he had originally begun.

The point of the oracle is not in the potter's complete control over the clay, but in his right to change his mind. The clay can hinder the potter's design, but it cannot escape his hand. Above all it cannot dictate what it is to become. God is perfectly justified in cancelling His most emphatic message of doom in the moment a nation repents (vv. 7f.). Equally none can rely and presume on a promise of blessing. If the obedience that called it forth turns to disobedience, the blessing may become a curse (vv. 9f.).

One of the most striking examples of this taken from Jeremiah is the oracle in 34: 2-5. God, in pity for the harassed, weak king, on His own initiative sends him a message that while he cannot escape punishment, it will be far milder than he could have expected in his wildest hopes. But however much Zedekiah clung to Jeremiah as his one hope, he refused to trust God. As a result probably every word of the oracle went into literal effect, but in a manner that meant not alleviation of punishment but a heightening of it to an extent that makes our blood run cold.

In its original setting the oracle in the potter's house was given to encourage Jeremiah. He had to understand that neither his

apparent failure until then, nor the categorical nature of his message of doom meant that there was no hope for Judah (18: 11). Far more important to God than the fulfilment of His oracles was the repentance of Judah, and Jeremiah would have cared little for his shattered reputation as a prophet, if he could have saved his people.

Perhaps it ought to be said that this principle of contingency does not apply to the oracle which reveals the character of God or the working out of His grace in the setting up of the kingdom of God, for the sin of man cannot change God's character or deflect Him from His purpose of grace and salvation. But wherever the question of human response is involved, there is of necessity also an element of contingency.

This is most distasteful to those who are too small-minded to appreciate Emerson's dictum, "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines," and who attribute to God their own vices. It is offensive to those who seek to glorify God by so exalting His power that there is no possibility of choice left to His creation. Above all it is infuriating to those who, unsatisfied with God's grace in the present, wish to show their importance by knowing the working out of God's plans in detail. Even the day and hour of His second coming were hidden from the Son of Man in the days of His flesh (Mk. 13: 32). The omniscience of the Father must include a knowledge of how the individual man and nation will respond to His word, but it is never given to man to know, until the decision has been made irretrievably.

It follows that for much of the prophetic message, it was not possible for the prophet's contemporaries to judge whether he had been truly sent by God, because the fulfilment lay beyond their time. There are, however, other means of judging a prophet, and these are particularly indicated in Jer. 23: 9-40. This is no consecutive oracle, but messages given on various occasions during his life. The one drawback is that they can be used effectively only by the spiritually minded, but that is in the nature of things, for spiritual matters are spiritually discerned.

(To be continued)

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