THE PROPHECY OF JEREMIAH

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XXVI. THE SIEGE OF JERUSALEM

NONE of our sources gives the date or the exact cause of Zedekiah's revolt (2 Ki. 24: 20b, Jer. 52: 3b, 2 Chr. 36: 13). It is reasonable to suppose that not too much time will have elapsed between Zedekiah's refusal to pay tribute, or whatever means he took to throw off the Babylonian yoke, and the arrival of Nebuchadrezzar's forces before Jerusalem late in December, 588, or in the first days of 587 B.C.[1] So it is possible that the revolt was caused by the accession to the Egyptian throne in 588 of the energetic Hophra (Apries),[2] but it should not be regarded as certain. Egypt certainly gave what help it could to Judah. Judah's partners were the Ammonites (Ezek. 21: 18 ff.) and Tyre and Sidon (Ezek. 26: 1-28: 23).

There is no record of any action by Jeremiah comparable to his wearing a yoke about five years earlier (27: 2), or of any warning message sent to Zedekiah. So it may well be that Judah went down the slippery slope of revolt so slowly but surely, that the historian might find it hard to determine the exact cause or date of the break.

There is an interesting difference in the reactions of Jeremiah and Ezekiel to the revolt, which is worth noting. The former obviously looked on it as something inevitable with only one possible outcome. He had apparently no denunciations for those responsible until they broke their oath about the "Hebrew slaves" (34: 8-22). His attitude is largely reflected by the editor of *Kings* (II, 24: 20). On the other hand Ezekiel (17: 11-21) considered that Judah's great sin lay in Zedekiah's breach of his solemn oath to Nebuchadrezzar (cf. also 2 Chr. 36: 13), which is not even mentioned by *Kings* or *Jeremiah*.

Normally a great deal depends on our circumstances. Ezekiel, probably in common with the majority of the deportees in Baby-

[1] I have been convinced by the arguments in E. Auerbach, *Wann eroberte Nebukadnezar Jerusalem?* V.T. XI, pp. 128 *seq.*, so in contrast to earlier instalments I assume that Zedekiah was appointed king after 1 Nisan 597, which means that his "first" year began with Nisan 596, his ninth year was 588/7, and Jerusalem was destroyed in 586. See p. 168, n. 18.

[2] So T. H. Robinson, *A History of Israel*, Vol. 1, p. 438.

lonia, regarded Jehoiachin as the true king of the people, Zedekiah being little more than a regent—he does not call him *melekh* but *nasi'*. This was probably Nebuchadrezzar's own intention, for on his ration documents found in Babylon Jehoiachin still has the title king.[3] The solemn oath probably included some mention of this. Jehoiachin had accepted Nebuchadrezzar as his sovereign lord of God's appointing and so had found a measure of grace in a strange land. For Zedekiah to rebel was to fly in the face of God and the true king and to make destruction certain. Ezekiel's attitude seems to have been shared by many in Judah as well (Jer. 38: 19).

For Jeremiah Jehoiachin was the *de jure* king who would never return. He had to deal with the *de facto* king and with the "bad figs" over which he ruled. In the general gloom the added sin of a broken oath to Nebuchadrezzar had little importance, but the wrong done to the "Hebrew slaves" showed that the people were going down in destruction not merely because of the sins of the past, or because of their ruler's broken oath, but also because of their own sins in the present.

JEREMIAH'S REHABILITATION (21: 1-7)

The suggestion made earlier,[4] that those left in Jerusalem had seen in Jehoiachin's deportation a sign of their own goodness and God's blessing on them, is borne out by the apparent lack of any special preparation to resist the Babylonian might. It was not until the Babylonian troops were actually around the walls (21: 4) that the euphoria suddenly ceased and the people were sobered. Discoveries made at Lachish show us that Konyahu ben Elnathan, the commander of the army, hurried down to Egypt,[5] probably to try to arrange for help, in which he was evidently successful. On the other hand, at long last, it was recognized that Jeremiah had been telling the truth all along, and so, just as in the days of Isaiah (2 Ki. 19: 2), a delegation waited on him for an oracle of comfort and deliverance (21: 2).

Jeremiah's answer was unequivocal. So far from blessing and delivering, God would not even be neutral in the coming struggle. He would not take Judah's side but would actively fight against him (v. 5). There would not be even the normal hope of survival, because to the normal hazards of a siege, famine and sword, would be added the plague as well (v. 6). Survival, in any case, would be for execution (v. 7).

[3] Cf. ANET, p. 308; DOTT, p. 86.
[4] *E.Q.*, Vol. XXXVIII, No. 1 (1966), pp. 43 ff.
[5] Lachish Ostracon III, ANET, p. 322; DOTT, p. 214.

The position of this section is superficially puzzling. It has no obvious relationship to the oracles about the kings in 21: 11-23: 8, and it is out of position among prophecies that are arranged in mainly chronological order. A clue to the answer is given by the mention of Pashur ben Malchiah (v. 1); he has been brought into the closest reasonable juxtaposition with Pashur ben Immer (20: 1-6). The latter Pashur's action combined with Jehoiakim's burning of the roll (36: 23) meant Jeremiah's formal repudiation by church and state alike. This may well have been one of the main reasons why we have no record of his being consulted either by Jehoiachin or by Zedekiah in the earlier years of his reign. Now Zedekiah's action, backed as it was by Zephaniah the high priest (v. 1; cf. 29: 25), meant Jeremiah's official rehabilitation. From now on he was not merely a prophet but the prophet, and this gave him the standing he needed for his witness during the siege.

THE MESSAGE FOR THE PEOPLE (21: 8-10)

It is hardly likely that this message was given to the delegation, but there are no grounds for separating it from its present context. We can safely assume that once his status had been recognized he made this his standard oracle whenever opportunity suited, but that the authorities felt they could not interfere with him except as to be narrated later.

There would be no need to say much about Jeremiah's exhortation to all and sundry to save their lives by desertion and surrender, were it not that it has scandalized many expositors, some of whom, e.g., Duhm and Cornill, have flatly declared that he could not possibly have said this. It is no answer to their argument to say that most who have taken up this position have been German Lutherans with their exaggerated theological ideas of absolute obedience to the state, a view that was not shaken until the Nazi régime; at the same time it suggests that the difficulty lies not in Jeremiah's actions but in the prejudices of those who have sought to understand him.

Already in 605 Jeremiah had proclaimed Nebuchadrezzar God-appointed ruler of Judah (25: 8-11). This had been solemnly repeated in Zedekiah's fourth year (27: 5-7; 28: 14). The warning had been added that rejection of Nebuchadrezzar's rule would bring divine punishment with it (27: 8), while acceptance of it would bring national survival (27: 11). Irrespective of Zedekiah's oath, irrespective of whether he or Jehoiachin was to be considered the true king, his revolt was a revolt against God himself. Even in the context of modern nationalism such a consideration should be decisive for the God-fearing man; the claims of Caesar must never

be allowed to encroach on the claims of God. But Israel was not a nation in the modern sense; it was God's people, and the king was merely His representative. Once we accept the fact and the validity of Jeremiah's earlier teaching and Israel's basic concept of itself, there was no other way open to him but to urge on all and sundry that he immediately put an end to his rebellion against God.

We are not told that this was Jeremiah's regular message until 38: 2 f., when the position in the city had already become desperate. Yet his arrest considerably earlier[6] makes sense only if those who so mishandled him assumed that he was carrying out the advice he had been giving publicly for some time. If it is not mentioned till ch. 38, it will be partly because to the common man it did not make sense until the position began to be desperate. It is remarkable that he was allowed to advocate surrender and desertion for so long. For me it is explained by the fact that once they had recognized him officially as prophet they could not silence him. They could imprison him for desertion, real or imagined, but they could not stop his message.

A. S. Peake, writing on this problem, said:

> We must not overlook the difference between Jeremiah and the people. He knew his place to be in the doomed city. The captain may urge the passengers and then the sailors to abandon the sinking ship; his own place is on board till the last man has left. Jeremiah knew that the ship of State was foundering, but he had a loftier duty than to save his life.[7]

This is well said, but it does not go far enough. Shortly after the deputation of 21: 1-7 Jeremiah approached the king with a message containing a grain of hope (34: 1). The Babylonian siege of Jerusalem had not yet reached its height, because part of the forces were required for the capture of Lachish and Azekah, which still held out (34: 7); it is safe to assume that this was before Hophra's intervention drew away the Babylonian forces for the time being.

On the face of it Jeremiah's words do not make sense. Jer. 34: 2f. merely repeat the message of 21: 3-7 and reach the climax that Zedekiah would stand before Nebuchadrezzar to give account for his actions, with deportation as the result. Then there follows an apparently unconditional promise of a peaceful end for him and an honourable burial. Quite apart from the fact that the prospect of such a burial would hardly be much consolation to him, it is questionable whether Nebuchadrezzar would have permitted it. We must not only import a conditional element into v. 4 but also give *'akh* a meaning which will clearly contrast the promise with the

[6] Cf. *E.Q.*, Vol. XXXVII, No. 2 (1965), p. 104.
[7] *Jeremiah* (*The Century Bible*), Vol. 1, p. 24.

prophecy of doom. Rudolph is surely correct, when he translates,[8] "Nonetheless obey the word of Yahweh, Zedekiah, king of Judah (thus says Yahweh concerning you), so shall you not die by the sword . . ." He omits or transposes the bracketed words, but though this is neater, it cannot be said to be absolutely necessary.

If we take it this way, then the word of Yahweh to be obeyed is that already proclaimed to the people (21: 8-10). The king was being offered mercy on the same terms as his subjects, or even more, for now we can give v. 5 its natural meaning of a peaceful death and burial in Jerusalem. The individual citizen was guaranteed no more than his life, but Zedekiah was being offered the preservation of the city as well.

Jeremiah's message of grace—little though most so regarded it—was offered to all alike and to the king above all. There is no justification for Skinner's remark, "Those whom he counselled to save themselves by individual surrender were the private citizens who with their wives and children were being sacrificed to political ambitions in which they had no share, and for which they had no responsibility."[9] The comparison of Jeremiah with the captain of a sinking ship is less apposite than that of a doctor who remains at his post so long as there are any to be succoured; perhaps better still would be Christ's words, "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10: 11).

THE HEBREW SLAVES (34: 8-22)

What Zedekiah's reaction to Jeremiah's words may have been, we do not know. It matters little, for soon afterwards something happened which transformed the situation.

It is not fanciful to suppose that Zedekiah reacted to Jeremiah's message not by obedience but by an act of outstanding "generosity." Since the covenant was made by Zedekiah with the citizens of Jerusalem in the presence of God (v. 18), the initiative was probably his, and he may well have offered some compensation to the slave owners.

We may take it for granted that the law of the Hebrew slave[10]

[8] *Jeremiah*, p. 202.

[9] *Prophecy and Religion*, p. 263.

[10] For our purpose the exact meaning of the phrase is not essential. A. Alt is, however, probably correct in arguing that we are to interpret "Hebrew" not ethically but socially, i.e., that as with Habiru it means one who with his loss of land and livelihood has also lost his full standing in society, cf. his *Die Ursprünge des israelitischen Rechts* in *Kleine Schriften zur Geschichte des Volkes Israel*, Vol. 1, pp. 291-294.

(Ex. 21: 2-4; Deut. 15: 12-15) had long been ignored, and the Josianic reforms do not seem to have changed the position. Religious reform is always easier than social. In addition, we may doubt whether such a freeing of the Hebrew slave would normally have had much point so long as the jubilee laws concerning property were ignored (Lev. 25: 8-34). 2 Chr. 36: 21 implies that the laws of Ex. 23: 10 f. and Lev. 25: 2-7 had not been obeyed. All the less will there have been any interest in keeping the Jubilee—a fact that is in any case implied by the prophetic attacks on land-grabbing. Normally it will have been lack of adequate land that will have created the Hebrew slave, and without any hope of land in the future freedom had little meaning or hope for him.

We gain the impression that the ceremony was no mere belated keeping of the law of the Hebrew slave, but a once-for-all freeing of all Israelite slaves, a gesture of generosity that would surely move God to mercy. If Jeremiah refers to the law (vv. 13, 14), it is to stress that, so far from being a generous act, it was merely a belated fulfilment of duty. The ceremony was carried out by one of the age-old covenant rituals of the Fertile Crescent (cf. Gen. 15: 9 f., 17). It is probable that the participants called down a curse on themselves— might they be as the slaughtered calf—invoking God as witness and implementer of the curse, if they did not keep their solemn promise.

We may speculate, if we will, on the motives behind it beyond that of bribing God. In the hunger of the siege it will have saved many an owner from the need of feeding his slaves; it will have provided new recruits for the sorely deplenished ranks of the fighting men. These and other similar motives are possible, but they will all have been subsidiary; the great thing was that God would now have to show His generosity in return. The policy seemed successful, gloriously successful! Suddenly the enemy vanished from before the walls of Jerusalem leaving not a trace. It could only mean that God had once again worked a miracle as in the days of Hezekiah.

In fact the Babylonian army had marched south to meet Hophra's troops coming up from Egypt. The general[11] showed his sense of scorn for any force that Zedekiah could put into the field by not leaving even a small body to contain Jerusalem and so defend his rear (37: 5). Judah's leaders could at first grasp only that the Chaldeans had gone, and so they began to round up their former slaves again. Since they were the judges, there was no possible

[11] His name is not given us, but cf. 39: 3. Nebuchadrezzar seems not to have come further south than Riblah (2 Ki. 25: 6).

appeal against their action. This led to one of Jeremiah's extremest denunciations: "Therefore, thus has the LORD said, '*You* have not obeyed Me by proclaiming release, everyone to his brother and everyone to his neighbour. Behold *I* am proclaiming release to you—oracle of the LORD— (release) to the sword, to pestilence and to famine. I will display you as an object to make the kingdoms of the earth tremble" (35: 17). They had broken God's covenant by ignoring God's demands, and they had broken their own covenant, which they had called on God to witness, so God declared them released from the bonds of His Covenant.. They were outlaws from then on, fit sport for the sword, pestilence and famine. Even the laws of decent burial would be denied them (v. 20).

Whether it was Jeremiah's oracle or the reproach of a conscience that was not altogether seared, we are not told. Perhaps it was the news of imminent battle that would result in Hophra's complete defeat and withdrawal into Egypt. Anyway Zedekiah realized that the miracle was no miracle and that his policy of bribing God had become a boomerang. So once again he sent a delegation, this time humbly to entreat Jeremiah's intercession (37: 3). His answer was one of complete hopelessness, and the call to the king to surrender was not even repeated (37: 7-10). By implication he refused point blank to pray for the doomed city and its rulers.

Jeremiah was not to see the return of the Babylonians, because he lay in prison charged as a traitor and attempted deserter.[12] We are given no indication how long it was before he was taken out of the great cistern, cleaned down and smuggled into Zedekiah's presence (37: 17). What a subject for an artist! The king in his royal robes, in the prime of life (he was about thirty-five at the time), well fed, and the prophet with all the marks of prison on him, even if he had been rendered tolerably respectable, half-starved, old (he was nearly sixty). Yet it is the king who humbly asks for a message from God, and the prophet who replies, "You shall be delivered into the hand of the king of Babylon."

THE PIT AND THE MIRY CLAY (38: 1-28)

Transfer to the easier imprisonment of the court of the royal guard (37: 21) simply meant for Jeremiah that he could take up his old message of destruction, surrender and desertion (vv. 2 f.). The

[12] Cf. *E.Q.*, Vol. XXXVII, No. 2 (1965), pp. 104 f. It should be noted that Jeremiah was never absolved from the charge or released from custody so long as Zedekiah was on the throne.

situation was growing desperate, and Zedekiah's ministers could see that even the elite royal guard was being influenced. There are no grounds for thinking that their demand for Jeremiah's death was primarily motivated by personal hatred. Indeed we may ask ourslves whether they had not passed beyond that stage. The very logic of events demanded Jeremiah's elimination, as it would have anywhere else. If in addition the prophet could disappear suddenly and mysteriously, taken by God rather than by human hands, it would greatly stabilize the waverers.

Zedekiah's despondent and almost cynical answer, "Behold, he is in your power,[13] for the king cannot do anything against you" (v. 5), has often been taken as proof of his weak character. This is doubtful. When at the king's command Jeremiah was brought out of Jonathan's cistern prison (37: 17), he could have reviewed the charge and acquitted Jeremiah. Instead he only changed the place of his imprisonment, thus by implication approving of the sentence. In the court of the king's guard Jeremiah had proved such a nuisance, that Zedekiah's ministers could claim that his leniency had been an error of judgment. Short of quashing the judgment, Zedekiah could hardly refuse to let them take Jeremiah back to Jonathan's prison, where with the short rations he would infallibly have died very soon. The sequel (v. 26) strongly suggests that this is what they wanted him to understand. This, however, hardly justifies Cunliffe-Jones's interpretation of Zedekiah's answer as "a formula which apparently gave them a free hand short of Jeremiah's death".[14]

So his acquiescence was no necessary sign of weakness. In addition, however much he may have been urged and pushed, there is no suggestion that he was not in control until the day he revolted. Even then he could have saved life and kingdom by an early surrender. Now, like so many others in his position, he had become the victim of circumstances, for while his lords would have prevented his surrender, they would at any time have been ready to save their own necks by betraying him. He was not the first to discover that he who would ride the storm may be swept away by it.

A public trial and execution would have given Jeremiah another opportunity to proclaim his message and would have shown that the royal ministers were afraid of its truth. He had to disappear

[13] Literally, "in your hand."

[14] *Jeremiah* (*Torch Commentaries*), p. 227; cf. Peake, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 168.

quietly and mysteriously. Opportunity was taken of a moment when the court of the guard was empty. Jeremiah disappeared into one of the cisterns which lay beneath the court, his whereabouts known only to his enemies and a few trusted retainers. A certain deep-rooted awe and superstition prevented them from throwing him in. If they had done so, it would infallibly have meant almost immediate death in the thick mud that covered the bottom of the cistern.[15] Instead they lowered him by ropes (v. 6). He was gone from sight, and it was all one to them whether he perished from hunger, or whether in weariness and weakness he lost his foothold in the dark and fell to disappear into the thick, clinging mud, never again to be seen by human eyes. For all they knew the mud might even be deep enough for him not to be able to find firm ground beneath his feet before he had been covered.

The instruments at God's disposal are often unexpected. News of what had happened somehow reached Ebed-melech, a negro eunuch slave, possibly a high official in the royal harem, because he seems to have had an easy access to the king. We are not told why his protest moved the king. It may be that the vision of the prophet sinking slowly ever deeper into the mud unnerved him,[16] or he may have been angry at the way his permission had been interpreted.

The preparations made by Ebed-melech reveal vividly the viscosity of the mud. The terror of Jeremiah's position can probably be imagined only by those who have passed through a similar experience. It is mentioned in the Psalter as a position of utmost danger (Ps. 40: 2; 69: 2, 14). It was, however, greatly increased by the thick darkness in which he found himself. He had not feared death, but this experience nearly broke him. As a result, when Zedekiah arranged to speak to him once again (v. 14)—did he think that his action might have won him some respite?—for the first time Jeremiah hesitated (v. 15).

[15] The Hebrew *va-yashlikhu*, translated a trifle unintelligently *and cast* by RSV, may indicate the speed used. It may be that the lack of water in the cistern points to a period just before the former rain, i.e., about eight months before the fall of the city.

[16] The RSV treatment of the Heb. text in vv. 9, 10 is hard to understand. In v. 10 it has, probably correctly, accepted the emendation "three men" instead of "thirty men"—we may not exclude the possibility that "thirty" is correct, the majority of them being intended as a guard in case they were disturbed. Yet in v. 9 it has allowed the impossible Heb. text to stand. Were "there is no bread left in the city" correct, then Jeremiah would have starved equally well, when he had been removed from the cistern. In addition Ebed-melech knew that starvation was not the pressing danger. We should end the sentence with "... and he will die there."

Emboldened by the king's oath Jeremiah gave him God's last offer of mercy. Even then surrender would mean the sparing of the king and his family, while the city would escape the extremity of punishment. "Conscience doth make cowards of us all." Zedekiah looked beyond Nebuchadrezzar to the Jews who had espoused the Chaldean cause either out of conviction or moved by Jeremiah's warnings. How would they greet him, the destroyer of his country? (v. 19). They might celebrate the king who went down to Sheol amid the ruins of his capital, but the man who surrendered tamely after ruining his people could be only the cause of opprobrium and curses. Even if Jeremiah assured him that they would not have their will of him, this could be only by his being kept in custody. As he watched the despair passing over the doomed king's face, the prophet foretold the *qinah* dirge the palace harem would sing over him:

> The men on whom you trusted have allured you
> and prevailed over you;
> Your feet have sunk in the quicksand—
> they have turned back.

In these words the king heard his fate clearly and knew they were true. Humanly speaking his feet were too fast in the quicksand for him to extricate himself. When we come to look at what happened after the fall of Jerusalem, we shall see that some of the rats had probably already left the sinking ship. His request to Jeremiah not to divulge the subject of the conversation (v. 24) was more natural than many realize. Most of his ministers were prepared to save their skins, if they could, and they would assume that Zedekiah would do the same. If they heard Jeremiah's message, they might well hasten to betray the king; alternatively they would set such a watch on him as to deprive him of all liberty of action.

Commentators have much searching of heart as they discuss whether Jeremiah was justified in lying (v. 27). It may be that if some of them had written after Hitler and Stalin instead of before them, they would have viewed the situation differently. To lay down one's life for the truth is a noble end to one life, but we may question its justification, when others are involved in one's ruin. Even if Jeremiah had merely remained obstinately mute, he would simply have confirmed the ministers' suspicion that Zedekiah was planning a last-minute bolt, which, be it remembered, could save Jerusalem from the worst destruction. Happy the man who has not stood where Jeremiah did; judgment on him is best left to those who have passed through his experience, many of whom have

lied valiantly for the sake of others. Sin among men often creates positions where there is no perfect solution or way out.

If Jeremiah was at fault, it will rather have been because he was so shaken, that he hesitated to answer Zedekiah (v. 15). Jeremiah's weakness will have encouraged the king to show his weakness.

Some front-rank commentators, e.g., Rudolph,[17] argue that 38: 24-28 must originally have stood after 37: 21. The only real argument in favour is Jeremiah's alleged plea that he should not be returned to Jonathan's cistern-prison (v. 26). We should remember, however, that Jeremiah's enemies were in considerable perplexity. We can be sure that the prophet had been lowered into Malchiah's dry cistern with considerable secrecy; Ebed-meleh's intervention had probably been even more secret. They will have been taken aback to see Jeremiah in his old place again, and puzzled to know exactly what had happened. We may be sure that neither Ebed-melech nor the king were revealing any secrets. Such a plea by Jeremiah would merely show that he himself was not very clear about what had happened, and that he had taken the removal from the cistern to be an act of repentance by those who had put him in, preparatory to his being sent back to the slightly less rigorous conditions of Jonathan's cistern-prison.

This section of Jeremiah's life ends with his message of divine comfort and reward for Ebed-melech (39: 15-18). In a time of complete destruction and almost universal death he would find the protecting hand of God over him, even as he had protected Jeremiah.[18]

(To be continued)

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[17] *Op. cit.*, p. 223.

[18] Addendum to p. 158, n. 1: Cf. also E. R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*², pp. 156, 161 ff.