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# The Word of God in the Book of Jeremiah<sup>1</sup>

H. CUNLIFFE-JONES

I had better entitle this paper: 'Prolegomena to an understanding of the Word of God in the book of Jeremiah', because the issues I am presenting to you are very elementary and not at all at a high theological level. Behind the experience in which the reading of part of the book of Jeremiah may be the occasion for the Word of God to become 'event' in our lives, there must lie the possibility of our reading the book of Jeremiah as having in some way a contemporary Word from God to us. So the simple question I want to consider is this: How do I read the book of Jeremiah to discover its religious meaning for today?

It must be because the question is so simple, and so obvious that the answer to it has been neglected. Professor R. B. Y. Scott in his valuable and illuminating study of *The Relevance of the Prophets* (1947) says in the preface: 'The result of critical study is not to destroy but to clarify the spiritual value and moral authority of the Scriptures.' Is it? Yes, I suppose it is. But for whom? The negative affirmation here seems to me quite unassailable. Critical study has not *destroyed* the authority of the Scriptures. And there is something to be said on the positive side too. Critical study, I would say, has started a process of clarification of the authority of the Bible, which, if only it can be assimilated and made effective in the thinking of the ordinary educated person may give the opportunity for a new living acceptance of the authority of the Bible. But we must beware of suggesting that effective assimilation has taken place before it has actually done so. There is a persistent tendency to speak as if the Bible, because of the labours of historical scholars, has now a better hold upon the minds of men than it ever had, and that we can confidently appeal to its authority which has received a new recognition. To my mind this is premature. Please God it will come. But the quickest path to its coming is the recognition of the unfulfilled tasks which must be carried out before the modern Christian can have a new confidence in his own handling of the Bible. There has just come into my hands Professor Leonard Hodgson's lectures to undergraduates in the University of Oxford on *Christian Faith and Practice*. In the course of the first one he says: 'If Christianity be not such a message for the world, it is nothing. But it cannot be this without the historical element in its creed, and the price which faith must pay for having anything to say that is worth saying is a willingness to submit its historical assertions to the most rigorous criticism

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<sup>1</sup> With the kind permission of the Study Department of the World Council of Churches.

of historical scholarship. By the providence of God we have, immediately behind us, as we face the needs of the present age, a period in which theology has been mainly occupied with rigorous critical and historical study of the books of the Bible, both of the Old and of the New Testament, the result of which is that we can with greater confidence than ever before proclaim our faith in Jesus Christ as God at work in this world's history rescuing his world from the chains of evil.'

Now I shall be misunderstood if I am taken as denying what Professor Hodgson affirms. I only want to ask who are the 'we' who have such confidence? If it is the Biblical scholars, I agree and am thankful for it. If it is the theologians, for whom Professor Hodgson has the right to speak, then the rest of this paper will indicate that I think some reservations must be made in agreeing with this. If it is the ministers of the Church, still more reservations must be made. If it is the members of the Church, I am not at all sure whether we ought to say 'yes', but that the reservations are almost so great as almost to amount to a denial; or to say 'no' and admit that something has to be allowed on the other side. In any case, I believe that there was a great gulf at this point between Professor Hodgson's ability to find a present religious message in the Bible and that of his audience.

### The Bible and A Message for the Present Day

The Bible is, of course, a large book, and generalisations about it are a little precarious. Let us consider the book of Jeremiah. How am I, as an educated Christian, to read this book so that I can find out its message about the living God for the world in which I live? I cannot do this by neglecting its historical meaning, but I want to read it, not to understand the past but in order to live by faith in God. Where shall I find the help that will enable me to find my way about the book of Jeremiah with some degree of intellectual comfort, and understand its message to the present day about the living God? The only true answer to this is that such help is not easily accessible, and until this answer can honestly be changed it is nonsense to speak of any real authority of the Bible so far as this concerns the book of Jeremiah.

What I am advocating is simply that there is a part of Biblical studies which properly belongs to the systematic theologian. It is only a very limited part. It is by no means the part that gives rise to new creative interpretations. But it is, in its way, absolutely indispensable to the acceptance of the authority of the Bible in contemporary life. I tread here on dangerous ground. My plea, because it comes not in the main highroad of any established discipline, but at the intersection of various disciplines, is liable to meet with opposition and neglect. The biblical scholars may well dislike it, because they are not likely to be impressed with the thoughts of amateurs in the sphere in which they are expert. The systematic theologians will not like it because it seeks to press them to undertake a difficult piece of work which they have been content to leave aside. I once asked Emil Brunner whether a commentary on Ezekiel by a man called Brunner was by him. He explained to me that he was a *Dogmatiker* and not a biblical scholar. In so saying he seems to me out of the tradition of the Reformation but he illustrates the difficulty. Yet whatever the neglect and opposition, I believe that my plea is sound and indispensable.

## The Historical and Theological Approach

Let me make it clear. The systematic theologian must humbly acknowledge and be continuously indebted to the work of the biblical scholar whose historical approach is primary. There can be no satisfactory present meaning of the Bible which is not built upon its historical meaning. It should be said, however, that there is a positivist conception of history, which, though it is fruitful in detailed research, gives no place for the judgment of the systematic theologian. It is held by many scholars. A current example is an article on 'The Understanding of the Old Testament' by Professor O. S. Rankin of the University of Edinburgh, in the *Hibbert Journal* for January, 1951. But here the conflict is not between the historian and the theologian, but between two different conceptions of the meaning of history. If the historian thinks of any particular area of Biblical history as needing to be set in the context of the completed revelation in Christ as given in the New Testament and in the consummation of all things, he has implicitly opened the door for a legitimate and necessary judgment by the systematic theologian. But at the moment, there seems no immediately practical steps which will convince the holders of a positivist view of history that theirs is a narrow understanding of what history means.

The systematic theologian must admit his continuous indebtedness to the historian, whose full perspective acquits his own judgments of any taint of arbitrariness. And the theologian must not claim that he and he alone can interpret the Bible to modern man. Rather the historical approach to the Bible can have directly a present meaning. Dr. C. H. Dodd is perhaps the most brilliant contemporary exponent of this. His method here is to clarify what actually happened, so that the very sharpening of the historical outline by the resources of modern historical scholarship makes us, as it were, contemporary with the event; we are there at its happening, and in being there we are moved to love and obey God. I am not disposed to deny or belittle this approach. I am humbly grateful, though I want even more of it than I have yet been given. Dr. Dodd himself has written a little booklet *How to Read the Gospels* which is both very good but at the same time tantalising. For the crucial question is how Dr. Dodd proceeds from this general survey to the detailed exposition of the Gospels chapter by chapter as the ordinary reader must read them. There is a gap here and the filling of it is a great want. For unless the ordinary reader can find his own way in an intelligible manner about the Bible itself, he will not read it. And the amount of Bible reading in the Church today is lamentably and cripplingly small.

But the historical approach to the task of expounding the Bible in its contemporary meaning is not enough. We must add to it the theological approach, which, on the basis of historical understanding, makes the transition between that age and this. Unless we can mix the Bible with our contemporary thinking it will remain dead wood, for all the reverence we give it. This is a dangerous enterprise, because we may make errors. But it is better to make errors which can be corrected, than to bypass the issues which must be faced if the Bible is to be alive for us.

## The Application to Jeremiah

Let us then consider what are the problems to be met and overcome if we are to treat the book of Jeremiah as having a contemporary message from God for us.

There is first, of course, the literary and historical problems. Nothing we can do with the book of Jeremiah can alter the fact that it is not in a form which makes systematic and consecutive reading easy. It consists of a mixture of poetry and prose oracles; it contains many redundances, not to speak of the difference between the Hebrew and Greek texts. It is not arranged in chronological order. Perhaps we could say that it contains the thoughts of Jeremiah, the thoughts of Baruch, and the thoughts of later commentators. Theological interpretation must start from the book as it is; and we must bear with its imperfections and seek to mitigate them in our presentation of the book to the present-day reader. One thing that is quite certain is that no solution of the problem is to be reached by heaping together passages which ought to be read together. This is desirable for many purposes, but not for helping people to read their Bibles. It is much easier to read Skinner's *Prophecy and Religion* than the *Book of Jeremiah*, and many people do not read the *Book of Jeremiah*, but quote out of Skinner the parts of Jeremiah which have attracted their attention. We must be given help to read the book in continuous fashion, and once we can do this, then we can draw comparisons, collect passages together and see the necessary inferences. But the general picture is no substitute for laying ourselves open to the impact of the book.

The same thing is true in principle of the historical questions. Jeremiah is an important historical document and must be seen in relation to the other evidence about the last days of the Kingdom of Judah. Once again the historical problems must be accepted in their full complexity. An admirable example from a period other than that of Jeremiah both of the full complexity of the historical issues and of the means of finding a way through it, is to be found in Professor H. H. Rowley's Schweich lectures, *From Joseph to Joshua*, in which he seeks to harmonise the extra-biblical evidence with conflicting biblical traditions in such a way as to give the fullest possible credit to the Biblical text. In the Book of Jeremiah, the questions of the relations between chapters seven and twenty-six (the temple sermon), the relation of Jeremiah to the Josianic reformation, the contents of the letter to the exiles (chap. 29) and many others, can only be decided on the basis of historic probability. And the assessment of that historic probability must, of course, take full account of the faith of Israel. It is only in the setting of a real understanding of the history that the theological questions can rightly be raised and answered.

There is a second group of problems relating to the difference between the understanding of the processes of the universe then and now. It may be possible to solve the historical problems without raising the question of what the situations would mean in terms of the present day. But if we are to take the book of Jeremiah into our own thinking we must not only elucidate the thought of the book in its ancient setting, but must also consciously relate it to the life of today. I may give as one example here a quotation from Professor North: *The Old Testament Interpretation of History*. 'It is open to us, if we choose to argue, that even if the Hebrew Kingdoms had been righteous, instead of wicked as the prophets declared they were, they would still have gone down before the might of empires like Assyria and Babylonia; that the fact that they did go down is no evidence that they were particularly wicked; that they were at least no worse than their neighbours, and that the prophets had no reason to expect them to be any better than they were. These are pertinent questions', says Professor

North, 'but this is not the point in the discussion at which to attempt to deal with them.'

These questions seem to be properly historical questions; and the relation between the prophetic understanding of history and the kind of understanding open to a modern Christian is one which falls within the full historical perspective. I am bound to say, however, that it appears only too easy to avoid such questions in an historical discussion. The theologian, however, cannot avoid them, because he must attempt a conscious relating of the ancient document to the life of the modern world.

There is a third group of problems which concern the relation of the book of Jeremiah to the eternal truth of God. Here the problem is mainly the problem of how to take seriously the reality of God at the centre of life in a world in which he is very much at the circumference. It is how to accept the normal functioning of life and yet to think that the first and great commandment is to love God with heart and soul and mind and strength. But beyond that the problem is how to read the book of Jeremiah so as to feed our souls on the truth that is binding upon us and set aside the limitations and distortions which we know to be there. This is not a question of reading into the book of Jeremiah what it does not contain. It is rather a question of reading it first in the light of the completed revelation in the New Testament, and second in the light of the experience of the continuing Church of God. What we are asking for is that the historical understanding of the book, which penetrates to its theology and religion, should be re-set in positive and systematic terms in the light of later revelation and experience. This provides us with a standard and a criterion by which to separate the dross from the pure gold. Only if we have the courage to do this—to recognise that our positive allegiance to Christ demands our historical and theological criticism of the book, shall we have that real reverence before the divine revelation which shall make it fruitful in our hearts.

I imagine that there may be general agreement that the book of Jeremiah should be read in the light of its completion in Christ; while some might demur to my adding the additional criterion of the experience of the continuing Church of God. I should think it right to say that the completion of the Old Testament Revelation in Christ is an eschatological fact which is only complete in the final consummation, and that this is sufficient justification. But I have in mind particularly, for example, the lesson of toleration which has only been learnt by the Church in recent centuries, and as a result of interaction between the Church and the world. We must not let the experience of the Church obscure the Revelation; but we cannot receive the Revelation except in the content of the experience of the Church. If it be said that this opens the door to a complete subjectivism, I can only say that without the possibility of using subjectivism there can be no true apprehension of the objective Revelation.

### **The Living Message of the Book**

What, then, is the living message of the book of Jeremiah for us today? Amid the chorus of overwhelming praise for the prophets, commendation of their historic achievement and of their permanent worth, there are from time to time one or two disquieting remarks which suggest that the process of learning from the prophets may be more difficult than it would seem. C. H. Dodd wrote in his early work on *The Authority of the Bible* (1928):

'The prophets' remoulding of the idea of God is indeed, as we must frankly confess, partial. There is more perhaps in their conception of the divine character which we should wish to correct than in their ethical ideals for human Society.' And Austin Farrer has written recently in *The Glass of Vision* (1948): 'Nothing, perhaps, but the prophets' dramatic attempt to predict and wield the destiny of peoples in the name of God could have created the sense of history as an intrinsically meaningful forward movement; but prophetism must be got rid of before scientific history can begin, for the dynamic of historical process is not rightly estimated by intuitions of a moralistic divine teleology in battles and famines.' The prophets must be honoured for their achievement in the historic development of Israel; but the question for those who seek to read them today is whether they still have a contemporary word. And that is a more difficult question.

I think that Jeremiah has suffered more than most books from the exigencies of accepting the consequences of liberalism for theology. Historic criticism is the most far-reaching upheaval the Church has ever known. I have a good deal of sympathy with John Henry Newman and also Canon H. P. Liddon in this connection. Not that I share their point of view. But they were right as to the profound effect of admitting modern historical thinking. And we are not yet out of the wood. In the circumstances of the rise of historical criticism, it was natural to seek adjustments which would provide an intelligible and fruitful basis for teaching without too much head-on collision. In regard to Jeremiah this meant a concentration on the life of Jeremiah to the neglect of his teaching. This has been a fruitful line of study, bringing with it great enrichment, but it has its defects. Let me quote to you the summary which Professor H. H. Rowley gives of the book of Jeremiah in his recent book *The Growth of the Old Testament* (1950). Professor Rowley's scholarship is, of course, impeccable, and what he says is a masterly summing up of the trend of study of the book during the last half century.

'Apart from the elements of his teaching shared with other prophets', he writes, 'Jeremiah is notable for his perception of the inner quality of religion as fellowship with God, depending not on this place or on that, but on the soul's *rapport* with God. The Temple was not essential to worship (vii : 1-15), nor was the true circumcision that of the flesh (iv : 4). His emphasis on the individual (31<sup>30</sup>) is frequently noted, but he did not forget that the individual is a member of society, and in some way carried in the stream of its life. He warned men of the calamities their policies would entail for the children of his day (16<sup>3f</sup>), while denying that they could blame their fathers for their own sorrows (31<sup>20</sup>). The formal inconsistency of these attitudes was due to his recognition of man's sociality and his individuality. The Covenant, to be valid, must be no mere inheritance from the past, but one the individual makes his own in the writing of its law on his very personality (31<sup>31-34</sup>) though it should not be forgotten that it is still a Covenant with the nation—with the house of Judah—and not merely with the individual. Jeremiah's teaching was born of his own experience of loneliness and suffering, and of a sensitiveness of spirit unsurpassed by that of any Old Testament figure we know. Unmarried, hated and persecuted by his own family (11<sup>21-28</sup>) despised by Jehoiakim and bitterly hated by the courtiers of the weak Zedekiah, cast into a foul cistern (38<sup>6</sup>) he had scant human fellowship to sustain him. Add to this that the tarrying of the fulfilment of some of his prophecies made him a

laughing stock to men, and we can understand why there were times when he roundly vowed he would prophecy no more and complained that God had deceived him (207). Yet the prophetic fire, that could not be quenched, burned in his bones, and he was driven again to prophecy (209).'

In this summary there seem to me to be four elements. (1) Fundamentally Jeremiah's teaching is the same as the other prophets'; (2) apart from this, his emphasis is on the soul's rapport with God; (3) he emphasised both man's sociality and individuality; (4) he had a distinctive and tragic life. Here (2) and (4) belong together, for Jeremiah's emphasis on the soul's rapport with God is but the inference that has been drawn from his setting down of his own experiences; it belongs to the understanding of his life. This is the aspect of Jeremiah which has been most sympathetically and brilliantly treated in modern times. And I have nothing but praise for the illumination which modern studies have given. I have, indeed, been warned by one person of distinction not to try to expound Jeremiah, because he has already been treated in such masterly fashion, and so far as concerns this aspect of the book, there is nothing that I want to add to or to detract from the brilliant expositions which have already been made.

Professor Rowley's point that Jeremiah emphasised both man's sociality and individuality is a balanced and important affirmation and we shall need to come back to it. Where I find difficulty is chiefly in the opening phrase, 'Apart from elements in his teaching shared with other prophets'. It is a commonplace of Old Testament scholarship that Jeremiah added nothing, in principle, to the teaching of the other prophets. I wonder who started this particular hare? I am not sufficient of a student of the history of interpretation to know. I am not, of course, prepared to deny that there is no truth at all in it—that would be ridiculous; but I am strongly convinced that it has had the most unfortunate effect in making scholars feel excused from any attempt to treat the content of Jeremiah's teaching. The idea goes back at least to A. B. Davidson, who wrote in his article on Jeremiah the prophet (in Hasting's *Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. ii, published in 1899): 'The Book of Jeremiah does not so much teach religious truths as present a religious personality. Prophecy had already taught its truths, its last effort was to reveal itself in a life.' 'But', Dr. Davidson went on, '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.' This, to my mind, gives the right picture. Jeremiah added no new *concepts*. He was not an abstract thinker. At the same time, indeed, because of that, his thinking was profoundly influential, and has to be taken seriously. The difficulty from the point of view of someone who wants to read the book of Jeremiah, of the idea that he added nothing to the earlier prophets is that what he did say is passed over without discussion; and that the treatment of the teaching of earlier prophets does not answer the precise questions that arise in reading Jeremiah.

There are five questions which I believe must be answered in any positive exposition of the present message of the book of Jeremiah.

### (1) *God and History*

Can we so expound Jeremiah's conviction of God's action in history that we can learn from it how to interpret God's action in our own history? This is the crucial question, and it seems to me to be evaded in modern

studies. Professor Guillaume in his Bampton lectures on *Prophecy and Divination* (p. 341) writes: 'For the most part, the prophets foretold political disaster and at the same time called the people to repentance. In Jeremiah's case it is clear that he was preoccupied with two urgent convictions which were indissolubly bound up in his consciousness: a sense of moral evil and a premonition of national disaster. It is impossible to say which of these was primary and which was secondary. Either in itself was sufficient to rouse to white heat the passion of a poet. The latter was sufficient to throw a man back on God, but it was not sufficient to compel him to preach new doctrines of God and to endeavour to alter the whole basis of the religious life of the world.'

But for the interpretation of Jeremiah as having a word of God to say to us, we must relate to one another his sense of moral evil and his premonition of national disaster. We must ask whether he was right and what are the implications of what he said. Of course, the simplest thing is to say that Jeremiah was right in his historical circumstances, but that this carries no implications for ours. This saves Jeremiah's reputation, but at the cost of stultifying his influence.

Professor R. B. Y. Scott in a chapter on 'The Prophets and History' (op. cit., pp. 145, 151) expounds the prophets as teaching that 'the moral law expressed in the ethical conditions of Yahweh's worship is the solvent and the ferment of social history', and that the 'area of social history was precisely the area where Yahweh's power was most evident, where his guidance and support were indispensable'. Or again 'Because of their overpowering certainty of Yahweh's intercourse with themselves, his present activity in current social history seemed obvious to the prophets. Immediately after Jeremiah's call and commission, he discerned 'signs' of what Yahweh was about to do (14-16). They were able to identify the God of their ecstatic experience with the God of Israelite tradition, and indeed, we may say that the experience was inevitably conditioned by their own possession of the tradition. But it was the *essence* of the tradition which concerned them, viz., the nature of Yahweh as a God of ethical will, showing himself in historic events and through individual prophets and leaders, and setting moral obedience as the primary condition of his service.'

This is well said. But were the prophets right? Was Jeremiah right? I think we must say with Guillaume that the two convictions of inevitable disaster and moral evil were fused together in Jeremiah's mind. That Jeremiah's political judgment was as a matter of fact justified and that it was his religious insight which gave him the freedom to make it. The question as to whether he was right about his conviction of moral evil we must defer to another section. But we must hold with Jeremiah that God stands in the midst of human history, and that he is active in our present historical situation. We are bound also to hold that moral evil is a factor which has baleful consequences sometimes in the short run, but certainly in the long run, though the disaster may be long delayed. But I think we are bound also to say that Jeremiah's conviction of the inevitable disaster was a political judgment, which has a relative independence in principle of the judgment on moral evil, and that we cannot reduce political judgments to a direct dependence upon moral judgments. In other words, while we seek to hold on to the moral authority of God and his present activity in history, we are conscious that their relationship is more complicated and obscure than appears in the life and teaching of Jeremiah. This makes it

more difficult to relate what Jeremiah said and did to our present experience than is quite satisfactory.

Since I prepared this paper, I have re-read the chapter on 'The Prophetic Interpretation of History' in Dr. Wheeler Robinson's last magisterial book *Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament* (1946). This chapter seems to me an almost classic example of how the historian can evade (without lessening the merit of his discussion) questions which the theologian must face and answer. Wheeler Robinson held that 'The prophetic interpretation of history was (a) theocentric, (b) constitutive, (c) unifying'. (a) The prophets declared that God and God alone is the true centre of the universe; (b) the prophets were intensely practical; whether they proclaimed judgment or deliverance they were dealing with an actual situation. To it they applied the word of revelation disclosing God at the centre of the situation; in it they believed that word to have operative power, and to inaugurate an ultimate decision and manifestation of God. (c) The unifying principle in the prophetic interpretation of history 'created a pattern of history out of all its complexities, a pattern which disclosed the previously hidden purpose of God' (op. cit., pp. 124-129). Wheeler Robinson did indeed raise an objection to this interpretation of history. 'It is easy' he wrote (p. 133) 'to dismiss the prophetic interpretation of history as too simple to explain its complexities.' But he dismissed it by saying that it was 'the criticism raised by priests and prophets who were the contemporaries of Isaiah.' (Isa. 28<sup>9-13</sup>.)

Now all that Wheeler Robinson affirmed about the prophetic interpretation of history I want to affirm too. But we cannot really affirm this unless we ask, firstly, was the prophetic interpretation of history *right* in its contemporary setting; and secondly, what would it *mean* in terms of the historical process of our own day? If we neither raise nor answer these questions, then we cannot take the prophetic interpretation of history into our own thinking and experience. And Wheeler Robinson in the magnificent historical exposition which he gives, passes them by without notice.

If we should decide with Adam Welch that we cannot decide whether Jeremiah was right or not, that itself is some decision. Dr. Welch wrote (in the Introduction to the Book of Jeremiah translated into colloquial English), 'Probably the honour which is due to Jeremiah should not be claimed on the ground of the position he took in a question of politics. Politics is a matter in which, after the lapse of 2,600 years, it is profoundly difficult to decide who was wise and who was unwise. We should rather rest Jeremiah's claim to greatness on the principles he advocated, which made it possible, however the political game turned out, that religion could continue in Judah, and so could hope to continue in the world.' But even so, we must relate Jeremiah's principles to what he said and did, and have some idea of what their implication is for the world in which we ourselves live.

## (2) *God and moral retribution*

'When the modern philosopher of history speaks of "the prophetic interpretation of history" it is the doctrine of moral retribution that he has principally in mind' says Professor C. R. North (op. cit.). 'For him the chief emphasis in the prophetic interpretation of history is its insistence that righteousness exalteth a nation and that wickedness involves it in

disaster.' Certainly the note of judgment upon wickedness is strongly emphasised by the canonical prophets, and the impending exile did nothing to lesson this. We have here, I believe, to face two questions. First, whether the teaching of the prophets is true to the character of God, and secondly, whether it is likely to commend itself to the modern world. Dr. C. H. Dodd in *The Authority of the Bible* wrote of 'elements in the religious message of Biblical writers which we cannot hold to be true or valid', and he quoted Isa. 9<sup>17</sup> and 60<sup>12</sup>. But then he said, 'But it is an unprofitable theme. Certainly the prophets were sometimes mistaken. But in their errors they remain greater than we in our most impeccable orthodoxies. That is why it behoves us to let them speak for themselves, with eyes open to the element of error in their teaching, but in no wise perturbed by it.' I think that we have to go more deeply into the matter than Dr. Dodd has suggested, not for the sake of belabouring the prophets, but because whatever the justification and greatness of what they said in its historical setting, unless we get clear what is truth and what is error in it for us, we cannot mix it into our own contemporary thinking.

I venture the conclusion that the fundamental conviction of moral retribution that God is not mocked, is absolutely true, and needs to be reaffirmed in the modern world. That the prophets over-emphasise the retributive justice of God, that God is in fact less concerned to punish sin than they affirm. And that the prophets do less than justice to the creative activity of God in recreating the sinner. This recreative activity of God is, of course, present in the prophets, and the necessary complement to their judgment on sin, but it is not given the large place which is found in the New Testament.

The whole doctrine of moral retribution is in difficulties in the modern world because of modern psychological theories. In the modern discussion of punishment, theories of deterrence and reformation have found more champions than theories of retribution. And the prophetic denunciation of sin finds few champions among the modern psycho-analysts. I think here that while the theologian needs to listen to and understand the problems of the psychologists, he should be chary of accepting the view that the present emphases of psychologists are likely to be permanent. A discussion upon the meaning of the word 'guilt' would reveal divergencies between the psychologist and the moralist, the metaphysician, the lawyer and the poet, as well as between the psychologist and the theologian. But the spiritual atmosphere of the time has to be remembered in the exposition of the prophetic teaching on moral retribution.

### (3) *The Church of Israel and sin.*

Jeremiah's indictment of his people is drastic and extreme. 'The heart is deceitful above all things and it is desperately sick—who can know it? There is not a man in Jerusalem practising right or mindful of truth.' (Jer. 17<sup>9</sup> and 5<sup>1-5</sup>). And we have to ask what truth there is in his indictment. Are we to say that Jeremiah's indictment of Israel was completely and absolutely true; that this judgment was one of the turning points by which Israel learned to renounce the nature worship of the Semitic world and to cleave to Yahweh the God of Israel; but that, of course, it has nothing to say to us because that issue is behind us. Or are we to say that Jeremiah was absolutely right about the sin of Israel, and also that the issue is a fundamental one in the life of the Church, and that

we ought to apply the language of Jeremiah to the Church as we know it? Some answer at any rate is certainly essential if the book of Jeremiah is to come alive for our time.

The answer which I feel inclined to give at the moment is that Jeremiah's indictment is substantially true now as then, but that it is an indictment by an appallingly high standard. Some of his poetic shafts should be recognised to be Semitic hyperbole without thereby letting their cutting edge be dulled; and it should be recognised that this is not the language of ordinary prosaic decision, and that it presupposes a great many social virtues. There is real loyalty to Yahweh in Judah and real attempt to worship him and to do his will. Jeremiah blazes out because it is not absolute. The same thing is true in our modern times and we need Jeremiah's castigation from that absolute standpoint. But it must be recognised that his language is meant to move those who acknowledge loyalty to a purer loyalty—and not to denounce those who are in fact without loyalty. In other words, we should recognise that Jeremiah is no simple exponent of that personal communion which all good Christians should experience. He is a lonely, terrific, and terrifying figure, who would terrify us if he were present in the modern world as much as he did his own people. His word is that insistence on an absolutely pure and uncontaminated allegiance to God which, though not accepted at its face value, yet moves people nearer the truth than a more prosaic exhortation. My interpretation, here as elsewhere, may of course be incorrect: but some understanding of what the condemnation of Jerusalem and of the sin of his people would mean in our day is essential for the reading of the book.

#### (4) *The Church and the living God*

Professor Rowley, in the summary quoted earlier, said that 'Jeremiah is notable for his perception of the inner quality of religion, as fellowship with God, depending not on this place or on that, but on the soul's rapport with God.' I cannot help thinking that some of this interpretation is due to modern preoccupations and is not the best approach to Jeremiah. If we think of Deuteronomy as substantially the basis of Josiah's reformation, and as embodying both the tradition which nourished the 8th century prophets and which was transformed and vitalised by them, and then ask what difference Jeremiah made, then it becomes clear that Jeremiah made a profound difference to the understanding of the meaning of God and the meaning of Israel. It is God who is the centre of the Book of Jeremiah, and not Jeremiah and his religious experience. What Jeremiah revealed was that Israel is in the hand of God and that his purposes are not to be frustrated. He is not limited by the Temple as a means of grace, indeed, the Temple may prevent his will becoming known. He is not limited to the territory of Israel but can nourish and succour his people in Babylon. A. C. Welch (Abingdon Commentary, p. 679) spoke of the 'denationalisation of religion'. By that he meant not the removal of religion from its historic revelation in Israel, but the enlargement of that historic revelation that it might be seen to reach out and to embrace all men. Jeremiah was not universal in all his ways; but he reacted against the limitations of the Deuteronomic Covenant that by the stress and strain of his own experience the boundaries and character of the Covenant of Israel might be enlarged to cover all men. This seems to me the right approach to the question of Jeremiah's concern for spiritual religion. In the setting of a larger understanding of the meaning of God and Israel, the probing of the meaning of

the inner communion of the individual with God has a precious and enriching place. (This, I hope, links up with Professor Rowley's teaching about Jeremiah's emphasis both on sociality and individuality which is a valuable substitute for a falsely individualistic understanding of Jeremiah.) Jeremiah's function here is that of a corrective which presupposes the Deuteronomic convictions, and purifies them so that they can fulfil a greater purpose than their authors understood.

(5) *The meaning of prophecy*

It is with some hesitation that I include in this paper some remarks on the meaning of prophecy. It is necessary to do so, but I am conscious that all that can be said on the subject has been better said previously. Jeremiah has enriched and deepened our understanding of prophecy by his record of his emotional reactions and struggles against the word of God that came to him. The word of God that came to him was one thing; his own affection, concern, and sympathy pulled him in another direction. Not until it had become clear by painful experience that the word of God was right did Jeremiah cease his protests.

The question which I want to raise is this: Was Jeremiah always right? I doubt if anyone can ponder deeply on the meaning of the book of Jeremiah, as its nature is disclosed by historical scholarship, without being moved to sympathy and affection for this lonely fighter. That his communion was genuinely with the living God cannot be doubted. But what is the implication? That, therefore, he was always right in what he said? I think not. The Book of Deuteronomy advances two tests for a prophet: In 13<sup>1-5</sup> it affirms that no prophecy can be true which undermines the faith of Israel in the living God. In 18<sup>9-22</sup>, the test is added that the prophecy must be effective. But this test, if I may quote words which I have written elsewhere, 'does not face the full inwardness of the problem of the truth of prophecy, because, while the word of God must prove its power of effective action, it may not do so within the limits of time in which judgment must be made.'

'It was Jeremiah who did this, meeting in his own experience the problem of non-fulfilment of prophecies uttered in obedience to God's call to him. Out of his own travail Jeremiah has made clear for all time the *context* in which the truth of prophecy is to be decided—the openness to moral renewal, and the living reality of his personal communion with God. But even Jeremiah did not solve the question, for the truth does not rest with the prophet himself, but whether in fact what he utters builds up the people of God in the fullness of their faith in him.' (Deuteronomy, p. 114.)

What I have said here is that the consciousness of the inner witness of the Holy Spirit assures the reality of the communion with God, but that even this does not guarantee infallibility. That no prophet can be sure of. He walks by faith not sight. And he must be ready to be corrected within the life of the Church. There are passages in Jeremiah (e.g. ch. 28<sup>16</sup> the fate of Hananiah) which suggest an absolute word in the prophecy to an extent which is intolerable. And, indeed, the question of prophecy raises the crucial issue of the claim of God upon the world; can we at once take seriously the reality of God at the centre of every human life, and at the same time tolerate those who go against his truth and goodness?

These, then, are some of the issues raised by the book of Jeremiah: without an answer to them we cannot expound or read the book in its living relevance to the present claim of God upon ourselves.