

THE PROPHECY OF JEREMIAH

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MR. ELLISON'S qualities as an expositor of the Old Testament prophets have already won world-wide appreciation. The studies in Jeremiah of which an initial instalment is presented below will, we are sure, be a worthy companion to "Ezekiel: The Man and his Message".

I. IN THE EIGHTEENTH YEAR OF KING JOSIAH

ONE of the most enigmatic of the minor characters in the Old Testament is Huldah, the wife of an aristocrat in the reign of Josiah, who lived in the Mishneh quarter of Jerusalem (2 Ki.22:14; 2 Chr.34:22).

In 627 B.C., impelled partly by piety, partly by politics, the twenty-year-old king began a cautious reformation of religion. It had been proceeding six years, when he was startled by Hilkiah's discovery of "the book of the Law" in the Temple, which was under repair. Irrespective of our identification of the book and of our theories of how it came to be there, it opened Josiah's eyes to realize that the spiritual state and standing of Judah was not one to be met merely by a little spiritual whitewash and spring cleaning. So he ordered Hilkiah the priest "to enquire of the Lord" for him. That he did not trust the priest all too much is suggested by his having linked three of his highest courtiers with him in the carrying out of his command.

In the vast majority of cases to inquire (*darash*) of the Lord was doubtless understood as the obtaining of a divine oracle through a priest or a prophet at a sanctuary. Yet Hilkiah made no attempt to obtain the oracle himself—the command to the three courtiers is a virtual rejection of the high priest's oracle in advance, should he offer it. Nor did Hilkiah turn to the royal prophets (2 Ki.23: 2), who were doubtless under his control.

Why Hilkiah did not turn to Zephaniah or Jeremiah is apt to be a purely academic question. It is apt to assume that he whole-heartedly supported a thorough-going reformation and overlooks the fact that there is nothing in the recorded words of either

of these prophets that would have led him to expect the type of oracle he would doubtless have preferred.

But why Huldah? Why are we even told the part of Jerusalem in which the good lady lived? I cannot remember any real parallel to this in the whole of the Old Testament. One thing should be clear. She was one of the very few people in Jerusalem whose oracle would be accepted by the king without hesitation or doubt.

Some sixty-nine years elapsed between the death of Hezekiah and the first tentative reforms of Josiah. This means quite simply that when the beginning of new things came there may have been no one in Judah who had looked with adult eyes on the reformed temple worship of Hezekiah's days and had heard the words of Isaiah and Micah with adult ears. So far as we can gather from the brief account in 2 Ki.21 Manasseh took his syncretistic Baalized worship of Jehovah seriously and enforced it, at least in Jerusalem, with a heavy hand. All the official circles will have been deeply corrupted and implicated. Whatever Hilkiyah's personal views, he was a counterpart of the Vicar of Bray, and Josiah knew him and his prophets to be too deeply implicated in the past for any oracle they might bring about the effects of the past to be trustworthy.

It does not seem unreasonable to suppose that Huldah had been one of the moving spirits of a little group, which in the protection of an aristocratic house had met to keep the flame of truth alight and to pray for the coming of happier days. It may even have provided the background of those who were first able to influence the adolescent king (2 Chr. 34:3). This would explain why Huldah's oracle would carry weight, where that of others would not. It would even give an adequate reason why the situation of her home should have lived on in the sacred records of Israel.

I have mentioned Huldah in this way because it is difficult for us to bring the background of Josiah's reformation and Jeremiah's call to real life. We are apt to regard the pre-exilic idolatry in Judah as marginal and a mere aberration which hardly influenced the broad current of true religion among the masses of the people. Statements like 2 Ki. 21: 11-15; 23: 26; 24: 3, 4; Jer. 15:4 are almost unconsciously watered down as being judgments *ex eventu*. We do not grasp that Josiah's reformation failed because it could not succeed, that Jeremiah stood alone because he could not find his one man when he looked for him (Jer. 5:1).

We are apt in our thinking to link Jeremiah with the great eighth-century prophets and to separate him from Ezekiel, whom we regard as a prophet of the exile. Even though Jeremiah's best years had been lived and the bulk of his work done before Jehoiachin went into exile with Ezekiel behind him, yet in essentials, in spite of all their differences, Jeremiah and Ezekiel belong together. The former becomes fully comprehensible only when we constantly see him in the shadow of the boiling pot, ready at any moment to boil over with destruction from the North (Jer. 1:13f.). Equally Ezekiel comes into clear focus only when we realize that he is not preaching to a doomed city some eight hundred miles away but striving desperately to bring his fellow-exiles to an understanding of the reasons for the doom so soon to fall. Ezek. 16; 20:1-14; 23, chapters so seldom taken really seriously either by conservative or liberal, serve as a justification for Jeremiah's pessimism, but also indicate by their unsparing wideness of scope with what thoroughness the Spirit of God had had to teach the younger prophet the inner significance of his people's religious history; Jeremiah seems to have grasped it almost intuitively from the first. This can be in part explained by the fact that Jeremiah spent his earlier childhood under the shadow of Manasseh, while Ezekiel grew up in the Indian summer of Josiah's reign.

For our present purposes there is no need to reconstruct the details of Josiah's reformation¹. All that really concerns us is when it started. For a long time now it has been usual to accept the statements of 2 Kings 22 with only minor reserve², and to date the reformation as starting in 621 B.C., Josiah's eighteenth year. The information in 2 Chron. 34:3, according to which it began six years earlier, has normally been dismissed as pure invention by the Chronicler³. Today there is a growing willingness to recognize that the reformation will have started before 621

¹ I have offered brief suggestions in *The New Bible Commentary*, pp. 330ff., 362f. I cannot accept the fuller reconstruction in D. W. B. Robinson, *Josiah's Reform and the Book of the Law*; it seems to overlook that it is illegitimate to use *Chronicles* to impose on *Kings* an interpretation which could never be derived from the latter, if it stood alone.

² The main exceptions are to be found among some who argue for an exilic or post-exilic date for *Deuteronomy*. For some literature see Lods, *The Prophets and the Rise of Judaism*, p. 139; Rowley in *Studies in Old Testament Prophecy*, p. 160.

³ This viewpoint is still maintained in the most recent commentary of importance, Rudolph, *Chronikbücher*, 1955.

B.C.⁴, though it is normally linked with an unwillingness to accept *Chronicles* as fully reliable in its details. Now that we can date Ashurbanipal's death in 633 B.C., there is nothing unreasonable in seeing the young king of Judah in 631 B.C., possibly immediately after coming of age, dissociating himself personally from the worship of the Assyrian astral deities, which was the outward symbol of Judah's vassal status. Four years were enough to show that Assyrian rule was growing slacker and that no reprisals were being taken for this lack of respect to their gods. Hence there are no grounds for questioning the categorical statement that the public reformation began in 627 B.C. The argument⁵ that any such steps were hardly credible before Nabopolassar's seizure of power in Babylon in 625 B.C. is based on the supposition that the reform at the first was concerned solely with the removal of the Assyrian deities and overlooks also how very little archaeological evidence we have for these years of rapid Assyrian decline.

Provided then that we recognize that it will have been cautious and tentative to begin with, there are no grounds for doubting that Josiah's reformation began in his twelfth regnal year (627 B.C.). Since, however, the narrative in *Kings* obviously wishes to lay chief stress on the effect of the book of the law, while that of *Chronicles* equally seems to wish to proceed in one sweep from the discovery of the book to the making of the covenant and from there to the celebration of the Passover, the actual details of the reformation take a subordinate place which defy any certain historical reconstruction. There are no grounds, however, for supposing that the reformation was in its inception purely political, and doubtless the more blatant distortions of Yahweh worship disappeared with the symbols of foreign domination. The function of the book of the law will have been to quicken and deepen something that was still half-hearted and tentative.

A closer study of the mess cleared up by Josiah shows clearly enough that apart from the official Assyrian astral worship there was nothing that cannot be explained by West Semitic syncretistic corruption of Yahweh worship. Moreover there is nothing that can be reasonably understood as implying that the worship of the Assyrian deities was practised outside Jerusalem.

⁴ For the most part this goes back to Oestreicher, *Das Deuteronomische Grundgesetz* (1923); cf. also Schofield, *The Historical Background of the Bible*, p. 193; Rowley, *op. cit.*, pp. 164f.; Noth, *The History of Israel*, p. 272.

⁵ Rowley, *op. cit.*, pp. 164f.

Though it will not have left popular religion unaffected, it was entirely a state cult. It is essential to grasp this, if we are to understand much in Jeremiah's message.

In spite of much recent research which has underlined the cultic importance of Judah's kings⁶ we have been slow to apply the knowledge. Josiah's actions will have been applauded by some and deprecated by others, but they were the king's acts that had to be accepted without question. Any interpretations which stress a prophetic campaign in favour of the changes or suggest violent opposition to the removal of the *barnoth* fail to realize that this reformation, like Hezekiah's a century earlier, was an act of political autocracy. There is ultimately no reason for supposing that Judah had any more choice in the matter than had the men of Bethel (2 Ki. 23:15-18). The reticence of the narrative hides from our eyes that Josiah extended his kingdom at least to the Plain of Esdraelon and Eastern Galilee (2 Ki. 23:19; 2 Chr. 34:6f.), which explains how he came to oppose Necho at Megiddo. Those who longed for the good old days of Ahaz and Manasseh will have been silenced by the obvious tokens—obvious that is to the popular mind—of divine favour as shown by the restored kingdom.

II. THE GROWTH OF THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH

IF we look away from the very few who regard *Jeremiah* as a

pseudepigraphic work, or who submit it to drastic surgery on preconceived theories of metrical structure, there is comparatively little variation in the main features of exposition. When we come to detail, however, interpretations are apt to vary violently. This can only in part be attributed to personal idiosyncrasies; the main cause is probably varying views about the manner in which the book was written and compiled.

As we have it now in the Massoretic Text the structure of *Jeremiah* is plain enough and shows every sign of careful editing. The following outline would command fairly general acceptance, though some of the detail will have to be justified, when we come to the exposition.

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| A. Chs. 1-25:14 | Oracles against Judah |
| 1. Ch. 1 | Jeremiah's Call |
| 2. Chs. 2-20 | Against the People |

⁶ E.g., A. R. Johnson, *Sacral Kingship in Ancient Israel*; also the same writer's *Hebrew Conceptions of Kingship* in Hooke, *Myth, Ritual, and Kingship*.

(a) Chs. 2-6	Mainly from the time of Josiah
(b) Chs. 7-20	Mainly from the early years of Jehoiakim
3. Chs. 21-23	Against Kings and Prophets
4. Ch. 24	The Two Peoples
5. Ch. 25:1-14	Conclusion
B. 1. Ch. 25:15-38	Oracles against the Nations
C. Chs. 26-35	Oracles of Hope
1. Chs. 26-29	Narrative Preparation
2. Chs. 30-31	The Book of Hope
3. Chs. 32-35	Narrative Conclusion
D. Chs. 36-45	Stories about Jeremiah
B. 2. Chs. 46-51	Oracles against the Nations
E. Ch. 52	Historical Supplement

Where the matter is discussed, most moderns agree that LXX in its uniting of B.2 with B.1 is either original or at least older than the present Massoretic Text.⁷ An important exception is Oesterley and Robinson,⁸ following Mowinckel, who seems to exclude chs. 46-51 from any real place in the book. In our treatment of 1 : 10 we shall point out the extreme improbability of any such view.

If we follow LXX in its arrangement, it becomes immediately obvious that Isaiah 1-35, Jeremiah and Ezekiel are put together according to a common pattern. However we interpret this, it is clear that we have to deal with careful arrangement and editing, and any theory that does not do justice to this is likely to be inadequate.

Any denial of the details of ch. 36 is today a curiosity and may be ignored. It is generally accepted that *Jeremiah* owes its inception to the prophet's own action, but there is no agreement as to what was in the enlarged scroll of 36 : 32—the question of the contents of the original scroll is unanswerable and is therefore merely academic.

Since there is fairly general agreement that ch. 36 is the work of Baruch, we are entitled to take its language strictly. A comparison of vv. 2 and 32 will show us immediately that *all the words* (36: 2) must be regarded as meaning that the original scroll

contained a fully representative selection of every type of oracle of doom. Since the purpose was to make the maximum impact on the people, when it was read, the oracles will have been arranged with great care. There is no suggestion in 36 : 32 that the enlarged scroll seriously modified the original scheme. If then we find that in chs. 1-20 there are signs of careful arrangement, that the order seems to be generally speaking chronological, and that there are comparatively few oracles we are compelled to date after the fifth year of Jehoiakim, then the onus of proof would seem to lie on those that deny that in these chapters we have substantially the enlarged roll.⁹

Many seek to approach the problem by an examination of the style of the book, in which there are obviously major differences. Oesterley and Robinson¹⁰ attempt to apply an omnibus criterion to the composition of the prophetic books by dividing their material into Oracular poetry, Prose in the third person and Prose in the first person. Irrespective of its applicability to Jeremiah, any such scheme seems altogether too mechanical to meet the manifold problems of the prophetic books. It would be well if more attention were paid to G. A. Smith's protest¹¹ against the assumption that prophetic poetry must always be regular in metre, or that a prophet who normally used poetry could not use prose as well, when it suited his purpose. The scheme shows all its weakness, when applied to *Jeremiah*, for it is compelled to affirm that its oracular poetry, so characteristic of the prophet, could not have found a place in the original rolls; it is hard to believe that the roll, had not the prophet's characteristic style been heard all the time.

Far more promising is Mowinckel's suggestion¹² that we are to see three main strands in *Jeremiah*: A. Jeremiah's oracles, mainly but not exclusively in verse; B. Narration about Jeremiah; C. Oracles in prose in a Deuteronomistic style.¹³ It is in fact very difficult to believe that the man whose voice we hear in A was responsible for the *language* of C.

While I accept this division as well founded, I find its normal application most doubtful. It involves the exclusion of Jer. 7 : 1-8 : 2 from the original scroll; this is on the face of it so improbable that any theory demanding it is deeply suspect.

⁷ So Peake (Century Bible), p. 64; Eissfeldt, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*¹, pp. 409f.; Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament*², p. 487; G. A. Smith, *Jeremiah*, pp. 14f. (by inference); Rudolph, *Jeremiah*², p. 153; Weiser, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*², p. 162.

⁸ An Introduction to the Books of the Old Testament, p. 313.

⁹ For simplicity the oracles against the nations are not under discussion here.

¹⁰ Op. cit. pp. 224-232, 290-293.

¹¹ *Jeremiah*, pp. 31-43.

¹² Zur Komposition des Buches *Jeremia*.

¹³ Set out in detail in Rudolph, op. cit., pp. xiv-xvii.

There is little doubt among those who accept the essential genuineness of *Jeremiah* that Mowinckel's B (found mainly in chs. 36-45 and in the narrative sections of chs. 26-35) is the work of Baruch. Now between the style of B and C there is a marked resemblance, and Pfeiffer¹⁴ maintains that many of Jeremiah's prophecies have come down to us in Baruch's language. Though we need not accept Pfeiffer's theory of Baruch's treatment of Jeremiah's oracles, for which there is neither evidence nor motive, there is in fact an interesting indication that we should in fact see Baruch's hand in C. This source is not found in chs. 1-6, and as we shall see later there is general agreement that the vast bulk of the material here is from the reign of Josiah, while there is no oracle in the following chapters that we are under any compulsion to place before the time of Jehoiakim—the fact that this is so often done is in furtherance of theories about Jeremiah's activities. Baruch first appears on the scene (36 : 4) in the fourth year of Jehoiakim (605 B.C.) Though we are not compelled to conclude that this was his first introduction to the prophet, we are not able to push the links between the two men back before Jehoiakim's first year. Indeed it may well be the incident described in ch. 26 (cf. 7 : 1-15) that first brought them together. It is not fanciful therefore to suppose that Baruch supplemented Jeremiah's memory, where he himself had heard the oracles, giving a prose summary of them.

In many modern works there is an altogether too facile assumption that much of Jeremiah's message could have been preserved orally for a long period of time. The textual problems and the broken state of *Hosea* are a standing reminder to us of the difficulties of transmission, when society is falling into ruins. It is easy for Nielsen to write,¹⁵ "In all probability Baruch belonged to the circle that we by force of analogy must surmise existed around the great Prophet"; but not only is the surmise against the whole trend of the book, it is also an example of the wish to bring all the prophets into a common mould, a process they stubbornly refuse to submit to. For all that is genuine in *Jeremiah*—the question of possible interpolations is best left to be considered when we come to the suspect sections—we are in fact virtually shut in to Jeremiah himself and Baruch.

If this argument is reasonable, we have reached the position that we have no reason for doubting that at least chs. 1-20, with

the exception of a few passages, represent the enlarged roll of 36 : 32. Chs. 21-25 : 14 can hardly, by virtue of their contents, have been in the original roll. Whether they were part of the enlarged roll, or whether they were later added, there is no indication. Though some of the oracles against the nations were in the original roll, it seems fairly certain that the collection as we now have it had an independent existence for some time. The chronological dislocations in chs. 36-45 justify our doubt whether Baruch lived to round off his work. It is even possible that he never intended these stories to form part of the book.

The purpose of this discussion has been to claim that especially in chs. 1-20 we can see Jeremiah's guiding will, that they do not represent a haphazard collection of oracles but a chronological series which is interrupted only where spiritual links make it advisable. In other words we are not dependent on subjective considerations in applying the oracles to events down to 605 B.C., but we are able to reconstruct much of Jeremiah's life and activities from them with a fair degree of certainty.

For the many who will regard such an approach as too facile, it is necessary to point out that we are only gradually becoming accustomed in our thinking to giving full weight to the importance and normality of writing by the end of the monarchy.¹⁶ It is mainly deeply rooted prejudice that will lead many to reject Rudolph's suggestion¹⁷ that Jeremiah in fact used a written copy of many of his oracles, when dictating to Baruch. We should also give more attention to the stress laid by Vriezen¹⁸ and others, on the influence of the downfall first of Israel and then of Judah in the production of a written literature. We must not forget either the arguments of Widengren,¹⁹ that there is much evidence that some prophecy will have been written down almost at once.

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(To be continued)

¹⁶ Cf. the evidence of the Lachish ostraca.

¹⁷ *O.p. cit.*, p. 212.

¹⁸ *An Outline of Old Testament Theology*, pp. 40f.

¹⁹ *Literary and Psychological Aspects of the Hebrew Prophets*; cf. Rowley, *The Old Testament and Modern Study*, pp. 133f.

¹⁴ *O.p. cit.*, pp. 504f.

¹⁵ *Oral Tradition*, p. 61.