

# THE PROPHECY OF JEREMIAH

(Continued)

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## V. THE EARLIEST ORACLES

I HAVE already referred to the Scythian hypothesis and to the role these wild horsemen from the north are supposed to have played in Jeremiah's call. The present reaction against this view (e.g., Welch, Rudolph and Weiser, to mention only three names) is sufficient to justify my assumption that the arguments in favour of it are sufficiently weak to be left over until we reach the section 4:5-6:26. This is the more so because many who accepted the Scythian theory were not prepared to place these chapters chronologically before 2:1-4:4.<sup>1</sup>

No one has, to my knowledge, doubted that the present order of the book intends the reader to understand that invasion and destruction were to be the judgment for the refusal to repent. The relationship of 4:1-4 to the following oracles, and the intrusion of ch. 5 into the picture of doom from the north to justify the darkening picture — cf. 4:6 with 6:1 — are sufficient evidence for this. To maintain otherwise would be to attribute the skilful literary arrangement of the first six chapters to blind chance.

This does not necessarily rule out an inversion of order. Whatever the motive in the collection of prophetic oracles and whatever the method of their preservation for future generations, some principle of choice and arrangement — not necessarily the same with each prophet — must have been operative. There are no *a priori* grounds on which we should reject the possibility that Jeremiah, or his editor, rearranged the order of his earliest oracles, that the Word of God should be more clearly grasped by future generations. The onus of proof must, however, lie on any who would propound this view. Indeed the great weakness of a work like Skinner's<sup>2</sup> is that he makes no attempt to explain the alleged inversion.

For me personally, once the Scythian identification of the northern enemy is rejected, there seems very little that can be invoked in favour of such an inversion. As little as do the

<sup>1</sup> E.g. Driver, *LOT*<sup>3</sup>, p. 252; G. A. Smith, *Jeremiah*<sup>4</sup>, p. 89; Peake, *Century Bible*, p. 117; Streane, *Cambridge Bible*, p. 29.

<sup>2</sup> *Prophecy and Religion*.

prophets' calls, so little do their recorded words fit into a pattern which had to be conformed to. We have already seen that there is no reason for doubting that chs. 1-20 are essentially the enlarged scroll of 36:32. If Jeremiah had indeed begun his ministry with visions of imminent destruction and had later followed them with his wooing call to repentance, how much more forceful would this order have been in the fifth year of Jehoiakim (36:9), when he already knew who the enemy from the north was (25:1, 9-14) and Jerusalem had already experienced his power (2 Ki. 24:1; Dan. 1:1).<sup>3</sup> But if we cannot attribute the inversion to Jeremiah, who else would be likely to be responsible for it?

When we add to this the obvious fact that once we grant that a reformation began in Josiah's twelfth year, however incomplete and inadequate it may have been, the present order of oracles makes perfect sense; any other view is hard to sustain. My exposition therefore takes for granted that in chs. 2-6 we have approximate chronological order, though since the oracles are obviously grouped, there may be some overlapping in time between chs. 3 and 4.

It is clear that ch. 3 is definitely later in time than ch. 2. The whole tone of the language testifies to this. In addition, the impossible "saying" — A.V., R.V. quite illegitimately "they say" — with which ch. 3 begins is clearly the last trace of a heading of the same type as 2:1, which will have marked the beginning of a new sub-section.

Ch. 2 gives the impression of being comparable with Is. 1, i.e., a number of short, originally probably unrelated oracles have been combined to form a spiritual whole.

*Israel's Ideal Standing (2:1-3)*

The word of the LORD came to me:

- (2) Go and proclaim in the ears of Jerusalem,  
 "Thus has the LORD said:  
 I remember for your good your loyalty, when you were  
 young,  
 your love as a bride;  
 how you followed me in the wilderness,  
 in a land that cannot be tilled.
- (3) Set apart for the LORD was Israel,  
 the first fruits of His harvest;  
 all who ate of it were held guilty,  
 evil came on them — Oracle of the LORD."

<sup>3</sup> Compare also D. J. Wiseman in Winton Thomas, *Documents from Old Testament Times*, pp. 78 f.

The first and one of the greatest to have his words recorded in "The Latter Prophets" said, "Hear this word that the LORD hath spoken against you, O children of Israel, against the whole family which I brought up out of the land of Egypt, saying, You only have I known of all the families of the earth: therefore I will visit upon you all your iniquities" (Amos 3:1, 2). We may feel that Lord Acton's aphorism needs qualification, "All power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely"; but we constantly see its truth being worked out in the Old Testament, except where men were restrained by the grace of God. In a society where family and clan loyalties were felt so strongly, power and nepotism went hand in hand, cf. the warning in Is. 22:24 f. The Israelite, confident of his election by Jehovah, with whom he stood in covenant relationship, found it hard to believe that his God did not act with the same irresponsibility and favouritism as did his kings and court favourites. So from Amos on we find the prophets trying to bring home to the people that privilege implies responsibility, where God is concerned.

By Jeremiah's time Judah was bruised and humbled. Israel was an Assyrian province ruled by foreigners. Judah was tributary, its area reduced, its treasures gone, its population terribly reduced by war and famine, disease and captivity. Behind the complete apostasy of Manasseh's reign had lain partly a belief in Jehovah's impotence. So Jeremiah's first message was that the old dream of privilege was not a vain one. Israel was His *segullah*, His privy treasure, and all who touched her had to expect Jehovah's judgments.

To answer the unspoken question of why it was not so then, Jeremiah pointed back to Israel's honeymoon period in the desert. We are reminded of the beautiful picture in Hos. 2:14 f, which was doubtless known to Jeremiah. Our first reaction is to ask how the wilderness wandering with all its unbelief and murmurings could be looked back to as an ideal. The suggestion that the JE tradition did not yet contain some of its more objectionable details, like the story of the golden calf,<sup>4</sup> need not be taken seriously. For all Ezekiel's stress that Israel's corruption went back to the beginning to Egypt and was continued in the wilderness (20:5-26), yet in 16:8-14 he clearly portrays the wilderness period as the time of Israel's closest fellowship with God. Balaam's oracles in their setting show precisely the same apparent contradiction between God's estimate of Israel and her repeated failures.

<sup>4</sup> E.g. Skinner, *op. cit.*, pp. 64 f.

We can up to a point agree with the view: "In this idealisation of the desert religion of Israel Jeremiah again follows Hosea (Hos. 9:10; 11:1). The essential idea which both prophets mean to convey is that the national religion was then uncontaminated by the corrupting influences of the Canaanite Baalism."<sup>5</sup> We must, however, go deeper. The difference between the Mosaic period and that of the Judges is not merely one of one God and many — Lev. 17:7 suggests it was not as simple as that, and the same impression is created by Jos. 24:14 f. The sins of the wilderness are due far more to a failure of nerve than of loyalty. We are apt so to magnify the wonders of God at the Exodus and in the wilderness that we forget the very real greatness of the people's response. We so deprecate lack of faith, the "evil heart of unbelief" (Heb. 3:12), that we fail to realize that lack of loyalty and love are even less pardonable.

*Israel's Apostasy (2:4-13)*

- (4) Hear the word of the LORD. O house of Jacob,  
and all the clans of the house of Israel!
- (5) Thus has the LORD said,  
"What injustice did your ancestors find in Me,  
that they went far from Me  
and followed that which is naught,  
and so became naught themselves,
- (6) instead of saying, 'Where is the LORD,  
who brought us up out of the land of Egypt,  
who led us in the wilderness,  
in a land of steppes and ravines,  
in a dry land, where the shadow of death broods,  
in a land where none passes through,  
and where men do not dwell?'
- (7) But I brought you to a garden land  
to enjoy its fruits and its riches.  
But scarce had you entered, when you defiled My land,  
making My possession an abomination.
- (8) The priests did not say,  
'Where is the LORD?'  
The guardians of the law did not know Me,  
and the rulers rebelled against Me,  
the prophets prophesied by Baal,  
so the people went after things of no profit.
- (9) That is why I yet bring My charge against you — oracle of  
the LORD.

<sup>5</sup> Skinner, *op. cit.*, pp. 64 f.

- yea, against your children's children will I bring it.
- (10) For go to the coasts of Kittim and look,  
Send to Kedar and consider with the greatest of care;  
look whether the like has ever been done.
- (11) Has any nation changed its gods?  
And yet they are no gods!  
But My people has changed its Glory  
for that which profits not.
- (12) Be aghast, you heavens, for this,  
and shudder exceedingly, — oracle of the LORD —
- (13) for two wrongs has My people committed :  
Me have they forsaken,  
the spring of living water,  
to hew themselves cisterns,  
broken cisterns,  
which cannot hold water.”

We shall later see Jeremiah, as Josiah extended his rule over Samaria, turning to the remnants of the northern tribes, but that can hardly be the explanation of v. 4. Rather we are to see this oracle first spoken at some covenant festival; it is members of the southern kingdom that are being addressed, but they are conscious that they represent “all Israel”. The twice repeated “Where is the LORD?” (vv. 6, 8) is probably a liturgical formula used at such festivals. But what exactly is Jeremiah accusing his people of? There is no suggestion that it was Manasseh's apostasy, for it is something that had begun with the Conquest (v. 7) and had apparently continued unbrokenly ever since.

The answer given by Skinner,<sup>6</sup> which has tended to become the standard one, is in some ways too simple. It fails to do justice to the developed polytheism of Canaanite religion as revealed by recent archaeology, and it does not allow for the fact that Israel had already been in contact with settled agricultural life both in the Patriarchal period and in Egypt. It may be that we can find the clue in “the prophets prophesied by Baal” (v. 8).

When Amos links the prophets and the Nazirites (Amos 2:11), he is doubtless connecting two things that went back to the earliest days of Israel's history. Yet apparently for the movement as a whole Jeremiah has only one verdict — it need not be argued that he did not include, nor would his hearers have taken him to include, figures like Samuel, Elijah and the canonical prophets.

<sup>6</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 58-63; see also T. H. Robinson, *Prophecy and the Prophets in Ancient Israel*<sup>2</sup>, ch. II.

The effort has been made to explain the rise of prophecy in terms of the ecstatic.<sup>7</sup> Though there is now a growing reaction,<sup>8</sup> it is clear that the theory does go far to explain the phenomena in the Old Testament until we have to deal with the canonical prophets and their great forerunners. It is probably not an oversimplification to say that the people will normally have judged a man's prophetic gifts by outward signs; for Jeremiah the tests are purely spiritual (23:9-32).

There is something paradoxical about the wilderness wanderings. They did not come naturally to the Israelites, for as Albright has pointed out, the Patriarchs were ass-nomads, not camel-nomads, who would never venture far from civilization.<sup>9</sup> It would be naïve to make Ex. 13:17 mean that God would have had any difficulty in bringing in the people by the way of the land of the Philistines. The wilderness was needed as a school for the people. They had to learn that Jehovah was not merely superior to the nature gods of Egypt, but that He was not dependent on nature at all. The description in v. 6 is not merely the pardonable description of the desert by one whose family had for centuries lived on fertile tilled ground; it is a deliberate linking of it with the *tohu wa-bohu* of Gen. 1:2. That explains why the manna was a humbling (Dt. 8:3). In a land where the normal resources of nature no longer existed, man could no longer rely on his own natural endowments. There are elements in the laws too which would seem to be devised to keep alive this dependence on the supernatural, e.g. the Sabbatical year.

Almost as soon as the people were settled in the land they seem to have forgotten their schooling. Life became something bounded by and based on the natural, and Jehovah became for them a nature and a natural God. However higher their religion may have been than that of the Canaanites, and there are indications that it was, Jehovah refused to be confined within His creation, and through His true messengers denounced the whole popular conception as Baal-worship.

The prophets gave themselves up to the leading of the strange psychic powers within nature, the rulers followed the precepts of worldly wisdom, and the priests, the guardians of the law, ceased to consider the inner nature of the religion they had to impart. As the leaders, so the people, only that they probably drew the natural

<sup>7</sup> T. H. Robinson, *op. cit.*, ch. III.

<sup>8</sup> See Rowley, *The Old Testament and Modern Study*, pp. 134-145; *The Servant of the Lord*, pp. 91-96.

<sup>9</sup> See Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel*, pp. 96-101.

conclusions more readily. In the realm of organization the descent into reliance on the natural may be seen in the replacement of the charismatic "judge" by the hereditary king, of the curtains of the Tent by the stones and cedar wood of Solomon's Temple, of the amphictyonic league by the centralized monarchy. In the religious realm the bitter fruits were polytheism with its immoral rites and idolatry, and in the social realm far-reaching injustice and poverty. The king had now undertaken the task of destroying the fruit of centuries of "Baalizing" Jehovah; Jeremiah doubtless wished him well, but knew that it was but love's labour lost and turned to the root of the evil. This would seem to be the real reason why Jeremiah refers only in passing (v. 23) to the signs of Manasseh's apostasy in Jerusalem.

There is no real justification for Skinner's view that at this early stage Jeremiah's outlook was still bounded by the conditions in Anathoth,<sup>10</sup> or in Welch's contention that these oracles are addressed to the northern tribes.<sup>11</sup> The latter we shall have to consider, when we reach ch. 3. As to the former, we have already seen that Jeremiah could not have grown up uninfluenced by near-by Jerusalem; for that matter Anathoth could hardly have remained uninfluenced either.

It is noteworthy that Jeremiah, as we have seen almost certainly a descendant of the great Abiathar, should lay the chief blame for conditions on the priesthood. It is disputed whether "the guardians of the law" (v. 8) is a mere synonym for "the priests", or whether they were a special class within the priesthood;<sup>12</sup> in either case their priority in mention and two-fold designation implies the greater blame.

The statement in v. 11 is literally true. Among the heathen we may find over the centuries changes in designation and titles and a shift of relative importance within their pantheon due to syncretistic contacts with neighbouring people, or the infiltration of foreigners. But since it is the personifications of the powers of an unchanging nature that are being worshipped, the gods remain in essence the same. To bring Jehovah, however, from outside the universe of His creating and to subordinate Him to its laws and limitations is to make of Him a radically different deity, however much the old names and titles might be retained.

<sup>10</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 57 f.

<sup>11</sup> *Jeremiah, His Time and His Work*, pp. 60 ff., 184 ff.

<sup>12</sup> The former view is maintained by Rudolph, *Jeremiah*<sup>2</sup>, p. 13, the latter by Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity*<sup>2</sup>, p. 197.

*The Fruit of Apostasy* (2 : 14-19)

- (14) Is Israel a slave by purchase or by birth?  
Why then has he been abandoned as a prey
- (15) over which lions have roared again and again  
and have let their voice be heard?  
(His enemies) have made his land a waste;  
his cities are ruined, without inhabitant.
- (16) Even the men of Noph and Tachpanches  
will shave your head.
- (17) Is not the cause of this  
that you have left the LORD your God?
- (18) And now what is the gain of taking the road to Egypt  
to drink the water of the Nile?  
And what is the gain of taking the road to Assyria  
to drink the waters of the Euphrates?
- (19) Your own wickedness will punish you,  
and your apostasy convict you.  
Learn and see that evil and bitter  
is your forsaking of the LORD your God,  
and that you have no fear of Me—oracle of the LORD of  
Hosts.

This section looks back to 2 : 1-3, and it may well be that it was originally a continuous oracle. A man may abandon a slave (v. 14) but hardly his wife (v. 2). The historical position is far from clear. Skinner would see a reflection of the Scythian devastations,<sup>13</sup> but I feel that a picture almost as wide as that of the apostasy (vv. 4-13) is needed. The lions will be the Assyrians who cracked the bones of the North and sore injured the South. Worse was to come. Despised Egypt, who had been so humbled by Esarhaddon and Ashur-bani-pal, and whose reigning Pharaoh was still officially a vassal of Assyria, would yet enslave Judah (v. 16, 'shave your head', a very probable conjectural emendation). This interpretation is supported by the mention not of Egypt as such, but of Tachpanches (perhaps Daphne), a frontier stronghold and of Noph (= Memphis), which had suffered so severely during the Assyrian conquest of the land. The fulfilment, however brief, was in Necho's defeat of Josiah and occupation of Judah. That is why I have left the time studiously vague in v. 18. It is improbable that Jeremiah is concerned with possible international intrigues of his own day; he is more likely referring to that long story of lack of faith, condemned especially by Hosea and Isaiah. If he had been referring

<sup>13</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 56.

merely to recent events, the answer might have been that the clouds would soon pass over. But ever since the death of Solomon Israel had been going steadily down-hill; it had lasted too long to be explained away.

The words omitted at the end of v. 17 are obviously mere ditto-graphy with the beginning of v. 18 and are omitted in LXX.

*The Realities of Baal Worship* (2 : 20-28)

- (20) For very long ago you broke your yoke,  
 you snapped your bands;  
 and you said, "I will not serve,"  
 while on every high hill  
 and under every green tree  
 you it was that bowed down as a harlot.
- (21) But I it was that had planted you a choice vine,  
 wholly true seed;  
 how then have you turned yourself into an ill-smelling plant,  
 into an alien vine?
- (22) Though you wash yourself with natron  
 and use much potash,  
 the stain of your guilt remains before Me—oracle of the  
 LORD.
- (23) How can you say, "I have not defiled myself;  
 I have not gone after the Baalim?"  
 Look at your behaviour in the Valley;  
 recognize what you have done.  
 A light-footed young camel running hither and thither,
- (24) breaking out into the wilderness,  
 in her desire snuffing up the wind!  
 It is her mating time; who can restrain her?  
 None who seek her need weary themselves:  
 in her month they will find her.
- (25) Refrain from wearing out your sandals  
 and your throat from thirst.  
 But you said, "No hope! No!  
 I love strangers, and after them I will go."
- (26) As a thief is ashamed, when he is caught,  
 even so are they of the house of Israel put to shame,  
 they, their kings, their lords,  
 and their priests and their prophets,
- (27) who say to the tree, "My father art thou,"  
 and to the stone, "Thou gavest me birth."  
 For they have turned their back to Me  
 and not their face.

But in the hour of their need they say,  
 "Rise up and save us!"

(28) Now where are your gods you made for yourself?

Let them rise up, if they can help you in the hour of your  
 need;

for as many as is the number of your cities

as many are your gods, O Judah;

and as many as is the number of Jerusalem's streets

as many are the altars for Baal.

Rudolph<sup>14</sup> follows Duhm in deleting "I have not gone" in v. 23, rendering "I have not defiled myself (by following) after the Baalim." There is neither versional, metrical nor linguistic justification, and his explanation that Israel could not possibly have so spoken at this time shows how difficult it is to grasp the essential dichotomy in Israel's historical religion. They would doubtless have agreed at once that much that had happened under Manasseh was a denial of true Jehovah worship, but they would have attributed it to Assyrian pressure or royal idiosyncrasies. They denied that there had been any real change in popular religion and insisted that this was truly worship of Jehovah.

Jeremiah answers them by referring them to the cult of human sacrifice in the Valley (*scil.* of the son of Hinnom). As we saw in our last chapter, this was probably a royal introduction, but it was offered to Jehovah, and not to any of the many deities to which Manasseh bowed the knee in addition. Hence it served to show the logical goal of what the people called Jehovah worship, but the prophets Baal worship. Many will object that we cannot be sure that this is the correct interpretation of "the valley." Nowhere else is *gay*' used thus absolutely with the definite article. Unless we *a priori* separate this oracle from Jerusalem, there is but one valley known to us in the vicinity which might so be called without further particularizing (cf. Neh. 2: 13, 15, etc.). Furthermore, though it may be purely a convention, Jeremiah always links the Baalized worship of Jehovah with the hill tops. The only valley worship he refers to is that at the Tophet in the Valley of the son of Hinnom.

To this he adds a picture of an uncontrollable young camel in heat (a textual emendation has been accepted in the beginning of v. 24). It is not probable that he is referring to the sensuality of much of popular worship—that is suggested in v. 20b—but rather to its captivating power, enslaving and blinding its adherents. Israel

<sup>14</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 16.

grants that the prophet is right (v. 25b), but like the drug addict declares herself incurable. Indeed it was not until a remnant of the people went down into Babylonia instead of Egypt at the heels of Nebuchadrezzar and were brought up out of there by the miracle of a second Exodus that the poison of nature religion could be cleared from Israel's system.

In the mocking reference to popular religion in v. 27, the tree is doubtless the *'asherah*, the wooden pole typifying the female element in deity, while the stone is the *mazzebah*, the upended stone typifying the male element. That the genders are reversed is merely prophetic irony. It was doubtless claimed that these symbols, borrowed though they were from the Canaanites, were harmless expressions of essential truth, but as is so often the case, the symbol became itself an object of trust and worship.

The chief argument against the view set out here would be one based on v. 27c, which seems to suggest that there was a conscious distinction made between Jehovah and other objects of worship. What Jeremiah probably means is that in the hour of need men turned to Jehovah not as the God of the land and of fertility but as the covenant God of Sinai and so reverted to the old pre-Conquest traditions once again. But for those that did it, there will have been no consciousness of any element of contradiction in their act.

In v. 28 I have followed Rudolph in inserting the last two lines from the LXX. They bear every sign of authenticity, unless indeed we disassociate this oracle from Jerusalem completely. We cannot take v. 28 literally. Except perhaps in Egypt, ancient Near-Eastern heathenism did not swarm with gods to this extent. One of the most difficult features of ancient mythologies for those who study them is the wide variety of often contradictory stories told of the same gods. This is only in part due to syncretism. Nature tends to be protean. As long as men worshipped its powers, they might well vary in their interpretations of them. It is only through revelation that we can obtain a unitary and coherent picture of God. A nature Jehovah would be interpreted differently at each local sanctuary, and Jeremiah mockingly calls each local conception a different deity. Since nature is to some extent within the individual's control, while revelation is not, nature religion tended to a multiplication of small sanctuaries erected as it seemed well to men.

#### THE INGRATITUDE AND SIN OF ISRAEL (2 : 29-37)

The first series of oracles ends with a series of pictures of irresponsibility and corruption. Because of the tendency to over-

stress the religious side of Jeremiah's reproofs, it is well to note v. 34; it may well refer to the much bloodshed in Manasseh's reign (II Kings. 21 : 16), but in any case it shows that social righteousness was never far removed from a prophet's message and thoughts.

The next chapter will show quite clearly the effect of Jeremiah's pleading, but already as we have followed his message—doubtless we are dealing with selected oracles that give the heart of many more that have not been recorded—it is clear that there was no popular welcome for it.

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*(To be continued.)*