

THE PROPHECY OF JEREMIAH

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XI. IN THE BEGINNING OF THE REIGN OF JEHOIAKIM

IT is easy to be unduly sophisticated in our interpretation of the events that followed on Josiah's death. It obviously was a tremendous shock, unexpected by any,¹ the more so as the king seemed to be under the protection of the divine oracle given by Huldah (2 Ki. 22: 18-20). We need not look, therefore, for any profound motives among "the people of the land," when they made a younger son, Shallum or Jehoahaz (Jer. 22: 11; 2 Ki. 23: 30), king.² Manasseh was probably the worst man religiously to rule Judah, but Jehoiakim seems to have been the most despicable in character.³ Since this will have shown itself already in his father's lifetime, it is doubtful whether we need look any further for the motive in the choice of Jehoahaz. Nor need we search far for reasons why he was deposed by Neco. Suggestions that he was following his father's political policy⁴ are hardly credible. It is enough to recognize that Neco probably hoped to incorporate at least all Syria into his realm, but until that time came, he preferred to rule through puppet rulers than to be troubled by political reorganization. They could be swept away when the time was ripe.

The new king's status was amply revealed by Neco's giving Eliakim the throne name of Jehoiakim. It was equivalent to proclaiming that he was no more than his honoured slave.

It has been widely held that Jehoiakim abolished his father's

¹ This is even more the case, if we follow many moderns, e.g., Oesterley and Robinson, *A History of Israel*, I, p. 424; M. Noth, *The History of Israel*², p. 279, in dismissing the testimony of Chronicles and maintaining that 2 Ki. 23: 29 implies that Josiah was seized and executed by Neco without a battle.

² There seem to be no valid reasons for thinking with Noth, *op. cit.*, p. 279, that Jehoahaz was Josiah's eldest son. We have both the indication of ages in 2 Ki. 23: 31, 36 and the genealogy in 1 Chr. 3: 15. Albright in *JBL* 51 [1932], p. 92, argues that the present figures are suspect because they would make Josiah a father at 14. Montgomery and Gehman, *Kings* (ICC), p. 523, find no special difficulty in this. It is clear, however, that Zedekiah's age (2 Ki. 24: 18) is incompatible with the order of the genealogy, which suggests that he was older than Jehoahaz.

³ See Oesterley and Robinson, *op. cit.*, I, p. 431, for a good evaluation of his character.

⁴ E.g., Noth, *op. cit.*, p. 279; Oesterley and Robinson, *op. cit.*, I, p. 430.

religious reforms,⁵ but the evidence for this is virtually confined to Ezek. 8, which, as I have pointed out elsewhere,⁶ is not to be taken literally. Bright is far nearer the mark, when he says, "Under Jehoiakim the reform lapsed. The king, being without religious depth, had little feeling for it, while popular opposition to it had never died."⁷ Even this is probably too strong. Though there are unexpected silences in *Jeremiah*, it is virtually impossible to believe that the prophet would have been silent, if there had been an *official* return to the cultic conditions of Manasseh's reign.

We do not always realize the far-reaching effects of cultic reformation. The religious policy of Ahaz will have put an end to the considerable degree of tolerance there seems to have existed in Judah between true Yahwism and the concepts of nature religion; the fairly thorough reform under Hezekiah was the obvious answer. This only set the pendulum swinging the more violently to open apostasy under Manasseh and to a clean sweep under Josiah. If Jehoiakim had wished to change the official religious policy, he would have had to revert to that of his great-grandfather. Had he done so, he would have found that the whole heathen cultic apparatus had been swept away and the traditional sacred sites effectively profaned. It appears that even the profaned sanctuaries of the North did not try to re-establish themselves once Jerusalem had fallen (41: 5).

Quite apart from the difficulties an official change of religious policy would have faced, B. W. Anderson is probably correct in his judgment, "In almost every respect, Jehoiakim was a different man from his father, Josiah. If his father wanted to model his reign after David, then Jehoiakim's ambition was to be another Solomon."⁸ We may infer that the *status quo* was maintained in official religion, but no attempt was made to control whether there was popular conformity to it. Consistently with this the only idolatrous cult Jeremiah mentions in this period of his activity is one clearly linked with the home (7: 17, 18; cf. 44: 17-19). The one apparent exception to this statement is in 11: 9-14; this will be dealt with in its place.

It is probably due to Jehoiakim's indifference to matters religious that we owe the small mention he receives in Jeremiah's oracles. The only one that centres round him (22: 13-19) is concerned with his injustice, not his religion. If this estimate of Jehoiakim and

⁵ E.g., Oesterley and Robinson, *op. cit.*, I, pp. 432 f.

⁶ *Ezekiel: The Man and his Message*, pp. 41-44.

⁷ *A History of Israel*, p. 304.

⁸ *The Living World of the Old Testament*, p. 330.

his religious attitude is correct, it will help us better to understand Jeremiah's first major public appearance in his reign.

JEREMIAH IN THE TEMPLE GATE (7: 1-15 ; 26: 1-24)

Rudolph can say, "It cannot be doubted that 7: 1-15 is the address summarized in ch. 26."⁹ Unfortunately this is too optimistic a judgment. For no apparent reason, for he does not find a chronological order to base it on, Young is inclined to put 7: 1-10: 25 in Josiah's reign,¹⁰ and the same attitude is represented by the anonymous contributor to *The New Bible Handbook* (p. 221), while F. Cawley is clearly hesitant.¹¹ On the other hand G. A. Smith is quite positive: "Nor am I persuaded by the majority of modern critics that it is a mere variant of the Temple address reported in Ch. xxvi. . . . Why may Jeremiah not have spoken more than once on the same theme to the same, or a similar effect?"¹² With him the decisive factor was probably his conviction that 11: 1-8 date from the time of Josiah.

For the purposes of this study it will be sufficient to say that three factors convince me that the two passages refer to the same event: (a) 7: 1-8: 3 gives every impression of being an essential unity, but I find it impossible to attribute 7: 16-20 to the time of Josiah—such open idolatry is irreconcilable with 2 Ki. 23: 24 ; 2 Chr. 34: 33 ; (b) the chronological difficulties felt by some are surely due to failure to realize that ch. 26 would have had no place in Baruch's enlarged roll, represented approximately by chs. 1-20 ; (c) it is hard to understand the blast of fury that greeted Jeremiah in ch. 26, if his message had already become familiar to the people.

The address was given "in the beginning of the reign of Jehoiakim" (26: 1), i.e., during the interval between the deposition of Jehoahaz in the late summer of 609 B.C. and the beginning of Jehoiakim's first regnal year in the spring of 608. Since it seems fairly clear that Jehoiakim was not in Jerusalem at the time, it cannot have been at the coronation ceremony, as suggested by some earlier expositors,¹³ but this absence makes it also improbable that Tabernacles, the great autumn feast, is intended,¹⁴ for

⁹ *Jeremia*, p. 47.

¹⁰ *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 225.

¹¹ In *The New Bible Commentary*, pp. 614b, 624a.

¹² *Jeremiah*⁴, p. 147.

¹³ E.g., Duhm, Volz.

¹⁴ So Morgenstern, *Amos Studies, HUCA*, Vol. XI (1936), p. 28 ; Weiser, *Das Buch des Propheten Jeremia*, p. 238.

Jehoiakim could hardly have been absent at its first celebration in his reign—unless indeed he had not yet returned from Riblah (cf. 2 Ki. 23: 33). All that is in fact necessary is that we postulate a representative congregation.

Baruch, to whom we doubtless owe ch. 26, will have added vv. 20-23, not because the incident was in any way connected with Jeremiah's address (the Hebrew of v. 20 does not suggest any direct link between the two stories), nor because it had taken place before it—the time involved makes this virtually impossible. He told the story of Uriah to show the very real danger to which Jeremiah had been exposed. It is worthy of note that Uriah is the first prophet we are told of to be put to death judicially since Elijah put the fear of God into Ahab and Ahaziah. Jehoiakim further showed his lack of respect for God by dishonouring the corpse. For the LXX this was such an enormity that, obviously falsely, it interprets the Hebrew to mean that Uriah was buried in his family sepulchre.

A closer study of Jeremiah's address will be given in the next chapter. For the moment we are concerned with its effect on his hearers. For them its two high-lights were that their confident cry, "The temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, are these,"¹⁵ is dismissed as "lying words" (7: 4); and the threat is made that even as the temple at Shiloh, so should this be destroyed (7: 14), and Judah would experience the same fate as the Northern kingdom (7: 15).

Though the downfall of the monarchy is implicit in these threats, for the choice of the Davidic monarchy and of Mt. Zion and its temple are closely linked (e.g., Ps. 132: 11-14), what shocked the people was the prophecy of the destruction of the temple and city (26: 9). Similar messages given by earlier prophets (e.g., Amos 9: 1; Isa. 32: 13-15; Micah 3: 12) seem to have been received without any marked outburst of hostility. Elsewhere we gain the impression that the earlier messages of Jeremiah and the oracles of Ezekiel were received with a hostile but fairly passive incredulity. Why then this sudden flare-up of popular hatred, which would gladly have lynched him and which seems to have followed him for the rest of his life?

In the early history of Israel we find the worship centred on a movable tent, even though there were many secondary fixed sanctuaries. The civil leadership was in the hands of "charismatic"

¹⁵ Though a singular is preferable in an English translation—so R.S.V., "This is the temple . . ."—the plural need cause no difficulty, as it is probably used with reference to the whole complex of buildings.

men, i.e., such as had been chosen by God and marked out for leadership by gifts of the Spirit; though here again on the city and tribal level power was in the hands of regular elders. The former helped to protect them against the view of all primitive Semitic religion that a god was more interested in the ground he ruled than in the men who lived on it.¹⁶ The latter guarded against the idea that the well-being of the people depended on Yahweh's having some special family at His disposal. It was no coincidence that the building of a national temple, which at the same time was clearly in some sense regarded as a royal chapel, followed hard on the heels of the establishment of the monarchy.

When "the tabernacle of David" fell at the disruption of the kingdom, the average Judaeon, instead of saying "Ichabod," will have looked for a restoration of the vanished glory, less because of his confidence in the character of God, and more because of his possession of the Davidic monarchy and of the Jerusalem temple, the guarantees to him of safety and ultimate salvation. Though Judah had several times, especially in 701 B.C. in the reign of Hezekiah, been on the verge of destruction, salvation had always come. But the experiences of 701 B.C. will have confirmed the beliefs of many that God had saved Jerusalem solely because it was the site of His temple, while He allowed the other cities to be captured and their inhabitants led into captivity.¹⁷

Under Josiah it must have seemed to many that because the king had made of Zion the *sole* sanctuary of Yahweh in the land, Judah had once again stretched out towards the ancient frontiers of Israel. Then almost overnight these dreams of grandeur vanished. The Davidic line in Jehoahaz and Eliakim-Jehoiakim was humbled as never before in its long history. It is virtually certain that the new territories were lost. But Jerusalem with its temple remained safe. Could there have been for these people a more convincing proof that the Temple was all that Yahweh really cared about? The safety of Judah and its royal line depended on their being the humble sanctuary-servants of Yahweh. And now Jeremiah was declaring that their last hope was no hope, and that it would be swept away.

We need not be surprised at their outburst of savage fury. Probably every Christian denomination, to say nothing of other developed religions, has a "holy of holies" where the step of the profane and sceptic may not come. When we examine the faith

¹⁶ Cf. Robertson Smith, *The Religion of the Semites*³, pp. 92 ff.

¹⁷ See Pritchard, *ANET*, p. 288a; Winton Thomas, *DOTT*, p. 67.

of many good and pious Christians a little closer, we find that it is in fact based on some theory of the Church or its sacraments, of the inspiration of the Bible or of the nature of the divine choice. Where these are denied, there can normally be neither pity nor pardon.

It was in the nature of things that the opposition to Jeremiah should be led by the priests and prophets, but there is no evidence for the view frequently expressed that they had to stir up the people, or that the latter changed sides. It is not expressly so said, but it was probably their intention to lynch Jeremiah without trial, as so nearly happened later to Paul (Acts 21: 27-31). As with Claudius Lysias, it will have been the din of an excited oriental mob that brought the high officials of the crown on the scene (26: 10). It should not be forgotten that the royal palace and in particular "the Hall of the Throne . . . even the Hall of Judgment" (1 Ki. 7: 7, R.S.V.) formed part of the one great complex of buildings on what we think of as the Temple Hill.

The "princes" (*sarim*) were not necessarily of the blood royal, and none of them mentioned by name in *Jeremiah* seem to have been. They were the ministers and high officials of the crown.¹⁸ Between them and the priests there will have existed considerable rivalry, especially as Josiah's reformation is bound to have increased the power of the latter. This probably was the motive of their interference; if they knew that it was Jeremiah that was in trouble, there is no evidence that *at that point* they were prepared to intervene on his behalf.

The "princes" insisted on a regular trial "in the gate." They were by virtue of their position as the king's representatives the judges; the priests and prophets were the prosecutors. There is no suggestion that the people at this point abandoned the prosecutors; rather they were expected to approve and applaud the verdict, whatever it might be. Jer. 26: 11 gives only the penalty demanded by the prosecution; obviously a summary of Jeremiah's address must have first been repeated. The charge is clearly one of blasphemy, the argument being that no true prophet could have so spoken. Jeremiah's defence is more peculiar than some have realized. His plea, that he was acting at Yahweh's command, and that to put him to death would mean the shedding of innocent blood with the inevitable retribution it would bring, was what might have been expected. But why the plea that they should amend their ways (26: 13)? It would seem that he is reminding

¹⁸ For a discussion of the term see Pedersen, *Israel*, I-II, pp. 37 ff.

them of and stressing the conditional element in his address (7: 5-7).¹⁹ This suggests that the principle enunciated in 18: 1-12 was well known and understood. Since not even the most self-confident priest or temple-prophet claimed to have Yahweh under his complete control, the contingency in Jeremiah's message moved it from their point of view from the impossible to the improbable. This also helps us to understand Pashur ben-Immer's drastic action (20: 1, 2) after Jeremiah's breaking of the water-jar (19: 10, 11), a message and action that excluded all element of the contingent.

Common sense should tell us that the contribution of "the elders of the land" (26: 17-19) cannot be a justification of the acquittal given after the verdict had been spoken (26: 16). Baruch's order serves to underline that it was Jeremiah's defence and not the quotation of precedent that won the day for him. We have no means of determining who these elders were. It may be that they were simply the acknowledged leaders of the free farmers, "the people of the land." If the tentative suggestion made earlier is correct, that Jehoiakim was still at Riblah, they would not yet have been crippled by the special tax levied on them (2 Ki. 23: 35).

Their reference to Mic. 3: 12 raises a problem, which shows how little we really know about many areas of Israel's history. Unless we reject the chronological statement in 2 Chr. 29: 3, there seems to have been hardly time for the cultic reform to have been the result of Micah's prophecy. In addition it is hard to see how a cultic reform could have been an answer to Micah's charge of social unrighteousness. It is far more likely that we have in 26: 19 a reference to a temporary social reform otherwise unmentioned.

There can be little doubt that Jeremiah's address must have left a deep-rooted bitterness, for the people, though overawed for the moment by his calm defence of himself, were soon thirsting again for his blood. Welch,²⁰ strangely enough, sees the priests as the instigators both with Uriah and Jeremiah, and claims, "Jeremiah was only saved from a like fate by the interference of Ahikam." But there is no evidence that Uriah's execution had any popular element in it. In fact I find it hard to believe that a man of Jehoiakim's temperament would have troubled to extradite

¹⁹ Welch, *Jeremiah—His Time and His Work*, pp. 137-142, argues that both in ch. 7 and 26 the conditional element has been added by editors, but he has found few to accept his position, the more so as the reference to Mic. 3: 12 and its sequel shows that it was regarded as conditional, though not so in form.

²⁰ *Op. cit.*, pp. 150 f.

Uriah from Egypt unless it was he himself who felt particularly aggrieved by his oracles. It is far more likely that the "they" of 26: 24 are the "princes." It is not impossible that Jeremiah was taken briefly into "protective custody" until popular excitement should lie down, and that the "princes," having demonstrated their authority over the priests, were quite ready to sacrifice Jeremiah as a mischief-maker to popular anger.

(To be continued)

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