

# THE PROPHECY OF JEREMIAH

(Continued)

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## XII. JEREMIAH AND THE CULTUS

Though more recent writings have tended to show an abandoning of extreme positions, it still remains true that the most controversial aspect of Jeremiah's oracles is his attitude towards the cultus. While none of these oracles should be interpreted in isolation from its context, to consider them together in one chapter may help us to a truer balance in our final judgment.

### THE TEMPLE

Welch<sup>1</sup> in his treatment of 7: 1-15 follows Ehrlich in his quite plausible repointing in v. 3 to make it read "that I may dwell with you in this place"<sup>2</sup>; he sees a misunderstanding of v. 3, so rendered, in v. 7 and eliminates vv. 5-7 as a post-exilic gloss. Similarly in ch. 26 he removes as another editorial gloss vv. 3-6, 13. He then takes what is left of the address in close connection with 7: 21-26, which is basically sound exegesis. Having removed all elements of contingency from the Temple address, he can say:

It is only, however, when the condemnation of the sacrificial system is set beside the doom against the temple that the full significance of Jeremiah's position can be recognized. Exactly as the prophet attacked the principle of the ordained ceremonial law, he rejected the principle of the peculiar sanctity of the temple. The two belonged together in his mind, and constituted a double evidence of the failure of the nation to grasp the meaning of true religion. . . . He thrusts into the foreground the religious significance of this doom. The impending ruin is not to be the outcome of political conditions or the result of a mere shifting of power among the nations. The temple is to go, and its sacrifices are to be discontinued in the interests of true religion. Yahweh is to bring about this thing.

It is one thing to bring the oracle on the Temple and the one on sacrifice in ch. 7 into close juxtaposition of thought; it is another to give to the Temple oracle an interpretation which virtually demands that Jeremiah's hearers had already heard his oracle on sacrifice. Then his arguments for post-exilic glosses are weak in the extreme. Even that based on the double meaning given to "place" (*maqom*) in vv. 3 and 7 has little force, for such double meanings are frequent in the prophets. It evaporates entirely,

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 135-151.

<sup>2</sup> This is in any case the rendering of Aquila and the Vulgate, and is followed by BH, Moffatt, Knox and Rudolph.

however, if here too in v. 7 we re-point and render, "then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers . . ."<sup>3</sup>

Once we render both passages of Yahweh's dwelling in the Jerusalem temple then the whole picture changes. We are listening to the prologue of the tragedy that plays itself out in Ezek. 8-11, where the glory of Yahweh abandons the sanctuary. When Jeremiah says that, "This is the temple of Yahweh, the temple of Yahweh, the temple of Yahweh" is lying or deceptive words, he is not questioning the right of the sanctuary to be so called. We are back in thought with Solomon's question in his prayer of dedication, "But will God in very deed dwell on the earth? behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain thee: how much less the house that I have builded!" (1 Ki. 8: 27). The popular idea was that God was in some way bound to Zion. Jeremiah knew that His presence was an act of pure grace. To behave in the Temple as though it were not the dwelling of the Giver of the moral law and the Claimer of undivided loyalty would be to force Him to leave it. The thought in Ezek. 8 is the same except that it is purely religious loyalty that is stressed. The destruction of the Temple was no punishment in itself; it was merely the outward sign that God had forsaken it.

All this means that for Jeremiah the Temple was a means by which God could show His grace, but which had no value in itself, if that grace was not being communicated. There is no great difference between Jeremiah's message and that in Isa. 1: 12-17. In the earlier God repulses the worship, in the later He declares that He will withdraw from it.

If we take *Jeremiah* as a whole, it is a reasonable inference that the prophet had long come to the conclusion that the Temple was not essential to the communion of the Israelite with his God, but the time had not yet come for the liberating revelation of "the hour cometh, when neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, shall ye worship the Father" (Jn. 4: 21).

That this is the true interpretation of his Temple address is suggested by the complete lack of hostility shown in his other oracles to the venerable shrine. Indeed oracles of restoration like 31: 6, 12, 23 seem to imply the existence of the Temple, and this

<sup>3</sup> So 8 Hebrew MSS., Vulgate, BH, Rudolph and Knox. Though the evidence is too evenly balanced for dogmatism, I personally accept the renderings suggested in both verses. Moffatt does not change the pointing in v. 7, for he clearly regards vv. 5-7 as a gloss.

is particularly true of 33: 11, where the inference is unavoidable. In addition in 17: 26 the Temple is depicted as something which can be the focus of blessing.<sup>4</sup>

The warning which Pfeiffer gave in another setting<sup>5</sup> about Amos needs to be constantly heeded in the study of the prophets' attitude towards things cultic: "Amos, however, did not, as has been maintained, advocate the abolition of sacrifices: he did not oppose the institution but its misuse, and did not introduce a new order of service. He moralized religion, but did not substitute morality for religion." Whether Jeremiah came to a true knowledge of God and His will because of the Temple or in spite of it, we cannot tell. There is in fact no evidence that his spiritual development would have been any different, had there been no Temple at all or if there had been no Josianic reformation. So it is with all the great prophets. The will of God they proclaim and the way to God they lay down is linked neither to Temple nor to cultus. These exist to serve the worshipping community, not to create it. Had they been advocating the sweeping away of these externals they would have been creating the position pictured in the New Testament where the last state of the man was so much worse than the first (Matt. 12: 43-45).

#### SACRIFICE

There are no adequate grounds for doubting that the oracle in 6: 16-21 is, like the vast bulk of the first six chapters, from the time of Josiah, for the twin sins condemned are of omission rather than of commission: the people refuse to learn either from the lesson of history (v. 16) or of prophecy (v. 17).

(16) Thus says the LORD:

"I said,<sup>6</sup> Stand by the roads that have been from the beginning<sup>7</sup>

and ask the ancient path,

'Which is the good way?' Walk in it

and find yourselves a place of rest.

But they said, 'We will not walk!'

(17) Again and again I set watchmen for you:

<sup>4</sup> The genuineness of these passages, or of some of them, is often queried, but the discussion must await the consideration of the passages concerned. I have, however, in no case been forced to the conclusion that the passage is not by Jeremiah.

<sup>5</sup> *Introduction to the Old Testament*<sup>2</sup>, p. 582.

<sup>6</sup> Following Rudolph, *Jeremia*<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Following Volz, G. R. Driver, Rudolph.

- 'Give heed to the sound of the trumpet!'  
 But they said, 'We will not give heed!'
- (18) Therefore hearken, you nations,  
 and know well<sup>8</sup> what I will do to them.
- (19) Hear it, earth!  
 Behold, I am on the point of bringing evil  
 on this people,  
 the fruit of their devices,  
 for they did not give heed to My words  
 and My instructions they rejected.
- (20) What care I for incense brought from Sheba,  
 or for the sweet-smelling cane from a distant land?  
 Your burnt offerings do not win My favour,  
 and your sacrifices are not pleasing to Me."

In the setting we can hardly maintain that v. 20 throws much light on Jeremiah's attitude to sacrifice. It is only one more link in the chain that goes back to Samuel's words: "Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams" (1 Sam. 15: 22). At no time in Israel's prophetic tradition will sacrifice divorced from the obedience demanded by the covenant have had objective value ascribed to it. Even in the story of the Sinai covenant itself it is made absolutely clear that obedience, the acceptance of the covenant terms among which sacrifice is not explicitly mentioned, was what mattered. Jeremiah's stress here on the embellishments added to the standard sacrifices shows that it is the concept of sacrifice as the feeding of the deity (Ps. 50: 12, 13), as virtual bribery, as something divorced from every concept of morality, that he is concerned with.

This poses, however, a major problem for those who interpret 7: 21-23 as meaning that Jeremiah was opposed to all sacrifice on principle and denied that it had any divine sanction or origin. After all, it is not usual to attack the misuse of a custom, if you are convinced that there is no right use for it.

There is no difficulty in assuming that Jeremiah changed his mind about sacrifice, that his conceptions widened between the oracle of ch. 6 and that of ch. 7, or that thoughts which were originally latent later became open and clear-cut. But before we do so, we must find an adequate cause for the development. Can it really be said that the conditions during the later years of Josiah would have had this effect? We know so little of this period, that we cannot rule this out as impossible, but for all that it would

<sup>8</sup> Following Giesebrecht and Rudolph.

remain hard to explain why we find no trace of this development in Jeremiah's oracles.

#### THE QUEEN OF HEAVEN

The text as it now stands gives ample motivation for the sweeping nature of 7: 21-28. We saw earlier that Welch based his interpretation of the Temple oracle by assuming a close link between it and 7: 21-23, and ignoring the oracle on the Queen of Heaven (7: 16-20), which finds no place in his book. It is symptomatic of modern distrust of the order of the material in the prophecy that both Skinner<sup>9</sup> and G. A. Smith<sup>10</sup> deal with the passage only in connection with 44: 15-19. We shall see, however, that this oracle has a direct bearing on the radical rejection of sacrifice.

We know now that Queen of Heaven was the title of Ishtar, the goddess of the morning star, as worshipped by the Babylonians and Assyrians. It is reasonably obvious that the title became known in Judah under Manasseh, or possibly Ahaz. But that is not to say that her worship began then. Skinner may say with reference to 44: 17, "That (the women) could look back to the reign of Manasseh as a time of ease and happiness in the nation's history evinces a depth of religious callousness, an aloofness from the struggles and sufferings of the prophetic party at that time, which we might expect to find in the secluded upper coteries of society and nowhere else,"<sup>11</sup> but he overlooks the stress on the universality of the practice in ch. 7.

It is far more likely that with the tenacious memory of the oriental woman the defiant exiles in Egypt were thinking back, not to the humiliating days of Manasseh, but to a time when Israel and Judah were a power in the Near-Eastern world. After all nearly sixty years had elapsed since Manasseh had gone to his reward, so it is unlikely that many could have been drawing on their own recollections.

Though titles and symbols might vary, Ishtar was the great mother-goddess of the Fertile Crescent, whom the Canaanites had worshipped as Ashtoreth, or perhaps Anath. Over much of Israel's history, whatever their men-folk might be doing, the women worshipped Ashtoreth at home. When they were introduced to the Mesopotamian version of her, they quickly adopted the new title to honour her the more, but her worship went on unchanged.

<sup>9</sup> *Prophecy and Religion*, pp. 342 ff.

<sup>10</sup> *Jeremiah*<sup>4</sup>, pp. 312-316.

<sup>11</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 344.

Josiah's enforced reformation came to a halt at the women's quarters in the home. So long as a woman did not draw attention to herself by acting as a medium, her religion was her husband's concern. Now that barriers of state restraint were down the private religion of countless homes came into the open. The stress on the role of the children and of the fathers (cf. 44: 19) is intended to show that all along they had in secret connived at practices which were in open defiance of all that Judah's state religion claimed to stand for.

The worship had been able the easier to go underground because of its nature, the pinch of incense, the libation, the cakes, either in the shape of a woman, or perhaps crescent moon or star-shaped—these being Ishtar's symbols (44: 19). God draws the further conclusion: where these have been there were doubtless libations to other gods as well (7: 18).

Nothing could have brought out the incorrigibility and insincerity of the people more clearly. They had passed the possibility of repentance, something that is brought out so clearly in ch. 44. So God's judgment is made clear in the prohibition: "Now you, do not pray for this people; do not lift up cry or prayer for them; do not intercede with Me, for I am not listening to you" (7: 16).

#### OBEY MY VOICE

In the light of the foregoing it is easy to understand the oracle that follows (7: 21-28):

- (21) Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: "Add your burnt offerings to your sacrifices, and eat the meat. (22) For in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt I did not speak with your fathers nor command them concerning (details of) burnt offering or sacrifice, (23) but this thing I did command them, 'Obey My voice, that I may be God to you, and you will be a people to Me; walk in all the way I shall command you, that it may be well with you.' (24) But they did not obey nor incline their ear, but walked in their own counsels, in the stubbornness of their evil heart, and turned their back and their face. (25) From the day that your fathers came out from the land of Egypt till this day I have persistently sent all My servants the prophets to them day by day, (26) yet they did not listen to Me, nor incline their ear, but stiffened their neck; they did worse than their fathers. (27) Therefore speak all these words to them, but they will not listen to you; call to them and they will not

answer you. (28) Say to them, 'This is the nation that did not obey the voice of the LORD its God and would not accept discipline. Faithfulness has vanished and has been banished from their lips.'

We may, if we like, think that the oracle has been puffed out with Deuteronomic terms, when it received its prose form. But to say with Welch, "Besides, the oracle of vv. 24-26 cannot even be ascribed to the prophet, for it directly contradicts the idea of the innocence of the wilderness period, an idea which Jeremiah (2: 2) shared with Hosea,"<sup>12</sup> is inadmissible. No theories which suggest that the darkest strands in the wilderness story are later additions can eliminate the fundamental failure of the generation of the Exodus or bring them into Canaan. Not only is there no adequate reason for believing that the tradition of the Exodus was systematically darkened with the passing centuries, but there is much to be said for F. V. Winnett's theory that the basic story of the wanderings is cast round "ten murmurings or testings."<sup>13</sup>

Once we take 7: 21-28 as an essential unity and recognize that the oracle in 7: 16-20, though separate, is approximately contemporaneous, there is nothing in Jeremiah's attack on sacrifice which goes in essence beyond 6: 16-21. The long-standing worship of the Queen of Heaven was merely a symptom of the people's constant refusal at all periods to accept God and His will, as He had revealed Himself through the prophets. All sacrifice had, therefore, become meaningless to Him.

Before we consider the oracle more closely, it is necessary to discuss the translation of v. 22. In the Hebrew we have the balanced phrase at the end of this verse and the beginning of the next, 'al dibhre 'olah wazabhah; ki 'im 'eth-ha-dabhar ha-zeh ziwwithi. When we remember that a poetic oracle lies only just below the surface of the prose, it seems very hard not to believe that the repetition of *dabhar* is deliberate. If it is, it surely justifies A. Guillaume's translation, "concerning matters of burnt offering and sacrifice,"<sup>14</sup> i.e., concerning details of them. If this is correct, it makes a denial of the divine origin of the Israelite sacrificial system almost impossible to read into Jeremiah's oracle. But even if we reject this rendering, we are not really much better off.

When we read *Exodus* in its present form, we find that the first

<sup>12</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 142 f.

<sup>13</sup> *The Mosaic Tradition*, ch. VI.

<sup>14</sup> *Prophecy and Divination*, pp. 373, 378.

step in the covenant ceremony is God's demand for an unconditional acceptance of the covenant, although its terms have not yet been revealed. This demand is based on God's actions in the Exodus (Ex. 19: 3, 6). This demand is accepted by the people (19: 8). Then follows the giving of the Decalogue (20: 1-17), which is the only part of the Law spoken directly to the people (20: 18-21). It goes without saying that the Decalogue is devoid of cultic detail. In the Book of the Covenant that follows (20: 22-23: 33) cultic detail is minimal. It is only *after* the covenant has been ratified (24: 1-8) that we gradually hear details of the Tabernacle, the priesthood and of sacrifice. In the most literal sense Jeremiah's words are true. "In the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt" God had literally spoken of obedience, not cultic matters. Jeremiah is clearly indicating that the order of revelation is indicative of its relative value.

We can hardly escape this conclusion by appealing to the literary criticism of the Pentateuch. It is now generally agreed that whenever the Priestly code may have been written its sacrificial system was in operation long before the exile. What is more, the hypothetical post-exilic editor placed all this cultic detail as a virtual appendix to the basic legislation of the covenant.

So what Jeremiah is telling his contemporaries is that God is completely indifferent to the way in which they may bring their sacrifices. They may even commit the cultic enormity of eating the whole burnt offering, as though it were a peace offering. Where there is not the basic requisite of obedience, God refuses to regard their goings on in the Temple as sacrifice to Him. Sacrifice in the Old Testament is not the creator of a true relationship between man and God—this always depends on God's prior action—but its sustainer, and if the relationship has been destroyed by disobedience, it cannot be recreated by sacrifice.

Little attention need be paid to modern suggestions that after all the bulk of the Hebrew cultus had been derived from the Canaanites. Quite apart from the questionable formulations of the facts,<sup>15</sup> it should be clear that Jeremiah was not speaking as an antiquarian, who would, in any case, not have been understood in that rôle. If we are to understand him as rejecting sacrifice completely as something never divinely willed, we must with

<sup>15</sup> I attribute the undoubted similarities between the Canaanite and Hebrew cultus to the possession of cultic traditions by Israel going back to the Patriarchs, but divinely modified at Sinai. It should be clear from the language of Lev. 1-7 that it is only the details and not the underlying principles that are new.



Rudolph regard it as due to his "religious intuition."<sup>16</sup> Such an interpretation overlooks the fact that Jeremiah had no interest in smashing the cultus, but in persuading Judah to return to its covenant obedience. To smash the worship of the cultus would not automatically turn men's hearts to God; rather it would make them ask what was to take the place of sacrifice.

That this is the correct interpretation seems to be indicated by the casual reference to the priest and sacrifice in 31: 14. Its rejection by Rudolph<sup>17</sup> seems to be entirely subjective, and it is retained by Weiser.

#### THE SABBATH

The above interpretation would be even more reinforced, if we could prove that 17: 26 is a genuine oracle by Jeremiah. Though S. R. Driver accepted 17: 19-27 as from Jeremiah,<sup>18</sup> his attitude was exceptional. G. A. Smith mentions the passage only to reject it, and Skinner passes over it in silence. It is the more welcome, therefore, to find Rudolph<sup>19</sup> and Weiser<sup>20</sup> both recognizing it as a genuine oracle of Jeremiah that has been worked over. The real objection of most scholars to the passage has been expressed briefly and excellently by Cunliffe-Jones<sup>21</sup>: "it is clear, not that Jeremiah would not have spoken about the sabbath day, but that he would not have said *this* about the sabbath day. One of his great themes was that God is greater than all the means of grace, and that it was possible to hold on to the means of grace, and yet be utterly disobedient to God in mind and heart. He would not have made the fate of Jerusalem depend on a formal ritual observance not necessarily related to a transformed way of living."

What are we to say to this eminently fair statement of the problem, one that we cannot avoid by suggesting it is an early oracle that has received its present position as an illustration of 16: 10?

In the first place the term "a formal ritual observance" is too sweeping. That which for most may be truly no more than a formality, may be for a few a revelation of character. No doubt on the day that our Lord sat by the treasury the giving of most was a merely formal act, but the two mites were a revelation of the widow's character (Mk. 12: 41-44). Then in a given historical situation an otherwise insignificant action may take on especial

<sup>16</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 53.

<sup>17</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 179.

<sup>18</sup> LOT<sup>9</sup>, p. 258.

<sup>19</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 109 ff.

<sup>20</sup> *Der Prophet Jeremia*, pp. 155 f.

<sup>21</sup> *Jeremiah*, pp. 136 f.

significance. We need not doubt that Ashtoreth had been worshipped by many of the women of Israel as Jehovah's consort right down the history of the nation, but it was only in its open revival early in the reign of Jehoiakim that her worship suddenly became a clear pointer to the true spiritual state of the nation. So, it may be, the keeping of the Sabbath could have been a little later in the same reign.

In the time of Amos (8: 5) the Sabbath was observed but disliked. Since every effort to demonstrate an effective link between the Sabbath and the religion of Mesopotamia has broken down, we are not likely to be wrong in taking for granted that there was next to no Sabbath observance in the reign of Manasseh. During his many years of apostasy it will have ceased to be a living tradition. What Josiah may have done to enforce it, we cannot even guess, but now we are in the reign of Jehoiakim. There had recently been a very serious drought. Taxes were heavy owing to the heavy indemnity that had to be paid to Egypt (2 Ki. 23: 33) and the cost of the new palace that was being built (22: 13, 14). Under such circumstances men begrudge a forced tribute of time to God.

In spite of efforts to link this oracle with Neh. 13: 15-22, no close similarity can be observed. Rather the stress on Judah coming in at the gates with loads suggests that those that came up for the Temple worship saw no reason for not combining business with their worship. It is less likely that it is the complete desecration of the Sabbath that Jeremiah is attacking, and rather an attempt to make the best of both worlds. Under such circumstances a complete and radical setting aside of the Sabbath as holy to Jehovah might really have indicated a true change of heart in the people. It is not chance that it is the Sabbath, not sacrifice, or circumcision, or tithing, or fasting that finds a place in the Decalogue. True Sabbath-keeping demands the co-operation of the whole man and is never merely a formal ritual observance.

This means that 17: 19-27 is in no necessary conflict with what we have already seen of Jeremiah's attitude to the cultus but may very well support it. In that case too v. 26 will serve as a valuable warning against a too radical interpretation of 7: 21-23.

#### CIRCUMCISION

The same attitude towards outward observance is seen in the short oracle 9: 25, 26 on circumcision. Though the historic setting is unknown and the text has been questioned, the main point is clear enough.

So far as can be established, until the coming of the Greeks circumcision, except for the Philistines, was virtually universal in the western arm of the Fertile Crescent and was also very common among the Egyptians, especially the priests and those of higher rank. In the eastern Fertile Crescent it was apparently not practised.

God says that the days are coming when He will punish not merely Judah's neighbours, including the Egyptians and nomad Arabs, but also Judah. They are joined together by one feature, they are all "circumcised but yet uncircumcised" (R.S.V.). In His sight they are all uncircumcised, presumably because like Judah they are uncircumcised in heart. Since it should be clear that the oracle is really pointed at Judah and not at the other nations named, it seems unnecessary to ask what, if any, historical event lies behind it. It could be the plot mentioned in 27: 1-11 early in the reign of Zedekiah; though Egypt is not mentioned by name, it was doubtless behind it.

The motivation for the punishment is not given, and there is no need to suppose that it was necessarily the same in each case. Above all there is no reason for supposing that the uncircumcision in heart is regarded as culpable in any but Judah.

Judah was doubtless looking on its circumcision, the covenant sign, as one of its reasons for believing that God would not abandon the people at the last. Jeremiah points out that the same argument would guarantee His intervention in favour of the neighbouring peoples, who were also circumcised. So far from that He was going to punish them; in His sight they were uncircumcised—"all these nations are uncircumcised" (v. 26, R.S.V.). But so too for that matter was "all the house of Israel" for they were uncircumcised in heart.

It can hardly have occurred to an Israelite that his circumcision was the same in Jehovah's sight as that of one of his heathen neighbours. He probably never asked himself, wherein the difference lay. It could scarcely be the age at which the ceremony was performed, in infancy instead of at puberty. For all that the shift of time pointed to the difference. Why exactly the Canaanites practised circumcision we do not and probably never will know. But in some way it will have represented the yielding of the man's sexuality, his fertility, to the gods. The transfer to infancy will have represented the yielding of his whole nature, of his heart, to Jehovah. Where the heart was not circumcised, i.e., where a man was stiffnecked (Dt. 10: 16) and had not yielded himself to God's will, his bodily circumcision was in God's sight no whit

different from that of the heathen, which was uncircumcision in God's sight.

Here again we see that Jeremiah is neutral to the ceremony as such. He is not attacking circumcision. He stresses that the ceremony divorced from the spiritual reality it represents is worthless.

#### THE ARK OF THE COVENANT

In this connection it is worth mentioning the short oracle in 3: 16, 17. This clearly presupposes the disappearance of the Ark. However we understand 2 Chron. 35: 3, it shows that the Ark was still in existence in the reign of Josiah. We shall then be wise to date this oracle either in the reign of Zedekiah or shortly after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. In coming days the phrase was no more to be heard, "The Ark of the Covenant of the LORD; it shall not enter their minds; they shall not remember it nor miss it, and it shall not be made again." The reason for this was not some defect in the Ark, or even in its use, like Nehushtan, Moses' bronze snake. Rather it was a symbol of a great reality, and when the reality comes, symbols may fade away. "At that time they shall call Jerusalem the throne of the LORD, and all nations shall be gathered to it." The Ark, or rather the mercy seat above it, symbolized Jehovah's throne in the midst of His people. When He, in fact, would reign in their hearts, the need of the symbol would vanish.

It is surely here that Jeremiah's thought becomes clearest. He was no enemy of the material in religion as such, but more perhaps than anyone else in the Old Testament he realized that God, who is spirit, could not be worshipped by the material. The material, whether sacrifice, circumcision or cultic furniture, was a pointer to spiritual realities. It was of value so long as it led men to the spiritual; it was worthless and dangerous, when men remained content with it and put their trust in it.

#### THE FALSE PEN OF THE SCRIBES

This principle of the worthlessness of the material in religion, if it does not lead to spiritual reality, finds perhaps its most drastic expression in the short oracle of 8: 8, 9. Though it is linked in thought with 8: 4-7, which deal with the incomprehensible behaviour of the people, it seems to be a unit in itself.

How can you say, 'We are the wise  
and we have the instruction of the LORD in our midst?'  
Not so! to a lie transformed it  
has the lying pen of the scribes.  
Ashamed are the wise,

they are dismayed and taken ;  
behold, they have rejected the word of the LORD  
and of what use is their wisdom to them ?

There seems to be no point in enumerating the various suggestions that Jeremiah had become suspicious of the genuineness of the scroll found in the Temple, or that he thought that copyists were using their opportunity to strengthen those elements in it that suited their purpose. Had he meant anything of the sort, he would have said it more clearly, more often and more violently. His charge is that these men who consider themselves wise have rejected Jehovah's word, i.e., the word of the prophet. The grounds on which they rejected it was that they had the Torah, the instruction of the LORD. In the context this can only mean that they were basing themselves on the Pentateuch in whole or in part (our interpretation is not affected by literary critical considerations), which contained all they needed, according to their claim.

Jeremiah affirms that where confidence in and reliance on the written page prevents a man from hearing and accepting the word of the LORD as spoken by the Spirit through one of His prophetic servants, then even the loving work of the devoted scribe has been falsehood and devoted to falsehood.

It is doubtful whether anyone has ever gone further, or could have gone further in his stress on the primacy of the spiritual. There is nothing material which cannot be and which has not been used wrongfully, however much it has come from God and however hallowed and blessed it has been for some.

*(To be continued)*

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