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# THE PROPHECY OF JEREMIAH

(continued)

by H. L. ELLISON

## XVII. IN THE FOURTH YEAR OF JEHOIAKIM

**I**N the 40 or more years of Jeremiah's prophetic activity (626 to at least 586) the events of the year 605 represent the main watershed. For 23 years (cf. 25: 3) he had prophesied disaster. His message from the first had been destruction from the North (1: 13f., 4: 6, 6: 1, 10: 22), but nothing in the international situation had given the slightest support to his warnings.

If there was a Scythian incursion,<sup>1</sup> it swept down the coastal plain, leaving Judaea untouched. Little from outside seemed to disturb the Indian summer of Josiah's reign. Though Nineveh was destroyed in 612 by a coalition of Medes, Scythians and Babylonians, and Assyria breathed its last two years later, the West seems to have remained quiet. When in 609 disaster fell at the fatal field of Megiddo, it was from the South that the enemy had struck. Soon, however, it seemed as though little had happened. True enough, there had been a swinging tribute and Josiah's new provinces in the North had vanished without trace, but there seemed no reason why Judah should not continue its existence under the suzerainty of Egypt as it had for over a century under Assyria. Jehoiakim's building of a new palace (22: 13-17) showed that he evidently thought so.

We have already seen that it was the despising of God's word which he had been given to speak that broke Jeremiah's heart.<sup>2</sup> Our modern efforts to find psychological explanations of prophetic phenomena, however valuable they may be in certain directions, have tended to deflect our attention from the profound moral certainty of the canonical prophets that they were God's spokesmen, and indeed the uneasy recognition of the people that they were. Repeatedly we find them identifying themselves with God's attitudes and judgments. This deprived them of the solace of many a weary modern preacher, *viz.*, that it was merely a man that

<sup>1</sup> For arguments against see *E.Q.* Vol. XXXII, No. 4, 1960, p. 223. Note the silence of Noth, *The History of Israel*<sup>2</sup>, and the doubts of J. Bright, *A History of Israel*, p. 293.

<sup>2</sup> *E.Q.* Vol. XXXV, No. 3, 1963, pp. 165ff.

was being rejected. We are so familiar with modern criticisms of the ministry, something as old as the experience of the apostles (1 Cor. 4: 9-13), that we often fail to grasp that this was not really possible in Israel. Faced with the prophets there was an "either —or". Either the message was accepted or the validity of the prophet's call had to be denied.

Jonah sulking under the withered *qigayon* may seem an object of fun to the modern Sunday School child and of scorn to the more sophisticated man in the pew, but he is nobler than we account him. I grant that he was probably clear-sighted enough to recognize what the sparing of Nineveh might mean in suffering for his people; in addition his own reputation as a prophet had suffered. But let us give Jonah his due; in the long run, when the Ninevites had recovered from their fright, the reputation of the God of Israel must have suffered in the eyes of the heathen Assyrians.

God had assured Jeremiah, "I am awake over My word to perform it" (1: 12). He had shown him the cauldron ready to boil over; he had filled his message with an imminency probably not matched by any other prophet. Yet the long years had rolled by without any sign of judgment going into effect. Were the people really so much to blame, if they took Magor-missabib, the awesome name of judgment to come (20: 3), and made a mock of it (20: 10)?

All this is part of the strange phenomenon that Paul calls "God's foolishness" and "God's weakness" (1 Cor. 1: 25). It is analogous to the strange ambivalence in the teaching on the Parousia in the Gospels, where our Lord can, according to one's preconceptions, be understood as teaching that He will come again either almost immediately or after a considerable delay. God in His works and revelation evidently refuses to conform to the pattern set for Him by man's thoughts and standards.

Jeremiah faced the problem and was broken by it, but in the process learnt to know God in a new way. There are all too few today who have learnt his lesson. We may take a few examples from the apparently trivial to the very serious. There are not a few who, in spite of the express teaching of Jer. 18: 1-10, demand and occasionally even fake fulfilments to prophecies, which to all appearances have never had them. There have always been some who have seriously calculated the date of the Second Coming in defiance of Mk. 13: 32.<sup>3</sup> Others ignore our Lord's words in Matt.

<sup>3</sup> A reference to LeRoy E. Froom: *The Prophetic Faith of our Fathers*, Part II of Vol. III and Parts I & II of Vol. IV, will give some indication of the extent of this last century.

11: 27 and inform us in great detail exactly how the divine and human are united in Jesus of Nazareth. Yet others apparently overlook that Paul stressed that "the word of the cross" is the power of God—not His wisdom—in contrast to the foolishness it is to those that are perishing (1 Cor. 1: 12). They think it possible to produce a theory of the atonement both Biblically adequate and philosophically attractive.

God did not permit the international situation to change dramatically until Jeremiah had come to the end of himself. It seemed that Necho's intervention, though it had failed in its first intention of keeping Assyria, the sick man of the Fertile Crescent, alive, had yet established an equilibrium. There was no sign that Media wanted to enlarge its possessions for the time being and Babylonia seemed to have reached its limits along the great curve of the Euphrates and was hardly able to hold its own.

Then suddenly in the early summer of 605<sup>4</sup> Nebuchadrezzar, at that time heir-presumptive of Nabopolassar, took the offensive, crossed the Euphrates and defeated the Egyptian army. He caught up with the survivors near Hamath and defeated them so overwhelmingly that the Babylonian Chronicle can claim "not a single man [escaped] to his own country".<sup>5</sup> By the time the news of his father's death (16th August, 605) reached Nebuchadrezzar he had apparently already reached the Egyptian frontier.<sup>6</sup> After a dash back to Babylon across the desert to make sure of the crown he was soon back in the West; though he was in Babylon for the New Year's festival in 604, he soon returned again to receive the submission of the western kings and chiefs, among whom must have been Jehoiakim.

The prophetic books do not concern themselves with the intuitions of their authors and very seldom with their hopes. We have no firm basis for discussing whether Jeremiah may have anticipated that the new Chaldean rulers of Babylon would prove to be the Northern enemy, even though this seems to have been revealed to Habakkuk long before Carchemish,<sup>7</sup> and there was also extant Isaiah's oracle of doom to Hezekiah (Isa. 39: 6f.).

What is clear is that for Jeremiah Nebuchadrezzar's victory at

<sup>4</sup> See D. J. Wiseman in *DOTT*, p. 79; E. Vogt in *Supplements to V.T.*, Vol. IV, pp. 74ff.

<sup>5</sup> See *DOTT*, pp. 78f.

<sup>6</sup> There are no grounds for doubting that Dan. 1: 1-4 should be placed at this point.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the dating see my *Men Spake from God?*, pp. 73f.

Carchemish meant his emerging from his long, dark tunnel of inner suffering into the daylight again. This change is expressed in the oracles 25: 1-14; 25: 15-38.

"THEY SHALL SERVE THE KING OF BABYLON SEVENTY YEARS"

Many earlier commentators, and some more recent, e.g., Streane<sup>8</sup> and Welch,<sup>9</sup> looked on Jer. 25, once it had been stripped of later accretions, as a unity. It seems far more likely that the majority of moderns are correct in keeping the two parts of the chapter separate. Personally I am convinced that 25: 1-14 represents the conclusion of the first great section of the book, while 25: 15-38 served originally as the introduction to the oracles against the nations.<sup>10</sup> In other words, though the two oracles are virtually contemporaneous, their juxtaposition is probably accidental.

Numerous scholars, e.g., Volz,<sup>11</sup> considers that 25: 1-14 formed the introduction to the roll of 36: 2, others that it was its conclusion, e.g., G. A. Smith,<sup>12</sup> Skinner,<sup>13</sup> Weiser.<sup>14</sup> I, however, find Rudolph's argument,<sup>15</sup> strongly supported by E. Vogt,<sup>16</sup> conclusive, that no connection is to be postulated.

This is one of the oracles where we clearly find Baruch's prose version of Jeremiah's original poetic oracle.<sup>17</sup> It is hard to see why either the introduction or conclusion of the roll should have lost its original literary form, or why, if it were the conclusion, it should have been moved from its original position and separated from indubitable roll material. In addition we are clearly told (v. 2) that so far from being composed for the roll this oracle was spoken to the people by Jeremiah.

We cannot date the oracle with absolute certainty. The editorial

<sup>8</sup> A. W. Streane, *Jeremiah and Lamentations*<sup>2</sup> (Cambridge Bible).

<sup>9</sup> A. C. Welch, *Jeremiah, His Time and His Work*, pp. 113ff.

<sup>10</sup> So W. Rudolph, *Jeremiah*<sup>2</sup>, pp. 147 seq. among many, and cf. *E.Q.* Vol. XXXI, No. 3, 1959, pp. 147f. It is to be noted that in LXX 25: 15-38 comes *after* and not before chs. 46-51, an anomalous position hard to explain.

<sup>11</sup> In Sellin, *Kommentar zum Alten Testament*, Vol. X.

<sup>12</sup> G. A. Smith, *Jeremiah*<sup>4</sup>, p. 178.

<sup>13</sup> J. Skinner, *Prophecy and Religion*, pp. 241f.

<sup>14</sup> A. Weiser, *Das Buch des Propheten Jeremia*, p. 223. For a fuller list of names see Rudolph, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

<sup>15</sup> Rudolph, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

<sup>16</sup> E. Vogt, *op. cit.*, pp. 84f.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. *E.Q.* Vol. XXXI, No. 3, 1959, p. 150.

comment, "the same was the first year of Nebuchadrezzar, king of Babylon" (v. 1), would be linguistically strictly correct only after the Nisan of 604, i.e., in Jehoiakim's fifth year. The technical expression for the period from August 605 to the following Nisan was "in the beginning of the reign of . . .".<sup>18</sup> That being so, we shall do most justice to the language by supposing that it means quite generally and loosely, in the first year in which Nebuchadrezzar came on the scene. If so, we need not postpone the oracle until he returned to obtain the crown. For me it is much more likely that Jeremiah spoke to the people as soon as the first news of the battle of Carchemish arrived, and that the oracle of 25: 15-38 will have been given shortly after. In neither do we gain the impression that the hearers had yet grasped the implications of Nebuchadrezzar's victory.

Though there are no difficulties in the translation of 25: 1-14, it seems indubitable that the original text has received considerable accretions, though perhaps not as many as most moderns seem to think. There can be little doubt that "saying" (v. 5) continues "speaking" (v. 3). LXX omits v. 3c, and v. 4 is a scribal memory of 7: 25f. The change of person in vv. 6, 7, is less important. Not only are such changes common, but here it may be due to Baruch's prose compression. If we were dealing with the verse original, I should agree that the construction "and unto Nebuchadrezzar the king of Babylon, My servant" (v. 9) is so harsh as to point to an editorial addition, even if it were to lead me to accept G. A. Smith's logic<sup>19</sup> and follow LXX in omitting Nebuchadrezzar and Babylon in vv. 1, 9, 11, 12. Seeing the oracle is carefully dated (also in LXX!), this does not make sense. Since Jeremiah knew that the storm was at last breaking, he must have known also that Nebuchadrezzar was God's instrument. It is easier to attribute the LXX omissions to some deliberate purpose and to regard the anomalous construction as due to compression. We can be fairly certain that "and against all these nations round about" (v. 9) and the consequent "these nations" (v. 11) are due to an editor who conceived of the two oracles in ch. 25 as a unity. To the same cause we must attribute "which Jeremiah hath prophesied against the nations" (v. 13c); whether "all that is written in the book" (v. 13b) is also to be so regarded depends on whether the oracle is to be regarded as the conclusion of the roll of 36: 2. Those who retain the words make "that land" refer to Judah and so omit v. 12 as a post-exilic insertion. It seems easier to regard v. 13b as the

<sup>18</sup> Cf. 26: 1 and *E.Q.* Vol. XXXIII, No. 4, 1961, p. 222.

<sup>19</sup> G. A. Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 180f.

addition. LXX is probably correct in omitting v. 14, which is a continuation of v. 12.

From the battle of Carchemish (605) to the fall of Babylon (539) was 67 years. Jeremiah's use of the same figure 70 in 29: 10 at least eight years later suggests that the mention of 70 years servitude (v. 11) was never intended to be regarded as an accurate statement of time, though the reality was close enough. Rather it represents the full span of God's wrath lasting for more than the life-span of any adult who heard Jeremiah's prophecy. In other words it corresponds to the 40 years of the Wanderings. Under wilderness conditions a shorter period was adequate.

If God's message of judgment included a long but limited period of subjection to Babylon, involving destruction and exile, it seems merely a hangover from extreme 19th-century humanistic scepticism to cut out the promise of the doom of Babylon (v. 12). It cannot even be maintained that it decreased the force of the message of doom, for that had already been done by the limiting of the period of judgment.

The same overwhelming certainty that midnight had struck is found in 25: 15-38, which must be almost contemporaneous with the previous oracle. It seems obvious that the handing of the cup of God's fury to the nations, presumably personified by their kings, was a visionary action. We may well ask ourselves whether Jeremiah left it at that. In general terms chs. 46: 1-49: 22 represent the oracles then received. If at the start of the reign of Zedekiah (the correct reading in 27: 1; cf. v. 3), Jeremiah sent symbolic yokes to the surrounding countries, it is most likely that in the aftermath of Carchemish he sent written copies of the relevant oracles to the kings they concerned.

#### THE ROLL OF DOOM

The sudden return of Nebuchadrezzar to Babylon in the August after Carchemish and again in February 604 without any particularly heavy tribute on the West—that was to follow in June 604—may well have caused the people to dismiss Jeremiah's new stand as pessimistic and of no more value than the oracles of the previous 23 years. This would be a sufficient explanation of the divine command to write the roll (36: 2); the long delay in reading it (36: 9) would fit a date late in Jehoiakim's fourth year best for the giving of the command.

Welch, by stressing that the roll was short enough to be read three times in a day (he says in an afternoon!), tries to disprove the description of its contents given in 36: 2.<sup>20</sup> But v. 32 is surely

<sup>20</sup> A. C. Welch, *op. cit.*, pp. 152-155.

evidence enough that Baruch in writing this story was making it clear that the oracles were merely a representative collection. Just as a representative selection of Israelites can be called "all Israel", so a representative selection of Jeremiah's oracles can be called "all the words I have spoken". Even allowing for the fact that Rudolph is probably correct in suggesting that Jeremiah had made notes of his messages,<sup>21</sup> and Baruch seems certainly to have done so in some cases, it would be only a pedant that would plead for absolute completeness even in the larger roll.

It is clear that we should render "I am restrained" in v. 5, for it is certain that Jeremiah was not in prison; otherwise he could not have disappeared so easily, when Jehoiakim ordered his arrest (v. 26). The easiest explanation is that Pashhur ben-Immer followed up the flogging he gave Jeremiah (20: 2) by forbidding him entrance to the temple courts. This lay within his legal powers.

The only reason I can find for the long wait until December 604 before reading the roll is that Jeremiah and Baruch deliberately waited for a fast day (v. 9), thinking that the minds of the hearers would be more favourably disposed to the message than would be the case on a feast. The failure to use the Day of Atonement for this purpose is no argument against this suggestion, for there is no evidence that under the monarchy it drew the people as a whole to the Temple; it was mainly a priestly concern.

Under the monarchy it was apparently the custom to proclaim a fast whenever the need was felt, cf. 1 Kings 21: 9 : 2 Chr. 20: 3 ; Joel 1: 4 ; 2: 15 ff. There seems little reason therefore in asking what the reason for it was. If the former rains had not yet started, it would have been an ample reason. D. J. Wiseman's suggestion,<sup>22</sup> supported by E. Vogt,<sup>23</sup> that it should be linked with Nebuchadnezzar's capture of Ashkelon in this month is more ingenious than convincing. That Jehoiakim should revolt in 601 (2 Kings 24: 1) after Nebuchadnezzar's serious defeat on the Egyptian border<sup>24</sup> is entirely comprehensible, but that he should risk attracting his attention so soon after formal submission and just when the Babylonian king had shown his power seems most improbable.

It is in conformity with normal Hebrew narrative method that the effect of the roll on its first hearers is not told us, for the point

<sup>21</sup> Rudolph, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

<sup>22</sup> D. J. Wiseman, *Chronicles of Chaldaean Kings*, pp. 68ff., DOTT, p. 80.

<sup>23</sup> E. Vogt, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

<sup>24</sup> D. J. Wiseman, *Chronicles of Chaldaean Kings*, p. 70; E. Vogt, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

of the story is its reaction on the court officials and king ; this consideration, incidentally, deprives Welch's argument based on the non-mention of the priests<sup>25</sup> of its cogency. But that Baruch should not tell us of the popular reaction indicates how little effect the touching of the conscience of the masses would have, if the rulers remained unmoved. We may infer, however, that Micaiah, Baruch's host's son, went and told the court officials what was happening just because the effect, hostile or favourable, was very considerable.

There is much to be learnt from the attitude of the royal ministers. Jehoiakim was by our concepts an absolute monarch, but it is not likely that theory and practice tallied. There is little doubt that the great officers of state did not merely hold office at the pleasure of the crown, and that the king could not just dispense with them, if he was minded to do more work himself. The only coronation service, after Solomon's emergency one, of which we have any account, that of Joash (2 Kings 11: 4, 12, 14), is too vague to tell us whether there was a written constitution or not. Certainly, however, there must have been a tradition the king would ignore at his peril.<sup>26</sup> Whatever they may have been able to do in secular matters, when it came to religion, the great officers looked at one another helplessly, fearstruck but waiting for the royal initiative (v. 16), even though they could forecast Jehoiakim's reaction with reasonable certainty (v. 19).

It is in a scene like this that we see most vividly the fell consequences of the institution of the monarchy. More and more it had shifted the nation's centre of gravity. It shows us that the reforming initiative of the "good" kings had equally with the religious leading of the "evil" ones made the religion of all but a small minority a conforming to the royal will.

#### JEHOIAKIM

In many ways the character and motives of Jehoiakim are enigmatic. Kittel can say, "Jehoiakim seems to have turned entirely into the ways of Manasseh. . . . In addition Jehoiakim—apparently under the influence of his like-minded mother, a political

<sup>25</sup> A. C. Welch, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

<sup>26</sup> The theory put forward by Th. H. Robinson in Vol. I of Oesterley and Robinson, *A History of Israel*, p. 431, that because he had been made king by force of arms there was no royal covenant with the people, and this "left him free to play the tyrant as he would," is worthy of serious consideration. It is strange, though, that it has left no trace in the narrative. It would also be an equivalent to denying his right to the throne as a descendant of David.

intriguer—must have been a pomp-loving ruler with a despot's whims".<sup>27</sup> The former statement is echoed by Th. H. Robinson: "It is quite clear that the new king at once reversed the religious policy of his father".<sup>28</sup>

We saw earlier that there is no evidence for these statements.<sup>29</sup> I have no doubt that Welch is fundamentally correct, when he says:

But religiously Judah suffered no interference from without. The Josianic reform was able to continue among the people, to confirm itself and to reveal its consequences for the national religion. Hence we find that, while Jehoiakim is condemned, he is condemned in the vague phrase that he did evil in the sight of the Lord, as all his fathers had done (2 Ki. 23: 37). No specific charge is laid against him; and in particular there is no mention of his having encouraged the worship on the high-places. The ideal of the one central sanctuary had so commended itself to the leading men of Jerusalem that no one thought of departing from it.<sup>30</sup>

To me it seems obvious that Jehoiakim was an atheist in the Biblical sense—*i.e.*, he thought God a being whose existence could be ignored. As he read history, both the nature-God of his great-grand-father Manasseh and the austere Mosaic God of his father Josiah had equally failed. While tradition demanded a minimum of religious observance, he would demonstrate that a king could triumph by his own powers. The accusations of pomp and luxury brought against him are based solely on 22: 13ff., but it is far from certain that this is what we are to deduce from the passage. "Do you think you are a king", says Jeremiah, "because you compete in cedar?"—obviously with Egypt and Babylonia. L. Woolley says about Yarim-Lim's palace at Alalakh: "It was a time (not the only one in Middle East history) when local princes vied with each other in the splendour of their houses".<sup>31</sup> I believe we shall be much fairer to Jehoiakim, if we see in his grand new palace a declaration of faith in a new policy, and in the injustice shown in its building a proclamation that he feared neither God nor man.

Such a man could not and would not forgive Jeremiah his oracle against him; though we cannot date it with certainty, it probably precedes the reading of the roll and would adequately explain Jehoiakim's treatment of it. His official motivation, "Why have you written in it that the king of Babylon will certainly come and destroy this land, and will cut off from it man and beast?"

<sup>27</sup> R. Kittel, *Geschichte des Volkes Israel*<sup>6</sup>, Vol. II, pp. 419f.

<sup>28</sup> Th. H. Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 432.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. *E.Q.* Vol. XXXIII, No. 4, 1961, p. 221.

<sup>30</sup> A. C. Welch *op. cit.*, pp. 134f.

<sup>31</sup> L. Woolley, *A Forgotten Kingdom*, p. 72.

(v. 29), need not bear out Welch's contention that this prophecy must have stood right at the beginning of the roll.<sup>32</sup> Jeremiah's recent oracle, 25: 1-14, must have come to the ears of the king, and in the light of it all the early warnings received an unambiguous meaning.

I do not think that Jehoiakim was a petty man. His murder of Uriah ben-Shemaiah (26: 20-23) and the unquestionable fate of Jeremiah, had he been able to arrest him (v. 26), were rather intended as demonstrations that Yahweh could not preserve those that claimed to be His spokesmen. Similarly, for men like Jehoiakim are not devoid of superstition, the burning of the roll was to demonstrate that Yahweh could not preserve His word ; in other words it was meant as a powerful form of counter-magic. If word ever came to him that the roll had been re-written in a longer form than ever, I do not doubt that a cold shiver ran down his spine. Similar motives probably lay behind his effort to cripple "the people of the land" (2 Kings 23: 35).

When we are told that none of the king's high officials showed any fear (v. 24), it is not meant as a contradiction of v. 16. Those that would serve a king like Jehoiakim could not venture to go too far in opposing him. In fact even to urge the king not to burn the roll, as did Elnathan, Delaiah and Gemariah, must have called for very considerable courage.

We are given no indication as to how or where Jeremiah and Baruch were able to go underground. When he says "the LORD hid them", it means no more than that, like Ahab's hunt for Elijah, the search for them was thorough, and that they felt it a miracle that they were not discovered.

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*(To be continued)*

<sup>32</sup> A. C. Welch, *op. cit.*, p. 154.