

THE PROPHECY OF JEREMIAH

(Continued)

by H. L. ELLISON

XX. THE DAY OF THE LORD (30: 4-11)

PARADOXICALLY, but hardly strangely for one familiar with Biblical thought, the message of hope begins with a foretelling of even deeper suffering.

- (4) Now these are the words that the LORD spoke to Israel (and to Judah):¹
- (5) "Thus says the LORD:
We have heard a sound of fear-filled trembling,
there is dread and no prosperity.
- (6) Ask and see,
do males bear children?
Why then do I see every man
with his hands on his loins?²
And why have all faces altered
and become pale?
- (7) For great is that day ;
none is like it.
It is a time of distress for Jacob,
but out of it he will be saved.
- (8) It shall be in that day—oracle of the LORD of hosts—that
I will break his yoke from off your neck, and I will burst
your bonds, and foreigners will no longer make slaves of
them,
- (9) but they will serve the LORD their God, and David their
king, whom I shall raise up for them.
- (10) And you, fear not, My servant Jacob (oracle of the LORD),
and be not dismayed, Israel,
for, see, it is I who save you from a far-off land
and your descendants from the land of their captivity.
Jacob will return and live in peace,
and at ease with none to disturb.

¹ For the reason for bracketing "and to Judah" cf. *E.Q.*, Vol. XXXVI, No. 1, p. 10.

² Metrical considerations support the LXX omission of "like a woman in childbirth".

- (11) You, fear not, My servant Jacob,
 for I am with you to save you ;³
 for I shall annihilate all the nations
 among whom I scattered you,
 but I shall not annihilate you,
 when⁴ I chastise you as is fitting ;
 but I shall in no wise leave you unpunished.”

The fact that vv. 8, 9 are in prose would create a presupposition that they do not form part of the oracle in vv. 5-7 ; this is made a certainty, when we realize that v. 10 continues the thought of v. 7. For that reason I have not followed LXX and R.S.V. in tidying up the concord by changing the second person to the third. The insertion of the prose oracle here, doubtless by Jeremiah himself,⁵ makes explicit, what is already implicit in the verse, viz. we are dealing with something that must by its very nature be eschatological.

As I said earlier,⁶ Jeremiah knew there could be no restoration of the North apart from re-union with Judah. He had been too influenced by Hosea's message to think of any other possibility. But equally he could hold out no hope of reunion with Judah as it then was, not even under Josiah, for he knew that Judah too must go into exile. Judah's restoration is always depicted as an eschatological event, so it follows that Israel's would have to be also.

The phenomenal spread of the white races of Europe into northern Asia, North and South America, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries involved far more bloodshed, oppression and wrong than is often realized, especially by those that have profited most from it. Even so it was possible only because superior weapons had joined hands with a form of society capable of extracting the maximum from the individuals involved.

God's will for His people was that they should display values that were spiritual rather than cultural. Hence there could be no easy triumph through the power of superior weapons in the great turning points of its history. For the rise of the empire of David and Solomon it sufficed that the power of Egypt, the Hittites,

³ I follow Volz, BH³, Rudolph and Weiser in adding these two lines from the identical oracle in 46: 28.

⁴ The standard English versions do not bring out that the chastisement and non-annihilation are contemporaneous.

⁵ I find the denial of its authenticity in Rudolph, *Jeremia*², p. 173, unconvincing.

⁶ *E.Q.*, Vol. XXXVI, No. 1, p. 9.

Assyria and Babylon should be at a low ebb, while the rise to imperial rule of Assyria and later Babylon made the fall of Samaria and Jerusalem a virtual certainty. But for the saving and settling of Israel supernatural powers had to co-operate. For the broken and terrified inhabitants of Egypt the ten plagues must have seemed like the breaking in of chaos, the more so as in the year of terror all the main gods of Egypt had been shown to be impotent. Garstang has graphically described the ravages of Egypt in Palestine which made the Israelite conquest a possibility.⁷ Little did the pharaohs know that they were doing the work of Jehovah for Him. Centuries later, before even the partial restoration of Judah could become possible, God had to raise up Cyrus, not merely to destroy the old but also to transform the whole aspect of the Fertile Crescent. Equally the partial restoration of the Jews in our days has needed two world wars and the death of a third of world Jewry to make it possible. In our present setting this last is particularly important.

The restoration of Israel would demand a universal cataclysm in the sufferings of which Israel would fully share, for the voice of the prophets from Amos agreed that the Day of Jehovah, the "day" that would usher in God's perfect sovereignty throughout the world, was one that would affect God's people first and foremost, *cf.* also 1 Pet. 4: 17f. Hence Jeremiah's extension of this oracle to Judah was entirely justified, for implicitly it included Judah from the first.

THE HEALING OF ISRAEL (30: 12-17)

The interpretation of this section, at least in its immediate application and translation, will depend on how we read the Hebrew of v. 17 with its reference to Zion in the Massoretic Text. I follow BH⁸, Rudolph⁸ and Weiser⁹ in rejecting this reading, though I do not think that it can be a gloss, as Weiser suggests. Rather the LXX points to the true reading *sedenu*; it is almost impossible to explain how the LXX could have misread as common a name as Zion, while the inverse process by the Massoretic Text is quite easy to understand. If we then take the oracle as referring to the North, then Weiser is surely correct in translating

⁷ *Joshua, Judges*, pp. 112ff. The general picture is not vitiated by his placing the conquest 150 years too early, for the process he described was continued by the troubles of the Amarna period and the campaigns of Ramesses II.

⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 176.

⁹ *Das Buch des Propheten Jeremia*, pp. 269, 281.

with past tenses in vv. 12, 13, for they refer to what happened at Samaria's downfall.

- (12) For thus says the LORD:
 "Incurable was your fracture,
 Unhealable your blow ;
- (13) there was none to plead your cause,
 no betterment for your sore,
 no healing for your wound.
- (14) All your lovers forgot you,
 they do not enquire for you,
 for I smote you as an enemy smites
 with a cruel chastening.¹⁰
- (15) Why do you keep on crying to Me about your fracture,
 that your pain is incurable?
 Because your guilt is great,
 your sins are many,
 I have done these things to you.
- (16) Therefore all that devoured you will be devoured,
 and all your enemies will go into captivity,
 and all your plunderers will become plunder,
 and all who made booty of you I shall give as booty ;
- (17) for I shall bring you healing again
 and I shall cure your wounds—oracle of the LORD—
 for they have called you 'Scattered',
 our hunters' prey asked after by none."

In this oracle Jeremiah brings to a focus thoughts we find scattered widely through the prophetic books. The fall of Samaria was no arbitrary punishment by God but was inevitable and in fact inescapable. In veiled manner it had been announced to Elijah on Horeb, when God first clearly enunciated the concept of the remnant (1 Ki. 17: 18). It is the basic message of both Amos and Hosea. Hos. 13: 14, rightly understood, states that Israel's only hope, if there is hope, lies beyond national death. We have it summarized in 2 Ki. 17: 7-18. Exactly the same was true of Judah from the year of Uzziah's death (Isa. 6: 9-13), though the point of no-return is given as the reign of Manasseh (2 Ki. 21: 11-15; 23: 26; 24: 3f.; Jer. 15: 4).¹¹

This oracle stands in its logical position in the chapter, for it explains why in the Day of Jehovah Israel will be treated other-

¹⁰ I have omitted v. 14c, as I consider it has come in by dittography from v. 15b.

¹¹ Cf. *E.Q.*, Vol XXX, No. 3, p. 144.

wise than the other nations (v. 11). It must be clearly noted that neither here nor elsewhere in these two chapters is there any suggestion that Israel's restoration is the result of any obligation on God's part, something that is often overlooked by those who speak blithely about the fulfilment of prophecy that must be. It will be, because it is based on God's character, not because God is under an obligation.

The North had received her writing of divorce (3: 8) and so God was no longer under any covenant obligation to her. The same became clear for Judah, when Jerusalem fell and the cultus came to an end for the time being. At the same time the restoration is not pictured as purely an act of grace, though it is based on grace. There is an element of *sedaqah*, of inherent rightness, about it. In 3: 11-13 we saw that the relatively far greater sin of Judah was a mitigating circumstance which made Israel's pardon possible; here it is the behaviour of the nations. In Zech. 1: 15 God says, "I am very sore displeased with the nations that are at ease; for I was but a little displeased [with Jerusalem], and they helped forward the affliction."

Apart from a passage like this we have absolutely no evidence as to how the Northern exiles fared at the hands of those among whom they had to live, but in as far as they remained true to Jehovah there is no reason for thinking that it will have been very different to the experience of the Jews. Of their many afflictions and sufferings, often "for the sake of the Name", among nations that have prided themselves on being Christian, space does not permit a catalogue, and something of them should be known to all readers. When, however, I read the savage and bitter outburst in Ps. 137: 8, 9, I cannot interpret it as coming merely from the embittered nationalist. There must have been a cynical cruelty in Babylon's treatment of its enforced guests that poisoned their very souls. It is not likely to have been very different with Samaria's exiles.

It is clear that the ill-treatment of the helpless and their exploitation rank among the most heinous of sins in God's estimation. Refusal of justice to the widow, orphan and alien is linked in the *torah* with the threat of direst punishment (Ex. 23: 21-24). Similarly the putting of "a stumbling block" in the way of "a child" brings the worst of guilt with it (Matt. 18: 5f.).

The true Israelite, whether from North or South, could not in exile do what most others could and would, viz. chameleon-like adapt himself to his new surroundings until gradually he was swallowed up by them. And so—we can speak with certainty only

of the Jew and of the true Christian, when he has been a member of a despised and very small minority—he experienced as no other minorities the innate depravity of the human heart. The unregenerate man does kick the man who is down; he excuses himself by attributing to him nameless and foul deeds; he makes him the scapegoat for the results of his own folly. The Jew has experienced this more often and more bitterly than any others. The nations have through their treatment of the Jew, through antisemitism ancient and modern, by murder, robbery and calumny, so displayed their own true nature, that in comparison Israel's faults, though many and great, are minor, and it is just of God to temper judgment with mercy. It is presumably along these lines that we should explain our Lord's theologically puzzling teaching in Matt. 25: 31-46. Our Lord's "brothers" are presumably both Jews and Christians. Those welcomed by the Judge and King are those who did not give way to the base passions aroused by need and weakness, but saw in them a call to help.

For Jeremiah the greatest sin of the nations is their failure (v. 17b) to realize that in the brokenness of Israel they are facing the divine judgment. This is the explanation of "therefore" in v. 16, which from the standpoint of human logic could be most easily deleted as due to dittography.¹²

In addition the utter extremity of Israel's need was in itself proof, if proof were needed, that it was divine chastisement that they were experiencing, not merely the working out of human history and hatred. If I suffer purely at the hands of men, who can say whether the suffering will be ended by aught but death? It is better to fall into the hands of God, for grace and compassion are among the chief of His attributes, and He keeps not His anger for ever.

THE RE-BUILDING OF ISRAEL (30: 18-22)

(18) Thus says the LORD:

"See, it is I who shall restore the fortunes of the tents of Jacob,

and on his dwellings I shall have compassion.

The cities shall be rebuilt on their *tells*,¹³

and the palaces where they were before.¹⁴

¹² E.g. Rudolph, *op. cit.*

¹³ A *tell* is the mound which has normally grown for centuries and hides the ruins of a succession of cities on the site; it is often of considerable height.

¹⁴ City and palace in Hebrew are to be understood as collectives; hence the plural in the translation.

- (19) Songs of thanksgiving shall come from them,
and the sound of them that are glad.
I shall multiply them, and they will not be few ;
I shall cause them to be honoured, and they will not be of
no account.
- (20) (Jacob's) sons will be as of old,
and his congregation will be established before Me.
I shall punish all who oppress him.
- (21) His mighty one will be of his number,
and his ruler will come out of his midst.
I shall allow him to draw near, that he may approach Me,
for who would else hazard his life
to draw near to Me?—oracle of the LORD—
- (22) and you will be My people,
and I, I shall be your God."

Here the modern Christian meets the stumbling-block of v. 3 in an aggravated form. Physical restoration is something we can find little room for in our picture of the future, yet it is here so stressed that it is virtually impossible to eliminate it by "spiritualization" or allegorizing. Israel is not being promised something better but the old, exactly as it was. Even the new cities will occupy the old sites, each on the *tell* which in Jeremiah's day spoke of defeat, ruin and exile. The prophet's gaze goes right back to before the times of failure. That is presumably why the name of king (*melek*) is avoided, though his office is implied.

Few educated men realize to what extent they have been influenced by Greek thought. It was not merely in the first century that the doctrine of the resurrection of the body proved a real embarrassment to many Christians. It is part of our creed, but quite clearly it plays little or no part in the thinking of most who affirm it. Popular views of what happens after death give clear enough evidence of that. In them the resurrection plays the part of a not very meaningful appendix. When all is said and done, there is something second-rate about the material and we need not regret over-much the mess we have made of it.

How different is the outlook of the New Testament. The whole creation is caught up in the hope of the sons of God (Rom. 8: 19). We are not Gnostics either to reject the material as we become ascetics, or to despise it as we become indifferent how we use it. For us the material has been sanctified because the Son of God has been manifested in the flesh. We are prepared to have nothing just because we have first learnt that in Christ we possess all things (2 Cor. 6: 10). We abandon much, not because we cannot

use it to God's glory, but just because we know we can. The poverty of the Christian is the poverty of his Lord, *i.e.*, the abandonment of his riches that others may be enriched.

This is why a belief in a millennium, in a world in which the perfect will of God is done perfectly, seems to be a theological necessity. Men and angels must yet know that God's verdict of "very good" on His creation was a true verdict. We must experience not merely the perfection of the last Adam's work but also what the first Adam should have achieved. How and when this will happen are questions of small importance compared to the fact. Similarly it is unimportant how exactly we should envisage such a promise as this oracle contains going into effect. It is the realization that forgiveness and restoration involve ultimately the blotting out of the failure of the past that is important.

The reference to the ruler in v. 21 is deliberately vague; it neither affirms nor denies the Davidic Messianic hope. But for the one who is prepared to go below the surface the implication that he will be priest as well surely points to the promise of the royal Melchizedek priesthood in Ps. 110, a promise that had had no fulfilment in either Israel or Judah.

The chapter ends with two verses (23, 24) which are found in virtually identical form in 23: 19, 20, which seems to have been their original position. There is, however, no need to see with most commentators a later insertion here. It is easy enough to understand why Jeremiah himself should have inserted them in the second edition of "The Book of Hope". Both in vv. 18-22 and in many of the oracles in ch. 31 the restoration is spoken of in such concrete terms from the here and now that the readers had to be reminded that for all that the promises remained eschatological.

There are no grounds whatsoever for following Rudolph and Weiser and making the wicked (v. 23) refer only to the Godless nations. As we have already been reminded, the Day of Jehovah is a day of judgment on all the wicked, no matter whether they are from Israel or the nations.

(To be continued)

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