

THE PROPHECY OF JEREMIAH

(Continued)

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XXI. THE TRUE RESTORATION OF ISRAEL

AT that time—oracle of the LORD—I shall be God to all the clans of Israel, and they will be a people to Me.” There is considerable doubt in Jewish tradition whether 31: 1 is to be regarded as the last verse of the previous chapter (so the old B. & F.B.S. Letteris text) or as the first verse of ch. 31 (so the new B. & F.B.S. Snaith text). It should not surprise us, therefore, to find Rudolph¹ interpreting the promise merely as a repetition of 30: 22, which merely makes explicit that the promise includes Judah (“all the clans of Israel”), while Weiser² argues equally emphatically that it is an introduction to the oracles of ch. 31. Cunliffe-Jones³ maintains: “This verse belongs to both chapters, giving the word of comfort in the face of the tempest of God’s anger, yet looking forward to the poem that follows.”

A link with the previous chapter the verse undoubtedly is, but even in so saying we betray an outlook foreign to Jeremiah. There were no chapter divisions in *The Book of Hope!* Ch. 30: 22 served to stress that the oracle 30: 18-22, with all its material precision, had yet a religious purpose. Now, as the tone of the oracles begins to change, we are warned that here too the literal pictures of return from exile are subordinate to the restoration of a true covenant relationship between Israel and his God.

(2) Thus says the LORD,

“The people that survived the sword
shall find⁴ grace in the wilderness—
Israel on his way⁵ to find his place of rest.

(3) From afar the LORD will appear⁶ to him :⁶

‘I have loved you with everlasting love,
therefore I have continued My covenant love to you.

¹ *Jeremia*², p. 177—so also Streane, *Jeremiah and Lamentations*² (Cam.B.).

² *Der Prophet Jeremia*, pp. 282f.

³ *Jeremiah* (Torch Commentaries), p. 193.

⁴ A prophetic perfect.

⁵ Following Aquila and Symmachus.

⁶ So LXX.

- (4) Once more I will build you, and you shall be built,
Virgin of Israel!
Once more you will adorn yourself with your timbrels
and go out in the dance of those that make merry.
- (5) Once more you will plant vineyards
on the hills of Samaria;
those who plant will both plant and enjoy the fruit.⁷
- (6) For there shall be a day when the watchmen call
in the hill country of Ephraim,
'Arise and let us go up to Zion
to the LORD our God.' "

This oracle shows clearly enough why Jeremiah's ministry to the North left no clear traces on the pages of history and must be inferred from his oracles. Jeremiah was bound to reiterate Hosea's message that ultimately the very existence of the Northern kingdom was illegitimate, and that its restoration was bound up with its recognition of the Davidic monarchy and the sanctuary linked with it (cf. Hos. 3: 5; 1: 11). We have no reasons for thinking that the North as a whole was ever willing to accept these conditions.

Its textual difficulties do not obscure the essential meaning of v. 2 and hardly justify some of the more extensive emendations suggested by Duhm and others. Indeed some of the alleged difficulties seem to derive from skilful conflation of thought by Jeremiah. On the one hand "the people that survive the sword" are clearly the descendants of the northern captives in the "wilderness" of the exile (cf. Hos. 2: 14; Ezek. 20: 35). On the other hand the generation of the Exodus is also envisaged. It was on its way to find its place of rest and it found grace in the wilderness; cf. especially Ex. 33: 12-16. So while we must interpret the perfects in vv. 2, 3 as prophetic perfects and translate as futures, yet they refer to the past experiences of Israel as well. Hence we have the stress on the abiding covenant in v. 3. The completeness of the forgiveness and restoration is shown in the title "Virgin of Israel". The conditions that once existed (2: 2) are to be fully restored.

The promise of restoration is followed by another oracle, which actually pictures the return.

- (7) For thus has the LORD spoken:
"Shout with joy for Jacob;
exult in defiance over the nations;⁷

⁷ I have followed Rudolph's interpretation of the Hebrew (cf. also R.V.mg.). The usual interpretation that Jacob is now the head of the nations, though doubtless true, hardly seems to fit the context.

make it heard, praise and say,
 'The LORD has saved His people,⁸
 the remnant of Israel !'

- (8) Behold I am bringing them from the land of the North,
 and I am gathering them from the ends of the earth ;
 among them the blind and the lame,
 the pregnant and she who has just given birth together ;
 they return as a great congregation.
- (9) Behold⁹ with tears they come,
 and with supplications for favour I lead them.¹⁰
 I cause them to walk by *wadis* filled with water,
 in a smooth way in which they shall not stumble.
 For I have been a Father to Israel,
 and Ephraim is My first-born."

Those who rejoice to see "fulfilments" of prophecy in the present may well point to the unprecedented influx of immigrants into the State of Israel in its first years, when a tragically high proportion came with broken bodies. It is probable, however, that the stress is not on some such literal fulfilment, but rather the Exodus motif is once again prominent. Just as Moses insisted that "not a hoof shall be left behind" (Ex. 10: 26), so here the universality of the new Exodus is being stressed. There will be none of the survivors that will not be able to profit from the Lord's intervention.

Its miraculous nature is in measure obscured by the rendering "rivers of waters" (v. 9, R.V.) or "brooks of water" (R.S.V.). The *nahal* is the torrent bed or *wadi*, filled with water only for short periods after rain. But now nature is to be harnessed to the welfare of God's people. As for smooth ways, they are but seldom to be found in the hills of Palestine. In fact, though it is not stressed so strongly, we are in that sphere of nature symbolism that plays such a part in *Isaiah*. Though it would be a serious mistake to turn away from a literal interpretation of the physical disabilities and handicaps, they obviously point also to the even more laming faults of character produced by rebellion against God.

That the religious side is paramount is shown by the use of "congregation" (*qahal*) in v. 8. This term links them with the

⁸ So LXX and Targum.

⁹ So BH⁸ and most moderns.

¹⁰ Neither of the versional renderings in this verse is quite convincing, viz. "With tears they went but with consolations I lead them"; see later comment.

people of the Egyptian Exodus in the wilderness. It also stresses that their main importance is religious rather than political. However attractive it may be to follow LXX and render as in foot-note 10—"consolations" is adopted by Rudolph, Weiser and R.S.V.—I feel we are dealing with a translator's, or early scribe's misunderstanding of Jeremiah's thought. Just as at the first Exodus those who came out of Egypt did so with mixed feelings, so would it be at the second. As is implicit in Jer. 31 and explicit in Ezek. 36: 24-27, redemption and restoration precede the spiritual blessings of the new covenant. So while the redeemed people travel with tears of joy, they are also tears of penitence, and the memory of past sin makes them fear, lest it be for judgment they have been brought out. The old confidence, so bitterly attacked by the prophets, in an automatic blessing, because they were God's children and people, has at last gone.

COMFORT FOR JUDAH

The next two oracles seem to have Judah primarily in mind.

- (10) "Hear the word of the LORD, you nations,
and declare it in the coastlands afar off, and say,
'The Scatterer of Israel will gather him,
and He will guard him as a shepherd his flock.'
- (11) For the LORD has ransomed Jacob
and has redeemed him as does a kinsman from the hand of
one stronger than he.
- (12) And they will come, and their shout of praise will ring out
on Mount Zion,¹¹
and they will be radiant over the goodness of the LORD,
over corn and wine¹² and oil,
and over the young of the flock and of the herd ;
and they themselves¹³ will be as a well watered garden,
and they will not pine again.
- (13) Then the virgin will rejoice in the dance,
and the young men and the old will be merry.¹⁴
I shall turn their mourning to rejoicing ;
I shall comfort them and give them joy for their grief.
- (14) I shall saturate the desire of the priest with fatness,
and My people will eat to the full of My good gifts"—
oracle of the LORD.

¹¹ So versions.

¹² It is doubtful whether there is any real difference between *tirosh* and *yayin* (cf. Koehler, LVTL, p. 1027b).

¹³ Literally "their souls".

¹⁴ So LXX, Old Latin, R.S.V., etc.

- (15) Thus says the LORD :
 "Hearken ! In Ramah lamentation is heard,
 bitter weeping.
 It is Rachel weeping over her sons,
 refusing to be comforted,
 over her sons, for they are no more."
- (16) Thus says the LORD :
 "Restrain your voice from weeping
 and your eyes from tears,
 for there are wages for your toil"—oracle of the LORD—
 "and they shall return from the enemy's land."
- (17) There is hope for you at the end"—oracle of the LORD—
 "and your sons shall return to their border."

That vv. 15-17 was addressed to Benjamin, and hence inferentially to the Southern kingdom as a whole, seems obvious to me. It is outside the scope of this study to discuss the apparent contradiction between Gen. 35: 19, which is normally interpreted to mean that Rachel was buried near Bethlehem in Judah, and 1 Sam. 10: 2, which indicates that her tomb was shown on Benjamite territory not far from the Ephraimite border. Too many of the place-names in 1 Sam. 9: 4; 10: 2-5 are unidentified for us to trace Saul's route with certainty. Yet it is clear that he visited Samuel's home in Ramathaim-zophim (1 Sam. 1: 1), the Arimathea of the New Testament, commonly abbreviated to Ramah (1 Sam. 1: 19). This lay in Ephraimite territory and should not be confused with the better known Benjamite Ramah here mentioned by Jeremiah.¹⁵ One of the first places he came to on his way home to Gibeah, once he had crossed the Benjamite border, was Rachel's tomb. So it seems clear that this was south of Bethel (cf. Gen. 36: 16), but north of Ramah in Benjamin.

I have laid stress on the site of Rachel's tomb because of the prevalence of the view that it is the downfall of Samaria that is here envisaged as the cause of Rachel's grief.¹⁶ The very finality of the language surely points to something more complete and definite. In 40: 1 we find that Ramah was used by Nebuzaradan as a sort of base camp for the captives, before they were marched north. It is the vision of her Ben-oni (Gen. 36: 18) marching northwards in fetters along the same weary road that Joseph's sons

¹⁵ For a discussion see Driver, *Notes on the Hebrew Text of the Books of Samuel*, pp. 3f.; H.D.B., Vol. IV, p. 198.

¹⁶ E.g. Peake, *Jeremiah and Lamentations* (Cent. B.); Cunliffe-Jones, *op. cit.*

had gone a century and a half earlier that breaks Rachel's heart, as she thinks of every cherished hope that now seemed to have come to an end. The promise of v. 16 indubitably includes the Joseph tribes, but the oracle must be one of those included in The Book of Hope, when its second edition was produced after the fall of Jerusalem.

If this is so, it becomes easier to see in vv. 10-14 an oracle addressed to Judah after the fall of Jerusalem. The nations of the world are summoned to rejoice in the restoration of Israel, because this is a sign that God is accomplishing through it His world-wide purposes of salvation. But while the North is linked with these, they are carried out essentially through the South. More clearly than in the earlier oracles we are moving in the realm of eschatology.

This interpretation is supported by the mention of Mount Zion. Weiser's argument that it implies no more than the pilgrim feasts (cf. v. 6) hardly carries conviction. Had I to accept the oracle as addressed to the North, I should be tempted to accept Rudolph's deletion of Zion as a later gloss. The picture is not merely one of prosperity but of Edenic blessing, such as we have in Joel. 3: 18; Amos 9: 13ff.

It is fashionable either to deny this oracle to Jeremiah or to delete v. 14. Except where this is due to the belief that he could not have uttered these words, which are regarded as typical of the exilic period, the motive is largely the unwillingness to concede that he could have included priests in his picture of the future. This has already been discussed in connection with 17: 19-27.¹⁷

THE REPENTANCE OF EPHRAIM

This section of The Book of Hope is virtually terminated with a challenge to true repentance.

(18) Surely I have heard

Ephraim shaking to and fro in lamentation:

“Thou didst in discipline chastize me and I was chastized
like an untrained bullock ;
cause me to turn that I may turn,
for Thou art the LORD my God.

(19) For after I turned away,
I repented again,¹⁸

¹⁷ *E.Q.*, Vol. XXXIV, No. 1, pp. 24f.

¹⁸ Inserting with BH³ *shabhti* for metrical reasons; it will have been dropped by haplography.

and after I was made to know,
I slapped my thigh.
I was ashamed and also humiliated,
for I bear the shame of my youth.”

- (20) “Is Ephraim My very dear son ?
Is he the child in whom I take delight ?
for as often as I speak of him¹⁹
I assuredly still remember him.
Therefore My heart is moved for him ;
surely I will show him mercy”—oracle of the LORD.
- (21) “Set up waymarks for yourself,
make yourself guideposts ;
turn your thoughts to the highway,
to the road by which you went.
Return, Virgin of Israel,
return to these your cities.
- (22) How long will you waver,
faithless daughter ?
For the LORD will create²⁰ a new thing on earth—
A mere woman will surround a man.”

This oracle should be read as a parallel to 3: 21-4: 2. Just as there, we hear what we know must be, if there is to be forgiveness and restoration, but we neither know whether it takes place or whether it is genuine.

Ephraim is depicted as looking back to the early days of his history (“the shame of my youth”) and slapping his thigh in incredulous disgust and shame at his folly. He recognizes that his exile and punishment are merited. God’s rather cryptic answer affirms that His love had always gone out to the prodigal and that there was abundance of mercy for the one that returns. On the other hand does Ephraim really grasp that he is so chained by his past that he cannot turn apart from God’s grace working in him, or is it a subtle pushing of the blame onto God ? Neither *Hosea* nor *The Book of Hope* gives us any answer, nor can we be sure that God’s love will finally triumph.

Ephraim’s repentance is met by a challenge to show that it is genuine. Let him prepare for the return ! Repentance has brought forgiveness, and forgiveness brings restoration. It is the Virgin of Israel who is addressed ; it is a call not to the believing individual but to the nation as a whole. It should send out men to mark out

¹⁹ Or “against him”.

²⁰ A prophetic perfect.

the way for the great Exodus which is so soon to begin. Exactly the same appeal to human foresight in spite of divine guidance is found in Moses's words to Hobab ben-Reuel (Num. 10: 31).

Talk is easy; verbal repentance does not demand too much of the sinner. It is another matter when man has to act on what he professes, and so we hear the ominous words "faithless daughter". So one last word of encouragement is given. "The LORD will create (*bara'*) a new thing on the earth"—something that has never been before in the experience of sinful men, and for which there is no precedent since Eden. "A mere woman will surround a man."

There is little point in adding much to the many myriads of words that have been written on this passage. Most interpretations given are either grotesque, like Jerome's application of it to the Virgin Birth, or trivial. Many of the more attractive fail because they do not give weight to *neqedah*, a female of animals as well as of man, at best a mere woman, used in contrast to *gebher*, the normal word for a man. This criticism applies to Delitzsch's attempt to rescue something from the wreck of the traditional interpretation:

. . . in chapter XXXI, 22 . . . the paradox is expressed, that the protection (indicated by *sobhebh* Deut. XXXII, 10,²¹ Ps. XXXII, 10) of the men will henceforth be effected by a woman, since a woman will bear the second David and in Him the victorious Defender of His people.²²

This makes *neqedah* singular while interpreting *gebher* as collective and does not explain why a word of no honour should be used for the mother of the Messiah.

In fact there seems to be no reason why we should not take the sentence literally and understand it as saying that the meanest of women will protect a warrior. This does not mean that the women's nature needs to have been changed, but that there will be no need for protection! Though Semitic history has known a few women of noble birth who have been war leaders, e.g., Queen Zenobia of Palmyra, none are recorded in Israel's history. Even a Deborah called a Barak to lead the armies of Israel, while in the story of Judith and Holofernes the action of the heroine was clearly not one to appeal to her.

The implication is that if Israel has truly repented and acts in faith in God's forgiveness and mercy, he will find that a new Eden has come to meet him in which all danger and warfare have disappeared.

²¹ The text has erroneously XXII.10.

²² *Messianic Prophecies*, p. 80.

The oracle in vv. 23-25, expressly addressed to Judah, calls for no special comment, since it adds nothing to the promises already given to the North. It is, however, worth noting the deep inner satisfaction of the prophet in v. 26. Though he has been almost crushed by the going into effect of the warnings he had been giving so long, he finds consolation and new hope in his vision of the Judah that is yet to be.

(To be continued)

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