

THE PROPHECY OF JEREMIAH

(Continued)

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XXII. THE NEW COVENANT (cont.)

FOR the modern man of spiritual insight the promise of the New Covenant forms such an obvious climax to Jeremiah's little Book of Hope that he seldom reads further. That is because, in legitimately claiming the promise for himself, he quite illegitimately detaches it from its historic setting. We are so accustomed in practical experience to one man's profit being another man's loss, that we virtually assume it must be so in the realm of the spirit too.

When we remember to whom the Book of Hope was first written, it is hard not to agree with Rudolph¹ and Weiser² that 31: 35ff. formed the conclusion of its original edition.

Thus says the LORD,

He who gives the sun for light by day

and the ordinances of the moon and stars for light by night,

He who stirs up the sea, so that its waves roar—

the LORD of hosts is His name :

“If these ordinances depart from before Me—oracle of the

LORD—

then too the offspring of Israel will cease
from being a nation before Me for all time.

³If the heavens above can be measured,

and the foundations of the earth can be explored,

then I will reject all the offspring of Israel

for all they have done—oracle of the LORD.”

This is not merely a piece of magnificent rhetoric. Religious man repeatedly minimizes and distorts God's purposes because he cannot grasp the greatness, power and wisdom of God's character and works. He stands under the condemnation of the title of one of J. B. Phillips' books, *Your God is too Small*. Two of the false doctrines springing from this narrowness of outlook are the belief that God does not desire the salvation of all men, and that He has rejected the Jew, hence *a fortiori* the Northern tribes as well. Here

¹ *Jeremiah*², pp. 186f.

² *Das Buch des Propheten Jeremia*⁴, pp. 288f.

³ Omitting “Thus says the LORD” with LXX.

Jeremiah proclaims in majestic and burning words the truth Paul wrestles with through the three chapters, Rom. 9-11.

Paul can proclaim triumphantly, "And so all Israel shall be saved" (Rom. 11: 26), for he has first demonstrated, "They are not all Israel that are of Israel" (Rom. 9: 6). Jeremiah too is quite clear that he is not dealing with a purely automatic national salvation. However great and however certain the divine triumph, "Then I will reject all the offspring of Israel" is a clear warning that some will fall by the way. It is true that BH³ stresses that "all" is omitted by LXX and Latin. But Rudolph, who was responsible for *Jeremiah* in BH³, lays no stress on it in his commentary, though he is not certain how he should interpret the "all".⁴

Modern man, in the pride of modern scientific knowledge, is inclined to discount this type of Old Testament passage. But the same God, who was able to reduce pre-scientific Job to despair by His questions, has as many more for the atomic scientist, for which he has not even the beginning of an answer. We live in an age when man is turning from the macrocosm to the microcosm, from what his eyes can tell him to what can be inferred only from his instruments. In so doing he repeatedly finds that the smallest bears witness to the power and wisdom of God at least as obviously as the largest.

The mention of the sea is because it is for the Old Testament a standing symbol of chaos. Ancient man was obsessed by the terror of the possibility of a new inrush of chaos. The prophet knew that chaos was merely the product of the human mind, of human fear and impotence, for there is nothing that is not under God's rule and control.

There are very few moderns who do not dismiss the concluding oracle (31: 38-40) as a product of the exilic period, which has been interpolated here. It certainly reads strangely :

Behold days are coming—oracle of the LORD—when the city of the LORD⁵ will be rebuilt from the Tower of Hananel to the Corner Gate. And the measuring line will go on straight on⁶ the hill Gareb and will then turn to Goah. And the whole valley⁷—with corpses and sacrificial ashes—and all the

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 187.

⁵ For a justification of the rendering see Gesenius-Kautzsch 129b.

⁶ RV, RSV "unto, to" presupposes the common scribal error of 'al for 'el.

⁷ Hebrew 'emeq.

terraces⁸ as far as the brook Kidron to the corner of the Horse Gate will be holy to the LORD. It will not be uprooted or overthrown for ever.”

But if we could justify Cawley's lapidary exposition of the passage—

A prophecy, the realization of which Nehemiah was to see and in which he was to have a share. Jerusalem would be rebuilt, the valley of Hinnom, polluted by Baal worship and refuse, would be purified; and the city and its environment would be made sacred for life and worship—in short, Jerusalem will be rebuilt (38), Jerusalem will be extended (39), and Jerusalem will be sanctified (40)⁹—

we might well see in it a suitable termination for the Judæan edition of the roll. Since Jeremiah saw the destruction wrought by Nebuzaradan, he could have written it as well as anyone else. In addition a starkly literal and concrete picture of restoration would be an antidote to any purely spiritualized interpretation of the promises of return.

So great, however, are the problems of interpretation that all conclusions must be regarded as hazardous. In the first place there are major gaps in our knowledge of the topography of Jerusalem at the close of the monarchy. In particular there is a growing belief that the pre-exilic city did not extend westward of the Tyropoeon Valley.¹⁰ We know vaguely the position of the Tower of Hananel (Neh. 3: 1) and of the Horse Gate (2 Chr. 23: 15); the position of the Corner Gate (2 Ki. 14: 13) is vaguer still; of the hill Gareb and of Goah we know nothing—by the time of the Targum their identity and location seem to have been forgotten. Unless we turn to conjectural emendations, the valley of v. 40 cannot be identified. Cawley, as we have seen, in company with most commentators, assumes that Ge-Hinnom, the Valley of Hinnom, is intended; Rudolph is indubitably correct in stating that the term *'emeq* is not used of Hinnom and indeed could not be.¹¹ Can it be that the end of the roll was damaged and that we have now only a damaged text that can never be restored? One thing is sure; all dogmatic interpretations are out of place.

XXIII. THE PROPHET'S DICHOTOMY

There is no evidence that, after some early misgivings (4: 10), Jeremiah had any heart-searchings about his message of judgment.

⁸ So Köhler LVTL, but it may be that we should render “cultic fields”; cf. Lehmann, *Vetus Testamentum*, Vol. III, pp. 361 seq.

⁹ *New Bible Commentary*, p. 627a.

¹⁰ E.g. *Oxford Bible Atlas*, pp. 80f.

¹¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 187, cf. E.Q., Vol. XXXII, No. 1, p. 12 and also the silence of G. A. Smith, *Historical Geography*²⁵, p. 684.

His problems arose from the reactions of those who heard it and not from his own inner doubts.

It was not until he had to give his messages of hope, to turn from woes to blessing, that an inner tension suddenly revealed itself. It may have been easy enough to hold out hope to the North. There was in any case the knowledge that the promises could not begin to go into effect until judgment had first come on the South. The position began to change when Jehoiachin was deported to Babylon with the cream of the population, and the defiant confidence of the popular prophets in a triumphant return within two years was shown to be a disastrous delusion (28: 2f. ; 29: 8, 28). It grew acute as the Babylonians encircled Jerusalem and its coming destruction threw long shadows before it. Only a form of supreme religious fanaticism, such as seized the Zealots in A.D. 70, could have blinded men to the certainty of Nebuchadrezzar's victory and the terribleness of his vengeance. In the light of what was bound to come, was a restoration, at least within the seventy years already foretold (25: 12 ; 29: 10), really credible ?

In 589, if not earlier, the blandishments of Egypt and the fanaticism of his advisers had driven Zedekiah to revolt. In January 588 the Babylonian army began the siege of Jerusalem (52: 4). At the same time all Judaea was overrun, until only Lachish and Azekah were left to offer resistance (34: 7). The Egyptians, realizing their own danger, if the Babylonians were to push their forces to the Egyptian frontier, intervened, and Nebuchadrezzar broke off the siege of Jerusalem to deal with them (37: 5). It was not long before the whipped Egyptians were back over their frontier and the ring of steel had closed again around Jerusalem.

During the Babylonian mopping up in the earlier part of 588 death had evidently visited Jeremiah's family in Anathoth. We may indeed question whether the Babylonians would have left any men capable of bearing arms at large within striking distance of the city. In any case we find Jeremiah taking advantage of the lifted siege to claim the portion of land he had inherited (37: 12), for the rather laconic language can hardly bear any other meaning. While it is fairly certain that there is a connection between this and the story in 32: 6-15, it is illegitimate to say, "During the interval of the interrupted siege Jeremiah undertakes a journey to Anathoth, probably to complete the business recorded in 32",¹² for 32: 2, 8 show us the prophet in the position pictured in 37: 21. There may well have been a major reshuffle in the lands of his family at this time.

¹² Paterson in Peake's *Commentary on the Bible*², p. 558b.

Though it is not our main purpose here, we should pause a moment and consider the light Jeremiah's action throws on his character. Here was a man going on for sixty and probably old for his years; he had no true heirs nor hope for them, for there is no evidence that adoption was practised in Israel. There could hardly have been any hope of selling his inheritance, and with Nebuchadrezzar's victory presumably the ownership of all land would revert to him. Yet even in this moment of crisis Jeremiah's heart went out to his share of the ancestral estate. Surely we are to infer that basically he was a very normal member of society, sharing in its general outlook and desires, and fundamentally as rooted in his ancestral soil as any other. His apparent eccentricities and his rejection by family and people must have hurt him far more than some realize.

JEREMIAH'S ARREST

There is nothing surprising in Irijah's assumption that Jeremiah was deserting to Nebuchadrezzar (37: 13). After all, his reputation was notorious, and for blind fanaticism he was simply a pro-Chaldaean. As far back as 605 he had proclaimed Nebuchadrezzar the divinely appointed ruler of the Fertile Crescent (25: 11). In 594 he had repeated the message (27: 6ff.), confirmed the reality of Jehoiachin's deportation and urged loyalty to Nebuchadrezzar (27: 12).¹³ When revolt had broken out, he was insistent that there was no hope (37: 7-10). Indeed afterwards he was to go so far as to urge desertion on his fellow-citizens (38: 21).

If we may judge from the mention of his grandfather's name, Irijah, the officer who arrested Jeremiah, came from a family of standing, which helps to explain why his accusation was accepted so readily.¹⁴ It is likely that he had been deeply revolted by Jeremiah's message and heartily welcomed an opportunity for putting him in his place. The "princes", Zedekiah's ministers and advisers, had not been willing to take the initiative and arrest Jeremiah on their own, but they evidently jumped at the chance, when he was brought before them on a formal accusation.

Jeremiah does not seem to have been given a formal trial. We may take the "anger" of his judges as seriously as we wish. Any one familiar with the story of the Bloody Assize will remember how Judge Jeffreys' anger would rise in proportion to the weakness

¹³ The date seems to be fixed by 28:1.

¹⁴ It is hard to understand why Streane, *Jeremiah and Lamentations*² (Cam.B.) should call him a sentinel, and Cunliffe-Jones, *Jeremiah* (Torch Com.) "a zealous sentry".

of a charge. Rudolph¹⁵ and Weiser¹⁶ probably go too far in stressing that the case was not referred to Zedekiah. Their action indubitably was, for the king knew where to find him, when he needed him (37: 17). An allegedly proved charge of desertion could be dealt with summarily.

It seems obvious enough that there was wide-spread opposition to the dominant policy in Jerusalem. Otherwise the authorities would hardly have taken over the large, many-vaulted cistern under the house of Jonathan, the royal secretary, as an extra prison.¹⁷ There Jeremiah might have rotted away in the dark, had Zedekiah not needed him, once the siege had begun again.

Jeremiah's plea led to his transfer to the court of the royal guard at the gate of the palace and to his receiving as reasonable a ration as was possible under the circumstances (37: 21 ; 32: 2). We are given no indication of the conditions under which he was held ; at least he had sunshine and did not have to fight for his food with a mob of half-starved prisoners.

THE REDEMPTION OF THE LAND

During this period of arrest God revealed to Jeremiah that his first cousin Hanamel would be coming to him with the offer of his land at Anathoth. This warning may be compared with God's preparation of Samuel for Saul's visit (1 Sam. 9: 15f.). In both cases the prophet was to be spared the doubt whether he was not being carried away by his feelings. Jeremiah's confession, "Then I knew that this was the word of the LORD", surely refers to the offer of the land and not to his cousin's coming (32: 8). "Jeremiah said" (32: 6) is more likely to be Baruch's introduction to the story than a suggestion that the prophet told everyone in the court, guardsmen, fellow-detainees and people waiting for royal audience, what was going to happen.

Hanamel could very well have been in Jerusalem, having taken refuge there from the enemy. Verse 9 is ambiguous. There is no real reason why we should not follow RV and RSV and take "that was in Anathoth" with the field. But even if with Rudolph and Weiser we link it with Hanamel, it would not exclude his having fled to Jerusalem. On the other hand Rudolph points out quite conclusively that Nebuchadrezzar could not have surrounded the

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 219.

¹⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 334.

¹⁷ It is difficult to understand the RSV rendering "the dungeon cells" (37: 16) ; it would be justifiable only if this had been a permanent prison.

whole city with his siege works. This is sufficiently indicated by 39: 4. Where others slipped out Hanamel could have slipped in, if he so wished.

It is very difficult to fathom his motives. In the near-famine conditions prevailing both inside and outside Jerusalem it is easy to see that he needed its price. But why should he think that his uncle had any interest in acquiring it? True, Jeremiah had priority and even duty in the purchase of the land, and the right of redemption, if it had been sold to someone else (Lev. 25: 25), but the oracle of v. 15, "Houses and fields and vineyards shall yet again be bought in this land", implies that not even land speculators were prepared to take advantage of the growing chaos. Hanamel may have heard of the interest shown by his uncle in his own inheritance and so have hoped that he would prove sufficiently eccentric to be interested in a further portion of the estate. Personally I believe that he was moved by a divinely given impulse, though he may well not have recognized its origin.

There can hardly be any doubt that Jeremiah paid the full peace-time price, though in our lack of knowledge of the value of money at the time, we cannot infer the size of the piece of ground that could be bought with 17 shekels. What is interesting is that Jeremiah was able at once to lay hands on the necessary silver. From his story we should hardly have expected it; it reminds us how little we really know of the prophet's background.

Not merely by paying the normal price for the ground but also by a most careful attention to the details of the transaction Jeremiah made it clear that it was a genuine purchase. "I bought the field at Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel and weighed him out the silver, i.e., seventeen shekels of silver. I signed the deed and sealed it; I took witnesses and weighed the silver on scales. Then I took the deed of purchase, both the sealed portion containing the terms and conditions, and the open portion, and I gave the deed of purchase to Baruch ben Neriah ben Mahseiah in the sight of Hanamel my cousin and in the sight of the witnesses who had signed the deed and in the sight of all the Jews who were at the time in the court of the guard. I commanded Baruch in their presence, Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, 'Take¹⁸ this deed of purchase, both the sealed portion and this open deed and put it¹⁹ in a pot, that it may last a long time.' For thus says

¹⁸ Omitting "these deeds" with LXX.

¹⁹ So LXX.

the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, 'Houses, fields and vineyards will again be sold in this land' " (32: 9-15).²⁰

JEREMIAH'S PRAYER

Behind the façade of Jeremiah's bold action was a breaking and despairing heart. As soon as he had some privacy he turned to God in a strange mixture of trust and doubt. He acknowledged God's almighty power and His moral rule; he recognized that God's threats were on the point of going into fulfilment, but he could not grasp how God's promises of grace could possibly go into effect as well.

The foretelling of judgment to come is not so difficult until it becomes judgment present. Jeremiah had shrunk from his vision of it (4: 19-21), but the reality was worse than any vision. As society dissolved before his eyes, reconstruction and restoration increasingly seemed impossible.

This is no criticism of Jeremiah. We find ourselves in the same dilemma. Even with the fuller knowledge brought by Christ we find it most difficult to hold a true balance. Where the judgment of God and the reality of hell have been adequately stressed, the number of the saved has normally been minimized. Where the wideness of God's mercy has been truly grasped, it is very hard to take His judgment seriously. Even so Jeremiah found himself unable to grasp how the two sides of God's work could both be true.

Many will doubtless find such a concept of prophetic dichotomy impossible to accept and will point to the earlier promises of restoration for the North. In fact no contradiction exists. Samaria had fallen to the Assyrians some eighty years before Jeremiah was born. We can be sure he had never spoken to anyone who had personally passed through that traumatic experience. Indeed the immediate results of the events of 721 seem to have been far smaller than those of 587, when Nebuchadrezzar captured Jerusalem. We find in 621 that Bethel still possessed a living tradition of the past (2 Ki. 23: 17). Evidently there had never been a

²⁰ Babylonian commercial custom used a clay tablet in contracts. This was placed in a clay envelope, which carried a copy of the contract. If any doubt was expressed about the version on the envelope, it would be broken in a law court and the sealed text examined. When the Western Fertile Crescent turned to the use of papyrus, the contract was written in duplicate on a sheet of papyrus, one half of which was rolled up and sealed, leaving the other copy of the contract open to be read. Cf. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*², pp. 33ff. The Qumran discoveries sufficiently illustrate the use of the pot for storage.

complete break, and it is most unlikely that it was the only case of the kind. In other words, something had remained, on which, humanly speaking, God could build.

Jeremiah was witnessing not only the collapse of his country but of society itself. The stunned hopelessness of *Lamentations*, though not written by him, gives some conception of his feelings, even though he could not have foreseen that the mad fanaticism of some of the survivors would snuff out the faint relics of national life the Babylonians had left. Archaeology has confirmed that virtually all organized life ceased in Judaea. Nor was Jeremiah really wrong. When reconstruction came, it was through the return of those deported to Babylonia, and their return was nothing less than a new Exodus. It might not be accompanied by the same miracles as the first, but it was made possible by as absolute an exercise of divine power in Babylonia as had once been shown in Egypt.

God's answer (32: 26-44), confirmed by a second oracle (33: 1-13), is most interesting. In certain respects it is comparable to His replies to Job. In the first place He affirmed His power. "I am the LORD, the God of all flesh. Is anything so wonderful as to be beyond My control?" (v. 27).²¹ Then followed reaffirmations both of destruction and of restoration, both in the strongest possible terms. Jeremiah simply had to accept that God was competent to unite what seemed irreconcilables to the prophet. It is usually assumed that a later editor expanded both the picture of destruction by adding vv. 29b-35 and that of restoration by vv. 37-41. The argument is purely subjective, for there is no MSS support for any omissions. I grant without hesitation that the shortened text is in many ways neater. On the other hand the text as it stands makes it clear that there was no minimizing of Judah's sin, and that the restoration pre-supposed a miracle greater than restoration, viz., a complete change of character on the part of the people. In addition the interpolator, had there been one, would probably have tried his hand in the parallel passage 33: 1-13. So there are no compelling reasons for doubting the genuineness of these verses.

The repetition in briefer form of God's answer in 33: 1-13 can reasonably be placed after Jeremiah's shattering experience in Malchijah's cistern (38: 6-13), when he had been sent back to the court of the royal guard (38: 28). Physically he had been reduced to breaking point, and we can easily understand why the message should have been repeated under these circumstances.

²¹ This distinctly free translation is intended to bring out the force of the root *pl'*.

So we see that while God had every sympathy with His sorely tried servant, the only help He could give him as he faced his inner dichotomy was to challenge him to enlarge his vision of God. Ultimately there is no other solution for anyone. Our problems spring from our finiteness and inadequacy, and it is only as we begin to comprehend the incomprehensible greatness of God (cf. Eph. 3: 19) that we realize that their answer lies in Him. Even the faithful prophet had to learn that lesson.

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Jer. 33: 14-26 finds no echo in the LXX. Since no conceivable motive has been advanced why it should have been omitted—the translators of the LXX were capable of deliberate omission for what was to them an adequate reason—it must be assumed that the MSS used for the translation did not contain this passage. In other passages the LXX renderings of *Jeremiah* demand a respectful hearing, when they differ from the Massoretic text, so we are not allowed to appeal to the Greek translators' use of MSS of doubtful value. In other words we must query this section as definitely as sections of the New Testament have been queried on MSS evidence.

We must not assume that these verses were first added to the Hebrew text after the LXX had been made, and even less that they were not composed until then. There is a good deal to be said for the suggestion, supported among others by Rudolph,²² that these promises had been put together from material in *Jeremiah* and circulated as a small collection to bring encouragement among the exiles or those who had lost hope after the return.

One thing seems certain in any case. The emphasis in these promises is one that we do not find elsewhere in *Jeremiah*. We have only to compare 23: 5f. with 33: 15ff. to see this. In addition the stress on the Levites is entirely foreign to *Jeremiah's* general message. The question of whether these verses should be regarded as Scripture is not one to be discussed here²³; we are merely concerned that there is no need to fit them into the general tenor of *Jeremiah's* teaching.

(To be continued)

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²² *Op. cit.*, p. 199.

²³ John 7: 53-8: 11 is today generally recognized not to be part of the Fourth Gospel, but that does not cause its canonicity to be denied.