

# THE PROPHECY OF JEREMIAH

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## XXVII. THE DESTRUCTION OF JERUSALEM

**T**HE final agony of Jerusalem was mercifully short. In comparison with Samaria's three years of resistance (2 Ki. 17: 5) we have only a year and a half for Jerusalem (2 Ki. 25: 1, 3), and from this we have to subtract the unspecified period in which the Chaldeans broke off the siege to march against Hophra (37: 5). The final struggle is not likely to have lasted more than a year and so Jer. 38: 28 does not cover any great length of time. Jerusalem's much shorter resistance compared with Samaria was doubtless due to inadequate stocks of grain; this will have been partly due to the recklessness mentioned earlier, but also to the fact that any extensive stock-piling of grain would have made the Babylonian representative suspicious.

Neither *Jeremiah* nor *Kings* gives any details of the sufferings of the last days of Jerusalem. After all, the horrors of war and above all of a siege were too well known at the time for a description to be necessary. Today there is a tendency in some circles to romanticize war as it was waged in the more distant past, but it could well be argued that even the H-bomb is a more merciful method of breaking a nation's resistance than those used by the Assyrians and Chaldeans.<sup>1</sup> Death by wounds, starvation, almost inevitable disease and executions when the victory had been won took a terrible toll, while many of the pitiable survivors were dragged off into slavery or exile. Lam. 2: 19ff. was presumably written shortly after the fall of Jerusalem, possibly even in the month's interval between its capture (2 Ki. 25: 3) and its destruction (2 Ki. 25: 8); it gives a picture of the unburied dead, even in the sanctuary—there was neither strength nor place to bury—of starving children and of cannibalism of the most tragic kind.

It is left to our imagination how Jeremiah watched day by day the ranks of the royal guard growing less, while his steadily dwindling ration of bread bore eloquent testimony to the growing famine in the city. Then came the day when the siege-works had drawn so close to the walls that the great battering-rams could play on them uninterruptedly day and night overpowering with their noise both the din of battle and the wailing of bereaved wives and

<sup>1</sup> Saggs, *Everyday Life in Babylonia and Assyria*, pp. 118, 122f., tries not too convincingly to whitewash Assyrian cruelty in war.

mothers. Probably Jeremiah's call to desertion stopped at this time. However much Nebuchadrezzar might hold out the hand of mercy, he must have ceased when surrender merely meant the inability to continue the struggle any longer.

We gain the impression that the last meagre scraps of food gave out just before a considerable section of the city wall collapsed (52: 6f.) on the 9th of Tammuz, perhaps towards evening. Zedekiah, following an obviously pre-arranged plan, fled from the city at its south-eastern corner together with the remnants of his fighting men (38: 4f.; 52: 7; 2 Ki. 25: 1, 4). That he could do this shows that 2 Ki. 25: 1, 4 must not be interpreted too literally. There will have been Babylonian pickets in all strategic points round the city, so that the flight could not go unobserved, but the actual siege wall and works were more limited.<sup>2</sup> Zedekiah's immediate goal, the plain of Jericho, suggests that he was trying to reach Baalis, king of Ammon (40: 14), who was also involved in the revolt.<sup>3</sup>

The number involved in the flight was too great to avoid detection under the light of the half moon. Zedekiah and a handful of desperate men might have succeeded, but clearly he was accompanied by at least male members of the royal family and his chief advisers. Worn out and half-starved, they were overtaken near Jericho by the fresher Chaldeans. The royal guard was scattered like stubble and the king, his sons and his chief ministers taken prisoner. So far as we can judge, they were taken straight away by Nebuzaradan, the captain of Nebuchadrezzar's bodyguard, to his master in his headquarters at Riblah, near Kadesh on the Orontes.

In the mean time the leaders of Nebuchadrezzar's army formally took possession of the helpless city. Nergal-sarezer, prince of Sinmagir, the Rab-mag, and Nebushazban, the Rab-saris,<sup>4</sup> and the other chief officers took their place formally in the middle gate<sup>5</sup> to receive the submission of any who might be left in any position of authority and to make temporary regulations.

Jerusalem had to wait in anxious tension for a full month until

<sup>2</sup> See comment on 32: 9, E.Q., Vol. XXXVII, No. 2, p. 105.

<sup>3</sup> The possibility cannot be excluded that he hoped to carry on guerrilla warfare in Jeshimon, the wilderness of Judah.

<sup>4</sup> Jer. 39: 13 is a firm foundation for this simplification of the text of 39: 3. It has long been recognized that only two persons are mentioned by name; for details see Rudolph, *Jeremia*<sup>2</sup>, p. 224; Weiser, *Das Buch des Propheten Jeremia*<sup>4</sup>, pp. 345, 347.

<sup>5</sup> Rudolph, *op. cit.*, p. 224; Weiser, *op. cit.*, p. 345, are probably correct in suggesting a site in the heart of the city in the wall between the Davidic city and the Solomonic additions.

on the 7th Ab (2 Ki. 25: 8) Nebuzaradan returned from Riblah with the conqueror's demands. The account he brought with him, doubtless proclaimed aloud to Jerusalem's representatives, told how all the captured ministers had been put to death in Zedekiah's presence, then when his sons had been killed he was immediately blinded, so that their death should be the last sight he should ever see. He was on his way to Babylon in chains to drag out the rest of his days in a dungeon there. As for his city, everything worth destroying was to be destroyed. His work began three days later (52: 10), and Miss Kenyon's recent excavations on Ophel have revealed how thorough it was (52: 9f.).

Apparently pretty well everyone on whom he could lay hands was deported (39: 9; 52: 15). The few spared owed their safety mainly to their insignificance (39: 9; 52: 16). Of the deported some were put to death (52: 24f.), probably less as a punishment for their part in the revolt and more as a warning to those who had been spared. Jeremiah's promise to the people (21: 9) found literal fulfilment, for those who had deserted saved their lives but nothing more; they too went into exile.

The interpretation of the figures in 52: 28-30 is far from clear. We need not doubt that only the more important persons are included; certainly "the poorest of the land" (52: 15) would not be. Even if we read with BH<sup>8</sup>, Rudolph<sup>6</sup> and Weiser<sup>7</sup> "in the seventeenth year" in v. 28, the numbers are pitifully small. Certainly Ezekiel's prophecy (16: 12-23) had gone into terrible fulfilment.

Nebuchadrezzar's policy remains an enigma for us. It has been suggested that he was following the Assyrian pattern and intended replacing the deportees with others from some far-off corner of his empire, but the appointment of Gedaliah (2 Ki. 25: 22) as governor speaks against the assumption. Had an emergency appointment been necessary, he could have chosen a notable from the province of Samaria. As it was, Gedaliah's appointment can hardly have been a reward for his taking Jeremiah's advice and deserting to the Chaldeans. Southern Judea, which had been detached as a punishment after Jehoiachin's deportation, was apparently left an empty no-man's land into which the Edomites gradually infiltrated as they were pushed from the rear by the Nabatean Arabs. It did not become Jewish territory again until the victory of John Hyrcanus, c. 125 B.C. The remainder of Judea and Benjamin became a royal preserve. The appointment of Gedaliah, who had no claim to royal blood, and the fixing of the seat of government at Mizpah

<sup>6</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 299f.

<sup>7</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 446.

were Nebuchadrezzar's proclamation that the old order was irreparably past, never to be restored. This was underlined by the giving of fields and vineyards to the landless (39: 10); old land-rights were thereby declared valueless.

#### THE FREEING OF JEREMIAH

We need not doubt that Nebuchadrezzar was well aware that after Carchemish Jeremiah had proclaimed him king of the western Fertile Crescent. It can well be that he was not deported with Jehoiachin just because Nebuchadrezzar hoped that he would act as a stabilizing influence on Zedekiah. Certainly, when many followed Jeremiah's call and slipped out of Jerusalem, they must have told the Chaldean generals how Jeremiah was suffering for his loyalty to God and the God-appointed king.

Nebuzaradan had been given his strict orders about the prophet (39: 11f.) and the story reads as though the rescue of Jeremiah was one of the first acts of the Chaldean leaders. Probably the mention of Gedaliah in 39: 14 is in anticipation of the story in ch. 40. When Nebuzaradan brought back the news from Riblah that the vast majority of the survivors were to be deported, we can picture the rough Babylonian soldiers rounding up everyone they could lay hands on. Even if Jeremiah had proof that he had been released by royal orders, it is not likely that they would listen to the protests of a shabby and broken-looking old man.

Nebuzaradan must soon have realized that Jeremiah was missing and he instituted an urgent search. He was found among the other fettered captives at Ramah waiting to be led off. He had his chains removed and set him completely free (40: 2-5). It is important that we should realize that this moment was Jeremiah's complete vindication. *He was the only completely free man in all Judah.* The deportees in Babylonia had much local autonomy, but fundamentally they had no freedom of movement. The survivors in Judea had no choice whether they went to Babylonia or stayed in the land. Jeremiah was invited to Babylonia as Nebuzaradan's guest, but he was free to remain, if he wished. Should he remain, he was advised to join Gedaliah, for only with him was he likely to find a centre of law and order with some security, but the advice was in no way an order.

A couple of paragraphs back I deliberately referred to Jeremiah as an old man. In fact he will have been between fifty-five and fifty-seven, and in normal and happier times would have been looking forward to being a great-grandfather.<sup>8</sup> To obtain a true

<sup>8</sup> Cf. L. Köhler, *Hebrew Man*, pp. 61f.

estimate of his age we have to add the experiences he had been passing through, which would have aged a much younger man. Today a doctor would have spoken of a long holiday or of retirement. The thought of going to distant Babylon as a guest of honour and of meeting old friends must have had its attractions. Even more he must have felt drawn to Anathoth; why should he not carry out the purpose that had led to his arrest (37: 12)? He could have walked the distance in a couple of hours from Ramah. He knew, however, that the remnants of his people needed him more than ever, if indeed they would listen to him, so to Mizpah he went. The prophet had so sunk his desires in the welfare of the people that we are not even told how he came to find Baruch there (43: 3). It may be that he had asked for his release from Nebuzaradan, but we are not permitted to affirm it.

#### JEREMIAH AT MIZPAH

Skinner could write, "We may well imagine, therefore, that these short autumn weeks spent at Mizpah were the happiest period of Jeremiah's long life".<sup>9</sup> He also suggests that "it is reasonable to suppose that he recognized in this chastened and humble remnant, emerging from the convulsions of the national dissolution, the nucleus of the new people of God in which religion would find its perfect embodiment".<sup>10</sup> G. A. Smith speaks similarly. Having discussed chs. 30 and 31, he says, "Had this [Gedaliah's assassination] not happened we can see from these Oracles on what favourable lines the restoration of Judah might have proceeded under the co-operation of Gedaliah and Jeremiah, and how, after so long and heart-breaking a mission of doom to his people the Prophet might at last have achieved before his eyes some positive part in their social and political reconstruction . . . But even such sunset success was denied him, and once more his people crumbled under his hand".<sup>11</sup> Similar views are expressed by Peake,<sup>12</sup> Weiser<sup>13</sup> and others.

That the second and fuller edition of *The Book of Hope* was written in this period need hardly be doubted.<sup>14</sup> Such prophesying, however, does not of necessity imply active co-operation with Gedaliah. We have already seen that vindication of Jeremiah's

<sup>9</sup> *Prophecy and Religion*, p. 279.

<sup>10</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 352.

<sup>11</sup> *Jeremiah*<sup>4</sup>, p. 307.

<sup>12</sup> *Jeremiah and Lamentations* (The Century Bible), Vol. II, p. 182.

<sup>13</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 352.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. E.Q., Vol. XXXVII, No. 1, p. 10.

message by the deportation of Jehoiachin did not lead to his acceptance by the people.<sup>15</sup> Have we really grounds for thinking it was otherwise, when the city fell? None of us really likes meeting the man who can say to us, "I told you so!"—whether he says it or not. Further, those around Gedaliah were for the most part not those who had saved their lives by yielding to Nebuchadrezzar but those who had not been shut up in Jerusalem (40: 7) and possibly also some survivors of the skirmish near Jericho (2 Ki. 25: 5). Many of them may secretly have thought that had it not been for Jeremiah, the impossible might have happened and Jerusalem have been saved.

We may not dictate to God how He should have acted, but yet it is hard to believe that had Gedaliah and Jeremiah been working hand in glove, Johanan's warning (40: 13) would not have been referred to the prophet. Gedaliah died, not because he was predestinated by God to die, but because he ignored the presence of God's prophet.

Our optimistic and idyllically minded commentators also forget Jeremiah's prophecy of the good and bad figs (24: 1-10), a prophecy which had been repeated in his letter to the deportees (29: 10-19). There is no evidence that the failure of the brief interregnum under Gedaliah came as any surprise to the prophet. He had no grounds at all for expecting that the future lay in the hands of those who avoided exile. Both the manner in which the leaders came to Jeremiah for the Lord's word (42: 2-6) and the nature of Jeremiah's answer (42: 18-22) make the suggestion that he played a leading part in the small community valueless. Jeremiah had been the embodiment of his message in a way probably no other prophet had been. By giving up his own inclinations and by joining Gedaliah he remained the proclamation of God's judgment to those who had no wish to hear his words.

#### GEDALIAH'S DEATH

We shall probably do best, if we do not enquire too closely into the motives of Ishmael ben-Nethaniah. Days of crisis and downfall produce both bad men and madmen, and Ishmael was both. Baalis the king of Ammon (40: 14) was probably merely fishing in troubled waters with the hope that anything that damaged Judah might help him.

Ishmael ignored the bonds of bread and salt (41: 1) as well as his previous oath of loyalty (40: 8f.). He had probably persuaded himself, that he was bound, as a member of the royal house (41: 1), to punish Gedaliah's disloyalty in exercising quasi-royal func-

<sup>15</sup> Cf. E.Q., Vol. XXXVIII, No. 1, p. 40.

tions and indeed in surrendering to the Chaldeans. His murder of the pilgrims may have had no further motivation than the gaining of a little time and the obtaining of their stores—note the grounds on which he spared the lives of ten of them (41: 8). The carrying away of the inhabitants of Mizpah (41: 10) may well have been to sell them as slaves—those he killed (41: 3) belonged to Gedaliah's immediate circle, which obviously did not include Jeremiah.

We cannot help feeling sorry that Ishmael escaped. Baalis probably handed him over later to Nebuchadrezzar in order to make his peace with him.

I said earlier that the leaders who had joined Gedaliah were not among those who had obeyed Jeremiah's message and yielded to Nebuchadrezzar, as had Gedaliah. Jeremiah's message to them virtually placed them in the position in which it had earlier placed those in the city. The king of Babylon had been appointed by God, and their trust in God would show itself by their submission to him (42: 11).

The ten days of Jeremiah's waiting (42: 7) are among the most remarkable in the history of prophecy. Jeremiah must have known what the Lord's will was. Certainly Baruch took it for granted (43: 3), but the prophet was not going to let his understanding take the place of "Thus says the Lord". God deliberately postponed the revealing of His will, so that the last act of judgment should be seen to be completely justified. Should anyone think this unreasonable, let him ponder the prophet's words, "You have not obeyed the voice of the Lord your God in anything that He sent me to tell you" (42: 21). God does not lay the same weight on eleventh-hour and death-bed repentances that man does. They are sometimes real, but not often. These few broken bits of the remnant had to show that even at five minutes to midnight they were not prepared to bow their hearts to God's will and trust Him.

Geruth Chimham (41: 17) was doubtless near the southern border of the rump area of Judea. Its position would enable the Jewish leaders to have a flying start on their way to Egypt should news come through that Chaldean troops were on the move. On the other hand they would have done nothing to awaken Nebuchadrezzar's anger, if they decided to remain in the country for they would not have crossed the frontier. It is hard to believe, however, that the otherwise unknown place name was recorded by Baruch or someone else merely because it had caught his fancy. The name seems to mean Chimham's khan or caravanserei, and Chimham is probably the son of Barzillai, whom David took back with him to court after Absalom's rebellion (2 Sam. 19: 38f.).

Doubtless he gave him land from his own estate south of Bethlehem. For the writer of this part of *Jeremiah* it was significant that this final act of faithlessness took place in a spot which should have reminded them of God's loyalty to David and his dynasty.

*(To be continued)*

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