

THE PROPHECY OF JEREMIAH

by H. L. ELLISON

XXIX. THE ORACLES AGAINST NATIONS (CONTD.)

EDOM (49: 7-22)

IN our evaluation of this oracle we must begin with the fact that much of it is parallel with the earlier part of *Obadiah*, viz.

Obad. vv. 1-4

Jer. 49: 14-16

vv. 5, 6

9, 10

vv. 8, 9a

7b, 22b

The general view is that *Jeremiah* quotes from *Obadiah*. Earlier the assumption was used as an argument for the early date of the latter¹; today it is used to deny the genuineness of these passages in the former, cf. Rudolph², Weiser³. The once fairly popular view that both are quoting an older oracle is now seldom found, though it is favoured by Pfeiffer⁴. Though little supported, there is much to be said for Budde's view⁵ that *Obadiah* used this oracle. G. C. Aalders' argument⁶ does not seem to have been adequately rebutted, viz. that the feminine in Jer. 49: 14 can be justified as referring to Bozrah, but there is no such antecedent for it in Obad. 1; therefore it must be a quotation from Jer. Provided we are prepared to accept the originality of *Jeremiah*, there is no valid reason for deleting these verses from the oracle.

On the other hand v. 12 can be best understood, if it is dated after the destruction of Jerusalem, so it may well represent an addition in the prophet's final editing of the oracle. Such an editing is the more probable, since 49: 19-21 give every impression of being a revision of 50: 44-46. *Jeremiah* may well have

¹ Among the few who still support this view is E. J. Young, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 260 (edit. of 1964).

² *Jeremiah*², pp. 268f.

³ *Das Buch der zwölf Kleinen Propheten*, Vol. I, p. 180; *Das Buch des Propheten Jeremia*², p. 409.

⁴ *Introduction to the Old Testament*², p. 507: "Both recensions are free reproductions of an earlier poem".

⁵ *Geschichte der althebräischen Literatur*, p. 214.

⁶ *Recent Trends in Old Testament Criticism* (IVF, 1938), p. 15; cf. also my *Men Spoke from God*², pp. 95f.

strengthened his prophecy just because it showed no signs of coming to pass at the time.

It is to be noted that, unlike the other prophecies from the fourth year of Jehoiakim (605), the oracle against Edom gives no hint as to God's agents in its overthrow, or even from what direction it might come. This vagueness does not justify our importing eschatological ideas into it as do some on the basis of vv. 13, 18.

Why the Edomites gave way to Arab pressure culminating in that of the Nabataeans we do not know. N. Glueck is doubtless correct, when he says, "Many of the Edomites were undoubtedly pushed out by the infiltrating Nabataeans . . . It is, however, no more reasonable to assume that all the Edomites left or were expelled from Edom . . . than it is correct to say that all the Judaeans left or were expelled from their homes as the result of similar conquests".⁷ At the same time, what was left of Edom on its own territory vanished amidst its conquerors, and apparently their city sites, though seldom forgotten, remained uninhabited for several centuries.

It should be noted that Jeremiah shows no special bitterness against Edom, nor is it exalted to the position of Judah's special enemy. Once again we have an oracle based purely on the contemporary historical position.

THE ARAB TRIBES (49: 28-33)

Towards the end of the Judaeen monarchy the Arabs were coming to the fore as traders. Nabonidus, the last of the Chaldaean kings of Babylonia, campaigned in central Arabia, living in Tema for 10 years. This shows that the Arabs had become a genuine threat to the Babylonian trade routes. So we can easily understand why Nebuchadrezzar raided them in 599/8 B.C. There is no contradiction between Kedar and Hazor (49: 28) and the names in 25: 23, 24. As shown by 2: 10 Kedar was used by Jeremiah as a general collective for the Arab tribes (cf. also Ps. 120: 5). Obviously Hazor has no connection with the great Galilaean fortress town. Already LXX had read the unpointed Heb. correctly as *hats'er*, i.e. enclosure. It refers to that stage of development, when the purely nomadic Beduin had so far settled as to have recognized and fixed administrative centres but had not yet fortified them; cf. v. 31. Probably "the city of the Amalekites" in 1 Sam. 15: 5 should be so understood. Before that

⁷ *The Other Side of the Jordan*, p. 133.

stage was reached an attack by an invading army had little hope of success. Once again the oracle fits into the general pattern of the year 605.

ELAM (49: 34-39)

Just as the previous oracles had the purpose of warning Jehoiakim to accept the overlordship of Nebuchadrezzar and remain loyal to him, so this, given in 597, was intended to convey a similar warning to Zedekiah, unless indeed it was intended to suppress any dangerous hopes among the deportees to Babylonia. The very general language used is no indication of lack of genuineness but springs from the ignorance of both Jeremiah and his hearers of far-distant Elam.

It lay to the east of southern Mesopotamia in the foothills of the Iranian plateau. Its position was fertile and strong, and commercially important because it controlled the trade routes to the plateau. At various times it had dominated parts of Mesopotamia and had ruled Babylon from c. 1300 to 1120.

Owing to the gaps in the Babylonian Chronicle we are not able to interpret the oracle with certainty. Elam had been conquered by Assyria under Ashur-bani-pal, but it may have regained a short-lived freedom at the fall of Nineveh in 612. Ezek. 32 is dated in v. 1 in 592, and vv. 24, 25 show Elam as having gone down to Sheol. We may assume, therefore, that in the interval, perhaps in the winter of 596,⁸ Nebuchadrezzar felt compelled to bring Elam under his sway. The closing verse (39) found its fulfilment under the Persians, when its chief town, Susa, became one of the Persian capitals.

THE ORACLE AGAINST BABYLON (chs. 50, 51)

We have seen that, with one exception, viz. the oracle against Damascus, we have no reason for doubting the essential genuineness of the prophecies against the nations attributed to Jeremiah. In the case of Moab, and just possibly in that of Edom, we had to recognize the probability of admixture from other sources. In addition we saw that, while the oracles may not be of outstanding spiritual importance, they admirably suit the situation in which they were given and will have been of the greatest practical importance for those that heard them.

It follows that *a priori* we might expect Jeremiah to have

⁸ So *The Oxford Annotated Bible (R.S.V.)*, p. 981. It is based on a hazardous conjectural reading based on a broken name.

prophesied Babylon's doom, and that not merely in general terms as in 25: 26—note the cypher (RV, RSV, tx. and mg.). It need hardly be stressed that if such a prophecy was uttered, it could be entrusted only to those in whom he had real confidence; they would be few.

If we are to attribute the prophecy as it stands (50: 2-51: 58) to Jeremiah, it is imperative to assume that he edited it after the events of 593 described in 51: 59-64. E. J. Young is certainly correct⁹ in recognizing that 50: 28; 51: 11, 51 presuppose the destruction of the Temple. While 50: 4, 7, 17, 33; 51: 34ff. could be interpreted of the position after the deportation of Jehoiachin, Young adopts the more natural position of assuming that they refer to an exile already begun.

We should go further. Seraiah had undertaken a task of very considerable danger, for we may be sure that Nebuchadrezzar's secret service agents did not give him much privacy. To picture him as solemnly declaiming the 103 verses aloud before throwing the weighted scroll into the Euphrates passes the bounds of the probable. We should approach the chapters then in the expectation that we shall find a collection of oracles just as in the Book of Hope (chs. 30, 31).

When we turn to the views of modern scholars on these chapters we find them virtually entirely negative. We must not forget, however, that it is only comparatively recently that these oracles against the nations have begun to be rehabilitated. In addition much of the old prejudice against the predictive prophecy is still abroad.

S. R. Driver said:¹⁰

It does not seem that this prophecy is Jeremiah's . . . The standpoint of the prophecy is later than Zedekiah's fourth year . . . The point of view is not that of Jeremiah either in or about the year 593 . . . The prophecy is not a mere declaration of the end of the Chaldaean rule, such as Jeremiah undoubtedly made: it is animated by a temper, which if it be Jeremiah's, is not adequately accounted for . . . Jeremiah is not, indeed, like Isaiah, a master of literary style: but the repetitions and the unmethodical development of the subject which characterize chs. 50-51 are both in excess of his usual manner.

A. S. Peake's opinion is similar:¹¹

It is an almost universally accepted result of criticism that 50: 1-51: 58 cannot be the work of Jeremiah.

⁹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 238f.

¹⁰ *LOT*⁹, pp. 266f.

¹¹ *Jeremiah and Lamentations* (Century Bible), Vol. II, pp. 254f.

He suggests that we should look for a date *after* the fall of Babylon:

Babylon was not destroyed by Cyrus, but remained for several generations, its continued existence a perplexity to those who read the earlier prophecies of utter ruin. To such perplexity our oracle seeks to give an answer.

R. H. Pfeiffer is far more forthright:¹²

The worst example is the oracle on Babylon (50-51), a prolix, disjointed, vacuous literary exercise abounding in reminiscences of late parts of Isaiah's book as well as of Jeremiah . . . It may be that this inane poem was concocted to supply the missing book that Jeremiah is said to have sent to Babylon, where it was to be sunk in the Euphrates, although this story, which contradicts Jeremiah's friendly attitude to Nebuchadrezzar, looks like a midrash . . .

O. Eissfeldt is much more careful:¹³

We can immediately see clearly that the threat against Babylon cannot in its present form derive from Jeremiah, in view of the mention of the king of the Medes as Babylon's chief enemy. It must come from the years before the conquest of Babylon, or may already presuppose that conquest. A closer examination reveals that we have here a composition which has incorporated a good deal of other matter . . . It hardly seems justifiable to go even further and inquire whether there is here any Jeremianic basis at all . . . A core of material deriving from Jeremiah himself may, it would appear, be demonstrated in 50: 17-20.

Rudolph¹⁴ is not prepared to grant any part to Jeremiah, and places the oracle between 550 and 540. He has, however, the valuable insight that it is not to be regarded as being of unitary construction and divides it into 15 sections (see below). Weiser¹⁵ takes up a similar position and calls it "a loose collection of sayings with many repetitions and without recognizable connection or sequence of thought".

If we separate out the facts from the personal opinions in the above, we shall recognize that these chapters do not give us merely, or even principally, Jeremiah's original oracle, and we shall not be surprised, if we find, as in the case of Moab, that the genuine oracles have attracted a considerable amount of floating material to them.

We should, however, first ask ourselves whether it is really true that Jeremiah's attitude to Nebuchadrezzar and Babylon was so relatively friendly that this oracle could not possibly come from him. We must beware of oversimplification on one side

¹² *Op. cit.*, p. 507.

¹³ *The Old Testament* (Eng. trans. of 3rd edit.), p. 362.

¹⁴ *Op. cit.*, pp. 274f.

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, pp. 426f.

or the other. If the message which Seraiah¹⁶ was solemnly to read aloud before throwing the weighted scroll into the Euphrates was in any real sense an oracle of doom, as it must have been, then it is clear that it will not have been made generally public before the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem. Then it could no longer serve as an encouragement to rebellion by the deportees. If it is asked why this symbolic action was carried out seven years before the fall of Jerusalem, the simple answer may be that this was the only opportunity that Jeremiah had in this period.

But what did Jeremiah think about Nebuchadrezzar and Babylon? Strangely enough, apart from these chapters, we have no evidence. As a young man Jeremiah lived through the agony of the visions of the enemy from the north. Suddenly with the battle of Carchemish it was given him to know who the long-feared, long-expected conqueror was to be. It must have brought some relief to his mind to know where previously he could only surmise. But there is no evidence that he ever welcomed Nebuchadrezzar. His message from that time was quite simply, "This is God's king; submit yourself to him and save your life; rebel and be destroyed". When in the final struggle for Jerusalem he urged both king and subjects to go out to the Chaldeans and save their lives, it was not from any trust in Nebuchadrezzar's merciful character—was it merciful?—but in confidence that submission to God's will would not go unrewarded.

If a closer acquaintance with the Chaldeans and their ways so sickened Habakkuk, is there any reason for thinking that Jeremiah's reaction will have been any less? He must have found himself in the same tension as we are familiar with in Isaiah's prophecies concerning the Assyrians. They were God's instruments of punishment, but the manner in which they did their task would bring punishment on them. All the available evidence points to the same being true of the Chaldeans. In our own days many, rightly or wrongly, proclaimed that Hitler and his Nazis were God's judgment on this or that, on these or those. Yet they hated his deeds and rejoiced in his fate. Instead of assuming that Jeremiah could not have composed this oracle, we should be prepared to accept the possibility that

¹⁶ His brother Baruch, Jeremiah's friend and scribe (cf. 32: 12; 36: 4), is often mentioned, but this is the only passage where Seraiah is named. In itself this is a powerful argument against the incidents being a later invention.

it throws light on an aspect of his outlook not otherwise revealed to us.

THE ORACLE

R.S.V. has printed far more of 50: 2-51: 58 as prose than seems justified. Attention is therefore drawn to where it seems to be in error, for normally prose is a fairly certain indication of a gloss. The sectional divisions of R.S.V. do not seem very wise. The following survey uses those of Rudolph, which are very largely those of Weiser as well, though he breaks up some of Rudolph's longer ones and unites some of his shorter ones. The titles to each section have been taken from Rudolph as well.

(a) 50: 2-7. *The Fall of Babylon and the Freeing of Israel and Judah.* It is strange that R.S.V. does not recognize that vv. 3-7 are in verse. It is particularly noteworthy that the identity of the enemy from the north is not suggested—Babylon, Judah's enemy from the north, is to be destroyed by an enemy from the north! In addition the special mention of Israel (cf. 31: 7b-9) was to be disappointed in the realities of exile. In other words there is nothing in this oracle to suggest a late exilic or even post-exilic date, and it is entirely compatible with authorship by Jeremiah.

(b) 50: 8-20. *Once again the Fall of Babylon and the Freeing of Israel.* Here only vv. 17bc, 18 are in prose. It should be clear enough that v. 17a belongs to v. 19, so we may confidently regard vv. 17bc, 18 as a later gloss. R.S.V. is at fault in printing vv. 8-10, 19, 20 as prose. The comments on the previous section apply equally here; indeed Israel, not Judah, has special mention in v. 19. Note that "be as he-goats before the flock" (8) virtually rules out any thought of hasty and disorderly flight.

(c) 50: 21-28. *The Joyful News of Babylon's Fall for Zion.* Here once again the whole section is in verse. Marathaim (Marratu) and Pekod (Puqudu) are respectively an area and a tribe within Babylonia; here they have been chosen for their value as puns in Heb., being equivalent to Double Rebellion and Punishment. As said earlier, v. 28 really presupposes a date after 586, but otherwise there is nothing contrary to authorship by Jeremiah, and this is of importance only if we insist that this was part of the scroll sunk in the Euphrates. He had foretold the Temple's destruction, for nothing less would destroy the false concepts bound up with it. But Nebuchadrezzar's act was merely a wanton act of revenge.

(d) 50: 29-32. *The Fall of Babylon's Pride.* Again the whole section is in verse. There is nothing here for or against authorship

by Jeremiah, but note the parallelism of v. 29 with 25: 14.

(e) 50: 33-40. *The Freeing of Israel*. Again all is in verse. Once again no objection can be raised to authorship by Jeremiah and the points made in section (a) are equally valid. Indeed Israel holds pride of place over Judah in v. 33. The Massoretic text in v. 38 is stupid. We should change the vowels and read, with Syriac and the Syriac translation of the fifth column of Origen's Hexapla, "sword". In fact, right through it would be better to render "sword" for "a sword", or even "the sword", for it is the sword of God's wrath that is intended.

(f) 50: 41-46. *The Enemy from the North as God's Instrument*. R.S.V. is incorrect in printing vv. 44-46 as prose. In vv. 41-43 we have a virtual quotation from 6: 22-24. As in 50: 3 Babylon is to be treated as she has treated. Only *a priori* reasoning can suggest that it was easier for an imitator of Jeremiah to do this than for Jeremiah himself. We have already seen that the striking oracle of vv. 44-46 has been inserted in the prophecy against Edom (49: 19-21), probably by the prophet himself. There is certainly no valid ground for denying this to Jeremiah.

(g) 51: 1-19. *The LORD against Babylon*. Unlike the cypher in 25: 26; 51: 41 the one in v. 1 (Leb-qamai for Chaldea) is not likely to be original as it is not found in LXX. R.S.V. is correct in taking v. 11bc as prose. We are not likely to be wrong in regarding this as a gloss. If we do not, it is fatal to authorship by Jeremiah, for he does not mention the Medes. In any case the general impression is not favourable to it. The agreement of v. 6 with 50: 8 is largely superficial, for the earlier verse is far more in accord with Isa. 48: 20; 52: 11, 12. Then v. 10 is more reminiscent of Deutero-Isaiah than of anything in Jeremiah. It is true that vv. 15-19 are a direct quotation of 10: 12-16, but the use is really different, and it cannot be compared with the quotation in the previous section.

(h) 51: 20-26. *Babylon's Honour, Sin and Fall*. There is no ground for taking v. 24 as prose (R.S.V.). This oracle is to be interpreted in the light of 50: 23. I find it hard to conceive of anyone except Jeremiah with his conviction that Nebuchadrezzar was God's king speaking thus of Babylon. Equally I cannot conceive of its being part of the scroll sunk in the Euphrates by Seraiah. The mountain of v. 25 is conceived of in terms of Palestine, where almost all the rock is limestone and so capable of being burnt to lime in the furnace.

(i) 51: 27-33. *Babylon's Fall is Near*. We could claim the oracle for Jeremiah by deleting the proper names, but even then

there is nothing in it to remind us particularly of him, though there are some verbal similarities, especially with ch. 4.

(j) 51: 34-40. *The LORD Avenges Babylon's Guilt against Jerusalem.* Surely the modern scholar is correct, when he refuses to hear the voice of Jeremiah here. The language goes far beyond that of Psa. 137 and *Lamentations*, for there is no consciousness of sin at all, and no recognition that the plundering of Judah was foretold as a punishment for its sins.

(k) 51: 41-43. *A Mocking Lamentation over Babylon.* This is a "lamentation" that could come from almost anyone with trust in God's retribution during the exilic period.

(l) 51: 44-46. *Against Babylon's God and Wall.* The same is true of v. 45 as was said of v. 6. It is not clear whether v. 46 should be looked on as prose or poetry; it is probably rhythmic prose. In any case, though its advice is excellent, it has no place in Jeremiah's original oracle against Babylon. It has no place in his work as a whole either, unless we explain it as a message sent to the exiles who were growing impatient because the downfall of Babylon had not come. But Jeremiah was probably dead before it was really needed.

(m) 51: 47, 48. *The Universal Rejoicing over Babylon's Fall.* It seems likely that we are moving from the situation of the exile to the concept of Babylon as the personification of the forces of false religion in the world. The thought is completely valid, and it has its parallels in the Old Testament, but it hardly fits in with Jeremiah's activities, or the general theme of these chapters.

(n) 51: 49-57. *The LORD'S Decrees Stand Fast.* The dialogue in vv. 50, 51 could come from Jeremiah, but it is more likely to be derived from someone living among the exiles in Babylonia. It is an element which does not enter the other oracles of the prophet, and its absence in chs. 30, 31 is particularly to be noted.

(o) 51: 58. *The Wall of Babylon.* Here again is an oracle that would come more naturally from a prophet in the Babylonian captivity. It was fulfilled by Xerxes in 485.

We are, in fact, dealing with a collection of oracles with a common theme. We saw no really valid reason for doubting that Jeremiah was the author of the oracles in ch. 50, but the only one in ch. 51 that seems to proclaim itself clearly as his is that in vv. 20-26. The others probably come from various exilic sources, some of whom had been nourished by the teaching of Jeremiah. Which oracle was spoken by Seraiah, or even if we still have it in its original form, we do not know.

Moorlands Bible College, Dawlish, Devon.