

# THE PROPHECY OF JEREMIAH

by H. L. ELLISON

## XXX. JEREMIAH'S SYMBOLISM

**I**N the previous issue of the *QUARTERLY* we saw that there are no serious grounds for questioning Jeremiah's authorship of the oracles in ch. 50, apart from an obvious gloss, and of 51: 20-26. At the same time no effort was made to identify the exact contents of the scroll entrusted to Seraiah (51: 59-64); the trustworthiness of the story does not depend on our being able to reconstruct the exact wording of the scroll. We may, however, ask ourselves why Jeremiah acted as he did.

Since the reading or recitation of the scroll was not public—there is no evidence that there were to be any witnesses—the recitation of the oracles would have been as potent if it had taken place in Judah. In addition Jeremiah placed Seraiah and through him himself in some considerable danger. He must therefore have attributed some considerable importance to Seraiah's symbolic acts. What did such symbolism mean to Jeremiah?

It is usual to explain prophetic symbolism as a means for interesting the uninterested and impressing the indifferent. This is unquestionably true so far as it goes, but it does not seem to have any relevance here. Seraiah's action was by its very nature highly secret, and knowledge of it will have been confined for some considerable time to a very small circle. The fate of Ahab and Zedekiah (Jer. 29: 21f.) was warning enough of Nebuchadrezzar's attitude towards prophets who meddled in matters concerning the welfare of Babylonia. In addition, even if Seraiah had been talked into acting for Jeremiah by his brother Baruch, something not even hinted at, we can hardly think of him as either uninterested or indifferent. So in this case we must look further for a motivation.

In our superior wisdom and knowledge we not only reject views which were almost universally held by our ancestors; we also despise them for holding them. Among these views are the ideas that actions rightly performed and words correctly spoken could bring about sincerely desired results. We associate this with magic,<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Noss, *Man's Religions* (p. 13), defines magic as follows: "Magic may be loosely defined as an endeavour through the utterance of set words or the performance of set acts, to control or bend the powers of the world to man's will." For a variety of reasons magic has come to be linked in popular thought with evil and the Satanic, but that is an undue narrowing of its meaning and connotation.

and magic we reject out of hand, yet we may well ask ourselves whether a belief which was at one time almost universal and still has many followers may not be based on valid principles. Basically the insistence on a formula of words was a claim to know the will of the deity, the performance of the symbolic action, the putting of oneself on his side and participating in his saving action.

It is not only in the Church of Rome that the validity of a person's baptism would be suspect, if the New Testament formula had not been used. Many would wonder, if the words of institution were not used at the Lord's Supper, and we often find the extreme ritualist and the extreme Protestant united in a demand for wine in contrast to grape juice or even some other fruit juice. There are splinter groups on the extreme verge of Protestantism which join Rome in demanding the use of unleavened bread. None are likely to accuse the Brethren of a belief in magic, when the vast majority of them insist on personally breaking a piece off the loaf.<sup>2</sup> Many other examples of practice in ordinary Church order could be added. The simple fact is that we can distinguish between faithful obedience and a lingering belief in magic only by discovering the motives behind the actions.<sup>3</sup>

There is one thing that Jeremiah will never be charged with, a belief in magic. Even the Ark of the Covenant held no sacred power for him. To understand his instructions to Seraiah we must see them as a demonstration of faith, as his Amen to God's words. This element of faith probably lies at the root of a number of his other actions.

While it would be straining the meaning of symbolism to an impossible extent to apply it in any real sense to Jeremiah's visions of the enemy from the North, yet his agony at what he sees and participates in (e.g., 4: 19-21, 23-26) gives his oracles a force and a power to convince which they would scarcely have had otherwise. Jeremiah must make the coming judgment inescapable for his people by participating in it beforehand.

It would be interesting to know what happened to the contract of purchase executed between Hanamel ben Shallum and Jeremiah (32: 9-15).<sup>4</sup> On the face of it there is something farcical about the

<sup>2</sup> The fact that they are virtually certainly misrepresenting the practice of the Apostolic church in no way invalidates the argument.

<sup>3</sup> One of the major weaknesses in the Graf-Wellhausen theory of the Pentateuch is precisely its failure to realize the essential immutability of priestly ritual. It normally tends to become more ornate, but in essence the heart of the ritual remains unchanged.

<sup>4</sup> For the whole incident see *E.Q.*, Vol. XXXVII, No. 2, pp. 105 seq.

whole proceeding. If Jeremiah's predictions of destruction went into effect, and there were few by then that really doubted it, the money and the land were as little use to Hanamel as to Jeremiah. Indeed the land would in any case be no use to the latter, for he was elderly, childless and unmarried. He had no hope of surviving until the time he had foretold and no kith and kin to will it to. At the very best the land would go to some surviving member of the clan, and that it would do even if Jeremiah did not buy it. The whole transaction made sense only if Jeremiah was so confident of the truth of God's promises that he was already living in them, if the reality was the future, the present only a dissolving mist.

THE LINEN GIRDLE (13: 1-11)

The foregoing may throw some light on the story of Jeremiah's linen girdle. Jeremiah bought a linen girdle, which would normally be used only by priests and perhaps the rich nobility. He kept it from any contact with water, though we are not to infer with some<sup>5</sup> that this was to allow it to grow dirty to symbolize the sin of the people, something that is not even hinted at. After an unspecified period of time he took it to the Euphrates, where he hid it in a cleft in a rock. After another period of time he retrieved it only to find that it had been damaged beyond repair.

What was it that he bought? In Heb. it is called an 'ezor, which is variously translated girdle, loincloth or waistcloth. Some claim it was worn next to the skin,<sup>6</sup> but Heaton<sup>7</sup> makes it clear that archaeological representation would then make "kilt" a far more suitable translation. In fact, however, as the representation of Judean captives from Lachish show us, the normal civilian was dressed in a long tunic. It is unlikely that Elijah wore a leather loin-cloth under a hair cloak (2 Ki. 1: 8), and to see a loin-cloth in Isa. 11: 5 ignores what we know of royal dress in Israel. We shall do far better to see in 'ezor, whatever it may once have been, a normal girdle.

If Jeremiah conformed to the traditional prophetic garb, which went back to Elijah, he wore a fairly tight tunic of coarse stuff and over it a hair cloak. In that case the linen girdle of the priest and gentleman, instead of the leather or sackcloth girdle of the peasant, would have stood out as a marked contradiction and doubtless brought a good deal of crude jests and banter on him. The careful

<sup>5</sup> Weiser, *Das Buch des Propheten Jeremia*, p. 112, with some reserve.

<sup>6</sup> So ISBE, article 'Dress', p. 877b. The opposite view is taken by HDB, Vol. I, article 'Dress', p. 626a, and by implication in Corswant, *A Dictionary of Life in Bible Times*, article 'Girdle', p. 132.

<sup>7</sup> *Everyday Life in the Old Testament*, p. 89.

instruction not to dip it in water was doubtless to rule out any suspicion of previous damage.

It seems inadmissible to argue that the whole matter was merely one of a vision or dream.<sup>8</sup> Visions and dreams were one thing, acted symbolism another. In any case Jeremiah would have had to leave off his girdle, or was that also part of the vision? A girdle that had never been seen either in its new state or ruined one, except by the inner eye of the prophet, was not likely to attract much interest. This would be true of any prophet, but more particularly of an unpopular one like Jeremiah.

The command came to Jeremiah to go to the Euphrates and leave the girdle in a cleft of a rock.<sup>9</sup> It is almost universally affirmed today that any literal interpretation is an absurdity, almost an impossibility. After all, it was a journey of at least 400 miles in each direction, and it is compared with Ezra's, which took a hundred days (Ezr. 7: 9). This was about the same length as Jeremiah's double journey, but an individual would normally travel a good deal faster than a caravan. There is no point in discussing the once popular suggestion that he went only to the Wadi Farah (*parah* in Heb.) not far north of Anathoth instead of to the Euphrates (*perat*). Though it was held among others by G. A. Smith<sup>10</sup> it seems fairly generally realized today that this is not how symbolism was carried out.

It is perhaps not sufficiently realized what a stir the three months' disappearance of Jeremiah would have caused, and the absence of his girdle, when he returned, would probably have been remarked on at once. The second journey would have been immediately interpreted as his going to find the abandoned garment.

The real reason why the literal interpretation is so seldom found is because the message it produced seems to be out of all proportion to the trouble it involved. When, however, it is translated with two small emendations, which seem called for by the very setting, it is seen to be one of Jeremiah's central oracles:

And the word of the LORD came to me: "Thus says the LORD, Thus is ruined<sup>11</sup> the eminence<sup>12</sup> of Judah and the great eminence of Jerusalem. This evil people which refuses to hear My words, which walks in the stubbornness of their heart and which has gone after

<sup>8</sup> E.g. Davidson (Cambridge Bible), Peake (Century Bible), Rudolph, *Jeremiah*, Weiser, *op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> There is no justification for "the rock" of R.V., R.S.V. This is a common Heb. idiom using the definite article, where English must use the indefinite.

<sup>10</sup> *Jeremiah*<sup>4</sup>, p. 184.

<sup>11</sup> Reading *nishhat* as in v. 7 with BH<sup>8</sup> and Rudolph, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

other gods to worship them and to prostrate themselves to them, has become like this girdle, which is good for nothing. For just as such a girdle clings to a man's loins, so I caused the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah to cling to Me—oracle of the LORD—so as to be for Me a people, a name, a praise and an ornament; but they did not listen.”

Jeremiah was not speaking of what might have been, but of what had been and what was. There was a time when Israel<sup>14</sup> and Judah did cling to God and so achieved eminence; cf. v. 9. But they had turned to the worship of other gods, and there was nothing left of past glory but rags and tatters; indeed of Israel there was nothing left at all. The emendations are surely correct, for it was not a question of the future; there was nothing left to be proud of. The very short-lived freedom under Josiah was past, and they were living as vassals under the tolerance of Nebuchadrezzar.

The hiding of the girdle by the Euphrates was meaningful. There had always been some excuse for the Canaanization of Jehovah worship. However corrupt this syncretistic worship might become, it was still Jehovah worship in its purpose, and it is doubtful whether Rowley's statement can be justified, “In the post-Settlement period, as reflected in the book of Judges, we find abundant signs of a new syncretism, which fused Yahwism with the religion of Canaan and brought it down to the level of Canaanite religion.”<sup>15</sup> Throughout the narratives we have the impression that something of the purer breath of Sinai is still there preserving it from complete corruption. There is no evidence that the religion of Egypt had much or indeed any influence in Israel.<sup>16</sup> But the introduction of Mesopotamian religion from Assyria and Babylon meant the deliberate worship of foreign gods and an idolatry which suggested that Jehovah had been worsted by them. The first indication of it is in Amos 5: 26f. Of its spread in the North we know nothing, but in Judah it reached its height under Ahaz and Manasseh.

In other words the oracle that issued from the symbolic action

<sup>12</sup> The usual translation “pride” may be right, but *ga'on*, derived from *ga'ah*, to be high, does not necessarily have a bad meaning. It is used of God in Ex. 15: 7; Isa 2: 10, 19, 21; 24: 4; Mic. 5: 4. The shade of meaning must be derived from the context. Here it is the glory that had been derived from close contact with God that is meant.

<sup>13</sup> A change of pointing with BH<sup>3</sup> and Rudolph, *op. cit.*

<sup>14</sup> Rudolph, *op. cit.*, is surely wrong in omitting “the whole house of Israel” even with some support from the Hexaplaric Syriac. Israel shared at one time in Judah's eminence.

<sup>15</sup> *Worship in Ancient Israel*, p. 58.

<sup>16</sup> For Ezek. 8: 6-12, which is often quoted as supporting Egyptian influence, see my *Ezekiel: The Man and His Message*, pp. 42f.

was not just a message of judgment to come that hardly justified the symbolic trappings, whether they be taken literally or merely as a vision. If that were all, there would be some justification for Duhm's contemptuous rejection of the whole section. It is a terrible acted justification of the declaration of 15: 4. We find it difficult to accept the thought that judgment should come on the people because of Manasseh. Here Jeremiah makes it clear that there will be no salvation because there is nothing left to be saved. The symbolic action was not magical in its effects or intention, but it was the prophet's solemn association of himself with God's verdict.

"EVERY JAR SHALL BE FILLED WITH WINE" (13: 12-14)

This interpretation of 13: 1-11 seems to be borne out by the oracle of 13: 12-14. The two are linked in Heb. by a simple "and". We must not, as does R.V., assume that the two are virtually one oracle and translate "therefore". Equally we may not with the R.S.V. assume that there is no link and leave the "and" untranslated, to say nothing of the white line. For all that, we have seen in our studies that the order in Jeremiah is not haphazard. We are justified in assuming that the editor was correct in placing the two oracles in juxtaposition, even though they very likely do not form a complete unity.

The English rendering, "Every jar (R.V. tx., bottle) shall be filled with wine," is in the light of the people's reply hardly illuminating. Whether we follow the Heb. "and they will say to you" or the more probable LXX "and if they say to you", it is clear that they regarded Jeremiah as uttering a truism.

The Heb. *nebel* means a jar of earthenware, as may be seen from v. 14; 48: 12; Lam. 4: 2; Isa. 30: 14. This is also the natural meaning in Isa. 22: 24. R.S.V. may be correct in translating it as "a skin" (of wine, water) in 1 Sam. 1: 24; 10: 3; 25: 18; 2 Sam. 16: 1; Job 38: 37. That skins were so used is indubitable, but there is nothing in the root of *nebel* to suggest a skin, and the context never demands such a use. R.S.V. has probably been misled into reading too primitive a state of society into the Samuel passages. Since water will regularly have been brought from the well in jars by this time, the rendering is gratuitous. Equally, however, there is no necessary link between the *nebel* and wine. Hence we shall do well to follow Giesebrecht's interpretation of "every jar shall be filled with wine", as do Rudolph (*op. cit.*) and Weiser (*op. cit.*) as a drinker's joke at a carouse—the drinkers being, of course, the jars. If this is so, the force can be better rendered by "every jar is there to be filled with wine".

The glory had departed from Israel. The people were now empty jars serving no purpose. They would be filled with the wine of God's wrath, until they destroyed themselves. A very similar thought, though expressed through different pictures, is found in Isaiah's oracle of doom against the North (9: 18-21). We have in our studies already seen how Judah went to its fate through the madness of its rulers rather than through any deliberate policy of the Chaldeans. Nature abhors a vacuum. If Judah was not filled with the Spirit of God, it would be filled with the spirit of drunkenness and madness that would destroy it.

*Moorlands Bible College,  
Dawlish, Devon.*