

CHAPTER 24

Jeremiah and his Contemporaries

IN the half-century or so that elapsed between the death of Manasseh (642 B.C.) and the destruction of Jerusalem (587) a number of prophets came on the scene. Apart from the towering figure of Jeremiah, there were Zephaniah, Nahum and Habakkuk, to say nothing of Daniel and Ezekiel (whose ministry was not, however, exercised in pre-exilic Judah).

The first of this group of prophets seems to have been Zephaniah, who was called to the prophetic ministry in 625 or a little earlier, during the early period of the reign of Josiah (to whom Zephaniah was related). The international scene was by now one of both confusion and hope; the Assyrian power was visibly waning, Babylon and Egypt were about to spring into fresh prominence, and for the moment Judah appeared to be on the verge of independence. King Josiah had probably already taken the first tentative steps towards autonomy. The internal religious scene was one of long-entrenched idolatry, fostered without overt opposition during Manasseh's long reign. It looks as if Assyrian cultic practices, in particular, had a fascination for many Judaeans.

It may have been the Scythian raid down the Palestinian coast¹ which spurred Zephaniah to prophesy; he does not mention them by name, but this picture of widespread desolation, engulfing lands as far apart as Assyria and Egypt, may well have been drawn from the havoc and fear such barbarian horsemen had recently caused. The Scythian raid had bypassed Judah, and all the old complacency of well-to-do Judaeans continued undisturbed. Time had healed the wounds caused by Sennacherib's depredations three quarters of a century earlier, and the Assyrian rule had been relatively well-disposed in recent years, so there were again plenty of wealthy

1. See above, p. 140.

citizens in Jerusalem. Zephaniah depicts them as guzzling wine and opining in drunken dogmatism, "The LORD will do nothing, good or bad" (1:12). The prophet offered no reproaches against the young king, who could scarcely be blamed for the existing situation, but the court and regents he declared would be punished:

I will punish the royal house and its chief officers
and all who ape outlandish fashions,
On that day
I will punish all who dance on the temple terrace,
who fill their master's house with crimes of violence and fraud.

(1:8f.)

The foreign worship, he declared, would be swept away:

I will wipe out from this place the last remnant of Baal
and the very name of the heathen priests,
those who bow down upon the house-tops
to worship the host of heaven
and who swear by Milcom,
those who have turned their backs on the LORD,
who have not sought the LORD or consulted him.

(1:4ff.)

As for those who should have given the people of Judah God's authoritative word, the prophets had been "braggarts" and "impostors", while the priests were profaning the holy things and doing violence to the law (3:4, J. B. Phillips). Viewed as a whole, the Jerusalem which was just regaining a precarious political independence could only be described as "the tyrant city, filthy and foul" (3:1), and the prophet offers us a vivid glimpse of God Himself searching with a lantern the dark city streets for those whom He must punish on the Day of his judgement. That Day was at hand!

We have no historical record of how Zephaniah's words were received, but there were those who felt the urgent need for religious reform, King Josiah among them. His reform programme and its effects may explain why a decade or so later, the prophet Nahum felt no call to pronounce doom on Judah, nor even to rebuke it; Jeremiah, too, seems to have adopted a "let's wait and see" policy about these reforms. Nahum's whole concern was with Assyria and its capital, Nineveh, which Zephaniah had described as "the city that exulted in fancied security" (2:15). It is disputed whether Nahum was similarly predicting its fall, or whether he was exulting over the fact that it had fallen; in either case, his prophecy may be dated *c.* 612 B.C., the year of the destruction of Nineveh. He depicts the battering-ram mounted against Nineveh's bastions, the siege

closing in (2:1); he contrasts the triumphant soldiery (of the Medes and Babylonians) with the terrified citizens being led away as slaves (2:3-8). We can readily hear in Nahum's words the pent-up feelings of hatred and revenge; but we must not overlook the reasons he gives for Nineveh's fall. Nineveh was a "blood-stained city, steeped in deceit, full of pillage, never empty of prey" (3:1), and therefore merited divine punishment. The vengeance and the anger were those of God himself, not of Judah and its citizens (1:2). The fall of Nineveh was simple justice.

Nineveh's fall meant permanent release from Assyrian bondage for both Israel and Judah (1:12-15). Thus far Nahum's words were true; but a mere three years later, Judah was already coming under foreign sway yet again, first that of Egypt and then Babylon. It was left to another prophet, Habakkuk, to address this new situation. He seems to have prophesied a few years later than Nahum, not earlier than 609 B.C. By now the Babylonians, under their Chaldaean king Nebuchadrezzar, were on their way to becoming masters of the whole of Palestine, whether Judah liked it or not; and in Jerusalem the well-intentioned, pious Josiah had been replaced by the selfish and despotic Jehoiakim, while Josiah's reforms had died with him. Habakkuk did not relish any aspect of these new conditions, and where most other prophets uttered oracles and sermons from God to the people, his book is notable for its two complaints, addressed to God. "Why" he challenged the Almighty, "Why dost thou let me see such misery, why countenance wrongdoing?" (1:3). He observed that in Jerusalem, where only twenty years before king and populace had hailed the new-found book of the law of God,² the law was now losing its hold, and justice was visibly distorted (1:4, J. B. Phillips). Why was God permitting the wicked to outwit the righteous in his holy city?

The answer he received to his first complaint was to the effect that the invincible Babylonians were coming, and they would impose their own "justice and judgement" upon the recalcitrant Judaeans (1:7). The awe-inspiring progress of the Babylonians armies is told in impressive language (1:8-11). Habakkuk could not doubt that all this was true, nor did he doubt that God himself was appointing them to execute judgement (1:12); but the very description of the Babylonians as "that savage and impetuous nation" (1:6) raised fresh doubts in his mind, and sparked off his second complaint. God, he recognised, was too pure to overlook the many evils to be found in Jerusalem; but by the same token, how could he tolerate the wickedness of the Babylonians, who after all had less to commend them than the Judaeans? "Why", he demanded of God, "why keep silent when they (the Babylonians) devour men more

2. See above, pp. 118f.

righteous than they?³ . . . Are they then to unsheath the sword every day, to slaughter the nations without pity?" (1:13, 17).

Habakkuk did not receive an immediate reply, and he portrays himself as climbing a watch-tower to look out for the answer that must surely come (2:1); a striking metaphor this, in a land and at a time when all too soon the invading armies would be descried approaching. The answer did come, in a famous but cryptic divine oracle (all the more cryptic for us, because of problems of text and translation): "The reckless will be unsure of himself, while the righteous man will live by being faithful" (2:4). The strictures in the rest of Habakkuk 2 indicate the sort of people whose position was so precarious — the traitor, the money-grabber, and the oppressor at home and abroad: "Woe betide you!" was the prophet's refrain. But the future of "the righteous man" was not further elaborated; nevertheless the promise stood, that he would live, as he both exhibited faith and kept faith. It was a statement that did not lose its force with passing centuries; the men of Qumran appropriated it,⁴ the apostle Paul treasured it, and Martin Luther rediscovered and proclaimed it.

The last chapter of Habakkuk seems to have a separate history from the rest of the little book, and many scholars have sought different authorship for it. But if it circulated separately, its authorship may have been the same;⁵ it is at all events satisfying to think that the man who poured out such heart-felt complaints and received such a thought-provoking response, should have gone on to experience full confidence in his God's power and control of history, so that he could conclude thus:

Although the fig-tree
 does not burgeon,
 the vines bear no fruit,
 the olive-crop fails,
 the orchards yield no food,
 the fold is bereft of its flock
 and there are no cattle in the stalls,
 yet I will exult in the LORD
 and rejoice in the God of my deliverance.
 The LORD God is my strength,
 who makes my feet nimble as a hind's
 and sets me to range the heights.

(3:17-19)

3. It is possible that Habakkuk had in mind King Jehoiakim's oppressive deeds as well as those of the Babylonians.

4. Cf. G. Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (Harmondsworth, 1962), p. 237.

5. Cf. W. F. Albright, in H. H. Rowley (ed.), *Studies in Old Testament Prophecy* (Edinburgh, 1950), pp. 1-18.

Habakkuk was not the only biblical character to challenge God for a reply; Abraham did so and Job did so; but nobody showed quite the same audacity in addressing the Almighty as did Jeremiah, Habakkuk's greater contemporary. He began his prophetic ministry about the same time as Zephaniah, and he survived Zephaniah, Nahum and Habakkuk in turn, continuing to proclaim God's message in Judah till and after the fall of Jerusalem. For fully forty years, therefore, he had the wretched experience of not only witnessing the death-throes of the kingdom of Judah, but also being obliged to diagnose the nation's sickness and repeatedly state the true prognosis to a patient of blind and irremediable optimism. The task brought him no joy, and at times he demanded to know why God had called him to the prophetic office. His most bitter outburst came when he pronounced a curse on the day he was born, and asked "Why did I come forth from the womb to know only sorrow and toil, to end my days in shame?" (20:14-18). He was deeply affected by the ostracism and persecution his preaching aroused, and he felt the nation's suffering as keenly as his own; but he was under the tremendous compulsion of the word of Yahweh, and that gave him the strength and courage to pursue his ministry without faltering or breaking down.

The book of Jeremiah presents many problems, not least among them the difficulty of dating much of the material; in particular, it is not at all easy to decide which of his oracles and sermons antedate the death of Josiah in 609 B.C. One would have expected that the prophet would have shown deep interest in Josiah's reforms; yet one searches the book in vain for a clear and unambiguous exposition of his viewpoint about them. It could be argued from 11:6 that Jeremiah was a "peripatetic evangelist" for the reform programme; but it could be argued from 8:8f. that on the contrary he denounced the newly-discovered "book of the law" as a hoax and a fraud! In fact, neither possibility is at all likely to be the truth; but the mere fact that such diverse interpretations are possible serves to illustrate something of the difficulties inherent in any attempt to reconstruct the course of the ministry of Jeremiah. Nevertheless, the attempt must be made.⁶

Called to be a prophet in the thirteenth year of Josiah, *c.* 627 B.C., Jeremiah may well have shared the concerns of his contemporary Zephaniah during his early ministry; his vision (1:13f.) of a burning cauldron tilted away from the north, threatening disaster from the north for Judah, is reminiscent of Zephaniah's words, and his challenge to Judah regarding "her adulterous worship of stone

6. The following outline owes much to the reconstruction of Jeremiah's life and ministry offered by J. Bright, *Jeremiah* (AB: Garden City, 1965), pp.LXXXVI-CXVIII.

and wood" (3:9) again recalls Zephaniah's condemnation of the wide-spread idolatries Manasseh's recent reign has fostered.

Then came Josiah's reforms, implemented mainly in 621 B.C. and the years following; as has been indicated, Jeremiah's reaction to them is a matter of debate and dispute. Since it must be admitted that he said very little in plain language about them, it seems probable that he realized that they had their pros and cons, and could not be either strongly supported nor condemned out of hand. He gave unqualified praise to their instigator, Josiah (22:15f.); and without question he must have rejoiced to see the removal of so many of the trappings of idolatry. But the reform programme changed little except externals, and Jeremiah's summing up was as follows: "Judah has not come back to me (i.e. to God) in good faith, but only in pretence" (3:10). Even before the death of the reforming king in 609 B.C., a fresh paganism, if on a lesser scale than before, was setting in: "You burn sacrifices to Baal, you run after other gods" (7:9), the prophet declared in his famous temple sermon a few months after Josiah's death. Worse, perhaps, was the false sense of security the reforms had engendered — few are so prone to arrogant spiritual pride as those who declare that they are "reformed". Jeremiah had this to say of such self-righteous practitioners of the faith: "Prophets and priests are frauds, every one of them; they dress my people's wound, but skin-deep only, with their saying, 'All is well'. All well? Nothing is well!" (6:13f.).

Josiah's death in battle and the Egyptian take-over which brought Jehoiakim to the throne should have given such self-righteous optimists cause to think. Why had the God in whose name they spoke so boldly allowed such a tragedy? Probably few of them troubled to ask themselves such an awkward question; but for those who had ears to hear, Jeremiah supplied the answer: "Men of Noph and Tahpanhes (i.e. Egyptians) will break your heads. Is it not your desertion of the LORD your God that brings all this upon you?" (2:16f.).

Jehoiakim was no reformer, and there is not the least ambiguity about Jeremiah's attitude to him and his deeds. What raised Jeremiah's deepest anger and most biting invective was Jehoiakim's decision to build a new palace and to utilize forced, unpaid labourers to do it. "If your cedar is more splendid, does that prove you are a king?" he enquired scornfully — and proceeded to pronounce personal sentence on the petty tyrant (22:13-19). Such a deed was totally inconsistent with the old covenant morality, which the Davidic king was pledged to uphold; and for that reason the prophet took the courageous step of threatening that the long and proud dynasty of David would be removed, by God himself. "These are the words of the LORD", he announced, "Deal justly and fairly . . . do not shed innocent blood, . . . If you obey, and only if you obey,

kings who sit on David's throne shall yet come riding through these gates in chariots and on horses, with their retinue of courtiers and people" (22:3f). The fate of Jehoahaz could be taken as a symbol of the reality of this threat; he had become king on Josiah's death, only to be deposed and exiled by the Egyptian's a few months later. Said Jeremiah, "These are the words of the LORD concerning Shallum⁷ son of Josiah, king of Judah, who succeeded his father on the throne and has gone away: He shall never return; he shall die in the place of his exile and never see this land again" (22:11f.). The royal house was closely linked with the temple, which in the popular thought and theology of the day was even more secure and imperishable than the Davidic dynasty; so Jeremiah was sent under divine compulsion to proclaim, in the temple itself, that a shrine which deserved the description of a robbers' cave would be destroyed by God himself. Again, the prophet could offer a token proof of his words; he advised his audience to go and inspect the ruins of Shiloh, the ancient sanctuary of Israel which had been destroyed many years before (7:1-15).

The audacity of Jeremiah nearly cost him his life (chapter 26). Influential friends saved him, but throughout Jehoiakim's reign the prophet was confronted by deep resentment and violent opposition on every hand. Even in his native village of Anathoth his neighbours and even some of his relatives threatened his life (12:1-6). Deeply hurt and distressed though he was, he refused in any way to mute or modify the word of God. Where he might have been wholly taken up with his personal concerns, his eyes were on the wider horizons of history. From 609 to 605, King Jehoiakim was the puppet of Egypt, and was apparently happy enough to co-operate with the Egyptians; but by now Jeremiah's convictions about the foe from the North had both hardened and crystallized — Babylon was the power raised up by Yahweh to be master of the Near East, and of Palestine in particular. The royal court proved deaf to his arguments, and so the prophet determined on one more dramatic bid to bring Judah to its senses. The story is told in Jeremiah 36; the prophet had his secretary Baruch write down on a scroll the full record of his sermons and oracles about Judah and its neighbours, and then sent him to read the scroll publicly in the temple, amid the crowds of a fast day. (Since his own temple address about three years earlier, he had been barred from the temple.) Baruch complied, and there were those who were deeply impressed; but not the king nor his intimate courtiers. The scroll was contemptuously destroyed in the king's personal brazier. Jeremiah's response was to prepare a fresh scroll, and to pronounce final doom on the house of David.

Judah was by no means the only nation to receive stern warning

7. Shallum was the personal name, Jehoahaz the throne name, of Josiah's successor.

from Jeremiah about the folly of seeking to oppose Nebuchadrezzar; Philistines, Phoenicians, Arabs and Elamites were all addressed by the prophet in terms of rebukes and threats. Jeremiah's viewpoint was not deterministic, however; though convinced that the Babylonians were God's chosen instrument in history (he could even call Nebuchadrezzar the "servant" of Yahweh, 27:6), he nevertheless applied moral judgements where appropriate. Thus the Ammonites, who in 601 fought a campaign on behalf of the Babylonians, far from being praised by the prophet, were attacked by him for their wilful renunciation of neighbourly standards of behaviour (49:1-6).

The facts of history themselves conspired to condemn Jehoiakim and to justify Jeremiah. Well might the prophet have lapsed into an "I told you so" attitude; instead, he showed a compassion and sorrow for his fellow-citizens, and not least the unlucky King Jehoiachin, when Nebuchadrezzar's forces marched into Judah and deported the young king and many exiles with him 597 B.C. "How can I bear my sorrow? I am sick at heart. Hark, the cry of my people from a distant land" (8:18f.). Thus Jeremiah referred to the exiles; and he went on to ask sadly whether the exiled king was not "a mere puppet, contemptible and broken; only a thing unwanted" (22:28).

The Babylonians placed Zedekiah on the throne of Judah, hoping to have broken the spirit of revolt. Jeremiah, having been proved right by the recent disasters, did not now find himself in quite such direct conflict with the royal court as in Jehoiakim's reign. The king himself and some of his leading men recognised him as a true prophet who had to be reckoned with. But the honeymoon period, if such it can be called, was of short duration, largely because of the incredible optimism and lack of realism which soon rose to the surface in Jerusalem circles. The exiles would soon return, it was said, and Babylon's grip would soon be relaxed, or rather permanently broken. We can attribute this folly partly to the efficiency of Egyptian propaganda, no doubt, but much more to the unshakeable religious dogmas of the Judaeans themselves, voiced now by such prophets as Hananiah in Jerusalem and Shemaiah far off among the exiles (chapter 28f.). False prophets they were, and false they were soon proved to be; but they nonetheless spear-headed a very powerful counter-attack against Jeremiah and his sane advice. One comforting idea which circulated in Jerusalem was that the exiles had been the guilty party, and that God would now bless and prosper a Judah purged of their presence; Jeremiah retorted scathingly that the "refined" Judah consisted of nothing but spurious silver (6:30). Changing his metaphor, he further described the exiles as good figs, the remaining Judaeans as bad figs, unfit to eat (chapter 24).

At the same time, true and honest prophet that he was, he made no pretence that Babylon was perfect nor that its power was per-

manent. Where Habakkuk had questioned the moral stance of Babylon, Jeremiah went further, and pronounced doom on it (51:60-64) — but not in the immediate future. He also predicted that the exiles would return — but not until seventy years had elapsed (29:10).⁸ Such hope deferred for seventy years must have been small comfort to the Judaeans of Jeremiah's lifetime.

The climax of Palestinian pretentious folly was the council of war held in Jerusalem in 594/3 B.C., when representatives of various local states solemnly discussed plans for revolt against Nebuchadrezzar.⁹ Jeremiah could not let that event pass in silence, and his uncompromising words of warning told the envoys that Babylon's rule was too strong to resist, and that any prophet or diviner in any country who claimed otherwise was a liar; to resist Babylon meant exile and destruction (27:1-11). Moab may have been the leader of the would-be revolt, if we may judge by the sustained violence of Jeremiah's oracle against the Moabites (chapter 48).

Whether or not Jeremiah's warning helped to postpone the revolt against Nebuchadrezzar, he could not prevent it, and the irrevocable step was taken in 589. Nebuchadrezzar's armies soon took the field, and Jerusalem's final agony began. Even now, Jeremiah had practical advice to offer, urging the king to surrender, and when that suggestion went unheeded, the citizens to desert the doomed city. It is small wonder that many Jerusalemites viewed Jeremiah's behaviour as that of a traitor, and had him thrown into prison; and that on his capture of the city the Babylonian king offered the prophet preferential treatment, even an honoured place in Babylon itself, though in fact Jeremiah chose to stay and seek to help a crippled Judah to reorganize, under the administration of Gedaliah (40:1-6).

Taken against his will to Egypt, Jeremiah's last recorded oracles (apart from those we are unable to date) were in warning to the Egyptians that they too would be overwhelmed by the Babylonians, and in final expostulation to the many Judaeans who had taken refuge in Egypt that they should learn the lessons past history would teach them, and above all turn from idolatry (43:8-44:30). To the last, his prophecies fell on deaf ears.

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We have now outlined the history of the two Hebrew monarchies from two different angles. We have seen that the stature of the prophets seemed to increase as that of the kings diminished; yet not

8. On the authenticity of this prediction cf. N. K. Gottwald, *All the Kingdoms of the Earth* (New York, 1964), pp. 265f.

9. See above, p. 128.

even a Jeremiah was able to convince his contemporaries of the truth of his words, in spite of the accurate fulfilment of prophecy after prophecy. Must we then view the prophets as a glorious failure? We may admire their zeal and courage, their moral stature and their spiritual perception; but must we add the rider that they were sadly out of touch with the mood of their times, and doomed to failure as unrealistic dreamers? Superficially, such a criticism might seem fair, but if it were so, how could one explain the fact that the Jewish people, survivors of the Babylonian holocaust, went on to collect, edit, treasure, study and canonize the words of these same prophets? As we view them now in historical perspective, we can see that their message was not only for their own contemporaries, but even more, perhaps, for later generations. But what did they say that was so relevant for posterity? Many abiding general truths, to be sure; but beyond that, they uttered many hopes and expectations and convictions which could only find fulfilment and illumination in later epochs. It now becomes apparent that in seeking to see Israel's history through the prophets' eyes, and the prophets through the eyes of history, we have neglected a vital part of their over-all message. It is to the faith that inspired them and the faith that they in turn inspired that we must now devote our attention.