

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Canadian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_canadian-journal.php

Jeremiah and the Preacher

ROBERT DOBBIE

A I

IT is possible to preach from Jeremiah only if, first of all, remembering his spiritual stature, one approaches him with reverence, and seeks to understand the factors which determined his growth and his achievements. Foremost among these Jeremiah would have placed his call to be a prophet. This summons he construed, as Paul construed his apostolic commission, in terms of a divine purpose which antedated his own life. He defined it in the form of an inner awareness, a consciousness of a supernatural constraint which compelled him to yield to its sway. This experience, which though private is not therefore necessarily subjective or unreal, and which cannot be understood without experience of the same order, stamps him as having enjoyed direct fellowship with God, in the creative moment when he sensed and accepted his prophetic vocation.

This call, however, may be significantly related to disquieting events of his time. It may well be that the ravages of the Scythian hordes obliged him to reflect upon the legitimacy or necessity of a prophetic destiny, just as it may have influenced Zephaniah; and the possible influence of current crisis or emergency upon a resolve to preach, demonstrable in both World Wars, is not open to question, even though, as some scholars maintain, the Scythians did not constitute such a political menace as has been imagined. The Hebrew assumption that history was the arena of meaningful events and divine initiative would contribute to such a possibility. W. B. Stevenson of Glasgow University used to insist that this sensitiveness to a clamant need might well be regarded as a call to preach.

Thus by supra-historical and historical urgency Jeremiah is moved to accept a prophetic vocation.

A II

Jeremiah would claim, as the second formative factor in moulding him in prophetic wise, his frequent or constant liability to receive the Word of the Lord. As in his sense of mission, this experience of the divine and living word involved inward and outward constituents.

Inward criteria are partly negative, partly positive. The former include his consciousness of the word as a fire in his bones when he refuses to comply with its demands (20:9; cf. 23:29), and his distinction between his own proclamations and those of other prophets. They speak from visions and dreams (23:25-32); they do not stand in the inner council of Yahweh or receive a command from Him (23:18, 21, 22); they have not been sent by

Him (27:15, 16; 28:15); they belong to the same nefarious order as sorcerers, diviners, and soothsayers (27:9-14). His positive standard of assessment is a clear certainty which expresses itself in obedience, as in his prompt response to the command to hide his linen girdle in a hole of the rock near the Euphrates (13:1-11), to put bonds and yokes on his neck (27:1-11), to buy a field in Anathoth while the capital was in extreme danger (32:6-12).

The Word of the Lord is also suggested or mediated to Jeremiah by a dialectic contact with Nature and History. Nature speaks to him of God. He resembles Brother Lawrence in his sensitiveness to the cosmic import of a budding twig (1:11f.). But more characteristically he finds spiritual suggestiveness in historic events. Grave political and national crises, like the invasion of Nebuchadnezzar, are eloquent of the inexorably moral purpose of Yahweh, though only those who already know Him can discern this significance. The religious history of Israel is full of spiritual meaning. It represents divine initiative in the call to the people; it preserves the memory of idyllic desert days of impeccable loyalty to Yahweh (2:1-3), of old ways which were good (6:16), of prophets who mediated to the people a divine imperative (26:5), and challenged them to acknowledge the claims of God. Significant occurrences, such as the discovery of the Law Book in the Temple, seemed to promise an epoch-making spiritual era. The written word became for a time a living word of God to the people, and at first Jeremiah did not seem inclined to doubt its validity in this respect.

Thus within his own soul, by communication with Yahweh, and by his interpretation of natural and historical phenomena, Jeremiah becomes aware of a real and imperious word of God addressed to him.

A III

This word was to the prophet an absolute norm by which he assessed all features of current religious life. The contemporary acceptance of modes of worship and piety as sacrosanct did not deter Jeremiah from criticising them without fear. To him they were not sanctified by antiquity or by use and wont. They were not necessarily entitled to approval because they occurred within the history of a chosen people. He regarded all contingency as subject to the moral and spiritual criteria which he found in the word of God. His prophetic function included the discerning appraisal of whatsoever was practised in the name of Yahweh. Concerning two particular sanctities he utters searing and devastating pronouncements—the Law Book which became the first Bible of the Hebrews, and the immemorial practice of sacrifice.

It is difficult to determine how far individual acceptance of the Law Book prevailed after Josiah's reform in 621 B.C. It is highly probable that any comparison of Judah, with its sacred written oracle, to Britain after 1611, fails to do justice to the priestly control over worship, if not indeed over the king. But it seems to have become clear to Jeremiah that even a nation-wide

acceptance of the Book as authoritative and mandatory did not guarantee the spiritual regeneration he sought. It gave no assurance of integrity on the part of scribes, because they falsified Scripture (8:8). The sages had no wisdom because they rejected the word of the Lord (8:9). Thus the presence of a scriptural document does not necessarily imply that it will be honoured or preserved intact. It is further obvious that the fact of Scripture, or reform initiated on the basis of Scripture, does not automatically beget conversion or renewal, for the prophet must needs prophesy still, and demand circumcision of heart and ear (4:4; 6:10). So impotent is the national attempt at religious reformation that Jeremiah cannot find one righteous man in Jerusalem in any rank of society (5:1-5). Even his own dynamic preaching, after twenty-three years of faithful witness, has not been able to move their hearts (25:3). Hence it is not surprising that the idea of a New Covenant represents the inexorable logic of his experience by its insistence on an inner moral metamorphosis, and the receipt of a new life of virtue at Yahweh's hands on the basis of forgiveness. Not the presence of Scripture, but only the activity of God, is equal to the challenge of human depravity and its wilful sinning.

More vitriolic is Jeremiah's attack upon the sacrificial habits of his generation. He denounces their naïve and credulous belief in the inviolability of the Temple, the centre of national sacrifice, maintaining that it does not provide protection to the country, and insisting that Yahweh is not necessarily bound to it, though such a faith represented current orthodoxy (7:14; 11:15-17; 12:7; 26:6, 9, 12). He ridicules the idea that the Burnt Offerings, which were regarded as so sacred that they could not be consumed by the worshippers, should be withheld from their enjoyment, and he bids those who sacrifice add such offerings to the Communion sacrifices which they consumed at festivals (7:21). He repudiates all sacrifice because it was not ordained by Yahweh when He liberated his people from Egypt (7:22); the terms of His commission involved only obedience and loyalty (7:23). He arraigns his contemporaries for their worship of the Queen of Heaven, a naturalistic worship that lacked moral restraints and sponsored vice (7:18). He rebukes them for their purblindness, which leads them to justify a combination of every kind of lawlessness with confident and arrogant appearance in the Temple, and with the claim that such wickedness is the destined end of their deliverance at Yahweh's hands (7:8-11).

A IV

The content of Yahweh's Word as it comes to Jeremiah relates to history, to the conduct of the nation and of the individual. It presents an indictment against the nation as a whole, the professional leaders, the rank and file of the people, Judah, small groups of Judeans, and individuals. Specific religious charges are made against worshippers. They are guilty of apostasy (14:10); they forsake the covenant (5:28; 9:4-6; 16:10-13); they are disobedient to the divine word (7 and 26), whereas the Rechabites are

obedient to their commission (35:18); they deny Yahweh's power to punish (5:11-13); they are given to idolatry (11:12), and to incense-burning (32:29). Moral condemnation relates to the sacrifice of children in the valley of Hinnom (7:31; 19:4-9) and to a wholesale rejection of social righteousness (5:1-5), including the enormity of enslaving again those who in a national crisis had been set free (34:8-16). Professional impropriety is found in the prophets (5:30-31; 14:13-16; 23:9-14, 26-32), the scribes (8:8), the priests (5:31; 23:33), King Zedekiah (24:8-10), and those who remain with him in Judea (29:15-19). In virtue of all this wickedness, nemesis is about to fall upon the land and nation.

The divine word, however, also speaks of mercy after punishment, provided the guilty repent (18:8; 26:3, 13; and especially 3:12, 13, 22, and 4:1-2). This mercy will express itself in the restoration of the people (16:15; 23:7-8; 24:6; 27:22; 29:11-14; 30:10-11; 32:36-44; 33:6-9; 46:27-8) and in the appointment of good "shepherds" (23:3-4). It is a manifestation of the divine love and faithfulness (2:1-13), which so essentially characterize Yahweh that He cannot punish without causing pain to Himself (12:7-11; 31:20). Its most significant and creative achievement will be the establishment of a New Covenant, the differential marks of which will be a direct fellowship with God on the part of men who have experienced His forgiveness (31:31-4), and in their lives demonstrate their loyalty to His constraints. This Covenant, through obedient response to divine and saving grace, will consummate the purposes of Creation and of History.

B I

Jeremiah assumes that prophecy is a charismatic function. It represents a divine imperative as to vocation, a divine endowment as to its fulfilment. Since it uncompromisingly presupposes the supernatural, it is not reducible to any form of humanistic service, which finds its inspiration and its end in finite or human values. Nor is its accomplishment guaranteed by any heredity as to religious office; membership of a priestly family, or of a family which has given birth to prophets, does not of itself assure a call to prophesy, or a God-given word to deliver. Only within the ambit of a divine constraint is prophecy either legitimate or possible. It is therefore the necessary correlate of prophetic mysticism.

The recognition of this mysticism is an indispensable precondition of understanding Jeremiah, and of preaching with relevance from him. To expound him without knowledge of the type of inner religious experience which made him a prophet, is to be guilty of interpreting him in a non-prophetic or scribal manner, similar to that employed by the Rabbis in relation to Scripture which they regarded as inspired, although they themselves had not experienced such inspiration as its composers knew. The prophet thus compels the preacher to examine his own credentials of vocation, to confess that he may not preach from prophecy unless he can preach prophetically, with the knowledge of an inward personal constraint.

Objection may be made to this apologia for prophetic mysticism as an indispensable pre-requisite of the preacher in any age, on the ground that his essential function is to interpret Scripture, which records, in addition to personal awareness of God, saving deeds which represent His purposes amid national and individual life. It would, however, seem difficult if not impossible, to construe these deeds as a manifestation of God unless one knew Him by acquaintance, and not merely by observation. Thus the understanding of Scripture would appear to presuppose that very experience of God of which the prophet speaks, and the preacher who was innocent of such prophetic mysticism would lack the means of right discernment of the Word of God.

A more serious objection to this mode of arguing may be that the Christian preacher is called to interpret Jesus Christ, who, in terms of divinity, cannot be understood within the orbit of human analogy or human experience. It is doubtful, however, how far this reasoning is cogent or this thesis acceptable. Any faith which acknowledges the full humanity of Jesus is obliged to conceive his spiritual mastery or finality in terms of awareness of his Father's will, and obedience to its demands. Even if the difference between His awareness and obedience and ours is such that it becomes a difference of kind and not of degree, the mode of awareness and of fellowship must be identical in His life and ours. Hence it is neither irrelevant nor presumptuous to contend that it is both salutary and necessary for the preacher to be a mystic in the prophetic sense, and that this equipment is required for a proper insight into Jesus. He can therefore be more discerningly interpreted if He is approached from the vantage point of an appreciation of the prophetic call.

A different demurrer to this emphasis contends that the preacher can receive his commission only within the Church, and therefore is not entitled to claim direct supernatural authentication for it. In like manner, it is maintained, the validity of his call depends upon its endorsement by the Church to which he belongs. This argument, however, confuses source and medium. While it is true that the Church constitutes the space-time milieu in which the preacher grows in faith and piety, it is not true that he is totally conditioned by its ethos. His primary contact, indeed, in reality if not in point of time, is not with the mundane or terrestrial at all: it is with God, or, on the supposition of Christocentric rather than Theocentric mysticism, with Christ. To deny the validity of this supernatural contact is to exclude the possibility of a church by renouncing its ultimate determinant.

It would consequently seem both legitimate and necessary to maintain that in preaching from Jeremiah one must begin by accepting the charismatic nature of one's call and function.

B II

Jeremiah claims to preach the Word of God. The Christian who preaches from him regards him as communicating or representing this same divine

Word, even though, because of his faith in the final revelation of God in Christ, he cannot accept it as a total or absolute expression of that Word. Does its incompleteness therefore constitute error or untruth in it? Can Jeremiah then be preached autonomously, or only within the ambit of the Word as it is in Christ? What is the Christian validation of Jeremiah's Word, so that it can be proclaimed now?

This validation cannot depend upon the fact that his word is now designated Scripture. The judgment that it is Scripture represents the verdict of the Church, and whether true or false it does not alter the character of his word, or make it express or embody more of God than it actually does. Hence its authentication must be inward, not outward. It follows that Jeremiah cannot be preached merely because he is found in Scripture: this would be tantamount to maintaining that he may be preached because the Church sanctions such proclamation.

Nor is it legitimate to contend that the Word of God as proclaimed has power to fulfil its purpose, and that therefore the presentation of it as it is in Jeremiah will *ipso facto* be effectual unto salvation. The Old Testament believed that the word, human or divine, had power of accomplishment in itself. One residue of this conviction is found in the belief that when "The Word" is uttered, one indispensable condition of the establishment of the Church has been realized. But this conception of the word—whether taken within or without the orbit of Scripture—is false to the facts of prophetic experience. The prophets were more disregarded than revered; it was not true that their word was irresistibly potent. If it had been so, such grim realities as the exile might not have come to pass, and the prophets would not have suffered hostility from all ranks of society.

The validity of the prophetic word must therefore depend—for Jeremiah as for us—on the measure of truth and insight it portrays. This means that the criterion of judgment cannot be the mode of apprehension or awareness, so long as the inter-personal relationship between man and God is not impugned. It is rather, of necessity, the content of his message, deriving from a real fellowship with God. In part its validity lies in its dialectical relevance to current history. Part of it is determined by the fact that it is morally regenerative in character, as the prophet's obedience to it indicates. In some measure the testimony of the prophet must be accepted, that he is moved by the imperiousness of a Personal constraint through a Word whose givenness is to him beyond dispute. Not unimportant is the fact that his word is still able to stir the souls of men. Its creativity, in repentance and conversion, involves a dynamic energy which is not evident in contemporary religious life, and presupposes a divine intrusion of judicial and redemptive character.

The questions which arise concerning the content of Jeremiah's word, whether it is true in itself, and whether it is true in relation to Jesus Christ, may both be tested by reference to the correlation of judgment and mercy in his conception of God.

That judgment is an inescapable element in life, an essential attribute of deity, is clear in the teaching of Jesus, and is suggested by the testimony of experience. According to Jesus, we are judged as we judge, we receive what measure we give; condemnation attends, not only the outward sin, but also the disposition which makes it possible; the Kingdom escapes those who do not sacrifice eye or hand rather than persist in sin, and it will be taken from the chosen people and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits of righteousness. In principle this judgment is not different from that which Jeremiah announced. The fact of it—whatever mode of its execution was envisaged—and the intrinsic dependence of it upon the character of God and the way He has made His universe, are self-evident to both. Judgment, as a manifestation of God's moral purposes, accompanies iniquity *pari passu*.

This conviction is abundantly justified by the evidence of life. The correlation of erroneous, unwise, or sinful living with disastrous consequences, in broken health or disease, in personal estrangement, in scarcely resistible tendency to sin, in distaste for the eternal and the divine, all imply a concomitant judgment upon human perversity and wrong.

But Jeremiah maintains that mercy accompanies and may be a correlate of judgment, and a prerogative of God. This also is true in the convictions of Jesus and the witness of life. The fact of Jesus, his summons to repentance, his ministry among the unreclaimed and outcast, his self-identification with the prodigals and reprobates, his power to refashion the morally lost, all testify to the fact of a divine clemency which mingles judgment with mercy, not as two incongruous or incommensurable entities, but as two aspects of one re-creative purpose, which is ever concerned to transform men into true sons of God. To this principle of redemption or restoration life bears ample testimony, in the fight of the body against disease, in the power of love to reconcile, in the fact that punishment or nemesis can be a means of discipline or grace, in the instinctive cry of the heart to God in the hour of dereliction or tragedy. While Jesus demonstrates a new power in the re-making of men and women, the principle of compassionate service was established long before His day; it is one expression, as it is one result, of the agony of Jeremiah's soul. He recognized—and we may therefore confidently preach from him—the regenerative principle of the Gospel, which in its judgment and its mercy is integral to the very constitution of the universe and of God.

B III

Jeremiah's attack on the Temple and on Sacrifice raises the question whether and to what extent his indictment can become part of a Christian proclamation within an ethos of sacramentalism, mediation, and priestly authority.

Jeremiah's position would seem clear. He believed in a natural or intrinsic sacramentalism, in which both Nature and History could suggest truth, and

therefore be a means of Grace. He rejected the idea that any agreed or conventional symbol, such as an offering, could establish proper relationships with God, or impart new life to the soul. This intrinsic sacramentalism, common to many mystics, would not seem logically, however it might appear pragmatically, to leave room for a conventional sacramentalism, yet this latter is the central fact of Christian sacramental worship. Not a little of the difficulty of accommodating the Lord's Supper to a tradition of experience of the Presence of God is to be seen in the diversity of interpretation to which it has been subject. It has been construed as primarily or exclusively a memorial feast; as also expressing an eschatological hope; as conferring a blessing in virtue of the participant's faith, and at the same time because the spiritual body of Christ is extended in the elements; as involving the metamorphosis of the elements, in substance if not in form, into the actual body and blood of Christ, by means of the priestly blessing, so that *ex opere operato* they impart grace to the worshipper.

The causes of this developing or variegated interpretation are not less significant of the perplexity caused by a disinclination to accept the fact of direct fellowship with God. These causes are in the main threefold.

(1) The New Testament writers received an ungracious heritage in the form of disbelief in the possibility of direct communion with God. The prophetic legacy of such intercourse was construed as a revelation in the past. A growing belief in divine transcendence, which made necessary such intermediaries as angels, the *Shekinah*, the *Memra* or Word, and made impossible any belief in a direct personal disclosure of God, was accompanied by the abandonment of a prophetic, and the adoption of an apocalyptic conception of history, in which fulfilment of the divine purposes depended less on human, if chosen, agents, and more on the autocratic and independent activity of God. Thus between Jeremiah and the New Testament, Hebrew tradition lost one of its most precious beliefs—the belief that, like the prophet, one could stand in the inner council of God, and be constrained by His will.

(2) An increasing emphasis on the Church as the society of those who found salvation in Christ, so that it could be claimed empirically that "Extra ecclesiam nulla salus," was followed by a false deduction from this phrase, to the effect that salvation could be found only by attachment to the church. Definition of the Church in terms of its Sacraments, or of the Word and Sacraments, resulted in an exaltation of the Church as the agency which mediated God to men, and even claimed the authority and the right to deny His grace to sinners. In this way, it might be legitimately maintained, the Church took precedence of the Kingdom of God. The fallacy inherent in this trend is manifest from the fact that one does not speak of the Sacraments of the Kingdom. In addition, it is not without significance that most evangelism does not appear to resort to a sacramental approach to potential converts. The outstanding exception of the Puseyite movement but serves to emphasize the fact that the evangelical appeals of Wesley and Whitfield, of

Moody and Drummond, of Studd and Andrews and Sundar Singh, and of Billy Graham, do not in any way present or imply sacramentalism as a constitutive factor in the rebirth of souls. May not Jeremiah then be right in his assumption that it is not necessary for their growth?

(3) This mediating office of the Church became intensified as a result of a growing sacerdotalism, which, quite apart from the question of its possibility, denied the right of the individual to direct fellowship with God, and limited his spiritual resources to such institutional aids as were clerically sanctioned. But any sacerdotal control contradicts the fact, involved in Jeremiah's experience of God, that part of the Old Testament at least testifies to the reality of such communion, and implies that it may not be regarded as outmoded by the claims of any category inconsistent with it. In addition, it would seem legitimate to contend that the knowledge of God vouchsafed to Jeremiah and his peers does not become invalid in virtue of the crucial words of Matthew 11:27b: "Neither knoweth any man the Father save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal Him," or the corresponding words in Luke 10:22b: "No man knoweth . . . who the Father is but the Son, and he to whom the Son will reveal Him." It may not even be irreverent to wonder whether these verses do not represent the application of a sacerdotalizing process to Jesus Himself.