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THE PROPHECY OF JEREMIAH

(Continued)

by H. L. ELLISON

XIV. "HEAR THE WORDS OF THIS COVENANT!"

THE majority of commentaries and discussions of *Jeremiah* take some connection between Jer. 11: 1-14 and 11: 18-12: 6 more or less for granted, even though their exposition of the former passage may be radically different.¹ The few exceptions seem to be mainly negative², i.e. a connection is not affirmed, but a conclusion is seldom based on its lack. Few question that, whatever the date of 11: 15-17, it provides an excellent link between the two passages. It is therefore reasonable to assume that, in spite of varying literary styles within it, at least 11: 1-12: 6 is a deliberately constructed literary unity in the structure of the book as a whole.

It may be that in a prophet like Isaiah the introductory headings give some clue to the literary history of the book (cf. also Jer. 30: 1 f.), but no such view is possible in Jer. 1-20, if we assume that the enlarged scroll of 36: 32 lies behind these chapters giving them their fundamental shape. It is both indubitable and instructive that the headings in 1: 4; 2: 1; 3: 1 (a fragment); 3: 6; 7: 1 introduce material which is in approximate chronological order. Whatever later sections may have been introduced, the basic material does seem to follow its true order in time. This seems equally true of 14: 1 and probably of 18: 1. If this is so, it implies that the onus of proof should lie on the majority which still maintains that section 11: 1-12: 6 should be dated during the Josianic reform.

Could they with any certainty refer the plot against Jeremiah's life to the reign of Josiah, their task would be very considerably simplified. It seems, however, far more difficult to do so than many have realized. If indeed Jeremiah, as most assume, was descended from Abiathar, his family were not social nonentities.

¹ A representative selection is A. S. Peake, *Jeremiah* (Cent.B.); A. W. Streane, *Jeremiah and Lamentations* (Cam.B.); J. Skinner, *Prophecy and Religion*, p. 110; R. H. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament*³, pp. 482, 495; F. Cawley: *Jeremiah* (*New Bible Commentary*); A. Weiser, *Der Prophet Jeremia*.

² E.g., G. A. Smith, *Jeremiah*⁴, p. 146 (by implication); W. Rudolph, *Jeremia*⁵; H. Cunliffe-Jones, *Jeremiah* (Torch Com.).

Hence, bearing in mind the close links between Anathoth and the capital,³ his assassination would have been difficult to hush up. How much more would this have been the case, had he become known, as so many suggest, as an enthusiastic advocate of Josiah's reforms? G. A. Smith seeks by implication to turn the force of this argument by saying, "But his earlier denunciation of such shrines, delivered independently of Deuteronomy, had been enough to rouse his fellow-villagers against him as a traitor to their local interests and pieties."⁴ Once, however, we remember that the reformation had started even before Jeremiah's call,⁵ we shall probably agree that this does not really meet the difficulty. Surely then it is fair to say that if the story of 11: 18-12: 6 stood completely isolated, most expositors would refer it to the days of growing gloom under Jehoiakim, when the disappearance of an unwelcome voice like that of Jeremiah's would have been positively welcomed at the court.

Since then both the setting and context of 11: 1-8 suggest the reign of Jehoiakim rather than that of Josiah, we may look at the oracles themselves to see whether they support such a dating.

The Massoretic text can hardly be defended in 11: 2; in contrast to v. 3; "speak unto the men of Judah" is a plural. There seems, however, no need to resort to the drastic cutting advocated by Rudolph and Skinner, and to a less extent by Moffatt. Weiser seems to point to the right understanding:

(2) "Hear the words of this covenant!" You (sing.) are to tell them to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, (3) and to say to them, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Cursed is the man who does not obey the words of this covenant, (4) which I commanded your fathers in the day I brought them up out of the land of Egypt, out of the furnace for smelting iron, saying, Obey My voice and do all I shall command you; then you shall be My people and I shall be your God (5) so that I may establish the oath I swore to your fathers to give them a land flowing with milk and honey—as you have today,'" I answered and said, "Amen, LORD." (6) And the LORD said to me, "Proclaim all these words in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem, 'Obey the words of this covenant and do them. (7) For your fathers in the day I brought them up from the land of Egypt up to

³ See *E.Q.* xxxi, no. 4, p. 205.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, pp. 146f.

⁵ See *E.Q.* xxxi, no. 3, pp. 145f.

this day I warned solemnly and persistently, saying, Obey My Voice! (8) But they did not obey nor incline their ear, but walked every one in the stubbornness of his evil heart. Therefore I had to bring upon them all the words of this covenant, which unavailingly I commanded them to do'."

If we so render v. 2, "Hear the words of this covenant!" becomes a kind of heading to the whole section, pointing to the threefold repetition of "this covenant", which is clearly intended to be the key-word of the whole.

At first sight it seems natural and obvious to identify "this covenant" with the Josianic covenant, which must have loomed so large in the minds of Jeremiah's hearers, at whatever time he spoke this oracle. But when we stop and ask, "Why this covenant?" we may feel compelled to think again. Fortunately Skinner has given us a completely convincing demonstration that a direct reference to Deuteronomy is excluded by "this covenant", unless indeed with Erbt we seriously cut the text and make of it young Jeremiah's reaction to the solemn proclamation of the covenant in Jerusalem or Anathoth.⁶ But we have to do more than explain why Jeremiah should have used "this covenant" of the Josianic one. It is clear that he was speaking neither of it, nor of that mentioned in Deut. 29: 1 at the end of the wilderness wanderings, but of the Sinaitic covenant at their beginning.⁷ E. König was correct in pointing out that accurate exegesis must make "this" look forward to vv. 4 f., which clearly specify what covenant was in Jeremiah's mind.⁸

The moment we free ourselves from a necessary link with Josiah's law-book and the covenant renewal based on it, we shall probably feel ourselves under no compulsion to move this oracle back into the days of Josiah. What are we to think, however, of the prophet's preaching mission to the Judean cities (11: 6)?

THE ITINERANT PROPHET

It is easy enough to let our imagination run riot and to see the prophet on a long preaching tour, urging people up and down the country to a whole-hearted acceptance of the reforms. Such a theory would also keep him busy during the latter years of Josiah, which have left so few traces in his recorded messages. But it does not explain the lack of record, nor why what has been preserved

⁶ *Op. cit.*, pp. 98-102.

⁷ Cf. Jer. 7: 22.

⁸ *Geschichte der alttestamentlichen Religion*⁴, pp. 240 f. His contention that Jeremiah was attacking the later Deuteronomic covenant (Deut. 29: 1) —surely merely a renewal of the Sinai covenant— seems to lack cogency.

shows such a surprising lack of interest in the reformation. In addition we must never forget that we cannot take royal approval for granted for an activity that would have suggested that acceptance of the covenant was, when all was said and done, optional.

We must, however, go further. It is probably impossible for us fully to place ourselves in the place of the ancient prophets. We almost certainly ascribe to them a preaching function they do not seem to have had. This is the only passage in the whole of prophetic literature that suggests an itinerant ministry, for a going from one sanctuary to another can hardly be so described. It is worth noting that even John the Baptist, at the very end of the tradition, let men come to him rather than going to men, and he does not seem to have gone far from the Jordan. The early Christian prophets too seem, however much they may have moved, to have used their prophetic views mainly within the framework of church meetings. Though the prophet might go to men, it was normally the other way round. We gain the impression that the regular prophetic message, in contrast to a rebuke of the individual, had its *Sitz im Leben* in the sanctuary.

As late as the reign of Zedekiah the clash between Jeremiah and Hananiah ben-Azzur took place in the Temple (28: 1), and the story suggests that both the prophets were there for prophetic purposes. Shemaiah the Nehelamite (29: 24) must have known Jeremiah's activity very well, but he assumes that he was under the high priest's jurisdiction. The jurisdiction of the priest was surely based mainly on the average prophet's being active chiefly in and near the sanctuary. It could hardly have been based solely on the nature of the prophet's activity. If this is so, in Shemaiah's eyes Jeremiah must have conformed in large measure to the normal pattern of prophetic procedure.

Most significant of all is the reading of the first scroll. Jeremiah was debarred from entering the Temple (36: 5), but rather than read it elsewhere in the city—surely there were places, at the gates, or elsewhere where a really representative company could have been obtained—he exposed Baruch to the possible violent reaction of priests and people, such as he had experienced less than five years earlier (26: 7-9). The special mention of the site of Ezra's reading of the law, "the broad place before the watergate" (Neh. 8: 1; contrast Ezr. 10: 9), may well suggest a deliberate innovation.

If the earlier suggestion that there was no sanctuary of any kind in Anathoth is correct,⁹ then we may even be forced to question

⁹ See *E.Q.* xxxi, no. 4, p. 206.

whether there ever was a period of prophetic activity centred on Anathoth. We saw that there is a slight but definite indication linking Jeremiah's earliest oracles with Jerusalem,¹⁰ and this is indubitably true of the subsequent oracles on the foe from the North. I am not suggesting that the canonical prophets were of necessity sanctuary prophets, as is held by some,¹¹ but they would not gladly have separated the giving of their more general oracles from the sanctuary. It is therefore highly improbable that a young and little known prophet would have toured the country, where he would have been faced by a dilemma. Either he would have had to deliver his oracles in profane places, thus scandalizing his hearers, or he would have had to use the high places he was denouncing so bitterly. Once Josiah's reforms had been carried through, any natural base of activity was removed, for he could not have used the profaned sites of the destroyed high places, and the forerunners of the synagogue had hardly come into being.

I am not suggesting that Jeremiah did not break with convention, but that it is much easier to envisage him doing so as a mature man. Jer. 6: 9-11 suggests such an activity in the later years of Josiah, but probably only in Jerusalem. He may very well under Jehoiakim have extended these brief and unconventional admonitions to the provincial cities as well, once it became clear to him that the nation was apostate at heart. Such brief words, passed on as opportunity offered, would also leave few traces on the permanent record of his book. This view has the added advantage of not forcing us to separate 11: 9-17, which must surely come from the time of Jehoiakim, from the previous oracle.

A CONSPIRACY

Linguistically and textually 11: 9-14 offers no special difficulties. The repetition of 2: 28¹² in v. 13 is presumably intended to imply that as things were in the early days of Jeremiah's ministry, so they had become again under Jehoiakim. In v. 14 we have merely a slight enlargement of the thought of 7: 16, and the motivation is the same. Renewed apostasy, bearing witness to merely outward repentance, made intercession useless.

Moffatt's rendering 'mutiny', or 'revolt' (RSV), seems to bring out the meaning in v. 9 better than the literal and traditional 'conspiracy'. The religious position under Jehoiakim was not the

¹⁰ See *E.Q.* xxxi, no. 1, p. 12.

¹¹ E.g., A. Haldar, *Associations of Cult Prophets among the Ancient Semites*, and cf. Rowley (ed.), *The Old Testament and Modern Study*, pp. 119-126 and *passim*.

¹² See *E.Q.* xxxii, no. 1, p. 13 for an exposition.

result of any deep laid plot, nor had there been, so far as we know, any secrecy behind the new development. What is evidently meant is that religiously Judah showed all the anarchy we might expect after a successful conspiracy of mutiny. The situation is summed up in a short oracle (11: 15-17), which has suffered considerably in its textual transmission. Most of the emendations I have accepted will be found in BH³, and for the most part I have followed Weiser.

(15) What right has My beloved in My house?

You have carried out your evil devices.

Can vows¹³ and the flesh of sacrifices

avert your doom,

that you may then exult?

(16) A luxuriant olive tree¹⁴, beautiful in appearance
the LORD once called you:

now with the roar of a great tumult

He sets fire to it,

and its branches burn.

(17) And the LORD of hosts, who planted you, has pronounced evil against you because of the evil that the house of Israel and the house of Judah have done to their own hurt in causing sacrifices to go up in smoke to Baal.

There is nothing in this oracle that goes beyond that in 7: 21-26, except that the passage of time is marked by the note of imminent doom here. It does, however, form a good link with the story of the plot against Jeremiah's life. Its contemptuous dismissal of current worship was bound to infuriate anyone with priestly pretensions.

JEREMIAH AND JOSIAH'S REFORMATION

Up to now in our studies in *Jeremiah* we have resolutely refused to adopt any *a priori* presupposition about Jeremiah's attitude towards Josiah's reforms. The only consistent assumption, surely a reasonable one, has been that in the first twenty chapters, if we make due allowance for the grouping of similar oracles and for minor later intrusions, the prophecies are in chronological order. Such an assumption is the more reasonable, because, if it is seriously wrong, we are almost certain to find ourselves increasingly involved in self-contradictions. Such has not been the case, nor, to anticipate, will it be.

¹³ So LXX, but perhaps with G. R. Driver (*JQR* xxviii, p. 109) and Hyatt (*JBL* lx, 1941, p. 58), "fat beasts".

¹⁴ The suggestion by Cunliffe-Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 104, that this implies that olive trees grew in the courts of the Temple has little to commend it.

On this basis we have not found the least sign of sympathy with the reforms. Equally there have not been clear signs of opposition. Our impression has been that for the prophet the reformation was but one more incident in the tragic history of Israel's religious failure. The one undoubted reference to it, *viz.* 3: 10, simply registers its half-heartedness, but Jeremiah's teaching on repentance makes it clear that he soon saw that official reformations could never meet God's requirements. Personally I believe he realized this from the first, but this is probably unprovable. Yet we may well remember that he does not seem ever to have held any real hope of the people's repentance and salvation, except as an eschatological event.

Equally there is no real evidence that Jeremiah was fundamentally opposed to the cultus as such. His language is entirely compatible with the view that for him the cultus existed for the maintenance of true relationship with God and not for its creation, and that without this relationship it was useless, misleading and even dangerous. There is no real validity in the suggestion made by some that the sharpness of his attacks on the cultus was due to a reaction against Deuteronomy and the reforms based on it. When we remember that the shadow of the boiling cauldron (1: 13) falls across his whole ministry, we need not wonder that we meet a stronger note of denunciation than we find in most of his predecessors.

What are we to think, however, of the argument that Jeremiah, whatever his later outlook, must have favoured the reforms at first? Rowley has expressed it as follows: ¹⁵

While the seeds of many of his richest ideas can be found in early prophecies, Jeremiah could grow. And there is nothing inherently improbable in his first hope that Josiah's reform would lead to purity in religion and in life being followed by disillusionment, and turning to opposition when he found men putting their trust in the written law and in obedience of the letter, rather than the acceptance of its spirit . . . All probability therefore favours the view that . . . he at first advocated the Deuteronomic reform, but later perceived its spiritual failure and therefore condemned its insufficiency.

Rudolph writes very similarly: ¹⁶

Volz argues rightly that at the beginning of his ministry Jeremiah saw in the worship of the high places the worst sin; if these cults of the high places were removed, he could not possibly find fault, but must have felt that the reform was a welcome ally. The war against all that was heathen, the demand for social thought and action were

¹⁵ *The Prophet Jeremiah and the Book of Deuteronomy in Studies in Old Testament Prophecy*, pp. 173f.

¹⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 73.

an expression of his inmost desires. Hence it is most probable that he welcomed Josiah's act of reformation (his silence during the rest of the reign of Josiah is best explained by his agreement with the goal of the reformation). At first, compared with all the good it did, he will not have noticed specially that the reform involved an enormous strengthening of the Jerusalem priesthood and of its cultus. He must have noticed then that the reform was not going beneath the surface but remained tied to externals . . . And so we must speak of a change in the prophet's attitude to Deuteronomy, however much he will have remained in harmony with the prophetic elements of this law.

These expressions of opinion, which are typical of not a little modern thought, appeal strongly to our reason and personal experience. For all that I remain unconvinced. Were they true, it is inconceivable that Jeremiah would not have said something in praise of the reforms. Carefully to have eliminated every favourable reference from the two editions of his scroll would have been something very close to fraud and a denial of the prophet's spiritual integrity. Since many who heard the scroll being read by Baruch will have been familiar with Jeremiah's messages over the years, the sudden elimination of part of his message could hardly have been overlooked. If there had been such a *volte-face*, it would surely have found its defence in some oracle.

The view is really based on a forgetting of that strange and indefinable factor that made a prophet. He was more than a godly and God-fearing man of deep spiritual insights. He had stood in God's council (23: 18, 22), and had gained an entirely different viewpoint from which to see man's strivings and efforts.

For us it is self-evident that we should sit in judgment on the great controversies of the time, testing them by the Scriptures in prayer, weighing the good and the evil in each, espousing those causes where the good clearly predominates and rejecting those where evil is clearly the master. Neutrality is held to be justified only where the two sides are fairly evenly balanced. When we consider questions like that of ecumenicity and the World Council of Churches, apartheid, gigantic evangelistic campaigns of the Dr. Graham type, fundamentalism, faith healing, etc., we are expected to make up our minds and then to come down squarely on one side or the other. But is that the prophetic outlook?

One of the great stumbling blocks in the New Testament for the modern scholar is our Lord's attitude towards the Scribes and Pharisees. It is claimed that He overstressed their faults and was silent about their many virtues. But surely this criticism is fundamentally to miss His "prophetic" vision. He was not concerned with the scales of man's judgment, but with the ultimate issues of

life. However much good we may say about the Pharisees, and there is much we can, it remains true that they were the first to reject Jesus, even though it was "less spiritual" and coarser men who drew the logical conclusions and handed Him over to the Roman governor for crucifixion.

I am profoundly convinced that only so may we approach Jeremiah's attitude towards the great reform, and also Isaiah's or Hezekiah's a century earlier. Modern scholarship with its stress on prophetic ecstasy is in danger of driving as deep a wedge between the prophet's own personality and feelings and his message as was the classical view of a purely mechanical inspiration. In the conflict between natural human judgments and the insights given by the divine council chamber the latter had to triumph completely. I do not doubt that the first impulse of Jeremiah's heart was to leap with joy, when the news of a clean sweep of all heathenism was first received. But as a prophet, viewing it from God's standpoint, he could see that it never had any chance of success. It was not that it stayed superficial; there never was any question of its being anything else. It was not merely that there was a sizeable political element in it. Josiah and his advisers had no concept of the fundamental, all-poisoning evil in the religion of Israel any more than orthodox Judaism has been able to grasp it. The great denunciations of Israel's past by Ezekiel would have been as incomprehensible to them as they have been to many a modern. So Jeremiah's silence was in fact a worse condemnation than an all-out attack could have been.

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(To be continued)