

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 *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

borne on by it to the most surprising and invaluable discoveries, the Friends have but one thought among them all—retribution, and but one emotion—indignation. They are for ever harping on one string, for ever singing one song, till we grow weary both of their strain and of them. The only change in them is that they so handle their one thought as that it grows narrower and still more untrue to experience every time they take it up; that they sing their one song in an ever louder and harsher note. All the life, the variety, the progress of the drama is concentrated in Job; and thus, silently and indirectly, but most effectually, our entire sympathy with him is secured. S. COX.

*SHORT PAPERS UPON THE PROPHET ·
JEREMIAH.*

NO. 3.—JEREMIAH'S LABOURS IN THE FIRST YEAR OF
JEHOIAKIM.

THE call of Jeremiah was in the thirteenth year of Josiah, and as that king reigned for thirty-one years, it was the prophet's happy lot to labour up to middle age in the company of one who had given his whole heart to God. But darker times were in store for him, and at length the day came when the work of Josiah's reign was to be tested, and when the nation must prove by its conduct whether the so-called reformation, wrought by his efforts and Jeremiah's preaching, was real, or a mere empty outward show.

Even the most inattentive reader of the Bible can scarcely fail to be struck by the very merciful way in which God dealt with the Jewish nation when lapsing

into idolatry. He sent them, first, Hezekiah, with the prophet Isaiah to stand by his side, and set the seal of Divine approbation to all he undertook. It was in vain. At Hezekiah's death there was a violent outbreak of fanaticism, during which the prophets of Jehovah were mercilessly slain, together, as Josephus tells us, with all the nobles and leading men who had shared in Hezekiah's labours, and been his friends and counsellors. Now, as Manasseh was but twelve years old when this happened, we must not ascribe the whole blame to him. As he grew older he shared in the popular enthusiasm for idolatry, and when in course of time he had a son, he sacrificed the poor babe to Molech. But the sin belonged to the whole people. As a nation they rejected God, and their conduct is comparable to nothing in modern times so much as to the French Revolution at the end of the last century, when the people abolished the worship of God by a national decree, and established instead a mock worship of the Goddess of Reason, while they revelled in the slaughter of all such as represented the former state of things.

Soon afterwards the armies of Esar-haddon appeared, and Manasseh was carried prisoner to Babylon, where he repented, but not in a very effectual manner. We read of no attempt on his part to undo the bad work of his early years, nor does he seem to have made any effort to stem the idolatrous tendencies of the people. But at least there was no more persecution during the rest of his reign, and those whose hearts had been with Hezekiah and Isaiah were free to follow their own inclinations, and labour quietly in their own way. Nor was that peaceful resting-time in vain; for when,

fifty years afterwards, Josiah mounted the throne, he found numerous wise and pious statesmen ready to aid him in his great enterprise. Foremost among these were Hilkiah, the high priest, and the princely Shaphan, whose noble sons, Ahikam and Gemariah, were such firm friends of the prophet Jeremiah. But had there not also been a considerable number of the people on Josiah's side, he could not have carried out his reforms with so high a hand. No monarch can act altogether independently of popular feeling, and to make Josiah's reign possible, there must have been much good but quiet work done for Jehovah during the latter years of Manasseh's reign.

And we must remember that the attraction of idolatry consisted in its immorality. People did not care for Baal and Astarte, for Molech and the Queen of Heaven, in themselves; but the worship of these gods meant pleasure. Baal, the lord, the master, the husband, was well represented by the mighty sun, under the influence of whose warm beams the gentle recipient mother earth poured forth from her fruitful bosom the rich stores of vegetable and animal life. The symbol of this gentle loving power was sometimes the moon, but more generally the planet Venus, whose soft and beautiful light became the emblem of love of every kind, pure and impure, chaste and unchaste. The worship of Jehovah was the worship of one who rewards and punishes human actions. He required not merely clean hands, but a pure heart. His service meant holiness, chastity, self-denial; and men cast it away. High and spiritual as was Judaism compared with heathen creeds, yet it had not the constraining motives of Christianity. And when the Jews saw how

the religions of the neighbouring Gentiles lent themselves to the worst passions of the human heart, and threw a halo of religious glamour round practices in themselves unchaste and unholy, they longed to cast off the restraints of their own pure religion, that they might enjoy life as the heathen did. If you read the second and five following Chapters of Jeremiah, the record and summary of his teaching during Josiah's reign, you will find that his description of the Jewish people is that of men eager to break through every moral restraint. He sets them before us as a nation not so much falling into sin through temptation, as seeking eagerly and fiercely to abandon themselves to voluptuousness. And by a natural reaction, side by side with the worship of pleasure, stood that of Molech. Aghast at its sins, the terrified conscience could find peace only by the most terrible sacrifices. The innocent children must be slain to appease the dark spectres of an imagination defiled by crime. Without understanding this intense immorality into which the Jews had been sinking in the days of their latter kings, we cannot understand the labours of Hezekiah and Isaiah, of Josiah and Jeremiah. The restoration of Jehovah's worship meant a reformation of morals, and the part of the work which especially belonged to the prophets was to reach the hearts of the people. The prophets sought to give them a true creed instead of an impure mythology, and they laboured thus for a creed because of that which true religion always brings with it—purity, chastity, self-denial, self-restraint.

Now, in the earlier Chapters we have a very brief summary of Jeremiah's labours, a short abstract, as it were, of the sermon which in various ways and forms

he was perpetually preaching. For eighteen years he was ever at work, and Josiah's great plan of a national reformation seemed to prosper. The Temple was repaired, the services restored; the Passover celebrated with unusual magnificence; the haunts, too, of idolatry and immorality were cleansed, and all the externals of religion made decent. It was a second and even more earnest repetition of God's merciful dealing with the Jews in Hezekiah's days. But it failed, not altogether, but in the main. The people were pleased and elated at all Josiah had done: they quite approved of it, and admired it, and said with threefold iteration, "The temple of Jehovah, The temple of Jehovah, The temple of Jehovah, is this" (Jer. vii. 4). But that was all. They stopped just short of the one thing needful. They would have nothing to do with real hearty personal holiness; and the prophet contrasts their external piety with their internal worldliness and irreligion, in the following remarkable words:—

Thus saith Jehovah of hosts, the God of Israel,
 Amend your ways and your doings,
 And I will let you dwell in this place.
 Trust ye not in lying words, saying,
 The temple of Jehovah, The temple of Jehovah,
 The temple of Jehovah, is this.
 For if ye thoroughly amend your ways and your doings;
 If ye thoroughly execute judgment between man and man;
 If ye oppress not the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow,
 And shed not innocent blood in this place,
 Neither walk after other gods to your own hurt:
 Then will I let you dwell in this place,
 In the land that I gave to your fathers, for ever and ever.
 Behold, ye trust in lying words, that cannot profit.
 What! to steal, murder, and commit adultery,
 And swear falsely, and burn incense to Baal,
 And to walk after strange gods that ye know not;
 And to come and stand before me
 In this house on which my name is called,

And say, We are delivered to do all these abominations?
Is this house, on which my name is called,
Become a den of robbers in your eyes? ¹

These striking words form part of a sermon preached by Jeremiah in the Temple, on the occasion of some solemn feast day, in the first year of King Jehoiakim. Josiah, in the discharge of what he supposed to be his duty as a vassal of Nineveh, had gone forth to battle with Pharaoh-nechoh, and had fallen at Megiddo. The nation had deeply mourned over his loss, and Jeremiah has given utterance to their sorrow in the Book of Lamentations. They had also shewn their respect to him practically, by passing over Jehoiakim, and putting Jehoahaz, a younger brother, upon the throne. The verdict upon Jehoahaz is adverse (2 Kings xxiii. 32), but Jeremiah speaks very kindly of him in that interesting chapter (Chap. xxii.) in which he contrasts the three kings, Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, and Jeconiah, who in such rapid succession had occupied Josiah's throne. "Weep sore," he says, "for him that goeth away: for . . . he shall die in the place whither they have led him captive, and shall see this land no more."

His was a hard fate. Scarcely grown to manhood, he saw his father slain. Chosen then by the people of the land to fill the throne, doubtless because he was the best and most promising of Josiah's sons, he laboured for three months to stem the tide of trouble that followed upon the defeat of the Jewish army. He was then summoned by the conqueror to Riblah, was dethroned, cast into chains, and dragged down to Egypt, to die there. Not content with wreaking his vengeance on a youth, Pharaoh-nechoh imposed a tribute upon the land, and, worst of all, made Jehoiakim king.

¹ Jer. vii. 3-11.

Both the Book of Kings and Jeremiah describe him as a heartless tyrant. Not only did he exact the tribute of the people of the land, but lavished money upon expensive and unnecessary buildings. By the first charge (2 Kings xxiii. 35) I suppose is meant that Jehoiakim did not defray the tribute, either in whole or in part, out of the royal revenues, but levied it as an extra tax entirely upon the industrial classes. Impoverished thus by waste of war and by heavy imposts, they were further compelled to build palaces for Jehoiakim by forced labour. Speaking of him, Jeremiah says :—

Woe unto him that buildeth his house by unrighteousness,
 And his chambers by injustice ;
 That useth his neighbour's service without wages,
 And giveth him not his hire ;
 That saith, I will build me a wide house and large chambers,
 And cutteth out for himself windows,
 Roofing it with cedar, and painting it with vermilion.¹

Now Solomon's great buildings had been erected chiefly by forced labour, and even in those prosperous days, and though mostly levied upon the conquered Canaanites, it had pressed so heavily upon the people as to have been one of the causes of Jeroboam's revolt (1 Kings xii. 4). From that time, if not altogether discontinued, its exaction had become rare, and Jeremiah did but express the conviction of the national conscience that to make men labour without payment was unrighteousness; and men's minds revolted the more against it because this forced labour was demanded for unworthy purposes. The palace which had satisfied Josiah in happier times was not good enough for Jehoiakim in adverse days, when the nation had suffered a disastrous defeat, and had a heavy war indem-

¹ Jer. xxii. 13, 14.

nity to pay. Well might the prophet say of one so mean, so unpatriotic, and so unjust,—

Thine eyes and thine heart are only for thy covetousness,
And for to shed innocent blood, and for oppression, and for violence, to
do it.¹

Now the accession of Jehoiakim to the throne was the opportunity given to the Jews of proving whether the reformation wrought in Josiah's reign was real or not. It was, no doubt, easy and even fashionable to repent when a Josiah was king. People went with the court, even if the court went into sackcloth and ashes. But when a king came who cared only for amassing money and wasting it on costly castle-building, the influence of the court went another way, and that process of sifting began which the Bible calls the refiner's furnace. Well, any one reading the Bible carefully will, I think, come to the conclusion that the work of Josiah's reign stood the test far better than that of Hezekiah's. Religion was not swept away by Jehoiakim with that thoroughness which made the reign of Manasseh such an era of national apostacy in the history of the Jewish Church. I have often read and thought over all such passages in Isaiah's writings as might throw light upon the terrific reaction which followed upon Hezekiah's death; and though I can see many indications of the existence at court of a strong party opposed to Isaiah's teaching (see especially Chap. xxii. 15-25), I can find nothing that altogether explains it. But everything is intelligible in Jehoiakim's days. A bad king succeeds a good one. All the commonplace people go with the fashion, and become lax and dissolute. But the religious people only grow more earnest and thorough. They are only purified and refined by

¹ Jer. xxii. 17.

trial. And so in Jeremiah xxiv. they are described in terms of high praise. The nation is there spoken of as divided into good and bad, placed in separate divisions like baskets of figs, ready to be removed each to its final destination. The good are called "very good figs, even like the figs that are first ripe;" the bad are "very bad, that could not be eaten, they were so bad." We see, then, that Josiah's efforts had not failed entirely. The nation must be chastened, but would still live on and be restored to its land. And those exiles about to be carried into captivity at Babylon were men choice and precious as that oriental luxury, the first ripe fig.

And God did not leave them to struggle in their trial-time without help. No sooner was Jehoiakim upon the throne than Jeremiah stood forth boldly and preached the sermon contained in Chapters vii.—x. of his prophecy; and so important an event was it felt to be, that we further have the history of it given to us again in Chapter xxvi. The sermon has just one lesson from beginning to end, and that is the lesson of reality. You cannot be and are not religious, says the prophet, unless you lead religious lives. If you go to the temple and take part in its services, and on your return home say, We are now delivered to do these bad things in our daily lives, that is, we are now free to do them, have compounded with God by going to his temple and being very devout there, and may now go on in our usual wicked ways; if thus you confess your sins only to repeat them, then you are the worse for your pretence of devotion, and not the better. Instead of honouring God by going to church, you have made his house a den of robbers.

For a den of robbers is not the place where they commit their sins, but where they rest and refresh themselves between whiles, and make ready for some fresh act of violence. And mark the way in which God shewed his abhorrence of the manner in which they thus used his Temple. He destroyed it. That splendid edifice, the pride of the Jewish nation, the object of so much loving care, for which David had collected the money and materials, which Solomon had built, and Hezekiah and Josiah restored and beautified; where so many generations of Jews had prayed and sung psalms and offered oblation and sacrifice, and round which so many hallowed associations had gathered; that noble Temple God utterly destroyed, because it was abused and put to an improper purpose, and so no longer aided men in leading holy and virtuous lives.

Jeremiah's words in announcing this just but severe punishment are as follows: "Because ye have done all these works, . . . therefore will I do unto this house wherein my name is called, wherein ye trust, . . . as I have done to Shiloh" (Chap. vii. 13, 14).

Now Shiloh was the place where the ark was first set up. When the Israelites under Joshua conquered Palestine, the tribe of Ephraim, as representing the house of Joseph, was the leading tribe; and Joshua, who himself belonged to it, chose Shiloh, an Ephraimite town, to be the centre of the national religion, and placed there the ark. It remained at Shiloh for many centuries, and there the priests ministered before it, until the wicked sons of Eli so profaned the place that men abhorred the offering of Jehovah; and then punishment came. The Philistines gathered their armies, defeated the hosts of Israel, slew the sons of Eli, and

captured the ark. We gather, too, from Psalm lxxviii., that they committed frightful atrocities. "The priests fell by the sword, and their widows made no lamentation. God gave his people over unto the sword, and was wroth with his inheritance; the fire consumed their young men, and their maidens were not given in marriage."

So complete was the ruin of Shiloh, that it never appears again in Jewish history. When Jeroboam, an Ephraimite, set up his calves, he did not choose it as a proper place for his new rites, though hallowed by three or four centuries of national worship. Even the ark was never taken back thither, but wandered about, and rested in all sorts of strange places, till at length David set up a tent for it in Jerusalem. The Philistines had so utterly destroyed the town, and committed such cruelties, that the people had a horror of it. And now Jeremiah tells them that their splendid Temple at Jerusalem, just restored at so great a cost, should be made as utter a ruin, and become as terrible a warning unto all who make religion serve only as a palliative for sin. Great was the excitement and indignation from one end of Jerusalem to the other at such ill-omened words. The news of the threat spread with fiery speed throughout the whole city. "The priests and prophets and all the people at once seized him, and said, Thou shalt surely die." And the magistrates heard of the tumult. They were at the time in the royal palace (Chap. xxvi. 10), engaged in their official duties, and when the tidings came they hastened to the portico of the "new gate of Jehovah" in the Temple, built by King Jotham, and as soon as they had taken their seats the trial began.

The charge was gone into. Priests and prophets—men claiming to be prophets quite as much as Jeremiah, for by the side of the true there ever stand the counterfeit and the false—these men joined with the mob in calling for the true prophet's death. It was shameful to say that Jerusalem should be destroyed; and to say it at the beginning of a new reign was treason; and the traitor Jeremiah must die.

They call upon him for his defence. It is simple, straightforward, and manly. God had sent him to preach these words. If they repented they might escape the evil, but not otherwise. As for himself, he was in their hands, and they must do with him as seemed to them good. "Only know ye for certain, that if ye put me to death ye shall surely bring innocent blood upon yourselves, and upon the city, and upon the inhabitants thereof: for Jehovah hath really and truly sent me unto you, to speak all these words in your ears" (Chap. xxvi. 12-15).

Now these magistrates had been appointed to their posts in King Josiah's reign, and they justified his choice of them. They called to mind how Micah, in Hezekiah's days, had prophesied that Zion should be ploughed as a field, and Jerusalem become a heap of ruins, and the Temple be so entirely swept away, that Mount Moriah would stand up bare and lonely like some scaur rising above the forest trees. And Hezekiah, they said, and all Judah, did not put him to death, but repented; and Sennacherib, so far from capturing the city, returned home broken and with his power gone. And so they acquitted Jeremiah. Their verdict was, "This man is not worthy to die, for he hath spoken to us in the name of Jehovah our God."

Just twenty-two years afterwards the first and primary fulfilment of Jeremiah's prophecy took place. The people did not repent. Though the sentence of the judges had given weight to his words, and the remembrance of Hezekiah's conduct had taught them the right way of averting the evil, and had encouraged them to choose it, they still persisted in their wickedness; and so, because they had religious privileges, and did not use them for the one purpose for which God had given them, namely, to aid them in living holy lives, He took their privileges away. During most of the rest of the reign of Jehoiakim Jeremiah lived in exile. After a short struggle his voice was heard no more in Jerusalem. And when at last he returned, it was for the sake of those who were to be removed to Babylon. In this sermon he had given God's last solemn call to the mass of the people, and they had rejected it. And though God is longsuffering, yet at length the time of justice comes: for it is equally true of Him "that he will by no means clear the guilty" (Exod. xxxiv. 7).

R. PAYNE SMITH.

BIBLICAL NOTES.

GENESIS ii. 5.—The Authorized Version, following the LXX., renders this verse thus: "And every plant of the field before it was in the earth, and every herb of the field before it grew: for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was not a man to till the ground." An appearance of logical sense is given to this rendering in our Version by connecting it with the previous verse, so that it reads: "In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, and every plant of the field before it was in the earth," &c.; as though God first made the plant and the herb of the field, and afterwards set them in the ground—a childish conception, for which certainly the original text is not responsible.

The Bible edited by Cheyne and Driver has this excellent note.