

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/robbadshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

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

easily guarantee the help of the Church in shewing this mark of respect to Apollos (Mack, Huther, Ellicott, Oosterzee).

Verse 15.—All who are with me salute thee. Paul, when resting and journeying, was often surrounded with sympathetic souls, who were ready to do his bidding, and who shared in his affection for individuals and Churches. *Salute those who love us in faith;* i.e., those whose love took its origin in, and now derives constant aliment and support from, the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ. *Grace be with you all [AMEN¹].* With various modifications this benediction is uttered by the Apostle. The laconic form here adopted is very unlike the work of a forger. The love of Paul is sent through Titus to the whole Church, and the impression is, that though the letter was meant especially for Titus, it may be profitable for many.

H. R. REYNOLDS.

SHORT PAPERS UPON THE PROPHET JEREMIAH.

NO. 5.—THE LINEN GIRDLE, AND THE SPECIAL OFFICE OF NEBUCHADNEZZAR.

JEREMIAH's method of teaching by symbolical acts was not only extremely forcible in itself, from the aptness of the symbols used, but also admirably fitted by its impressiveness to remain imprinted upon the people's memory, and thereby compensate to some extent for the prophet's absence. The symbol of the potter's clay is an epitome of the whole history of the Jews. There was a time when other clay would have served

¹ The evidence for *Aμην* in this verse is stronger than for its presence in either of the Pastoral Epistles.

God's purpose equally well (Exod. xxxii. 9, 10); the seed of Moses might have formed a nation as fit to be the depositaries of God's promises as were the Israelites; but when God had once taken the clay into his hand, his purpose must be carried out, and the ductile material must take whatever form He chose; and we have no reason to suppose that any other nation would have yielded itself more readily to its Creator's will than the Jews did. Perhaps nothing is more remarkable than the perverse power which man possesses of resisting God, unless it be the obstinacy with which he exercises it. But God's will is ever finally triumphant; and so, in due time, the Jews became a religious people.

It is the greatest mistake possible to represent them as naturally a monotheistic people. Their history up to the Babylonian exile proves just the contrary. They were a people with very many fine and noble qualities, but, together with a grand physique, they possessed also an intense aptitude for sensuous pleasures, and idolatry had therefore enormous attractions for them. We cannot cite better specimens of them than David and Solomon, men far above the average, and over-topping in their respective ways the heroes of heathen history, but both hurried into disgrace and ruin by the same passionateness of their animal nature. Now had the Jews lapsed into idolatry, not only would Christianity have become an impossibility, by mankind being deprived of that which was their appointed schoolmaster to bring them unto Christ, but the Scriptures of the Old Testament would have perished. How much exactly we owe to Ezra may be uncertain, but undeniably it was the returning exiles who saved for us the Bible. Necessarily, therefore, the impious

designs of Ahaz and Manasseh must be frustrated, and the evil tendencies of the nation, which those bad kings represented, must be arrested; and so God crushed the clay together, and sent the Jews into captivity at Babylon. The hopeless part of the nation—the bad figs of Chapter xxiv.—were cast aside, and left to perish at Jerusalem; others, no doubt, of the same evil stamp became demoralized among the heathen at Babylon, and at best remained Jews in name only, perhaps not even that. It was a sharp and terrible method of selection, and never perhaps was a nation put into a fiercer furnace than the Jews in exile. But it was pure metal that issued forth, and under Ezra and Nehemiah they began God's work again. Henceforward, whatever faults they retained, they had no tendency to idolatry, and were never without the presence among them of a large number of pious and believing men. And so they were made capable of understanding and receiving Christ's teaching themselves, and of imparting a spiritual religion to the whole world.

The sermon preached by Jeremiah in the Temple, after the two symbols of the potter's clay and the broken vessel, seems to have been his last public act in Jerusalem until the time just before Jehoiakim's death. It had been followed by personal violence to himself on the part of Pashur; and when Jeremiah had still ventured to send the roll of his prophecies by the hand of his faithful Baruch to the king, it was probably with difficulty that the two were able to effect their exit from Jerusalem, and escape from Jehoiakim's wrath. We gather, however, from the symbol of the linen girdle, that the Prophet found a refuge on the banks of

the Euphrates, and probably he spent some five or six years in Babylonia. The symbol itself is full of instruction. He was to take a new linen girdle (Chap. xiii.), and hide it in a hole, or rather cleft of the rock, by the Euphrates; and as Babylonia is a flat alluvial country, this points to some place in the north, before the river enters the plains, and suggests to us that Jeremiah was unwilling to make Babylon his home, perhaps because there he would have been in Nebuchadnezzar's power, and might have been forced to some unpatriotic act.

In this cleft of the rock the girdle was to remain many days, after which Jeremiah was to search for it again, and of course would find it "marred and profitable for nothing." The primary lesson is obvious. Judah is this linen girdle, a thing intrinsically of little value, yet dear and useful to the wearer. Without it he can do nothing: for the long Eastern garments, unless girt tightly about the person, impede all motion. Laid aside in a damp place, it quickly mildews and is spoilt. So at Babylon the national glory of Judah was a thing of the past. Its king and nobles and high officers of state; its institutions and policy; its trade and agriculture; all its national life, its hopes and aspirations, its plans and purposes, were things gone by. It was but a band of captives that represented so grand a history and so many centuries full of heroic and noble deeds.

But Judah was not to be forgotten. The very place chosen for her concealment—a cleft in a rock—spoke of safety. After many days she would be found again, and though stained and marred, and her beauty gone, she would still be fit for use, and God would again gird Himself with her.

And there is even a deeper lesson. As long as the girdle was in use, so long it retained its strength and beauty. Put aside, it quickly fell into decay. So with the Jewish nation : so with all nations at all times, and all men. As long as they are doing God's will, and carrying forward his plans, so long, like the girdle round the loins, they are safe, and preserve their vigour, and keep their place in the constituted order of God's providential arrangements. But separate from God all is lost. One nation here and there may be put into the cleft of a rock for future use: as a rule, they are put aside for ever, and, like refuse cast away, must sooner or later perish, holding together perhaps for a time, but gradually falling to pieces, and sure finally to be swept into the receptacle of things needed no more, useless, and soon forgotten.

Now this symbolical act belongs, as we have seen, to the period when God withdrew Jeremiah's personal ministrations from the Jews. It was in Jehoiakim's fifth year that Baruch read before him the opening predictions of Jeremiah's roll, and the king with fatal energy, indignant at the prophet's warning, refused to hear more, and cutting the roll into pieces, burned it in the brazier that was set in the centre of the chamber to warm the chill December air. For the king the warning voice was henceforward dumb: for the people there came only written words in place of personal influence; and the prophet must suffer, as those who witness for God constantly do, an enforced silence, more hard for an earnest man to endure than bodily pain. But wandering from place to place in Babylonia, and busy there, no doubt, in confirming the faith of the many Jews already in exile, he yet remembered those

at Jerusalem, and sent them this symbol of the mildewed girdle to teach them its lessons.

And so five or six years passed by; but when the time for judgment drew near, and Nebuchadnezzar was marshalling his armies to punish Jehoiakim for his rebellion, Jeremiah once again appeared in the streets of Jerusalem, wearing this decayed and water-stained girdle, and raising up his voice against the sins that were just about to bring upon the Jewish nation a terrible retribution. And as usual the lesson had its two sides. It told them, on the one hand, of beauty gone and usefulness departed. A girdle so decayed must be laid aside. The wearer would soon procure something stronger and better-looking. On the other hand, it reminded them that they were God's girdle; that his activity depended upon them, because they were the chosen race by whom He had ordained to work. Worthless as they were, yet even after this sojourn in Babylon, during which they would be laid aside, God would search for them again, and gird Himself with them, and if only they would cling to Him in faith, would once more use their instrumentality for the carrying out of his counsels. And so Jehoiakim and Zedekiah were laid aside to perish; but Jeconiah and those carried to Babylon were preserved there till that city fell, and by the decree of Cyrus the Jews were permitted to return. They were but a feeble remnant, yet in them the Jewish nation did revive and fulfil that Divine purpose for which their forefather Abraham had been called to wander with God on the hills of Judæa.

But let us turn to Nebuchadnezzar, for few grander figures stalk by in the pages of history, and few whose work was more important in its effects upon the human

race. Now we have seen that the exile was the turning point in Israel's history. It was a season of stern discipline, during which the doctrine of the Divine unity was driven with fierce pressure into the very depth of their hearts. From that time to this no nation has so strictly kept the second commandment, because none have learned it in so thorough a manner. In many Christian countries there is a tendency to a mild kind of idolatry. But from the day when the Jews set out upon their homeward march to the desolate land of their fathers, they have permitted no secondary mediators to come between them and God. If in Hosea's words they abide during these long ages "without a king, and without a prince, and without a sacrifice," so equally do they abide "without an image, and without an ephod, and without teraphim" (Chap. iii. 4).

It was Nebuchadnezzar who was specially raised up to stamp this great truth upon the minds of the Jews. In Chapter xxv. 9 he is called "Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylon, the servant of Jehovah." In the cuneiform inscriptions this is the regular way of spelling his name, but the less correct form, Nebuchadnezzar, had become somehow or other the usual mode of writing it at Jerusalem. Nebuchadrezzar means, "May Nebo protect the crown," Nebo being the planet Mercury. But the more important fact is that Jeremiah calls him "Jehovah's servant," a title given to very few persons in the Old Testament, because it means so much; for it is equivalent to Jehovah's prime minister or vicegerent. Thus Moses is especially called Jehovah's servant, as being the mediator of the Law. So Isaiah calls Jacob and Israel Jehovah's servants, because of the office which they held in the Jewish economy. But

chiefly it is the name given to the Messiah in Isaiah lli., because He is the Divine Word by whom God is revealed to man. It is therefore no slight thing that Nebuchadnezzar should have this grand title given to him.

Plainly it shews that God had raised him up for a special purpose. This was partly one of punishment. In Chapter xxv. a list is given of the nations which he was to chastise ; but his higher work was to make Babylon a fit place to be the home of the Jews, that they might there undergo such a discipline as would prepare them for becoming Christ's ancestors, the recipients of his religion, and its propagators throughout the world.

Till Nebuchadnezzar's time Babylon had not been the capital of a great empire. It was a very old city, and famous for its study of the stars, but it had long been subject to Nineveh. Its greatness was the work of one man. With Nebuchadnezzar it began : virtually with him it ended. It had long been struggling for freedom ; and when Nineveh was captured by the Medes, Nabopolassar, the father of Nebuchadnezzar, who, with a body of insurgent Chaldaeans, had aided in the siege, became king of Babylon. With Nineveh an empire fell which had been the dominant power in Asia for centuries. The empire of Babylon lasted seventy years. Of these, Nebuchadnezzar reigned forty-three. The great object of his ambition was to make Babylon a vast and magnificent town. For this end he enclosed so large a space within walls of massive strength, that in case of war considerable supplies of food could be raised inside the fortifications ; and his buildings were so many and splendid, that perhaps no man has

laid upon the earth such vast piles. With perfect truth he could say, "Is not this great Babylon, that I have builded for the house of my kingdom, and for the honour of my majesty?" (Dan. iv. 30.) But the citizens of this vast city were chiefly men kidnapped from their homes. He carried on wars far and near, that he might drag his captives to people the wastes of his mighty city. And justly does Habakkuk denounce a process so cruel. "Woe to him that buildeth a town with blood, and establisheth a city by iniquity" (Hab. ii. 12). But though thus Babylon was built up by the ruin of thousands of homes, yet when Nebuchadnezzar had carried his prisoners there, at all events he took care of them. He fostered commerce, so that Babylon was soon enriched by an active trade; and a large portion of this would naturally fall into the hands of a people so eminently fitted for commercial pursuits as the Jews. He was careful also to provide food for the support of a numerous population, knowing that the strength of a kingdom depends not only upon the bravery and vigour of its inhabitants, but also upon their numbers. Now Babylonia, as was mentioned before, was a vast plain covered over with earth washed down from the uplands of Armenia by the Tigris and Euphrates. Much of it naturally was marshy and unhealthy; but Nebuchadnezzar formed a vast system of canals, which served to drain the marshy portions and irrigate the rest. And thus the whole became immensely fruitful. Herodotus says that wheat there often produced two hundredfold, and even more; and he gives a marvellous account of the luxuriance of the plant and the breadth of the blade. And amidst this vast expanse of waving corn-fields there rose up groves

of date-palms and pleasant gardens, so that where now, owing to bad government, there is either unwholesome marsh or barren desert, there was a rich abundance of well-cultivated fields. It was this union of trade and agriculture which soon made Babylon so rich, that Jeremiah (Chap. li. 7) compares it to a golden cup in Jehovah's hand; and Daniel speaks of its empire as the head of gold of the mighty image which Nebuchadnezzar saw in his dream.

This, then, was the city and country which God had prepared to be the home of the Jews during the exile. They had been first formed into a people in Egypt, a country foremost at that time in civilization and literature and thought; but they still needed forty years of bracing exercise and simple life in the wilderness before they were manly enough to fight in battle with the seven nations of Canaan. And now that they had deteriorated, God squeezed them again together as the clay, and sent them to Babylon, where, midst the crash and struggle of diverse multitudes, picked out, like themselves, from many a ruined nation, and under the dominion of an intellectual race and a king of extraordinary mental power, they were formed anew for their high destiny. Daniel, no doubt, contributed much towards this reshaping of their national character; Jeremiah still more: but the circumstances and conditions of their daily life were all-important in aiding the personal influence of their leading men. And so they returned home from Babylon a noble, high-spirited, and deeply religious people. And though, when Christ came, they were again sinking down fast into political and moral degradation, yet was there in them a "holy seed," and, under circumstances out-

wardly the most diverse, history once again repeated itself, and the Providence of God followed identically the same course.

For just as at the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar God had previously picked out and removed into a place of safety all those whose hearts had been reached by the preaching of Jeremiah, so by the preaching of Christ and his apostles He gathered out of the mass of the Jews all those who were fit for higher and better work. The rest were left at Jerusalem, to be the prey of Titus and the armies of Rome. And just as God's promise belonged, not to Zedekiah and the nation, but to Jeremiah and the exiles, so did the succession to it belong, not to the synagogue, which had rejected the Messiah, but to the Church, which had believed in Him. Finally, as the possession of the promise carried with it the duty of being labourers for God and witnesses to his truth, so now it is the Church which must do Christ's work. The Jews are laid aside. Preserved wonderfully for some great purpose, to be accomplished in God's appointed time, they are not now his representatives. The golden candlestick that must bear aloft the light of God's truth stands no longer in the court of their Tabernacle, but belongs to those who believe in and preach Him who is "the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world." But every privilege is heavy with responsibility; and the symbol of the girdle warns us that it is only by cleaving to Christ and doing his work that man or nation can continue in safety, and attain unto the end of its high vocation.