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THE PROPHECY OF JEREMIAH

(continued)

by H. L. ELLISON

XV. THE PROPHET'S PASSION

Now that we have answered the problem posed by Jer. 11: 1-14, we can consider the closely linked incident of the plot against Jeremiah's life by his family and the men of Anathoth. It may be a help, however, first to reconsider our view of Jeremiah's character.

Little though he could have realized it at the time, there could hardly have been a better symbolic picture of the prophet as God's spokesman than Moses' vision of the burning bush. As mysterious as the fire in the heart of the bush, burning but not consuming it, is the presence and work of the Spirit of God in the true prophets. At first it may well have been pleasant and even welcome, but then it must increasingly have become an all-compelling power and finally, at times at least, sheer agony.

Paul's claim, "We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord" (2 Cor. 4: 5) is a statement of the prophets' position in New Testament terms. Their joys and sorrows, their suffering and anguish were no concern of their hearers or of posterity, unless, as was the case with Hosea and Jeremiah, they became in some way an integral part of the prophet's message. Already earlier I criticized the reading into the story of his call a "natural timidity of character".¹ Whether or not Jeremiah's was a more sensitive character than that of most of the other canonical prophets it is hard to say. The only positive evidence I know for it is the lyric nature of some of his verse, which is surely a precarious foundation for any far-reaching conclusions. The other evidence adduced is based on Jeremiah's revelation of himself to us as part of his message as a whole.

We should not forget that it is in the nature of things that prophets do not write about prophecy. Few indeed have been the writers on the prophets who themselves have ever felt the breath of the spirit of prophecy. As a result they have tended to reduce the prophets to spiritual dictaphones or to men of outstanding spiritual insight, or even to men of abnormal psychology. But they seldom have done justice to that agonizing tension expressed in our Lord's words: "I have come to set fire to the

¹ *E.Q.* Vol. XXXI, No. 4, pp. 213f.

earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism to undergo, and how hampered I am until the ordeal is over! " (Luke 12: 49f., N.E.B.) Hence I shall not make the mistake of trying to explore Jeremiah's soul, but, on the assumption that he was a normal man, I shall seek to understand the agony that seared him and ultimately brought him to an essentially new knowledge of God.

THE AGONY OF PROPHECY

Already in dealing with the oracles about the foe from the north I referred to Jeremiah's anguished sharing in his vision.² What is more, even the sternest of the prophets, men like Amos and Ezekiel, reveal almost accidentally that they were not merely human channels conveying messages of divine judgment and chastisement, but that they were also torn asunder between their people and God. This two-fold love and the anguish it caused are in Jeremiah's case perhaps best shown by the juxtaposition of the independent oracles 8: 18-9: 1 (Heb. 8: 18-23) and 9: 2, 3 (Heb. 9: 1, 2), a juxtaposition that can surely not be accidental. In the former we find Jeremiah mourning for his people, in the latter longing to leave them for ever.

- (8: 18) My grief mounts up in me ;³
 my heart is sick.
- (19) Lo! hark! the daughter of my people cries for help
 from the length and breadth of the land:⁴
 " Is the LORD not in Zion?
 Is her King not in her? "
 " Why have they insulted Me with their carved images,
 with their foreign nothingnesses? "
- (20) " The harvest is past, the autumn⁵ is ended
 and we have not been saved."
- (21) Because of the breaking of my people I am broken ;
 I am in mourning ; horror has seized me.
- (22) Is there no balm in Gilead?
 Is there no doctor there?
 Why has there not been restored
 the health of the daughter of my people?

² E.Q. Vol. XXXII, No. 4, p. 219.

³ So Rudolph, *Jeremia*², p. 56 ; Weiser, *Das Buch des Profeten Jeremia*, p. 79 ; see BH³.

⁴ So moderns since Duhm.

⁵ The traditional rendering 'summer,' or even 'ingathering of summer fruits' (R.V., mg.) effectively obscures the meaning for those unfamiliar with the climate of Palestine.

- (9: 1) Oh that my head were water
 And my eyes a spring of tears,
 that I might weep day and night
 for the slain of the daughter of my people!
 * * * *
- (2) Oh that I were in the wilderness in a rest-house for
 wanderers,
 that I could leave my people and go away from them:
 for they are all adulterers, a solemn assembly⁶ of
 treacherous men,
- (3) they bend their tongues like a bow.
 Lies and not trustworthiness⁷
 prevail in the land.
 They go forward from evil to evil,
 and Me they do not know—oracle of the LORD.

We are introduced here in these two oracles most effectively to the tension in which Jeremiah, and surely the other prophets, stood. During the first four years of Jehoiakim's reign it steadily increased.

“THEY SEEK MY LIFE TO TAKE IT AWAY”

The first incident profoundly to influence Jeremiah was his narrow escape from being lynched at the beginning of Jehoiakim's reign (7: 1-15; ch. 26).⁸ So far as our records enable us to judge, from the time Elijah put the fear of God into Ahab and Ahaziah his son no prophet was put to death, however much he may have been ill-treated. Not even Manasseh is accused of this except in late and apparently valueless tradition. Zechariah ben-Jehoiada (2 Chr. 24: 20, 21) can hardly be regarded as an exception to this, for there is no evidence that he was regarded as a prophet. How great then must the shock of his narrow escape from death have been to Jeremiah, especially when the reality of the peril was confirmed by the judicial murder of Uriah ben-Shemaiah soon after (26: 20-23). It is one thing to know by bitter experience that one's people has rejected God's message, it is another to face the reality of the rejection of the messenger, a rejection that may at any time find its consummation in murder.

Both the rejection and the threat to his life became even more real to the prophet soon after by the attitude of his family and the

⁶ The use of a religious term implies that treachery had become their religion.

⁷ For the minor alteration in text see BH³.

⁸ See *E.Q.* Vol. XXXIII, No. 4, pp. 224ff.

men of Anathoth. This expression means the free land-owners of the village, a group that will have been severely restricted by the unashamed land-grabbing so bitterly attacked by Isaiah and Micah (Isa. 5: 8-10; Mic. 2: 2).

There has been some controversy as to whether we should regard 11: 18-23 and 12: 1-6 as a continuous passage or as referring to two separate events. When we remember that Anathoth was only a village, it seems clear enough that Jeremiah's family will have been the "gentry" there. It is hard to believe that the few free farmers would under the conditions then existing have ventured to take action against Jeremiah without the knowledge and connivance of his family. When, in addition, we find that his family had been involved in some form of serious treachery against him (12: 6), it seems an over-refinement to argue for two separate attacks on him.

Before we try to interpret the incident, we must look at the text more closely. There are few moderns who would defend the present position of 12: 4a. b.⁹ It is of little importance whether we link it with 12: 13¹⁰ or with ch. 14. If we do the latter, it may have been transferred from one column of the scroll to the one before by scribal carelessness. Today most go further and transfer 12: 6 after 11: 18,¹¹ thus telling us what God had showed Jeremiah (11: 18). The verse could have been moved to its present position by an editor to explain 12: 5. Finally, I agree with Rudolph that 12: 3 stands best after 11: 20a, but I prefer to bring 12: 4c with it, but this will depend on how this line is translated (see note 14). When these changes have been made, the passage reads:—

(11: 18) The LORD caused me to know, and I knew it; then Thou didst cause me to see their practices.

(12: 6) "Even your brothers and the house of your father, even they have dealt treacherously against you, even they cry aloud behind you: ¹² do not trust them, when they speak fair words with you."

(11: 19) But I was like a pet ram brought to the slaughter. I did not know that against me they devised devices.
"Let us destroy the tree and its sap; let us cut him off

⁹ It is omitted (in some cases 4c as well) by Peake, *Century Bible*; Streane, *Cambridge Bible*; Skinner, *Prophecy and Religion*, p. 111; G. A. Smith, *Jeremiah*⁴, p. 339; BH⁸; Moffatt; Rudolph, *op. cit.*; Cunliffe Jones, *Torch Bible Commentaries*; but Weiser, *op. cit.*, argues for its retention; this involves him, however, in an awkward transposition of 4c.

¹⁰ So Moffatt, among many.

¹¹ E.g. Rudolph, *op. cit.*; Weiser, *op. cit.*; Cunliffe Jones, *op. cit.*

¹² The emendation in BH⁸, taken from Volz, does not seem necessary.

from the land of the living, so that his name be no more remembered."

- (20) O LORD of hosts, who judgest righteously,
who triest kidneys¹³ and heart,
- (12: 3) Thou LORD knowest me ; Thou seest me ;
Thou triest my heart's attitude to Thee.
Drag them away as sheep for the slaughter
and set them apart for the day of killing ;
- (12: 4c) for they say, " He will not see our latter end."¹⁴
- (11: 20b) Let me see Thy vengeance on them,
for to Thee have I committed my suit.
- (21) Therefore thus says the LORD about the men of
Anathoth, who seek your life, saying, "Do not prophesy
in the name of the LORD, or you will die by our hand."
Therefore thus says the LORD of hosts, " See, I am on
the point of punishing them ; their young men shall
die by the sword, their sons and their daughters shall
die by famine
- (22) and there shall be no remnant for them, for I shall bring
evil on the men of Anathoth in the year of their
punishment.
- (12: 1) Righteous art Thou, O LORD,
if I plead my suit before Thee,
yet would I discuss judgements given with Thee.
Why does the way of the guilty prosper?
Why are all those at ease whose lives are treachery?
- (2) Thou plantest them and they take root ;
they grow and bear fruit.
Thou are near in their mouth
and far from their kidneys.¹³
- (5) " If you have run with footmen and they have wearied
you, how will you compete with horses?
And if only in a peaceful land you feel secure,¹⁴
what will you do in the jungle of Jordan? "

On the assumption that the whole section deals with one incident only, the following seems a reasonable reconstruction which does not read too much into the text.

It is hardly credible that Jeremiah's call to be a prophet can

¹³ Not as the seat of the emotions, but as the most hidden part of the inner man.

¹⁴ If with a minor textual change we follow LXX, " For they say, God does not see our paths," this line would fit better after 12 : 2.

¹⁵ So Rudolph, *op.cit.*; perhaps with G. R. Driver and R.S.V., "And if in a safe land you fall down."

have been received by his family with any enthusiasm. Both the frequent linking of priest and prophet in the prophetic writings and our more recent knowledge of the average prophet's connection with a sanctuary have helped us to see that the two functions were to some extent complementary. But for all that the priest claimed precedence. Many reasons for this can be suggested, one of the more important being the hereditary nature of the priesthood, which made the sanctuaries virtually their property—not even Athaliah tried to dispossess the Zadokite priesthood of their control of the Jerusalem sanctuary. Then the fact that many prophets gave the impression of being on the verge of lunacy will have lowered the standard of most in the eyes of normal men. The subordinate position of the prophet is best summed up in his being judicially under the control of the chief priest (29: 26).

The feeling that Jeremiah had lowered himself by becoming a prophet will have been increased by the apparent failure and undoubted unpopularity of his message. When his father died—we can assume this with reasonable certainty before the death of Josiah—Jeremiah is not likely to have felt welcome in his old home and will have avoided Anathoth. To his proud relatives the scene in the Temple gate will have been the last straw. Irrespective of whether they visited Jerusalem to function in the Temple or for pleasure they will have met the mockery and sneers of their fellow-priests. They must have felt the same way about Jeremiah's words as did the priests who were on duty in the Temple at the time. To make matters much worse he had brought shame on his family. A family council will have met and decided that the death penalty was called for. Any who know something of Near-Eastern life with its fierce sense of honour and family pride will regard this as quite normal.

Had Jeremiah been a less notorious character, his family's purpose might have been achieved by poison or the assassin's dagger. As it was, they seem to have tried to inveigle Jeremiah back to Anathoth for a visit, probably for some family festivity. It had been arranged that once he was there some of the free land-owners of Anathoth should accuse him of something, probably blasphemy, that involved the death penalty. While his relations held back "so as not to interfere with justice," he would be condemned and stoned to death by the men of Anathoth. Were the news gradually to leak out, Jehoiakim was not the man to ask awkward questions about those that had rid him of a turbulent prophet.

As one and another of his relations met him in Jerusalem, there was a sudden new cordiality and appreciation of his message.

For Jeremiah's wounded spirit this must have been balm, and doubtless he agreed willingly to pay a visit to Anathoth. He was "like a pet ram brought to the slaughter." Suddenly, just before it was too late, God gave him a revelation of what was really happening. It may have been linked with a realization that behind his back they were openly disassociating themselves from him ("they cry aloud behind you").

Once the plot was discovered, how changed everything was! Jeremiah could not meet a member of his family or anyone from Anathoth who had been in the plot on the streets of Jerusalem without hearing the fierce whisper, "Stop prophesying or . . . !" How great the shock to Jeremiah is seen not merely in the bitterness of his complaint but also in his plea to God to justify His ways.

"WHEREFORE DOTH THE WAY OF THE WICKED PROSPER?"

Jeremiah had been brought up in the nearest approach to our middle-class that Israel knew under the monarchy. It is quite natural that the sins he condemned so unsparingly were disloyalty to God and false religion with all the actions that sprang fairly naturally from them. We gain the impression that he had a deeper understanding of corrupt human nature but not of human life than his predecessors. As a result it was with profound revulsion that he glimpsed the fires of hell that can set a man's life alight (Jas. 3: 6). His reaction:

"Drag them away as sheep for the slaughter
and set them apart for the day of killing"

was what we should expect from one brought up as he was. The respectable saint can seldom bring himself to apply his theology of human nature to everyday life, the more so as "things as they are" were probably no more considered a topic for polite conversation in Jeremiah's day than they are in ours. We should understand Jeremiah's reaction less as a cry for vengeance and more as the longing that such evil, treachery and hatred should no longer poison the air.

This interpretation is supported by the fact that it was the denial of his prophetic integrity that hurt Jeremiah most. To tell him to stop prophesying was equivalent to denying the inner compulsion of the Spirit. Jeremiah was no fanatic. We find him both as a young man (4: 10) and in his late ministry (28: 1-11) prepared to believe that he might have been wrong. A man may misunderstand the Spirit, or he may be moved by other spirits (1 Kings 22: 23), but in either case he has not been speaking of his own volition. This inner compulsion was generally understood (Amos 3: 8). Even Amaziah, priest of Bethel, did not tell Amos to stop

prophesying, but to do it somewhere else (Amos 7: 12), while for Amos the silencing of the prophet was one of Israel's major sins (Amos 2: 12). So the command to Jeremiah to desist was equivalent to a denial of his integrity; understandably and very humanly we find Jeremiah begging for vindication (11: 20; 12: 3, 4c).

We are left with the impression that to all this God gave no answer at all. So, politely, but firmly, Jeremiah told God that though he did not doubt that God could put him in the wrong, he was convinced that God's dealing with the wicked did not make sense (12: 1, 2). Though we do not have the passion of Job and his friends, we have presented in brief the problem that takes up chs. 15-21 of Job.

The fact of death as the wages of sin, or even of the second death, does not of itself answer the problem of the relationship of God's righteousness to human sin. There are sins so gross, so evil, so cruel, so corrupting, that we are compelled by our innate sense of justice to expect that God will deal with them in some special way. Even a concept like Dante's in the *Inferno* of circles of increasing punishment hardly satisfies men for long, and for Jeremiah, so far as we know, Sheol was a place of undifferentiated gloom.

The terms of the coming punishment on Anathoth did not differ essentially from Jeremiah's prophecies of doom as a whole. This meant that they would be sharing the same fate as those who apparently had sinned much less grievously. Indeed, they would have shared in this fate, even if they had not wronged the prophet.

However reasonable Jeremiah's plea may seem to us, the only answer granted by God was that He did not see what he was complaining about. Not only was what he had suffered quite normal, but he might expect very much worse before he was finished.

GROWING HOSTILITY

We have nothing to show us whether the fact of the plot against Jeremiah's life and its failure leaked out and became public property. There is no point in speculating, because nothing depends on it. The way in which his family had rejected him and hated him must have been too notorious in Jerusalem even to supply a subject for gossip. As is almost always the case, this will have encouraged Jeremiah's many enemies to show their hostility the more openly.

That is why in this period we find Jeremiah driven to symbolic actions (13: 1-11) and enigmatic sayings (13: 12-14) in order to gain a hearing at all. His position may momentarily have been changed for the better when the great drought came (14: 1-15:

10), but evidently it led many to blame him for the desperate need (cf. 2 Kings 6: 31). Jeremiah found himself walking in a fog of hatred, breathing it in at every step, and so we hear him breaking out in another desperate outburst which, unfortunately, has been preserved for us only in an imperfect text (15: 10-21), though the versions give us some guidance in our search for its original form.

15: 13, 14 is clearly enough a somewhat abbreviated doublet of 17: 3, 4. It was probably transferred from the next column in the MS. I know of no modern who tries to justify them in their present setting. Though there are a number¹⁶ who try to justify v. 12, it is at the expense of considerable emendation and that without gaining any general agreement, so I prefer to omit it.¹⁷ Omitting then these three verses we obtain approximately the following meaning—no justification is offered for the textual changes made; the majority will be found in BH³.

- (10) Woe is me, my mother, that you bare me
a man of strife and contention for everyone.¹⁸
I have neither lent nor borrowed,
but they all curse me.
- (11) Truly, LORD, I have served Thee sincerely,
I interceded with Thee for the enemy
in the time of his misfortune and in the time of his need,
- (15) Thou knowest it.
LORD, remember me and intervene for me¹⁹
and avenge me on my persecutors.
Take me not away in Thy longsuffering (towards them);
recognize that it is for Thy sake that I suffer shame.
- (16) If Thy words were found, I ate them,
and Thy word was to me joy;
and the rejoicing of my heart was
that Thy name was named over me,²⁰
LORD, the God of hosts.
- (17) I did not sit rejoicing in the circle of merrymakers;
lonely sat I under the weight of Thy hand,
for Thou hast filled me with Thine anger.

¹⁶ E.g. Peake, *op. cit.*, and G. A. Smith, *op. cit.*, following Duhm (the former with reservations), and Weiser, *op. cit.*, following Volz.

¹⁷ So Skinner, *op. cit.*; Rudolph, *op. cit.*, who considers it, with fair probability, as a corruption of 17: 1.

¹⁸ Lit. 'for the whole earth' or 'whole land.'

¹⁹ Lit. 'visit me.'

²⁰ Whatever the meaning of this, it can hardly be, as implied by A.V., R.V., that the sacred name formed part of his (*yerimyahu*). This was too everyday, even among the godless, to underlie his words. He is probably thinking of his call to be a prophet.

- (18) Why is my pain perpetual,
and my wound unhealed, incurable?
Alas! Thou art to me like a deceitful stream,
like waters that fail.
- (19) Therefore thus says the LORD,
“ If you repent, I shall permit you
to serve Me again ;²¹
if you produce the precious and not the vile,
you shall act as My mouth.
Then they will turn to you,
but you will not turn to them.
- (20) Then I shall make you for the people
a bronze wall, inaccessible ;
even if they fight against you,
they shall not prevail against you,
for I am with you
to save you and deliver you—oracle of the LORD—
- (21) and to deliver you from the hand of the wicked
and free you from the grasp of the terrible.”

Jeremiah had the welfare of Israel so much on his heart that God had repeatedly to command him to cease his intercession for his people (7: 16 ; 11: 14 ; 14: 11). If I pray for someone continually, that fact can hardly be hidden, but the people blamed him and cursed him, when the judgments he had foretold began to come to pass. At all times there have been those who have seemed to think that something unpleasant is not true until some busybody declares it to be. Cigarettes never caused lung cancer until some doctors, who should have known better, declared that they did!

Such ingratitude, moral blindness and general turpitude moved Jeremiah to an impassioned protest. God's longsuffering with men like this was rank unfairness to His faithful servant the prophet. It was not even as though Jeremiah had acted under compulsion, like Jonah, when he went to Nineveh with the Lord's message. He had positively welcomed the divine message and had let it so possess him, that it separated him from all normal life around him. In fact, like the dried up *wadi* that fails men at the time of their greatest need (cf. Job 6: 15-20), so God had failed him.

The full force of v. 18 cannot be felt until we compare it with

²¹ Lit. 'to stand before Me'; this is a term applied originally to the slave before his master ; it was extended to the courtier before his king and to the service of God by priest and prophet.

Jeremiah's early oracle attacking the false gods of Israel's worship:

“Two wrongs has My people committed:
 Me have they forsaken,
 the spring of living water,
 to hew themselves cisterns,
 broken cisterns,
 which cannot hold water” (2: 13).

In other words Jeremiah accused his God of being in the moment of crisis no better than the heathen gods he had earlier denounced.

Jeremiah's earlier outburst God had been able to dismiss with a minor rap over the knuckles, with the reminder that he ought to have realized that the hostility and treachery of his family was part of the warp and woof of normal life. Now sterner measures were needed. He faced Jeremiah with the categorical demand for repentance.²² So long as he could think and say such things, he could not remain His prophet. There is a wide-spread belief in certain circles that anything that comes welling up from the depths of my being with almost irresistible force must be from the Holy Spirit. Some such feeling was probably shared by Jeremiah, and it explains how he ventured to go as far as he did in his complaint against God. In answer to this feeling God told him that a true prophet must be able to discriminate between the precious and the vile. He is not a mere channel only, but remains in conscious control of his emotions and words (cf. 1 Cor. 14: 32).

Jeremiah's repentance is left to us to imagine. It was followed by the warning that this time he had been defeated, he had turned to the people and their ways and thoughts (15: 19); this was never to happen again, and so he would ultimately find them turning to him. In addition God repeated the guarantee that Jeremiah was His impregnable citadel.

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(To be continued)

²² For the rendering of *shub* as *repent* cf. *E.Q.*, Vol. XXXII, No. 2, p.113.