

THE PROPHECY OF JEREMIAH

(Continued)

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VI. THE FAILURE OF REFORM

WE noted earlier that the "They say" with which ch. 3 begins in A.V., R.V. is a completely illegitimate rendering of the Heb. 'saying'. LXX and Syr. may be correct in their omission of it, but it is far more likely that they were taking the easy way out, as does R.S.V. Since its presence cannot be explained by any of the normal rules governing scribal errors, it seems most natural to take it as the last word of the standard type of heading, "(The word of the LORD came unto me) saying."¹

The chief grounds on which this has been questioned is the wish of many commentators to link 3 : 1-5 closely with the end of ch. 2. It seems more likely, however, that we are passing to the much darker outlook of 3 : 6-4 : 4. If ch. 2 represents Jeremiah's message during the years 625-621 B.C., when Josiah's reformation was gradually gaining momentum, we may well see in these verses his caustic comment on the light-hearted acceptance of the Book of Law in the latter year.

If a man divorces his wife,
and she leaves him
and marries another,
will he return to her again?

Would not that land be completely polluted?

And you — you who have played the harlot with many
lovers —

are you to return to Me? — oracle of the LORD.

(2) Lift up your eyes to the hill-tops and see;

where have you not been ravished?

By the waysides you have sat waiting for them
like an Arab in the wilderness,

and you defiled the land by your great whoredom and your
evil.

(3) The heavy rains were withheld

and the latter rain did not come,

but a harlot's brow is yours,

you have refused to be humbled.

¹So Rudolph, *Jeremia* ², p. 22; Weiser, *Der Prophet Jeremia*, p. 29.

(4) In spite of this have you not started calling to Me, "My Father!

Thou art the Friend of my youth.

(5) Will He be angry for ever?
or will He keep it to the end?"

So you have spoken, yet done
evils to the uttermost.

This translation calls for a few comments. It is obvious that v. 1 is dealing with the position envisaged in Dt. 24 : 1-4, though it is unlikely that Jeremiah is directly basing himself on the law. In every people there is a tendency to regard certain practices as particularly reprehensible. Jeremiah's language makes it clear that quite apart from God's condemnation of it his contemporaries considered remarriage to a woman who had already been rejected and divorced and who had then become the wife of another something particularly abominable. This is something we should bear in mind, when we consider the greatness of Hosea's love for Gomer. Since Jeremiah is not directly quoting the law, we cannot raise any *a priori* objection to the emendation that would read, "will *she* return unto *him* again?" Though this makes a better parallelism with "are you to return to Me?" at the end of the verse, we shall do well to let the Hebrew text stand, even if the emendation can claim the support of LXX. The initiative in marriage, as in divorce, was the man's. Here, however, the initiative in departing from Jehovah was Israel's, but in Josiah's reformation she was taking the initiative in seeking to return.

Some have found difficulty in "and she leaves him"; this is hardly to be regarded as mere parallelistic filling. It wishes rather to stress that we are not dealing with the case of a wronged wife, who might have married another out of sheer necessity. She has gladly acquiesced in her husband's breaking of the marriage bond.

It used to be common to prefer the LXX reading "woman" instead of "land" in "Would not that land be completely polluted?", but once again it seems preferable to retain the Hebrew text. Martin Buber in particular has helped us to see how close the connection of land and people is in Old Testament thought. In any case Deut. 24 : 4 is quite sufficient support for the reading we have retained (cf. also 3 : 9). The change of text is quite understandable in Alexandria, where the link between people and land had ceased to exist.

It now seems universally recognized that A.V., R.V. text were at fault in seeing here a gracious invitation and translating "yet

return again to Me." Though this is a perfectly possible translation of the Hebrew, it is entirely out of harmony with the whole tenor of the passage.

The picture in v. 2 is of the Arab in ambush by the way side awaiting eagerly for someone to rob; even so Israel awaits eagerly the opportunity of whoredom. We cannot be sure of the precise reference in v. 3. We do not know enough of the times of Josiah to venture a guess whether his early years had been marked out by shortage of rain, and hence drought. Obviously there can be no reference to the drought of ch. 14.

We can almost certainly date this oracle within narrow limits by v. 4, which undoubtedly refers to the sudden popular acceptance of Josiah's reformation.

The Problem of Repentance

A quotation from *Lamentations Rabbah* is typical of the rabbinic attitude towards repentance:

R. Helbo said to R. Samuel Nahmani: "Since I have heard that you are a good Haggadist, tell me the meaning of Lam. iii. 44, 'Thou hast covered thyself with a cloud that our prayers should not pass through.'" He replied: "Prayer is likened to a bath, repentance to the sea. As the bath is sometimes open and sometimes shut, so the gates of prayer are sometimes shut and sometimes open, but as the sea is always open, so the gates of repentance are always open. When a man wishes to bathe in the sea, he can bathe in it at any hour he likes. So with repentance, whenever a man wishes to repent, God will receive him." But R. Anan said: "The gates of prayer, too, are never shut."²

Whatever may be thought about the attitude to prayer, very many Christians would agree with R. Samuel on repentance without the least demur. But that does not mean that they are necessarily correct. It is, incidentally, significant that the rabbis understood Jer. 3:1 as a gracious invitation to repentance.³

Since this is no treatise on systematic theology, we are not concerned here with the undoubted fact that obstinate continuance in sin may make repentance psychologically impossible, the more so as quite obviously this is not Jeremiah's thought. Equally we are not dealing with the need for "prevenient grace" before the sinner can truly repent. Jeremiah is really questioning the people's whole understanding of repentance.

Teshubah implies etymologically turning round and then returning to the point at which the individual or the nation left the path of God's will. It certainly implied for Jeremiah's hearers

²Quoted from Montefiore and Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology*, p. 316.

³Montefiore and Loewe, *op. cit.*, p. 318.

the automatic resumption of former relationships that had been broken by sin. This is borne out by the expressions put in the mouth of Israel, "My Father" and "The Friend of my youth". They were basing themselves on the covenant and were appealing to the covenant God's loyal love and not to His grace. "My Father" is the wife's respectful address to her husband.

Amos had made it clear that a sinful Israel stood in the same relationship to God as the Ethiopians, and that where the covenant had been spurned, the Exodus was in the same category as the divine control of the national movements of the Philistines and Syrians (9 : 7). None stressed the loyalty of an all-loving God to the covenant more than Hosea, yet for all his vision of the time when Lo-ruhamah and Lo-ammi should become Ruhamah and Ammi the book ends virtually with a question mark. This is best expressed by the final picture we have of Gomer in 3 : 3. Bought back from harlotry and slavery her husband says to her, "You shall sit still for me many days; you shall not play the harlot, or belong to another man; but I will not go in to you." She has been brought back and shut in, but she has not been restored to her privileges as wife. Though this will depend on her conduct, yet ultimately the decision is her husband's, not hers. Did Gomer finally yield to a love of which she was so unworthy? We should like to think she did, but we just do not know. Isaiah sees this covenant love triumphing in a remnant, but only after Jehovah Himself has smelted away the dross and alloy (Is. 1 : 25).

Jeremiah seems to sum this all up, when he denies that repentance, in the sense of starting again where things had gone wrong, was possible. A sheer yielding to the unspeakable grace of God, as their ancestors had done, when they left Egypt in faith, was another matter. To use Jeremiah's own picture, the faithless wife might plead for mercy, but she had no right to expect her old place back, still less to ask for it. What God in His abundant mercy might do was another matter. The whole history of Israel had been one of renewing a broken covenant, as though man could renew what he had broken. So it is that when Jeremiah looks to the future he sees the days coming "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers . . . forasmuch as they broke My covenant, and I had to lord it over them" (31 : 31, 32). All Israel's history from the golden calf on had been lived out under the shadow of a broken covenant. Nothing less than a new one with a new power would suffice to meet Israel's need. So too in Ezekiel the return to the land precedes

repentance and transformation, which are God's act.

Much of the controversy about Jeremiah's attitude to Josiah's reformation has revolved around the question whether he would be interested in what was essentially a reform of outward religion centred on the Jerusalem temple. What is even more important is whether we can see him involved in a movement the crowning point of which was one more renewal of the covenant (2 Kings 23 : 3).

Jeremiah and Israel

It has usually been taken for granted that where we meet any mention of Israel in a prophet after the downfall of Samaria (721 B.C.) Judah is obviously meant. This view has been gradually modified. It was first recognized that the Samaritans were far from being only non-Israelite. Then the invitations of Hezekiah (2 Chr. 30 : 1) and Josiah (2 Chr. 35 : 17, 18) to the North — something that would have been impossible had they been all non-Israelite semi-idolaters — have increasingly been given due weight.

It is also now fairly generally recognized that the account of Josiah's religious reformation in the North (2 Ki. 23 : 15-20; 2 Chr. 34 : 6, 7) means that his political power extended over Samaria and quite likely over eastern Galilee as well. Whether this was with the approval of expiring Assyria or not we cannot tell, but when Josiah stood at Megiddo against the advancing army of Necho, he was not taking a gamble far from his own bases, but was defending his own territory at a vital point.

It is not surprising, therefore, that passages in Jeremiah have been recognized as having been addressed primarily and directly to the remnants of the Northern tribes, and through them in some cases their brethren in exile. It is another matter, however, when it is urged that, when Israel is mentioned by Jeremiah, we are normally to understand the North.⁴ Underlying it is the fallacy already mentioned earlier that one born and brought up in the area of Benjamin would be linked in sympathy with the Northern Kingdom first of all. There is no reason for linking Jeremiah's earlier activity particularly with Jerusalem — though equally there are no grounds for excluding the capital — and so it may well be that he was heard north of the old border as well, but except in chs. 30 and 31 there is little trace of a special ministry to the remains of Ephraim.

⁴A protagonist of this view is A. C. Welch, especially in his *Jeremiah — His Time and His Work*.

Judah had ever since the disruption of the kingdom been the true Israel, the bearer of the God-given religion and dynasty. It had received many accessions from the North from time to time (2 Chr. 11 : 14, 16; 15 : 9). The only final spiritual hope the prophets could hold out for Samaria was reunion with the South (Amos 9 : 11; Hos. 3 : 5). Once its political power was gone, it could hope for a national future only with Zion as capital.

We have in our present setting an interesting oracle (3 : 6-13) addressed to the northern tribes, which owes its position mainly to the fact that it is an indirect but all the more effective condemnation of the South and so a reinforcement of 3 : 1-5.

(6) The LORD said to me in the days of Josiah the king : "Have you seen what Apostasy Israel did? She went on every high hill and under every green tree and played the harlot there. (7) I thought, 'After she has done all this, she will turn to Me,' but she did not turn, and Treachery, her sister Judah, saw it. (8) She saw also that because of her adultery I sent away Apostasy Israel and gave her her writing of divorce. Treachery Judah, her sister, was not frightened but went and played the harlot as well. (9) Harlotry came so easy to her, that she polluted the land, playing the harlot with stone and tree. (10) In spite of all this Treachery, her sister Judah, did not return to Me with her whole heart, but only in pretence — oracle of the LORD."

(11) And the LORD said to me : "Apostasy Israel has shown herself less guilty than Treachery Judah. (12) Go and cry these words to the North, and say :

Repent, Apostasy Israel ! — oracle of the LORD —
 No longer with angry face will I look on you,
 for loving and faithful am I — oracle of the LORD —
 I will not be angry for ever.

(13) Only recognize your guilt,
 that you rebelled against the LORD your God
 and squandered your love on strangers
 under every green tree,
 but did not obey My voice — oracle of the LORD."

The historical justification for this oracle lies in the fact that Judah did not plunge into the extremes of idolatry until the reign of Manasseh, i.e. after Samaria had met its doom. It clearly comes from a time when the development of Josiah's reformation had become clear, for he dismisses it with the biting word, "In spite of all this Treachery, her sister Judah, did not turn to Me

with her whole heart, but only in pretence.”⁵

The thought can hardly be that Israel may be pardoned, because Judah is worse than she. There is no suggestion that the fate of Samaria was too severe or too precipitate, but rather that if God had borne with Judah this long, in spite of all her sins, then Israel might expect acceptance, if only she would “know” (v. 13) her guilt. This implies a full inner recognition of all its enormity and a corresponding outward expression of it in confession.

In its present position, therefore, this oracle is a reinforcement of the warning in 3 : 1-5, but it is also a preparation for the proclamation of the gracious work of the Lord, which answers the problem of these verses.

It is not easy in such an oracle to be sure how best to translate *shub*. Traditionally it is rendered ‘return’, but it is questionable whether this is the force of the Hebrew, which thinks less of distance and more of disloyalty and disobedience. ‘Turn’ would seem to represent this better. Then in v. 12 there seems no reason for not bringing out its full force and inner meaning by rendering ‘repent’.

(To be continued)

⁵The application of this to Josiah’s reformation is expressly denied by Rudolph, *op. cit.*, p. 25, but this is due to a textual emendation which seems unnecessary and impairs the historical setting of the oracle. Those who, like Welser, deny it on more general grounds, seem to overlook that it could hardly have been understood in any other way by its first hearers.