THE PROPHECY OF JEREMIAH

(Continued)

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XIII. THE SHAME OF JUDAH

THE long cultic section 7: 1—8: 3 ends with an oracle (7: 29—8: 3) to which normally little attention is given. It seems to me, however, that it not only throws interesting light on Jeremiah's attitude to religion generally, but also provides a valuable check on our interpretation of the Temple and sacrifice oracles preceding it. Like most of the other oracles in this section it is, apart from the first verse, in prose, but repeatedly we can feel the swing of the original metre beneath it.

(29) "Shear off[1] your crown of consecrated hair[2] and throw it away
and raise a lament on the hill tops;
for the LORD has rejected and given up
the generation of His wrath.
(30) For the sons of Judah did that which I consider evil—oracle of the LORD. They both[3] placed their abominations in the house which is called by My name to defile it (31) and built the great shrine[4] of the Burning Place[5] in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom to burn their sons and daughters with fire—something I never commanded or thought of. (32) Therefore the days are coming—oracle of the LORD—when they will no longer be called the Burning Place and the Valley

[1] This rendering, quite apart from its suitability, has been chosen to avoid the impression of a linguistic link with the end of the previous verse, created by the E.VV.

[2] An attempt to bring out the play on meanings in *nezer*; see the later exposition.

[3] "Built" in Heb. is an anomalous perfect with *waw*. I take it, not as a scribal error, but as an indication that the verbs "placed" and "built" are contemporaneous in time.

[4] This is the *reductio ad absurdum* of translating *bamah* as "high place", for we are dealing with a shrine deep in the valley. The plural of A.V. R.V. cannot be justified. We may either follow LXX, R.S.V. and render as singular (a mere matter of pointing), or we may take it as a "plural of majesty", either on account of its size or importance.

[5] Topheth can hardly be a proper name, as it is usually used with the definite article. There are no adequate reasons for refusing to accept the LXX vocalization, in which case the Hebrew vowels are those of *bosheth* (shame). The LXX vocalization gives us a meaning of the type suggested.

of the Son of Hinnom, but Slaughter Valley, and they will bury in the Burning Place for lack of room elsewhere. (33) The corpses of this people will be food for the birds of the air and the wild beasts, and none will frighten them away. (34) In the cities of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem I shall silence the sound of joy and the sound of gladness, for the land will become a desolation. (8: 1) At that time—oracle of the LORD—the bones of the kings of Judah and the bones of its great men, the bones of the priests and the bones of the prophets and the bones of the inhabitants of Jerusalem will be brought out from their graves, (2) and they will be spread out before the sun and moon and all the host of heaven, whom they loved, served and followed, whom they consulted and worshipped. They will not be gathered up or buried; they will be manure for the fields. (3) Death shall be preferred to life by all the remnant that remains of this evil clan everywhere where I drive them—oracle of the LORD of Hosts."

Certain general comments seem called for before we try to penetrate into Jeremiah's meaning. A.V., R.V. may be technically correct in adding "O Jerusalem" in 7: 29, but it is misleading. This is a prophecy to the southern kingdom as a whole, and it may just as well be Israel, personified as a woman, that is being addressed.

Should we translate by pasts in 7: 30 or by perfects, as in A.V., R.V., R.S.V., Moffatt? This is not a question of idiom but of interpretation. If we accept the latter, it implies either that we have here one of Jeremiah's earliest oracles, spoken before Josiah's reformation (a position I have never seen defended), or that there had been a return to the ways of Manasseh after Josiah's death. Rudolph,[6] Weiser,[7] and Cunliffe Jones[8] all expressly support this view, the two former appealing to Ezek 8. I argued against this view in general in THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY, xxxiii (Oct.-Dec., 1961, pp. 220 f.). It seems particularly inappropriate in this context. Even if we could argue on the basis of Ezek. 8, which in any case dates from the time of Zedekiah and is no valid evidence for that of Jehoiakim, that pagan cult objects were brought back to the Temple, we may be certain from the silence of both Jeremiah and Ezekiel, as well as of *Kings* and *Chronicles*, that human sacrifice was not re-introduced in the last

[6] *Jeremia*[2], p. 54.
[7] *Das Buch des Propheten Jeremia*, p. 74.
[8] *The Book of Jeremiah*, p. 88.

days of Jerusalem. But here it is linked in the closest manner with the "abominations". So it seems only reasonable to see the whole oracle referring back to the sins of the time of Manasseh, thus justifying the past tenses of my translation.

Few of our Lord's sayings can have infuriated the "lawyers" more than, "Woe unto you! for ye build the tombs of the prophets, and your fathers killed them. So ye are witnesses and consent unto the deeds of your fathers: for they killed them and ye build their tombs" (Luke 11: 47 f.; cf. Matt. 23: 29 ff.). We are puzzled by it, because it is apparently so illogical, so gratuitously unfair. We should resent it, if the various memorials to the Reformation martyrs were so interpreted. But Jesus knew that there had never been any whole-hearted repudiation of the sins of the past; they were no longer committed, but excuses were made for those that had committed them. The Jew of the Second Commonwealth gloried in the fairer pages of the history of the First. For that matter many of the martyrs' memorials are testimony to the fact that in the period in which they were erected increasingly men were returning to the doctrines which had been the cause of their death.

So too it was in the time of Jeremiah. His constant message was that reformation and superficial repentance were inadequate. Nothing less than a new beginning uncontaminated by the past (cf. 4: 3) was sufficient. The general relaxation in mood under Jehoiakim, shown by open indulgence in the household cult of the Queen of Heaven, showed that this utter repudiation of the past was lacking. Therefore this generation shared in the sin and guilt of their fathers and grandfathers, and in God's judgment both generations would be joined. This is the most cogent reason for agreeing with Rudolph,[9] as against Weiser,[10] that 7: 29—8: 3 is to be regarded as one oracle.

ISRAEL'S SIN

Israel is called on to "Shear off your crown of consecrated hair". The use of *nezer* looks on the one hand to its meaning of "diadem" and stresses the bringing down of Israel's pride. On the other hand it refers to the long hair of the Nazirite, the sign of his consecration to Jehovah. Israel, now represented only by Judah and Jerusalem, is to cease being holy to her God. The mention of the hill tops links the humiliation and profanation with past Baal worship (cf. 3: 2, 21).

[9] *Op. cit.*, p. 55.
[10] *Op. cit.*, p. 74.

Israel's sins are then particularized as the placing of "abominations" in Jehovah's temple and the offering of children to Him. The word "abomination" (*shiqquts*) seems to combine the thoughts of disgust and cultic impurity. That in the vast majority of its occurrences (28 in all) it involves some form of image seems clear, but two cases (Nah. 3: 6; Zech. 9: 7) demand and others suggest an extension to include the practices which the images suggested. It is unlikely that it is merely a strong synonym for idolatry, though it may be so used by Ezekiel. It probably referred in the first place to images of beasts and lewd sex, and the bestiality, ritual prostitution and perverted sexual practices that sprang from them.

We periodically meet with apologies for pagan practices, both ancient and modern, even from Christians completely void of any leaning to them. Mitigation is sought in a plea of immaturity, or of an attempt to express the inexpressible supernatural and numinous. But wherever we turn in paganism, we sooner or later find objects of worship and practices which justify to the full Paul's terrible condemnation of heathenism (Rom. 1: 18-32). Be it noted that these practices are not merely the expression of the beliefs of a depraved minority. They are part and parcel of the religion, and the minority who do turn from them with loathing have yet to justify them in one way or another. Israel had revealed her own degradation by introducing into the house of her God not merely symbols of the natural (the term *shiqquts* does not seem to be used of Jeroboam's golden bulls, which were intended to represent Jehovah's throne, or of the *mazzebah* and *'asherah*) but also the symbols and practices of the unnatural.

If it were claimed that these were symbols of other deities, leaving the majesty and perfections of the God of Israel unclouded, then Jeremiah turns with loathing to the sacrifice of children to Jehovah the King. To imagine that He had commanded such a thing, or even thought of it, showed complete ignorance of His character, and was the evidence of fundamental alienation from Him. Ezek. 20: 25, 26 throws some light on this. Ezekiel claims that owing to the rebellion of Israel in the wilderness God gave them "statutes that were not good", which led to the offering of their first-born by fire. It is fairly certain that he is referring to passages like Ex. 13: 2; 22: 29b; 34: 19; Lev. 27: 29; Num. 3: 13; 8: 17. Some of them clearly refer to redemption of the first-born, others do not, but rebellion against the will of God led not merely to a low view of Him, but to such a perverted one, that the sacrifice of the first-born was regarded as superior and more

pleasing to Jehovah than his redemption.

Because child-sacrifice is so alien to our thinking, we fail to grasp the lasting principle involved, not of horror but of a complete failure to understand God's character. A modern prophet might well use the self-satisfaction of some with their isolation from their fellow-Christians as a similar sign of fundamental depravity. Other examples are the exclusion of fellow-Christians from fellowship and the Lord's Supper because they have not conformed to some man-made ritual, the justification on religious grounds of antisemitism and colour bars, and of slavery and exploitation.

Jeremiah foresaw the day of judgment, when the city fell to Nebuchadnezzar, when all normal possibilities of burial would be exhausted, so that even the Burning Place, which in the minds of most had kept its sanctity, even though it had been defiled and profaned by Josiah, would be pressed into use. Even this would not suffice, and in the end the corpses of the slain would be left to the scavengers of air and field to dispose of. To this is added the macabre picture of the Babylonian tomb-robbers flinging out the bones from the graves they were pillaging and leaving them to crumble away under the unseeing and pitiless eyes of the heavenly bodies they had put their trust in in the days of Manasseh, until they served as manure for the fields around Jerusalem.

If Jeremiah's chief accusation against Judah is that it can accept the unnatural as natural and even ascribe such concepts to Jehovah Himself, then it is most unlikely that he would have carried on a polemic against Temple or sacrifice as such. Shrineless and cultless religion can have as perverted a conception of the God worshipped as ever the religions where shrines and sacrifices played the chief role in the minds of the worshippers.

THE UNNATURAL DEPRAVITY OF ISRAEL

Since 8: 4 begins a new section of the book from a purely compositional point of view, we may not overstress the fact that it deals mainly with the complete spiritual irrationality and depravity of Israel. For all that the juxtaposition is not likely to be entirely accidental.

(4) "Say to them: Thus says the LORD,
Who falls without getting up again?
Who goes wrong and does not retrace his steps?
(5) Why then does this people,[11] having gone wrong,

[11] Omitting Jerusalem on grammatical and metrical grounds with one MS, LXX, BH[3] and most moderns.

continue to go wrong?
why hold fast to deceit
and refuse to return?

(6) I gave heed and listened:
they spoke untruths;
none was sorry for his evil,
saying, 'What have I done?'
Everyone follows his wrong way
like the chariot horse plunging into battle.

(7) Even the stork in the air
knows its migration times,
and the turtle-dove, swallow and bulbul[12]
keep the time of their return;
but My people does not know
the Rule[13] of the LORD."

Already Amos in 1: 3—2: 3 had based his condemnation of the peoples surrounding Israel on the assumption that there were certain basic, universally valid rules of life that could be taken for granted, even among the heathen. If he had been questioned, he would doubtless have justified his attitude not merely from his experience, but also and more especially from the fact that Jehovah is the Creator of all men. Certainly this seems to be Jeremiah's thought. Just as God has "built into" the migrating birds an intuitive knowledge of times and seasons, so man should have a knowledge of the *mishpaṭ* of the Lord, however exactly we render this phrase—it seems to mean the general principles on which individual judgments and laws are based. How much more should Israel, His people, possess it!

If we are tempted to suggest that Israel did not know that he had fallen and gone wrong (v. 4), all the prophets would unite in saying that only complete depravity or deliberate blindness could make him fail to recognize it. Their appeal is always to the history of Israel. If there was any truth in the covenant conception, to which the people in Jeremiah's day clung so desperately with their "The temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD are these" (7: 4), then all the disasters that had overtaken Israel could be due only to Israel's sin. There were only two logically possible positions: either Jehovah was impotent, a possibility ruled out by the wonders of the Exodus and Conquest, or Israel had proved unfaithful to the covenant. That being so,

[12] The identification of the bird is not certain.
[13] So G. A. Smith, *Jeremiah*[4], p. 199.

the course actually pursued by Israel could be due only to the most deep-rooted depravity.

We considered the oracle of 8: 8, 9 in the last issue. Here again we see that complete perversion of spiritual understanding that can prefer the written scroll to the living prophetic word; rather more, that can reject the prophetic word on the basis of written words, however venerable and true.

So once again, as in 6: 27-30, the conclusion is that the rot has gone so far that there is nothing to save, nothing worth saving. In 8: 13 we read:

> "When I would gather their harvest[14]—oracle of the LORD—
> there are no grapes on the vine
> and figs on the fig tree,
> and the leaves are withered;
> so I have ordained for them,
> those to lay them waste."[15]

(To be continued)

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[14] With a change of vowel points, cf. R.S.V.
[15] So Rudolph; the Hebrew is almost certainly corrupt.