THE PROPHECY OF JEREMIAH

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XXIV. JEREMIAH AND THE PROPHETS (*cont.*)

BEFORE we consider Jer. 23: 9-40, we should do well to refresh our memory with regard to the brief references to the prophets scattered through chs. 1-20.

We have seen at the very beginning of Jeremiah's ministry that in 2: 8 he denounced the prophets for prophesying by Baal,[1] i.e., for giving "themselves up to the leading of the strange psychic powers within nature." In 5: 30 f. we saw[2] the unholy alliance between priest and prophet for mutual alliance. In the later condemnations of Josiah's reign he seems to denounce the prophets as most responsible for the prevailing religious and moral conditions (6: 13, 14),[3] and we shall see this inference substantiated in ch. 23.

THE PROPHETS' PERSONAL LIFE (23: 9-15)

Jeremiah's main messages about the prophets are brought together in vv. 9-32 under the heading "Concerning the Prophets". The oracles, which were doubtless separate at the time of their being spoken, are intended to justify the uniqueness of Jeremiah's message when contrasted with that of the popular prophets. There can be little doubt that he saw in them teaching which would enable the ordinary hearer of an oracle to distinguish between that which was God-given and that which was not. It is this latter feature that will concern us.

Pride of place is given to the prophet's life.

(9) "My soul is shattered;[4]
all my bones tremble.
I have become like a drunken man,
like one overcome by wine,
in the presence of the LORD
and in the presence of His holy words.

[1] *E.Q.*, Vol. XXXII, No. 1, pp. 7 f

[2] *E.Q.*, Vol. XXXIII, No. 1, pp. 33 f.

[3] Cf. *E.Q.*, Vol. XXXIII, No. 3, p. 152—this is repeated in 8: 10 ff.

[4] I have avoided the literal and obvious translation 'heart', for in English this stresses the emotional. *Leb* often means the modern English 'soul' in a way that *nephesh* seldom, if ever, does. Here we have the contrast between the inner man (soul) and the outer (bones).

(10) 'With adulterers the land is full;
because of the curse the land mourns,
the meadows of the pasture land have dried up.
They run after evil,
their strength is not right.[5]

(11) Both prophet and priest are unholy;
even in My house I have found their wickedness'—oracle of the LORD.

(12) 'Therefore their way shall become for them
like slippery places;
in the darkness they shall be cast down,
and they shall fall in it;[6]
for I will bring evil on them
in the year of their punishment'—oracle of the LORD.

(13) 'In the prophets of Samaria I saw the unseemly;
they prophesied by Baal and led My people Israel astray.

(14) But in the prophets of Jerusalem I see the horrible,
adultery, walking in lies;
they strengthen the hands of evil-doers,
so that no one turns from his wickedness.
All of them have become to Me like Sodom,
and (Jerusalem's) inhabitants like Gomorrah.

(15) Therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts about the prophets:
Behold, I am giving them wormwood to eat
and poisoned water to drink;
for from the prophets of Jerusalem
unholiness has gone out into all the land.' "

It seems reasonable to suppose that we have two oracles here, *viz.* vv. 9-12 and 13-15. Their juxtaposition is, however, entirely justified, and there are no valid exegetical reasons for not considering them together.

The former may very well come from the time of the great drought in the reign of Jehoiakim (cf. 14: 1-6). This would explain v. 10, which otherwise would be hard to justify, and which is in fact queried by a number of commentators.[7] With great skill we start with the general corruption showing itself above all by the prevalence of adultery, which for the Old Testament meant the sapping of the very foundations of society. The blame for this is

[5] "Their might is not right" (G. A. Smith, RSV) is attractive but suggests an assonance or word play that does not exist in the Heb.

[6] For the punctuation cf. BH[3].

[7] E.g., Giesebrecht, Peake, G. A. Smith, Skinner, Moffatt, Rudolph.

narrowed down to the priests and prophets, and finally the cause is seen to lie above all with the latter.

There is considerable controversy whether Jeremiah's complete prostration (v. 9) was due to the situation he describes or to God's oracle of judgment. Those who hold the latter view normally delete the outward signs of God's judgment (v. 10). Even though I share the view that it was created by the oracle in the first place, I cannot agree that any deletion is necessary or advantageous. The actual sins mentioned are adultery, which is always hard to detect, if carried on with any circumspection, and that underlying motivation of actions designated by *ḥaneph* (vv. 11, 15). This is hardly equivalent to godlessness, or ungodly (RSV), but is rather "to be profane" (RV), i.e. the reverse of holy, of separation to God. Owing to the modern understanding of "profane" I have preferred to render "unholy". Such an attitude is one of the inner man and is not so readily discernible to the onlooker. So we may well assume that the oracle opened Jeremiah's eyes to the true state of affairs and thus to the true reason for the drought.

It should be obvious enough that, if I have dated this oracle correctly, it was not the prevalence of adultery that so prostrated Jeremiah. Already in the time of Josiah he had condemned the great men of Jerusalem for this sin (5: 7-9). It was the prevalence of it among the prophets that overcame him.

It is a matter of historic fact that ecstasy always tends to be linked with sexual irregularity. It may lead to asceticism as with the Montanists in the second century A.D., or far more likely to laxity. A list of "prophets" who have destroyed themselves by sexual irregularity would make sad and instructive reading. Where the Holy Spirit is Lord, He usually produces a normality the "normal" man can never achieve. Wherever ecstasy is due to other powers, from within or without, it is always in danger of destroying the harmony of a human personality. So it was in the closing years of Jerusalem among the popular prophets.

Why this characteristic should have shown itself in the prophets of Jerusalem and not in those of the North must remain a matter for speculation. The most probable explanation is offered by the period of open and deliberate paganism under Manasseh, when sacred prostitution came to play a far greater role than it probably ever did in the North.

Of special importance to us is Jeremiah's emphatic stress that morality always takes precedence of the prophetic gift, and that the immoral prophet is bound to bring a curse with him. This is a lesson that is as vital today as then. We are always tempted to

evaluate those who claim to represent God by their learning, their activities or their eloquence. However important and valuable these things may be, they will bring only a curse to the Church, if they are accompanied by lack of holiness and love. In other words, a corroboration of the validity of the prophetic message should always be sought in the life of the prophet. The operation of the Holy Spirit does not co-exist with unholy living.

THE SELF-CONSISTENCY OF THE DIVINE MESSAGE (23: 16-22)

Man is always more ready to threaten than to carry out his threats, and so he always hopes that the same may be true of God. In the Christian Church we have always been plagued by those that have taught that the warnings of the New Testament, to say nothing of the Old, need not be taken too seriously. In Israel this same tendency expressed itself through the popular prophets, who did not hesitate to deny God's warnings by countering them with their messages of well-being (*shalom*).

(16) "Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'Do not listen to the words of the prophets who are prophesying to you, filling you with false hopes. A vision from their own mind they speak, not from the mouth of the LORD.

(17) They keep on saying to those that despise the word of the LORD, It shall be well with you; and to everyone who walks in the stubbornness of his own heart they say, No evil shall come upon you.

(18) For who of them has stood in the council of the LORD to see and to hear His word?
Who has been attentive to His word and heard it?

(19) Behold the tempest of the LORD, wrath,[8] has broken loose, and a whirling tempest will whirl about the head of the wicked.

(20) The anger of the LORD will not turn back
before He has done and carried out
the intents of His mind.
After the present period[9] you will understand it clearly.

(21) I did not send the prophets
but *they* ran;

[8] BH[3], Rudolph and Weiser all omit as a gloss influenced by v. 20. If so, its repetition in 30: 23, 24 shows it must be very early.

[9] "In the latter days" (RSV) can be justified only on the supposition that the passage is eschatological, which it is not, though it could be in 30: 23 f. For my interpretation cf. Kosmala, *Annual of the Swedish Theological Institute*, Vol. II, pp. 27-37.

I did not speak to them
but *they* prophesied.

(22) Had they stood in My council,
they had proclaimed My words to My people
and had turned them from their evil way
and from the evil of their doings.' "

The concept of the prophets standing in the privy council (*sōd*) of God, when the King of kings unfolded His plans to His servants the angels and to His servants the prophets as well, was of hoary antiquity by the time of Jeremiah. It was taken for granted not merely by Amos—"Surely the Lord GOD does nothing without revealing His secret council (*sōd*) to his servants the prophets" (3: 7)—but also by Micaiah ben Imlah, when he faced Ahab's four hundred prophets (1 Ki. 22: 19-23).

To prophesy welfare (*shalom*) to those that despised God's words was equivalent to claiming that God had changed His standards and purposes. At the best of times such a claim would need strong proof to substantiate it. To do it when the whirlwind of destruction and judgment was blowing can at the best only be called spiritual obtuseness.

We, with our knowledge of the true state of affairs in the "Fertile Crescent", realize easily enough that Josiah's renewed and enlarged kingdom was, by its very nature, ephemeral, even as the later Hashmonean kingdom, though somewhat longer lived, was bound to be. A few of the more spiritual of the time may have known from the memory of Isaiah's message that there was no real hope of political independence for Judah. A few may have taken Jeremiah's warning of imminent judgment seriously. But for the ordinary man the fatal field of Megiddo was an impossible and incredible event. Only the greatest spiritual obstinacy could make it possible for the popular prophet to refuse to realize that he had been living in a fool's paradise. He should have seen that God's judgment storm was threatening to remove every landmark and to fulfil the warnings not only of Jeremiah but also of an earlier generation of prophets. As Jeremiah makes clear (v. 20), this was no eschatological, far-off judgment; many of his hearers would experience it for themselves.

The prophet was above all God's representative, God's spokesman. As such he was bound to recall the people at the very least to the standards of the Book of the Law, which formed the basis for Josiah's reformation. There was no question of a clash of opinion about God's moral demands, of differing standards between Jeremiah and the others—Jeremiah does not attack them for

a purely external understanding of the law, but for a failure to take it seriously at all. One did not have to be a prophet to know God's will, and the self-professed prophets did not even reach the level of the Book of the Law.

We can hardly understand v. 22 to mean that had the popular prophets of Jeremiah's own time been God-called prophets, truly carrying out the prophet's task, the people would have inevitably come to true repentance. .It is rather a statement of what they would have tried to do. It is probably also his condemnation of the popular prophets as a historical movement. They had always been opposed to God's prophets and so guaranteed that their efforts to bring Judah to repentance would fail. The Christian preacher who is faithful to God's revelation very soon discovers that his main difficulty is not the sinfulness and obtuseness of his hearers' hearts, but the opposition, often well meant, from other pulpits, where it is made clear why the Bible does not mean what it seems to.

THE MESSAGE IS WORTHY OF ITS THEME (23: 23-32)

It is not easy to decide whether the opening oracle of this section belonged in its first use to it, but certainly in its present setting it takes on a clear and permanent meaning.

(23) " 'Am I a God from near at hand'—oracle of the LORD—
'and not a God from far off?
(24) Or can anyone hide himself in secret places,
so that I shall not see him?'—oracle of the LORD.
'Is it not I who fill
heaven and earth?'—oracle of the LORD."

This emphatic oracle is not primarily a declaration of the transcendence of God as against His immanence. It is certainly not a suggestion that He cannot draw near His creation and people. It is a denial of two of the deeper spiritual fallacies the prophet in Israel was particularly prone to.

The popular prophets, by their "Baalization" of Yahweh, had made Him small enough and earthly enough for them to think that they could comprehend His nature and will without explicit prophetic revelation. Perhaps indeed they had once had a true prophetic word, which later they could appeal to and build on. So they had become as ready to say, "Thus saith the LORD", as a certain type of modern preacher is to begin his sermon with "The message which the Lord has given me for you. . . ." It is always a danger to think that human wisdom, logic and a knowledge of Scripture are sufficient for our comprehension of God.

Then there will always have been prophets prepared to play with fire, to run, as they thought it, minor risks by compromise and

"marginal" distortions of the divine message. It is an abiding fallacy of the religious mind that there are marginal areas into which God does not—we will not say cannot—intrude, so that we may allow ourselves certain liberties, which He will not call into question. The temptation for the prophet, though very different in its expression, may be illustrated by a sermon preached by a friend of mine many years ago. His text may be found in the AV, but is omitted in the RV and all modern translations. To the charge that he had preached on a text he did not consider to be part of the Bible he answered, "But I needed it for my theme!"

Jeremiah then lists some of the practices to which God objected.

(25) " 'I have heard what the prophets say who prophesy lies in My name, I have dreamt, I have dreamt, I have dreamt.[10]

(26) Am I in the hearts of the prophets who prophesy lies[11] and who prophesy the deceit of their own hearts,

(27) who try to make My people forget My name by their dreams, which they tell one another, even as their fathers forgot My name for Baal ?

(28) Let the prophet who has a dream tell his dream, but let him who has My word tell My word faithfully.
What has the threshed straw to do with the wheat?'—oracle of the LORD.

(29) 'Is not My word like fire?'—oracle of the LORD—
'and like a sledge-hammer which can shatter the rock?

(30) Therefore, behold I am against the prophets'—oracle of the LORD—'who steal My words one from another.

(31) Behold I am against the prophets'—oracle of the LORD—'who use their tongues and oracularly say "an oracle".

(32) Behold I am against those that prophesy lying dreams'—oracle of the LORD—'and tell them and lead My people astray by their lies and boastings—but I did not send them nor command them; they are absolutely of no value to this people'—oracle of the LORD."

The Old Testament is not merely a record of God's revelation but also of His condescension. It contains not a few commandments

[10] Following the emendation of Duhm, and so G. A. Smith and Rudolph for "How long" (v. 26). If it is not accepted, Weiser is probably correct in linking "How long" with v. 25, i.e., the prophet was claiming that he had had to wait a long time for his dream. The reaction to Jeremiah's ten day wait in 42: 7 for the divine word hardly bears out the suggestion.

[11] So Volz and Weiser. Rudolph "Is My name in the hearts . . ." is essentially the same.

intended to meet the needs and culture of the time that received them. Even by the time of Christ some laws and customs had either virtually dropped out of use or were being reinterpreted for changing circumstances.

So too it was with the prophet. In the wilderness God could say:

> If there is a prophet among you,
> I will make Myself known to him in a vision,
> I will speak with him in a dream (Num. 12 : 6).

The vision remained to the end an outstanding and possibly the main channel of God's communication with the prophet, but the dream gradually died out. The main difference between them seems to be that in the vision the prophet was active, in the dream passive. The uncontrollability and unpredictability of his dreams makes primitive man regard them with awe. With growing sophistication he discovers that they are in measure controllable, as the psychiatrist has discovered to his cost. By the time of Jeremiah the popular prophets will have known full well that they could normally produce the type of dream the situation seemed to need, though some seem not to have been averse to inventing dreams where necessary (v. 32). The attack is not on the "prophetic" dream as such, but on its recitation as being intrinsically more than a dream.

A comparable modern equivalent is speaking in tongues. No *a priori* reason can be advanced why *glossolalia* should not have a part to play in the Church today. Few, however, who have studied the modern phenomena of tongues, doubt that often they are attributable to the individual's own psychic powers, and occasionally to outside influences that are not of God. If they are used in conformity with Scripture, there is no reason why we should object to the use of tongues, but we must protest against any assumption that they are necessarily of the Holy Spirit. The test of both the "prophetic" dream and of *glossolalia* is not the phenomenon, but its spiritual content and relevance.

The name of God, which the people were in danger of forgetting (v. 27), was His character. It was rare, very rare, for the canonical prophet to indicate how he had received the divine message, unless indeed he was vindicating his call to be a prophet. It was the message and not the mechanics that mattered. The popular prophets, by drawing attention to themselves, obscured the one they claimed to represent.

For the growth of the wheat the straw is essential, but once the harvest has come, and the wheat is gathered and threshed, the

straw,[12] though it may become cattle fodder, has no place amid the wheat. Even so the prophetic dream served its purpose and then had to go the way of the Ark (3: 16 f.) and of all else used by God once their purpose was accomplished.

God's word is the sledge-hammer to break in pieces the stoniest hearts of men. How it is wielded and not how it was fashioned is what matters. Indeed, an undue preoccupation with the latter may mean that it is not wielded at all. The Bible is never averse to the judging of whether it is God's hammer we are wielding by the effects we are able to produce by it.

There is no intrinsic wrong in preaching another man's sermon or repeating his prophecy. It becomes evil, when one does not acknowledge the authorship and claims that it has been given one by God.

It is an old joke that the preacher wrote in the margin of his sermon-notes, "Argument weak—thump pulpit and shout." From the time of Paul on the Christian preacher has repeatedly tried to pass off his own ideas as God's word by the use of oratorical artifice and the skills of the rhetorician. So it seems to have been with the popular prophets in Jeremiah's day. If I have rightly understood v. 31, there had grown up a recognized tone of voice or manner of speaking to be used in the pronouncing of an oracle. Probably the habit began with the priests, but the prophets will have been glad to use this outward authentication for their own ideas.

The attack on the popular prophets ends with a bitter comparison with the idols of the people. When he says of them in v. 32 *ve-ho'el lo' yo'lu*, they are absolutely of no value, or profit, we are reminded of the similar statement in 2: 8, where the same word is used for the false gods.

THE DESPISING OF PROPHECY (23: 33-40)

Behaviour such as theirs was bound to bring all prophecy into disrepute, and the concluding section of the chapter brings this out clearly. The Heb. *nasa'* means 'to lift up'. From this is derived *massa'*, which means 'that which is lifted up'. Normally this was used with the meaning of burden, but in the prophets it is also found in the sense of lifting up the voice in oracular utterance. It is so found seventeen times, but the RSV has translated correctly, as against AV, RV (text), "oracle" in each case.

The ambiguity in *massa'* gave the godless men of Jeremiah's

[12] *Teben* is the chopped straw left after the threshing sledge has been driven over the sheaves; it was used for cattle fodder.

day the possibility of using it in a double sense. They would ask the prophet for his oracle, but by calling it a *massa'* they would indicate that it was a burden they did not want to accept or bear. For them God's answer was, "You are the burden"[18] (v. 33), and the threat of exile: "I will surely lift you up (*nasa'*) and cast you away from My presence" (v. 39).

Many think that such word plays are unworthy of Jeremiah, but when men insult God with their puns, they must often be answered and judgment pronounced in puns.

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[18] So LXX and moderns.