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Jeremiah and Nebuchadnezzar, King of Justice

In popular thought the very name of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, conveys an image of a merciless tyrant, one of the most sinister characters in history. He owes his reputation to post-exilic Judaism, which represented Babylon as the very epitome of evil in the pagan world, and its best-known king, Nebuchadnezzar, was identified with his kingdom.

The early Christian church took this image of Babylon from Judaism,¹ and it has prevailed to the present day even among Old Testament scholars. John Bright, for instance, admires the courage of those Jerusalemites who 'quite simply preferred to die rather than submit to Babylon any longer.'² He cannot think of Jeremiah as pro-Babylonian. He says: 'To mark him down as a Babylonian sympathizer, or a collaborationist, would do him great injustice. Though his words undoubtedly had the effect of undermining morale, they were not motivated by pro-Babylonian sentiments.'³

But Jeremiah's references to Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, indicate a favourable attitude on the part of the prophet, for on at least two occasions he referred to him as the servant of Yahweh.⁴ The first occasion occurred when foreign ambassadors came to Jerusalem for the very purpose of forming an anti-Babylonian alliance with Zedekiah, king of Judah. Jeremiah, as prophet to the nations,⁵ renounced their scheme and proclaimed the oracle of Yahweh: 'Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, my servant.' The second occasion occurred after the fall of Jerusalem, when the prophet declared to the Jewish exiles in Egypt Nebuchadnezzar's final victory over the pharaoh.

These two passages show that Jeremiah was as unquestionably pro-Babylonian as the author of Isaiah 44:28 was pro-Persian in his sentiments. For this Jeremiah needs no defence, for Nebuchadnezzar (like Cyrus to the later prophet) was in Jeremiah's estimation the great liberator from injustice and oppression.

It is interesting to note that, according to the narrative in Jeremiah 27:1, the prophet's conviction that Nebuchadnezzar was the servant of Yahweh came to him as early as the beginning of the reign of Jehoiakim. That king was genuinely pro-Egyptian in his sentiments, and committed his country to a close pro-Egyptian, anti-Babylonian alliance. At the same time, unlike his father, king Josiah, he relied on the wealthy classes of Jerusalem, who gave

1. Babylon was used as the symbolic name for pagan Rome. Cf. 1 Peter 5:13; Rev. 14:8; 16:19, 17:5; 18:10, 21.

2. J. Bright, *Jeremiah* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965), p. cviii.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Cf. Jer. 27:6; 43:10 (Jer. 25:9a is presumably not genuine).

5. Cf. Jer. 1:5b. The narrative of Jer. 27:1-11 perhaps describes the only occasion on which he could refer to himself thus.

him support in his pro-Egyptian policy and who were denounced by Jeremiah as exploiters of the poor.⁶ Jeremiah, whose belief in God and deep patriotism were interrelated with his conception of social justice, saw in Nebuchadnezzar the coming liberator of the poor, and for good reason. Contrary to Nebuchadnezzar's bad image in popular memory, Old Testament evidence⁷ and earlier discoveries of cuneiform texts show that this king of Babylon had a genuine concern for the poorer classes.⁸ This concern of Nebuchadnezzar for the poor is now confirmed by a recent discovery, through which we learn to know him as a king of justice.⁹

This latest evidence comes from a volume of cuneiform texts published recently by the British Museum, the results of which are evaluated by W. G. Lambert in the periodical of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq.¹⁰ The information given in these texts contains a reference of exceptional interest, as nothing exactly like it has been discovered before.¹¹ It follows a section which describes conditions similar to those reported in the Book of Jeremiah: 'The rich and powerful are to oppress the poor. The judges will pay no heed to justice, and will not lecture the oppressors on the error of their ways.' Then, suddenly, the text tells of 'a king devoted to justice and burning midnight oil to write down a just code for his land.'¹²

The name of the king is not mentioned in the text. Lambert assumes that he must be a king of Babylon, in view of the gods mentioned, and that the king is none other than Nebuchadnezzar. He bases his assumption first of all on linguistic grounds, for the language of the text is of late Babylonian form. 'The extent of the king's conquests is listed, and since Egypt is the first place given, only Nebuchadnezzar and his immediate successors can be considered possibilities,' but as the places mentioned are given not just as imperial limits, but as conquests, no king other than Nebuchadnezzar really fits.¹³ The text then deals with lavish provisions of daily offerings to the gods, thus corresponding with Nebuchadnezzar's description, with many coincidences of wording.¹⁴ These, according to Lambert, confirm the identification of this king with Nebuchadnezzar II.

The conditions described in the Babylonian text are strikingly similar to the conditions in Judah denounced by Jeremiah. According to the Babylonian author: 'They used to devour one another like dogs, the strong used to plunder

6. Cf. Jer. 5:26-28.

7. Cf. Jer. 39:10.

8. Cf. R. Campbell Thompson, 'The New Babylonian Empire,' in *Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. III (Cambridge: University Press, 1925), pp. 207f., 216. Babylonian records show that Nebuchadnezzar, when crown prince, was encouraged by his father, Nabopolassar, to work as a common labourer at the building of a temple.

9. Cf. W. G. Lambert, 'Nebuchadnezzar King of Justice,' *Iraq*, 27 (1965), 1-11.

10. Cf. *ibid.*, 1.

11. Cf. *ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*, 2.

14. Cf. *ibid.*, 3.

the weak who were not equal to lawsuit. The rich used to take the property of the poor. Regent and prince would not take the part of the cripple and widow before the judge and if they came before the judge he would not preside over their case ... you have broken my houses and seized land, arable land.¹⁵ This Babylonian text should be compared with the situation in Judah as described by Jeremiah: 'They watch, as fowlers lie in wait; they set a trap, they catch men. As a cage is full of birds, so are their houses full of deceit: therefore they are become great, and waxen rich. They are waxen fat, they shine: yea, they overpass in deeds of wickedness: they plead not the cause, the cause of the fatherless, that they may prosper; and the right of the needy do they not judge.'¹⁶

The writer from Babylon also gave an account of the method whereby the judges corrupted the law: 'If a man had nothing and went before him, then the judge made a decision, wrote a tablet and rolled a seal (on it), he would put down the tablet and not give it him.'¹⁷ The text seems to indicate that court decisions were to be handed over to the interested parties in writing. But in the case of poor plaintiffs or defendants the judges refused to hand over the tablets containing the decisions, for it would have been obvious that there was a gross miscarriage of justice. Those who could not afford to bribe the judges could not expect a fair decision in their favour, nor could they appeal to a higher authority (possibly the king), for the judges would not hand over their written decisions to them. Against such wilful action of the judges, poor clients without influence could not obtain redress.

The situation in Judah appears to have been similar, and this Babylonian text may shed light on the text in Jeremiah 8:8b: 'but behold the false pen of the scribes has wrought falsely.' The scribes in pre-exilic times were not scholars who expounded scripture, but royal civil servants who exercised the function of magistrate and judge¹⁸ and, who (according to the prophet), like their Babylonian counterparts, falsified the evidence of poor clients.

During the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, however, there was a radical change, for the chronicler records: 'He was not negligent in the matter of true and righteous judgment, he did not rest night or day, but with council and deliberation he persisted in writing down judgments and decisions arranged to be pleasing to the great lord, Marduk, and for the betterment of all the peoples and the settling of the land of Akkad.'¹⁹

Josiah, king of Judah, acted in the same spirit. Jeremiah denounced Josiah's son, Jehoiakim, by pointing out the virtues of his late father: 'Did not thy father eat and drink and do justice? He judged the cause of the poor and needy, then it was well. Was not this to know me? saith the Lord.'

This new information concerning Nebuchadnezzar II clarifies the reason for

15. *Ibid.*, 8.

16. Jer. 5:26b-28.

17. Lambert, 'Nebuchadnezzar King of Justice,' 8.

18. Cf. F. Nötscher, *Jeremias* (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1947), p. 35.

19. Lambert, 'Nebuchadnezzar King of Justice,' 8.

the Hebrew prophet's high esteem of him. Nebuchadnezzar, far from being an unjust, cruel tyrant, was in some respects like king Josiah of Judah, a great compiler of law and a protector of the poor. While Josiah's name is associated with the Deuteronomic Code, which according to tradition went back to Moses, Nebuchadnezzar could be considered a second Hammurabi.²⁰ This was of course no coincidence. Both kings lived in an age of national religious revival which, like the romantic revival of the early nineteenth century in Europe, stirred the national consciousness of the nations of the Near East. This romantic, spiritual, and intellectual upheaval, which became evident in Egypt in the middle of the seventh century B.C. and ended in Babylon about a century later, was an age which sought inspiration from the ancient past – as Josiah, for instance, did from Moses, and Nebuchadnezzar from king Hammurabi. But apart from a national awakening, very much like that in our nineteenth century, it was also an age of ideological warfare between two opposing world views. These clashes between ideologies recur in various forms in history in a time of great commercial expansion, or of the rise of nationalism or imperialism – as was the case in Europe in the nineteenth century, as well as in the Near East from Egypt to Babylon in the seventh and sixth centuries B.C. According to one view, the prosperity and might of the state is enhanced by giving full opportunity to the rich to become ever richer. This is the ideology of the *laissez-faire*, which greatly benefited the commercial and industrial classes, but caused the impoverishment of the artisans and the small land-owners, and often their utter ruination.

This situation, where the money lender increases his wealth at the expense of the small-holder, is graphically described in the Babylonian text, 'you have broken my houses and seized land, arable land,'²¹ and in a poetical vein in Jeremiah 5:26b: 'They watch, as fowlers lie in wait; they set a trap, they catch men ... therefore they are become great, and waxen rich.'²²

In contemporary Egypt, the great representatives of this ideology of successful expansive economy were the pharaohs of the Saitic dynasty. Herodotus records that pharaoh Necho built a canal (somewhere close to where the Suez canal now stands) and that its construction cost the lives of 120,000 men.²³ Though this figure may be an exaggeration, it shows that Necho was remembered as careless of human life when executing his great schemes of commercial enterprise for his kingdom.

Now there was a strong pro-Egyptian party in Jerusalem, whose leader appears to have been Eliakim (Jehoiakim), the eldest son of king Josiah,²⁴ and whose political sympathies did not change even when Egypt began to suffer serious military reverses against the rising might of Babylon. This

20. Cf. *ibid.*, 3.

21. *Ibid.*, 8.

22. A good account of social conditions in Jerusalem in the sixth century B.C. is given in Jer. 34:8–20.

23. Cf. Herodotus, *Histories*, II, 158.

24. Cf. 2 Kings 24:1.

loyalty towards a vanishing power, in spite of the great danger involved,²⁵ can best be explained by the supposition that the two parties were bound together by an ideological alliance against the menace of another ideology, represented by Babylon. As archaeological evidence shows, Nebuchadnezzar (and before him, Nabopolassar) seemed to believe that royal power should depend on the support of the people as a whole, rather than on the favour of the wealthy alone. This belief involved a policy of raising the living standard of the poor and giving them protection against usury and all kinds of exploitation by an equitable judicial system. King Nabopolassar himself was a Chaldean upstart, despised by the priests of Babylon, who constantly conspired during his reign to depose him from his kingdom.²⁶ But if Nabopolassar endeavoured to introduce social and juridical reforms in his kingdom (reforms which, according to recent archaeological discovery, already mentioned, his son Nebuchadnezzar succeeded in introducing), the conspiracy of the Babylonian priests may well have been based on more than snobbish contempt for the upstart. It was perhaps part of the general ideological warfare which we can see also in contemporary Judah.

In Judah, king Josiah became the protector of the poor. His task was the protection, not only of the fatherless and the widow from oppression, but also of the small-landowning classes against the danger of dispossession through usury. Josiah was made king by the *Am Haarez*, the people of the land – a term which in pre-exilic times referred to the gentry, the class of small-holders who, in the seventh century B.C. appeared to have been the mainstay of the country.²⁷ Jeremiah himself, as the narrative in Jeremiah 31:6–16 would imply, belonged to this class.

If we bear in mind the fact that Jeremiah lived in an age which was evidently one of clear-cut ideological conflict, the problem of his tragic life, including his much discussed attitude towards the Deuteronomic reform, can be seen in a clearer light. Some misconceptions which have entirely confused the issue can now be corrected.

There can be little doubt that Josiah, in spite of the benefits which his reform brought to Jerusalem, was not a popular king. The narrative in 2 Kings makes it clear that his reform, which meant the destruction of popular religion, was executed by means of ruthless violence which cannot but have caused resentment. According to a tradition mentioned by Josephus, the king made a house-to-house search in the cities and villages for hidden idols.²⁸ In our more tolerant age this would be regarded as a most brutal and unpardonable police action which, whatever its motives, must be condemned. To those who suffered under it, and there must have been many, king Josiah was but a cruel

25. The revolts against Nebuchadnezzar by Jehoiakim (cf. 2 Kings 24:1b) and by Zedekiah (cf. 2 Kings 24:20) show the strength of pro-Egyptian sentiment.

26. Cf. Thompson, 'The New Babylonian Empire,' p. 207.

27. Cf. E. Würthwein, *Der 'amm ha'arez im Alten Testament* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1936), p. 42.

28. Cf. Josephus, *Antiquities*, x, 4:5.

tyrant. The fact that his cultic reforms were not popular is shown by the tenor of the whole Book of Jeremiah, which indicates that the people of Judah stuck to their idols, sometimes openly, at other times in secret. Because of strong resentment against the king, his untimely death at Megiddo was not much regretted and, except by Jeremiah and a small circle, was not regarded as a national disaster at all.

The situation becomes quite clear if one carefully observes Josiah's death and the events which followed. It is generally believed that Josiah fell in a battle against pharaoh Necho. But the language of the Hebrew text in 2 Kings 20:11-29 does not indicate that a battle took place at that time.²⁹ As the text stands, it appears that Josiah died by the hand of an assassin when meeting the pharaoh. The purpose of his meeting with Necho was probably to negotiate rather than to fight, but it did not come to that, for he was killed, possibly by Necho's own hand. In any case, the army of Judah was not pursued, and the king's body was taken home to be buried with the honour due to a prince of the House of David.

The death of Josiah signalled the outbreak of contention between the pro-Babylonian and pro-Egyptian parties in Jerusalem. The party of the people of the land (or *Am Haarez*) pushed aside the first-born rightful heir, Eliakim,³⁰ in favour of Josiah's second son, Shallum (Jehoahaz). But after three months the pro-Egyptian party prevailed in Jerusalem, and Jehoahaz was deposed and handed over to pharaoh Necho at Riblah. The rightful heir (who very likely had been pushed aside because of his pro-Egyptian sentiments) was made king by his suzerain friend Necho, who bestowed on him the royal name Jehoiakim.³¹ In this action Necho evidently had the full support of the great majority of the people in Jerusalem. We may note that he carefully considered the pride of the Jerusalemites in conferring on his protégé the name Jehoiakim (Yahweh establishes) and in not exacting tribute from the treasury of the temple (which was the custom of the conquerors of Judah),³² but rather, with the help of Jehoiakim, taxing his enemies, the *Am Haarez*.³³ The common misconception is that Necho's actions hurt the national pride of Judah; on the contrary, it was immensely strengthened by them, since the Egyptian king, by conferring a Yahweh-bearing name (Jehoiakim) on the king, actually showed respect for the Deuteronomic Reform.

29. The account given in 2 Kings 23:29 is quite inconsistent with an armed expedition and a pitched battle. No Hebrew writer ever described such events in language of that kind. Cf. T. H. Robinson and W. O. E. Oesterley, *A History of Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), vol. 1, p. 424, n. 2.

30. Eliakim was the first born son of king Josiah (cf. 2 Kings 23:36, 31). Jehoahaz and Zedekiah were his half-brothers. Though the son of a different wife of the king, he was still the rightful heir according to Deuteronomic law, which stated that the first-born should take precedence regardless of the father's feelings towards the mother (cf. Deut. 21:15-17).

31. Cf. 2 Kings 23:34.

32. Cf. 1 Kings 14:25f.; 2 Kings 12:18; 14:14.

33. No doubt many were ruined by the heavy taxation. It is possible that the derisive connotation of the name as used in the post-exilic era actually dates from this time.

Jehoiakim thus commenced his reign in 607 B.C. with the full benefit both of the reform instituted by his father and of the popular Egyptian alliance, with its apparent political and economic advantages.³⁴ There can be little doubt that the first years of his reign brought prosperity to the people of Jerusalem. Otherwise the blind confidence and pride of the Jews in their temple, so fiercely denounced by Jeremiah,³⁵ would be entirely unintelligible. Jehoiakim's accession to the throne was met with popular approval. As for Jehoahaz (Shallum), who was sent in chains to Egypt (as the prophet noted), few lamented his fate.³⁶ Jeremiah, on the contrary, saw a real tragedy in the captivity of Josiah's younger son, who presumably would have followed his father's policy.

Jeremiah now began his own ideological warfare against Jehoiakim and the ruling pro-Egyptian faction of Judah. The difference between the contending ideologies is put in simple, clear-cut words, in his oracles concerning the royal house of Judah.³⁷ It was a fight between justice and injustice, between concern for and callousness towards the poor. The issues were the same as those stated by the unknown author in Babylon.³⁸ In Judah, however, it was a lonely war for the prophet, for it appears that Jehoiakim had the support of most of his subjects, including probably the prophet's own kinsmen;³⁹ then, as in our own day, a successful tyrant often gained the admiration of his former opponents. Jehoiakim, unlike his father Josiah, was a popular monarch whose lavish expenditure on buildings which embellished Jerusalem⁴⁰ increased the national pride of his subjects and their confidence in his internal and external policy. Had this not been so, the prophetic denunciations would have been directed against the king alone. But in fact, Jeremiah denounced Judah as a nation.⁴¹ This would have made no sense at all, unless the majority of the people of Judah had endorsed the policy of their king. It was precisely because a king like Jehoiakim (who was interested only in the grandeur of his throne and ignored the ethical demands of God) was popular in Judah, that Jeremiah denounced

34. Contrary to the theory of M. Noth, *The History of Israel*, 2d ed. (London: A. and C. Black, 1960), p. 280, there does not seem to be any proof that Necho reduced the territories acquired by Josiah to the border of the kingdom of Judah. It was in Necho's interest to entrust as much territory as possible to a reliable vassal. Jehoiakim's influence with Necho was considerable. This can be seen from the narrative in Jer. 22-23a, where it is recalled that an officer of the king of Judah could arrest a rebel on Egyptian territory.

35. Cf. Jer. 7:1-14; 26:1-9.

36. Jer. 22:10-12.

37. Cf. Jer. 22:13-17.

38. Cf. Lambert, 'Nebuchadnezzar King of Justice.'

39. The prophet complains of an apparent conspiracy of his own kinsmen against his life; cf. Jer. 11:9-23.

40. Cf. Jer. 22:14f.

41. Cf. Jer. 5:30f.: 'An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule at their direction; my people love to have it so ... See also Jer. 5:1-5.

his people as breakers of the covenant with Yahweh.⁴² Popular idolatry – which Jehoiakim (unlike his father) ignored as long as it was not detrimental to the Temple worship – stemmed, according to Jeremiah, from the same disobedience, and was part of the same conspiracy⁴³ which was latent already in the time of Josiah but only came out into the open during the reign of Jehoiakim. Meanwhile, the rich became richer and the poor poorer, and many debtors were forced to sell themselves into slavery.⁴⁴ The prophet, deeply concerned about their plight, looked to Nebuchadnezzar for succour. In the conflict with Egypt he foresaw the final victory of Babylon, and viewed the impending humiliation of pro-Egyptian Judah as Yahweh's just revenge against the breakers of his covenant.

It is not surprising that Jeremiah was hated and persecuted by his countrymen, since in their eyes he was nothing but an agent of an enemy power; in this, of course, they were right. Biblical evidence indicates that he was in direct touch with the Babylonian authorities, if not with the king himself. Both his possession of information concerning Babylonian intentions⁴⁵ and the high regard shown by Nebuchadnezzar towards him after the fall of Jerusalem⁴⁶ corroborate this. Things could not have been otherwise, because Jeremiah was devoted to a high principle which was shared also (as recent archaeological evidence shows) by the king of Babylon.

The ruling class of Judah, however, although forced by military circumstances to become the vassals of Babylon, remained the relentless enemy of all that Nebuchadnezzar had stood for. They rejoined Egypt at the first opportunity and contemptuously ignored whatever Jeremiah had to say. In fact, it was their reliance on Egypt which made them contemptuous toward both Jeremiah and Nebuchadnezzar. Apart from possible commercial advantages,⁴⁷ there was also an important political factor which justified their attitude. Since the Chaldean dynasty was unpopular in Babylon,⁴⁸ the ruling classes in Judah may have expected an internal revolt there. They had their ideological allies in Babylon itself, and for that reason they expected that Nebuchadnezzar's downfall would come sooner or later, despite his great military successes. That explains why the Jerusalemites, despite serious Egyp-

42. Cf. Jer. 11:10; 31:32.

43. Cf. Jer. 11:19.

44. Cf. Jer. 5:26f.; 34:8–11.

45. Cf. Jer. 38:17; 39:15–18; 42:7–12 (N.B.). Jer. 13:4–7 indicates that the prophet visited Babylon on at least two occasions, since part of the significance of divinatory prophecies lies in the fact that an act is actually performed. Cf. A. Guillaume, *Prophecy and Divination* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1938), p. 176.

46. Cf. Jer. 39:11f.; 40:1–6.

47. Pharaoh Hofra's friendliness to foreigners was well known. No doubt this was due to commercial interests. Hofra was the Pharaoh whose army liberation was vainly awaited by the people of Jerusalem before the destruction of their city by Nebuchadnezzar. Cf. R. R. Hall, 'The Restoration of Egypt,' in *Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. III, p. 303.

48. Cf. Thompson, 'The New Babylonian Empire,' p. 207.

tian reverses, remained loyal to the pharaohs to the very end. Against these political realists Jeremiah had nothing to offer but his firm faith in a just God, who would surely save the oppressed exploited poor of the land and give the final victory to the just king of Babylon. History proved him right. Nebuchadnezzar's subsequent treatment of defeated Judah, the land reform⁴⁹ instituted among the poorest, the respect shown by him to Jeremiah, his gentlemanly treatment of Jehoiakim's son, Jehoiachin,⁵⁰ and of the deportees to Babylon, and, finally, recent archaeological evidence show him to have been a generous and broadminded man in a cruel age – indeed, one of the finest monarchs in history, a king who was by no means unworthy of the prophet's high estimate of him in the oracles of Yahweh: 'Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, my servant.'⁵¹

49. The information concerning land reforms, as well as Nebuchadnezzar's concern for Jeremiah, is part of a section (Jer. 39:4–13) inserted in the narrative and missing from the LXX. Nevertheless, it contains important data concerning Nebuchadnezzar's generosity which are not included in the parallel passages (Jer. 52:7–16; 2 Kings 25:12). Apparently the post-exilic Jewish compilers wanted to delete any favourable comment on the Babylonians. In this case, however, a more conscientious editor evidently felt that the information contained here should be incorporated in the text. It is unlikely that the story is a mere invention; on the contrary, the passage is probably the original narrative written down by an eyewitness (very likely Jeremiah's secretary, Baruch). That would explain why this text, though not part of the scriptures as known to the LXX translators, was somehow preserved.

50. According to archaeological evidence, Jehoiachin was honourably treated by Nebuchadnezzar from the time of his deportation. Moreover, he is referred to in tablets discovered in Nebuchadnezzar's palace as 'king of the land of Judah,' which indicates that he retained his title even in exile. Cf. A. Malamat, 'Jeremiah and the Last Kings of Judah,' *Palestine Exploration Quarterly*, 83 (1951), 81–87.

51. Jer. 27:6.