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# THE PROPHECY OF JEREMIAH

(continued)

by H. L. ELLISON

## XVIII. THE PROPHET REAPPEARS

**J**EREMIAH went underground in December 604 and there is no evidence for his emerging again before the incident recorded in ch. 35. According to the Babylonian Chronicle<sup>1</sup> Nebuchadrezzar marched his troops into Syria and Palestine each year until 601, when he attacked Egypt. He was very seriously defeated and for a year and a half was unable to enforce his authority in the West. This led to Jehoiakim's revolt (2 Ki. 24: 1b). Already by 599 Babylonian light forces supported by loyal western levies were ravaging Judaea (2 Ki. 24: 2). In January 597 Nebuchadrezzar himself marched against Jerusalem, but Jehoiakim died before he reached the city. His fate is obscure; 2 Chr. 36: 6 is normally referred to this period, but E. Vogt is probably correct in seeing a reference to the time of his original submission (2 Ki. 24: 1a, Dan. 1: 1f.)<sup>2</sup>. It is therefore virtually impossible that the events of Jer. 35 should be dated in 597, as desired by Rudolph<sup>3</sup>, but Weiser, writing before the publication of the Babylonian Chronicle, places them too early in 602-1 B.C.<sup>4</sup> A date in 599 seems indicated, when the raids of the marauding bands were sweeping the Judaeian country-side bare and leaving anarchy in their train. The mention of Nebuchadrezzar (35: 11) can hardly be quoted against this, for a group of nomads such as the Rechabites would hardly know whether the Chaldaean king was leading the attackers in person.

If we may argue somewhat precariously from silence, Jeremiah will have vanished from public life for nearly five years. The only activity we can reasonably attribute to this period, apart from the writing of the enlarged roll (36: 32), is the composition of "The Book of Hope" (chs. 30, 31). For the modern Westerner this may seem surprising, but it scarcely is to one who knows the slower tempo of the East. In addition the close packed activity of the first five years of Jehoiakim's reign and his intense agony of spirit must

<sup>1</sup> See D. J. Wiseman, *Chronicles of Chaldaean Kings*, pp. 70-72, and *DOTT*, pp. 80f., E. Vogt, *Supplements to V.T.*, Vol. IV, pp. 91ff.

<sup>2</sup> So E. Vogt, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

<sup>3</sup> *Jeremia*<sup>2</sup>, p. 207.

<sup>4</sup> *Der Prophet Jeremia*, pp. 70ff.

have meant that Jeremiah needed a long period of inner recuperation. We shall probably be safe in thinking of him letting the months pass over him somewhere in the savage Wilderness of Judaea, where many a sore tried saint of God found refuge both before and after his time.

Then came the hour of divine judgment. As Nebuchadrezzar's bands swept like locusts over the land, Jeremiah returned to his prophetic duty in the capital. The time of withdrawal had made of him, as God had promised at his call, "a fortress, an iron pillar, a bronze wall" (1: 18). From now on there was to be neither flinching nor complaining. It need not surprise us that, apart from 35: 12-19, we have no oracle from this period preserved for us. None was needed. Jehoiakim had sought to get rid of both message and prophet; now the prophet was back and his message was going into fulfilment. His very presence was oracle enough. His fearless appearance bore testimony to his conviction that he and his people were in the hands of God for good or evil.

From Rehoboam on we are told of the burial of all the kings of Judah with the exception of Jehoiakim<sup>5</sup>. Presumably he did have the burial of a donkey, i.e. none (22: 19). The extreme reticence about his death cannot spring from lack of knowledge; rather it suggests that there must have been something peculiarly shameful about it. If I have read his character correctly<sup>6</sup>, it is not unlikely that he broke down when he realized what a fool he had been to defy God. Jeremiah's quiet but public return will have paralysed him as he recognized in his presence the shadow of coming doom. But even if I have misread Jehoiakim, he had his hands too full to spend time on arresting prophets. So, as the strands of Nebuchadrezzar's net drew tighter about Jerusalem, Jeremiah's very presence spoke to the people of what they were to expect.

#### THE RECHABITES

Because of frequent misunderstandings about the Rechabites it may be well to devote a few paragraphs to them. M. Black can write of "the orders of the Rechabites and Kenites or the permanent Nazirate",<sup>7</sup> which he links with the later Hasidim and Essenes<sup>8</sup>. The very thin evidence for this is given fully by H. J. Schoeps with the caveat that we are "dealing only with conjectures for which we can reach only, at the best, a certain degree of

<sup>5</sup> The burial of Hezekiah is not mentioned in the M.T. of 2 Ki. 20: 21, but it is found, doubtless correctly, in LXX; cf. also 2 Chr. 32: 33.

<sup>6</sup> *E.Q.*, Vol. XXXV, No. 4, p. 205.

<sup>7</sup> *The Scrolls and Christian Origins*, pp. 43f.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

probability.”<sup>9</sup> R. Kittel can call them “a sect”,<sup>10</sup> and J. Pederson implies the same, when he says: “The Rechabites, whose unity consisted in their following the nomadic ideal, formed a house, the father of which was the founder. Jonadab son of Rechab.”<sup>11</sup>

1 Chr. 2: 55 and 4: 11f. (LXX!) seem to link the Rechabites with the Kenites, who were semi-nomads. Until recently it has been usual to envisage the life of the semi-nomadic tribes of the Old Testament in terms of the modern Beduin. But, as Albright has pointed out so clearly<sup>12</sup>, we may not equate the semi-nomad dependent on the ass with the camel-nomads, or Beduin, as we now call them. The Israelites of the Exodus were not even typical ass-nomads, though the associated Kenites probably were. It seems, therefore, at the very least an exaggeration, when it is claimed that there was a strand in Israelite tradition which looked back to a nomadic ideal. Israel’s ideal is surely given in the Creation story. Adam was taken from the *'adamah*, the fertile soil (Gen. 2: 7), while Cain went out into the Land of Wandering (Gen. 4: 16). Then again there is no evidence, but rather the reverse, that ass-nomads looked on the desert with particular favour. The Kenites and other clans that had linked themselves to Israel will have been slower settling down, but that is all.

There are no grounds for doubting the Rechabite clan tradition that their special mode of life was due to Jonadab (35: 6), who enters history briefly in the time of Jehu a little under two and a half centuries earlier (2 Ki. 10: 15). He was evidently one of those strong-willed fanatics who must lead others into the way they consider right. Whether Jonadab was the head of the clan or merely of one of its sub-divisions we are not told. On this would depend whether all Rechabites, or only some, had adopted his ideals. If the former is true, it means that the scribes in 1 Chr. 2: 55 and also certain Rechabite figures in later Jewish tradition had abandoned their ancestor’s charge. The reason for Jonadab’s insistence was doubtless because he saw that the clan was on the verge of giving up its old manner of life.

There is no suggestion that the Rechabites had sought the refuge of Jerusalem during the comparable crisis of 701 B.C., when Sennacherib swept Judah bare. A semi-nomadic clan should not have found it impossible to avoid Nebuchadrezzar’s marauding bands. It may well be that the old fanatical zeal had worn thread-

<sup>9</sup> *Theologie und Geschichte des Judenchristentums*, p. 247 seq.

<sup>10</sup> *Geschichte des Volkes Israels*, Vol. II, p. 276.

<sup>11</sup> *Israel I-II*, p. 54.

<sup>12</sup> *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel*<sup>2</sup>, pp. 96-101.

bare during a couple of centuries of vicissitudes. Be that as it may, when the challenge came, they remained true to their old traditions. The temptation can have been no light one, for not only were they brought into one of the rooms for prophets (35: 4), but it was put to them by the leading prophet of the time.

It is doubtful whether we can with Rudolph<sup>13</sup> make v. 19 imply Jeremiah's sympathy for the Rechabites, or speak with Welch of "the interest the prophet took in the Rechabites and the sympathy he showed with them."<sup>14</sup> G. A. Smith is surely much nearer the truth, when he says<sup>15</sup>:

Whereupon Jeremiah went forth and held them up as an example to the men of Judah, not because of any of the particular forms of their abstinence, but because of their constancy. Here were people who remembered, and through centuries had remained loyal to, the precepts of an ancestor; while Israel had fallen from their ancient faithfulness to their God and ignored His commandments. The steadfast loyalty of those simple nomads to the institutions of a far-away human father, how it put to shame Judah's delinquency from the commands of her Divine Father!

Both Rudolph<sup>16</sup> and Weiser<sup>17</sup> take the promise (v. 19), "Jonadab the son of Rechab shall not want a man to stand before Me for ever," as meaning special service. They reject the view, toyed with by many of their predecessors, that some form of priestly or prophetic ministry is intended, and think that their witness as shown in their loyalty of life is implied. While "to stand before" indubitably has this technical meaning (cf. 19: 1), yet in the light of passages like 7: 10; Lev. 9: 5; Deut. 4: 10; 19: 17 it clearly had the wider sense as well of partaking in a religious action. Such would seem to be the meaning here; there would always be Rechabites to join in the worship of God.

#### XIX. THE BOOK OF HOPE

Traditional exegesis of the Bible has always tended to be dominated by the concept that the order in which things are recorded must be a chronological one. As a result, in spite of manifest breaches of chronological order in *Jeremiah*, it was normally taken for granted that chs. 30, 31, "The Book of Hope," were written late in the time of Zedekiah. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, *The New Bible Handbook*, *The New Bible Commentary*, *The New Bible Dictionary*, and E. J. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, to mention only a few stand-

<sup>13</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 209.

<sup>14</sup> *Jeremiah: His Time and His Work*, p. 240.

<sup>15</sup> *Jeremiah*<sup>4</sup>, p. 194.

<sup>16</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 209.

<sup>17</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 328.

ard works, do not even seem to realize that any other date is possible. Had they felt it necessary to justify their view, they would doubtless have appealed to the evidence of chs. 32, 33. While there can be little doubt that chs. 26-35 form a deliberately constructed unit, created either by Jeremiah or Baruch, there is no evidence that the scroll of 30: 2, with one minor exception, ever went beyond the bounds of chs. 30, 31. The exception is 3: 6-13; whether or not it ever formed part of The Book of Hope we cannot say, but it certainly belongs to the collection of oracles we find there.

Liberal exegesis was slow in throwing much new light on these chapters, because it was mainly interested in questions of their genuineness. Gradually there grew up a general consensus that little or nothing in ch. 30 was from Jeremiah, but considerable portions of ch. 31 were recognized as genuine. Particularly important was the recognition that some oracles in ch. 31 had from the first been addressed to Ephraim; these were ascribed to the earliest period of Jeremiah's activity<sup>18</sup>. P. Volz's commentary in 1922 opened a new chapter in our understanding of these chapters. He demonstrated that, if we remove a few elements referring to Judah, the vast bulk of these two chapters are to be interpreted of the Northern Kingdom.

I have earlier given my reasons for rejecting the view that Jeremiah's earliest ministry was to the North<sup>19</sup> and that 3: 6-13 should be placed before Josiah's reformation<sup>20</sup>. It is by the nature of things unprovable, but we can adopt as a working hypothesis that 3: 6-13 is from the reign of Josiah but well after the climax of the reformation, and that the bulk of chs. 30, 31 comes from the same period.

#### JEREMIAH'S NORTHERN MINISTRY

It is obvious enough that 31: 7-9 is an oracle depicting the return of *Ephraimite* exiles, Ephraim being probably used merely as a parallel to Israel. What is not clear is to whom the oracle was given.

There are no grounds for doubting that at least the majority of the descendants of the Northern exiles were still living in the areas to which they had originally been taken (2 Ki. 17: 6). Though it

<sup>18</sup> A brief summary of the Liberal position as it was in 1911 may be found in Peake: *Jeremiah and Lamentations* (Century Bible), Vol. II, pp. 68ff.

<sup>19</sup> *E.Q.*, Vol. XXXI, No. 4, p. 205, Vol. XXXII, No. 2, p. 111.

<sup>20</sup> *E.Q.*, Vol. XXXII, No. 2, pp. 107, 112.

might have been somewhat more difficult, Jer. 29 shows that there were no insuperable difficulties involved in writing to them. But there is no indication that such a letter was written, or that a copy of chs. 30, 31 was to be sent to the exiles.

Ch. 30: 3 might indicate that the roll was to be treasured up, so that when its promises were fulfilled there would be written evidence that it had been foretold and hence God's action. But v. 1 surely implies that we are dealing with normal oracles that had been spoken before they were written down. This is borne out by a study of the contents of the roll. However great the literary skill with which they may have been fitted together, it is clear that we are dealing with independent oracles, just as we are in ch. 2.

The easiest suggestion would seem to be that Jeremiah spent much of his time in the later years of Josiah, a period for which no other activity is recorded, in preaching to the remnant of Israel left in the area Josiah had added to his own kingdom. Rudolph, while agreeing with the time, objects that oracles fluctuating between the remnant left in the land and the exiles are most unlikely, and that in such a case one would expect messages for the new settlers as well<sup>21</sup>. Unless we are prepared to affirm that *Jeremiah* must contain all the prophet's oracles there is no special reason why any message he may have given these semi-foreigners with their syncretistic worship should have been preserved—we may even ask whether they would have welcomed such a message. In any case The Book of Hope was not the place to record it. The other objection seems to be based on a distorted picture of what happened, when Sargon deported the upper classes of Israel.

Modern scholarship has shown the older view, still propagated by the British Israelites, to be untenable, viz. that the remnants of the Israelite population were swept away into exile without leaving any behind. The tendency today is to go to the other extreme and minimize the importance of the foreign settlers (2 Ki. 17: 24, Ezr. 4: 2, 10). The fact of at least three different settlements over a century shows how determined the Assyrian kings were that the Israelite remnant should not become dominant. When Sargon claimed to have deported 27,270 or 27,290 after the capture of Samaria<sup>22</sup>, the smallness of the number is not a testimony to the many left but to the shocking mortality in the last desperate years of the Northern Kingdom. The vital position of Samaria, covering as it did the Egyptian frontier, made it essential for the Assyrian

<sup>21</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 175.

<sup>22</sup> See D. J. Wiseman in *DOTT*, pp. 58ff.

kings that the Israelites should remain a leaderless mob incapable of concerted and independent action.

Jeremiah could not preach to such a people simply a hope based on incorporation in Judah. Quite apart from the fact that probably the majority were not yet prepared to accept such a solution, it was no message of hope, for Jeremiah knew that judgment was coming on Jerusalem even as it had come upon Samaria. So they could not visualize the renewal of national life without the restoration of their exiled leaders<sup>23</sup>. So we should not find it surprising, if Jeremiah proclaimed the return of the deported to the children of those who had been left in the land.

#### THE WRITING OF THE SCROLL

It is worth asking ourselves why and when The Book of Hope was written. Just as in the case of the two scrolls written in the fourth and fifth years of Jehoiakim it clearly marks the completion and end of a period. This virtually rules out any date during the time his ministry to the North was being carried on.

It is clear that Necho immediately detached Josiah's northern provinces from the area under Jehoiakim's rule, and that this policy was continued by Nebuchadrezzar. This was not merely through lack of trust in Jehoiakim; both Necho and Nebuchadrezzar looked on themselves as heirs of Assyria and were slow to change the Assyrian administrative districts. It may be regarded as axiomatic that in the tense condition of the time no activity that might upset the *status quo* would be tolerated. A Judaeen prophet moving freely in Samaria would be assumed to be trying to bring back the lost province to loyalty to Judah. If in fact the content of Jeremiah's oracles was known to those in authority, he would have been a *persona non grata*, for their implication was that all foreign rule over the area would come to an end. This is in fact the overwhelming argument in favour of placing Jeremiah's activity in the North in the reign of Josiah, if we once accept that there had been such an activity.

Jeremiah's inability to visit Samaria as a prophet is in itself an adequate motivation for the writing of the scroll. We cannot possibly know whether copies were smuggled across the border, but, if they were, they would not merely have reminded the Israelites of the promises they had heard but would also have

<sup>23</sup> Exactly the same held good for Judah later. In spite of some recent attempts to prove the opposite, it is remarkable that those who were left in the land by Nebuchadrezzar seem to have had no formative influence at all on the post-exilic community.



encouraged them, when God's judgments broke over Jerusalem, even as they had over Samaria a century and a half earlier.

This theory permits of the scroll's having been written at any time after the accession of Jehoiakim and would favour an earlier rather than a later date. I find it hard, however, to reconcile its dominant note of radiant hope with the intense strains and stresses of Jeremiah's life in the first five years of Jehoiakim's reign. I consider it more reasonable to place it shortly after Jeremiah had gone into hiding. As will be seen later, such a dating removes the one real objection to the early dating of the oracles as a whole.

Just as Jeremiah's other scroll had a second edition so also The Book of Hope will have had. This will have been made either just before Jerusalem fell finally to Nebuchadrezzar in 587 B.C., or more likely in the interval between its fall and Jeremiah's going down to Egypt. The addition of a few oracles about the restoration of Judah and Jerusalem and a couple of minor additions to the oracles already in it will have made it clear, that, now that God's word of judgment had gone into effect, the same hope of mercy existed for Judah as had already been held out to Israel.

#### THE THEME OF THE BOOK (30: 3)

"Behold, days are coming—oracle of the LORD—when I shall turn the fortunes of My people Israel (and Judah), says the LORD; and I shall bring them back to the land I gave their fathers, that they may possess it."

I have bracketed Judah merely to indicate my conviction that this is one of the insertions made in the second edition. Strictly speaking it was unnecessary, for in the prophetic sense, as opposed to its political understanding, "My people Israel" included all the tribes.

Though it may on occasion be so used, "Behold, days are coming," is not an eschatological expression. The use of the participle seems to suggest that something now existing has set up a chain of causation which must end in the event prophesied. In the context the judgment on Israel, and later on Judah, must end in restoration. It is not that the restoration is an act of pure grace; the whole history of Israel is a history of grace on God's side. The judgment is grace which, because it is grace, leads to restoration.

Modern man would be far happier, if Jeremiah had omitted the promise of the land. We can grasp that the captive, who has lost his land as part of the penalty for sin, should be set free into the glorious liberty of the children of God. But that he should get his land back as well is too material to be spiritual.

We stand here before one of the tensions and antinomies of the New Testament. Matt. 19: 29 ; 2 Cor. 6: 8-10 ; 8: 9 ; Luke 6: 20-26 are only a few of the passages that express the tension in one way or another. We are those who know that the sovereign rule of God has drawn near to us, but we do not yet see all things subjected to the King. Hence we experience the antinomy of possessing and yet not possessing. In the light of eschatology, however, the restoration is full and perfect, not merely partial.

In the eschatological fulfilment of these promises the words will doubtless be transcended, for "Things beyond our seeing, things beyond our hearing, things beyond our imagining, all prepared by God for those who love him" (1 Cor. 2: 9, NEB) is the promise. But it is a fulfilment which is not instead of, but a filling full of, what has been promised, until it takes on new dimensions.

The promise of the land lay at the heart of the divine promises to the Fathers, even though to them too it may have pointed to something even higher (Heb. 11: 10). The possession of the land was the supreme proof of God's power and loyalty, its loss the undeniable evidence of His displeasure. It follows then that the promise of restoration and divine favour must be in terms of return to the Land.

If we have grasped that all the promises have their "Yea and Amen" in Him who is the real fulfilment of the promises, we may well seek to give a fuller and "higher" meaning to the land. We need to beware, however, lest like the dog in the fable, in our efforts to grasp that which is still shadowy because still future, we lose the reality offered us by the language of Scripture. In the exposition which follows I have not hesitated to use the literal language of the oracles, even though I am aware that the reality therein foreshadowed far surpasses my grasp or that of Jeremiah.

*(To be continued)*

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