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THE PROPHECY OF JEREMIAH

by H. L. ELLISON

XXVIII. JEREMIAH IN EGYPT

THE autumn days of 586 B.C. dragged with leaden feet past the terrified people at Geruth Chimham.¹ We can picture scouts watching the roads northward and westward, lest some Babylonian commander, anticipating the royal decision, should hasten to mete out punishment for the murder of the governor. By the time ten days had passed "common sense" had triumphed.

Jeremiah's confident message of divine mercy and care, but with a threat of judgment contained in it (42: 7-17), was received with such obvious incredulity and dismay, that he added an additional warning of judgment to come for those who intended to disobey God's will (42: 18-22). There is really no need to transfer 43: 1-3 after 42: 18 as do Rudolph² and Weiser.³ Even if Baruch had not given him any hints of how things were developing among the people, Jeremiah knew them well enough to guess how things were moving. In addition, the Oriental does not hesitate to show his feelings when he receives an unwelcome message.

The very fact that Azariah ben-Hoshaiah took the lead over Johanan ben-Kareah (43: 2; cf. 42: 1) in rejecting the prophet's message shows that there must have been a fiery discussion during the period of waiting in which Azariah, a relative upstart, for he is not mentioned in 40: 8, gradually won the day for flight to Egypt. His supporters are called by RV "proud men", by RSV "insolent men". Both renderings seem to miss the vital point in *zed*. Knox is very much nearer with "all the malcontents". BDB says of the word, "Always of opposition to Yahweh . . . terminus technicus for godless, rebellious men." The implication of it is that they were fully conscious that they were rejecting God's will.

¹ The murder of Gedaliah had taken place in Tishri 586; according to Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, this had begun on Oct. 7. This assumes that Gedaliah's period of government was very short, which seems the most natural interpretation of the story. T. H. Robinson in Oesterley and Robinson, *A History of Israel*, Vol. I, pp. 442f., puts its length at three or four years, and *The Oxford Annotated Bible* puts the assassination "probably in September, 582 B.C.". Jer. 52: 30 seems dangerously weak evidence for such a theory.

² *Jeremia*², p. 236.

³ *Das Buch des Propheten Jeremia*⁴, p. 359.

It would appear that in the discussions Baruch had argued strongly in favour of staying in the land—after all he knew Jeremiah well enough to be able to foresee what the divine oracle, once it came, was bound to be. So it was an easy whitewashing of their conscience to suggest that he had convinced Jeremiah that he should back him.

In all fairness we should add that Jeremiah's oracle demanded almost too much. They wanted no longer to see war or hear the sound of the trumpet (v. 14); it was not merely the wish to escape what might be but also the sights that reminded them so forcibly of the miseries they had been through. In addition they were afraid of famine (v. 16). In the ravaged fields there can have been all too little food available, while any who have passed through famine conditions as they had experienced in Jerusalem develops an almost pathological craving for food. So Jeremiah's call to stay was more than a demand that they trust God; it was an affirmation that this was the sole way to a true renewal of national life.

It is far from easy to know why they took Jeremiah and Baruch with them (43: 6). It can hardly have been out of love, wishing to save them from Chaldean wrath. Still less will it have been the hope of being able to discover the divine will at a later date. To me the most likely reason was superstition. Just as their fathers had pathetically placed their confidence in their mere closeness to the Temple (7: 4), so they probably hoped to share in the manifest divine protection over Jeremiah. They remembered God's hand over him during the siege of Jerusalem and expected that it would continue. They wanted him not as a prophet but as a mascot.

Obviously Kapelrud may be correct, when he says that Jeremiah insisted on going with them. "It is not unreasonable that Jeremiah wished to demonstrate his solidarity with his people, inasmuch as he had been sharply criticized previously for his attitude towards the Babylonians (Jer. 37: 11-21; 43: 3)".⁴ There is no possibility of disproving this, but it does not seem to fit in with what we know of the old prophet. Since, however, there were still those left in Judea who were worth deporting (52: 30) including men like the authors of *Lamentations*, it is reasonable to suppose that Jeremiah, if he had been given a free hand, would have preferred to remain in the land and serve them in their precarious and isolated position.

It is equally impossible to establish how many made the hazardous journey to Egypt. The very difficulties of the way should keep us from exaggerating the numbers involved. For that reason and

⁴ *Israel*, p. 104.

others Kittel's estimate of 17,000 to 19,000 is improbably high.⁵ In the light of 52: 30 we must take "all the remnant of Judah" (43: 5) in the setting of 40: 11f.; apparently it was only the relatively small community from Mizpah that was involved.

JEREMIAH IN TAHPANHES

Tahpanhes was a small Egyptian frontier town, almost certainly the modern Tell Defneh and the Daphnai where Psammetichus I (664-610 B.C.) settled a garrison of Greek mercenaries.⁶ It was probably near or identical with the Baal-zephon of Ex. 14: 9.⁷ The presence of the Greek mercenary garrison gave this frontier town an importance it probably never had before or after, but that is no reason for assuming that the fugitives settled there,⁸ though some may well have done so. The relatively large influx of Asiatics would hardly have pleased the Greeks; Pharaoh Apries is not likely to have regarded them as reliable defenders of the frontier; they themselves will have wished to move somewhat farther from Nebuchadrezzar's possible revenge. They were probably held there until the Egyptian authorities decided where they should be allowed to settle.

We may reasonably guess that neither then nor at any other time did a Pharaoh have a palace in our sense of the word in Tahpanhes, so RSV would have done better to translate the Hebrew quite literally, as did RV, "Pharaoh's house" (43: 9), i.e. the administrative centre for the town and district.⁹

The exact nature of God's command to Jeremiah (43: 9) must remain obscure. *Melet* (RV, RSV "mortar") is a hapax legomenon; *malben* (RV, tx., "brickwork"; RV, mg., RSV, "pavement") is not found elsewhere in this sense. It is not even clear whether he acted quite openly as suggested by RV, RSV, or with only a few speculators—so Moffatt, Rudolph,¹⁰ Weiser,¹¹ Skinner¹²—for it is not certain whether the omission of the definite article before men in Hebrew really justifies us in rendering "let some of the Jews see

⁵ *Geschichte des Volkes Israel*, Vol. III, 1, pp. 61f.

⁶ Herodotus, ii, 30, 107.

⁷ G. E. Wright, *An Introduction to Biblical Archaeology*, p. 39.

⁸ So H. R. Hall, *The Ancient History of the Near East*⁹, p. 546.

⁹ It may possibly have been the fortress of Psammetichus, the ruins of which have been excavated by Petrie.

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 238.

¹¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 365.

¹² *Prophecy and Religion*, p. 340. "It was apparently a night scene."

you" (Moffatt).¹³ As nothing depends on it, we should probably keep an open mind. Either publicly or privately Jeremiah hid big stones in front of Pharaoh's house and foretold that they would serve as a foundation for Nebuchadrezzar's throne and canopy (v. 10). He would destroy the temples of the gods in which the fugitives had implicitly put their trust by fleeing from Jehovah's own land. He would treat Egypt so contemptuously that Jeremiah compared it with delousing Egypt "as a shepherd delouses his cloak".¹⁴ In other words he would rid himself of those elements in the land that constantly kept his south-western frontier unquiet. Jeremiah's language shows his disdain for the rulers of the land where he had become a forced guest.

Josephus claims to know (*Ant.* X. ix, 7) that in Nebuchadrezzar's 23rd year, i.e. 581 B.C., he invaded Egypt, killed the Pharaoh and "took those Jews that were there captives, and led them away to Babylon". Since this conflicts with what we know of the dates of the Pharaohs Apries and Amasis, and there is no other evidence for it, we may assume that it was no more than an attempt to explain Jer. 52: 30 and provide a fulfilment for Jeremiah's words of doom in chs. 43, 44.

What is certain is that in 568/7 B.C. there was a campaign between Babylon and Egypt in which the former was victorious. Unfortunately the tablet recording it is so broken that little more than the fact of the campaign can be established from it.¹⁵ There seems, however, to have been no more trouble from Egypt until Cambyses crushed it in 525 B.C., so the delousing may well have been effective. Rudolph considers that Jeremiah's words of doom went into effect at this time.¹⁶

JEREMIAH'S LAST MESSAGE

A superficial reading of the first fourteen verses of ch. 44 would suggest that Jeremiah was to send a circular message to the various Jewish groups, but in v. 15 we find him addressing a representative meeting of some or all of them. This could be due to lack of final revision by Baruch, though obviously all theories of premature death to explain unevennesses in the book must be regarded with some suspicion.

¹³ The views of Peake (*Century Bible*) and Streane (*Cambridge Bible*), and to some extent those of Skinner, are clearly based on their questionable acceptance of Aquila, Symmachus and Theodotion in their rendering of "secretly", presupposing *ballat* instead of *melet*.

¹⁴ RSV is too squeamish!

¹⁵ ANET, p. 508b.

¹⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 243.

The general tendency of scholars is to solve the problems by more or less drastic editing. The most drastic is that of Erbt,¹⁷ which has been followed by Skinner¹⁸ and to a less extent by G. A. Smith.¹⁹ He deleted vv. 1-14 all but v. 4b. In vv. 15-19 only the women speak. All but the last words of v. 26, all of v. 27, most of v. 28 and all of vv. 29, 30 also disappear. The final result is interesting and neat, but it leaves unsolved the mystery of how the text ever reached its present form. It cannot be claimed that we are dealing solely with that over-used word glosses.

Rudolph, more moderate, as is his wont, is satisfied with cutting out vv. 3-6, 9-14 and 23, while he considers vv. 28-30 to be a *vaticinium ex eventu*.²⁰ Weiser has, however, shown that these excisions are not really necessary.²¹

But what is the setting of the whole scene? Skinner²² suggests the possibility of a "great representative gathering of Jews from all parts of Egypt, met to celebrate the resuscitation of the cult of the Queen of Heaven, on which the female element among them had set its mind". It may, however, be reasonably questioned whether such a gathering would have been possible for larger groups of strangers in Egypt, especially in a time of considerable internal stress and strain. Furthermore it is hard to feel that such a gathering would have been felt necessary. G. A. Smith²³ is surely nearer the truth, when he suggests, "It is not said that these came to Tahpanhes to receive the Oracle. Yet the arrival of a company fresh from Judah and her recent awful experiences must have stirred the Jewish communities already in Egypt and drawn at least representatives of them to Tahpanhes to see and to hear the newcomers." But would they normally have brought their wives with them?

I feel that all these interpretations do not do justice to v. 15, or indeed to the chapter as a whole. Why should we agree with the majority of modern scholars that "all the people who dwelt in Pathros in the land of Egypt" is a gloss? Awkwardness in style is not necessarily a sign of one. Still less are there valid grounds for rendering with the Syriac, "in Egypt and Pathros", i.e. in Lower and Upper Egypt, as do BH²³, Rudolph and Weiser, for

¹⁷ *Jeremia und seine Zeit*, pp. 77ff., 107.

¹⁸ *Op. cit.*, pp. 341-346.

¹⁹ *Jeremiah*⁴, pp. 311ff.

²⁰ *Op. cit.*, pp. 239-243.

²¹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 369-374.

²² *Op. cit.*, p. 342.

²³ *Op. cit.*, p. 311.

there are no other traces of this technical use in the Old Testament for *mizraim* (Egypt).

If we take the account as it stands, we find that Jeremiah was in fact not addressing the Jews of Egypt as a whole in one place. The message of vv. 2-14 is quite straightforward. However it was to be conveyed—and this is not suggested—it starts with a proclamation of the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem and gives idolatry as the reason for it (vv. 2-6). This is followed by a plea and a warning to the earlier refugees from Judah in Egypt (vv. 7-10). Because they had continued their idolatry they would suffer the same fate. The language is not clear enough to justify dogmatism, but it appears that Jeremiah divides his message of doom into two. In v. 12 he announces the fate of those with whom he had come into Egypt. They had come with the curse of God over them and under that curse they would perish. The position of the remainder, presumably the majority, was different. Their coming to Egypt had not been in defiance of God's will; many may well have been brought there by Necho along with Jehoahaz. So in the pronouncement of their doom the possibility of some survivors is granted (vv. 13f.).

There is nothing in this message that is intrinsically improbable; indeed, some such form of activity by Jeremiah was *a priori* to be expected. The most natural way for the message to be conveyed was for the prophet to visit the few main centres of Judean settlement. The mention of Pathros, rather than of some place names in Upper Egypt, implies that his fellow-countrymen in Upper Egypt were scattered through a number of settlements. Since there is nothing to link them with the community at Elephantine at the first cataract on Egypt's southern frontier,²⁴ we need not think of them as extending very far south. If this were so, it would have been comparatively easy for Jeremiah to arrange to meet them in some central place. When they are called a *qahal gadol* (v. 15, a great assembly), the stress is not so much on the number present as on the representative nature of the gathering.

How Jeremiah and his message were received in the other centres we are not told. There was probably quiet sympathy and veiled incomprehension. But with the refugees in Pathros it was different. It would seem that it was some of the women who first saw the true implications of Jeremiah's words, though, conforming to cus-

²⁴ A full account may be found in Oesterley and Robinson, *A History of Israel*, Vol. II, pp. 159-165. An adequate description will be found in any modern history of the period.

tom, they allowed their men folk to do most of the speaking for them.

All the evidence points to Josiah's reformation having been outwardly remarkably successful. There is no evidence for a return to the position under Manasseh; indeed vv. 17f. testify to the contrary. It was precisely the worship of the Queen of Heaven that bore witness to the superficiality and hence inner failure of the reformation.²⁵ Even at Elephantine the idolatry seems to have gone no further than the provision of wives for Yahweh, though some of the people were prepared to swear by the gods of their neighbours.²⁶ It was less a question of one God against many and more of what sort of God He might be. If one worships a god who needs a consort and shares his power with her, then it matters little whether one adds other figures to one's pantheon or not.

As I have said in an earlier instalment,²⁷ there are no grounds for thinking that the women were perversely thinking back to the time of Manasseh. Yet for all that it must have been about that time that the age-old Ashtoreth was dignified with the title and attributes of Akkadian Ishtar. They chose to forget that, just when she was being magnified, Judah was sinking to its nadir. This was the time of its deepest degradation, when it was confined within greatly narrowed boundaries and vegetated as a helpless vassal of Assyria. Indeed the exaltation of the old Canaanite goddess in her Akkadian finery was the proclamation that the way of prosperity lay in enslavement to the mighty forces of the world.

It was precisely the days of Manasseh that had sealed the fate of Judah (2 Ki. 21: 10-15; 23: 26; 24: 3; Jer. 15: 4), and this Jeremiah affirmed again without specifying the actual time involved (vv. 20-23). He realized that there was no point in arguing or pleading, so he challenged them to keep their word, "Then confirm your vows and perform your vows" (v. 25). They would find the judgment complete (vv. 26ff.). We need not boggle at the exception made in v. 28, which belongs to the same category as Amos 3: 12. Those returning would serve as evidence that what had happened to them was due, not to God's weakness but to His power; in addition they would magnify His grace, when they were contrasted with the deportees returned from Babylonia. Historically there is no evidence that any of the survivors in Egypt played any part in the restoration of the Jewish commonwealth or even in the later history of the Jewish diaspora in Egypt.

²⁵ Cf. *E.Q.* Vol. XXXIII, No. 4, pp. 220ff., Vol. XXXIV, No. 1, pp. 20f.

²⁶ Cf. The Clarendon Bible, Old Testament, Vol. IV, p. 221, bottom.

²⁷ *E.Q.* Vol. XXXIV, No. 1, pp. 20f.

Jeremiah then gave them a sign (v. 29). God would give Apries (Pharaoh Hophra) into the hands of his enemies. This happened in 566 B.C., less than twenty years later. He was either murdered by his servants or by his bitter enemies to whom he had been handed over by Amasis.²⁸ This in itself would not affect Jeremiah's hearers, but his death would be the warning that before long Nebuchadrezzar would be hammering on the gates of Egypt.

We have no further knowledge of Jeremiah. Even if he did not suffer actual physical violence, he was an old man who had suffered much, and so we can be sure that he did not live to witness what he had foretold.

If we could have stood there and listened to the enraged women spitting their venom at him, we might well have thought him unwise to stir up a hornets' nest. After all, in the vast prospect of revealed truth how insignificant is the home worship of a crude little Queen of Heaven. So too it is today. We are constantly being told that some doctrine or practice is merely marginal, popular, helpful to people of little education. We should not make much fuss about it, it is said, for people will gradually grow out of it.

The gravest corruption of truth is in some way to compromise the divine freedom and omnipotence. We may ascribe to His Torah, to the woman through whom the Word of God became flesh, to the record of His revelation, to the saints down the ages some inherent power and influence and we stand in deadly danger of seeing our God become an unduly small God.

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²⁸ H. R. Hall, *op. cit.*, p. 548.