



JEREMIAH

The Optimistic Prophet

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Dedicated to my Wednesday Covenant Discipleship Group,
who studied Jeremiah chapter by chapter.



PREFACE

Since I first read the Book of Jeremiah, I have been fascinated by this reluctant, but optimistic prophet. What follows, I wrote at the beginning of my ministry, but at the end of my ministry, I updated it. I did not change very much, but I recognize some inconsistencies. For example, sometimes I spell the Babylonia Emperor's name as *Nebuchadnezzar* and sometimes I spell it as, *Nebuchadrezzar*. I prefer *Nebuchadnezzar*, but sometimes the Bible spells it as *Nebuchadrezzar*. I have done the same with the word *temple*, which sometimes I spell with a capital "T" and sometimes I spell it with a lower case "t."

I realize that this book is not for everyone who wants to learn about Jeremiah and his message. This book is technical and academic, and that means that it may be difficult for some people to read. I'm sorry about that, but my purpose was to get at the heart of Jeremiah and his message, and that involves listening to what the critics might have to say. I read and studied the whole Book of Jeremiah to find out what his message was in his own time and what it might mean for us today.

My overall approach in part one was that of a critical analysis of what Jeremiah had to say about God. I personally conclude that his concept of God is consistent with Jesus' concept of God.

In part two I deal with Jeremiah as a true prophet in contrast to Hananiah as a false prophet. How can one tell the difference? What are the tests that enable us to discern true prophecy from false prophecy? Hananiah appears to be the optimistic prophet, but I conclude that Jeremiah is the true and optimistic prophet. We need to know how to distinguish true prophets from false prophets.

Jeremiah believed that without repentance, the exile was inevitable; so, in part three, I deal with the exilic period. What was it like, and what lessons can we learn from it?

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE -----	3
PART ONE: The Nature of God -----	7
1. God is Monotheistic-----	9
2. God is Righteous-----	15
3. God is Judge-----	21
4. God is Sovereign-----	31
5. God is Personal-----	41
6. God is Steadfast Love-----	49
PART TWO: The True Prophet -----	55
1. The Texts-----	57
2. The Historical Background-----	63
3. The Authenticity-----	69
4. The Meaning-----	73
5. The Relevance-----	83
PART THREE: The Instruction of the Exile -----	89
1. The Fall of Jerusalem-----	91
2. Deportation from Jerusalem-----	99
3. Life During the Exile-----	101
4. Return of the Exiles-----	111
5. Importance of the Exile-----	117
OUTLINE OF JEREMIAH'S CONCEPT OF GOD -----	123
PERSONAL REFLECTIONS -----	125
WORKS CITED -----	127
OTHER BOOKS BY THE AUTHOR -----	131

PART ONE

THE NATURE OF GOD

*If Israel knew the nature of God
she would not waste her time with ritual and sacrifice,
but would become more concerned with justice and righteousness.*

CHAPTER ONE

GOD IS MONOTHEISTIC

Jeremiah advances beyond the other pre-exilic prophets in his conception of a monotheistic God by denying the existence of all other gods and he refers to their worship as idolatry. For him idolatry was not only irreligious but also irrational.¹ This concept of God can be seen in the following three verses taken from the Book of Jeremiah. The pagan gods of certain nations are not gods at all, but merely idols. Jeremiah 2:5, 11, and 28 are quite expressive in relating the prophet's attitude toward these false gods:

What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves?

Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for something that does not profit.

...for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.

But where are your gods that you made for yourself? Let them come, if they can save you, in your time of trouble; for you have as many gods as you have towns, O Judah.

The above verses were taken from oracles of Jeremiah that were spoken quite early in his career. He accuses Israel of forsaking Yahweh when they began worshiping the false gods of the Canaanites. Such action was not the practice of foreign nations for they did not desert their gods, which were no gods, in exchange for others. These other gods are described in terms which indicate that Jeremiah thought of them as being devoid of any real power or existence; they are

¹ Raymond Calkins, *Jeremiah the Prophet* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1939), p. 354.

worthlessness, no gods, broken cisterns. They are unable to help in “time of trouble. The word *worthlessness* comes from the Hebrew *hebhel* which means “vanity” or “nothingness” and designates the characteristics of the pagan gods of Canaan.² Calling these gods broken cisterns is the prophet’s way of showing that the idols to whom the people have given themselves are not able to sustain them.³ Idolatry does not bring any advantage to worshipers; in fact, it has an adverse effect in that it makes them more like what they are worshipping. Such worship is unreal because the gods are not real deities but figments of the imagination. Israel has exchanged its “glory for that which does not profit” and she has done this foolishly because, when the object of worship is unreal, so is the subject. They followed after vanity and became vain for they worshiped neither a real god nor did they worship with any integrity. They became an abomination similar to that which they loved. Thus, in Jeremiah’s concept of idolatry, we see the burning conviction of the unreality of all religions save one, of all gods but Yahweh.

In Jeremiah’s call, which is recorded in Jeremiah 1:5 and 10, there was a recognition that God was calling him to be a prophet to the nations. “I appointed you a prophet to the nations,” and “I have set you this day over nations and kingdoms.” James Philip Hyatt affirms that Jeremiah dictated the account of his call to Baruch,⁴ but Sheldon Blank indicates that the phrases referring to nations were probably the result of a later editor.⁵ John Skinner raises a question that makes it necessary for us to consider very carefully the call of the prophet to the nations. How could a young inexperienced individual, unversed in public affairs, have been led to think of himself as presiding over the destinies

² James Philip Hyatt, “Introduction, The Book of Jeremiah,” *The Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. V (New York: Abingdon Press, 1956), p. 813.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 815.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 799.

⁵ Sheldon H. Blank, *Jeremiah Man and Prophet* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1961), p. 242.

of powerful empires and great nations?⁶ It is somewhat incredible that Jeremiah entered his public career as a prophet with a worldwide consciousness as the scope of his mission. We have two alternatives. We can either see these verses as an insertion by an editor, or else we can think of Jeremiah dictating this to Baruch many years after his call. By this time he would have been more aware of the political situation and would probably have recognized that there was no longer room for national prophecy in Israel. Skinner points out that there have been a few critics who have tried to resolve the difficulty by altering the text to read “my nation” rather than “the nations.?”⁷ At any rate, Jeremiah was conscious of the importance of international affairs and could see God at work in the fate of nations other than his own.⁸ To this extent he realized that all nations had to submit to the same God.

Jeremiah’s concept of a monotheistic God is strengthened by belief that Yahweh is the creator of the world in which all nations exist. Because God is the creator he may do with humanity and nations as he desires. There are several passages that point to Jeremiah’s belief in Yahweh as creator and we shall analyze these briefly. We must be careful to note that these passages reflect the work of a later editor and are secondary in regard to authenticity; however, in many ways it is believed that they do contain the true spirit of Jeremiah. We can say this because Jeremiah sees God’s right to control historical events as the result of his creative work. Jeremiah 10:12, although secondary, makes the assertion, “It is he who made the earth by his power, who established the world by his wisdom, and by his understanding stretched out the heavens.” It is only because Yahweh is responsible for creation that he can say in Jeremiah 27:5: “It is I who by my great power and my outstretched arm have made the earth, with the people and animals that are on the earth, and I give it to whomever I please.” Even though these are not the words of Jeremiah, they do express his thought concerning creation and history. God may do with the earth as

⁶ John Skinner, *Prophecy and Religion* (Cambridge: University Press, 1951), p. 28.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.29.

⁸ Hyatt, *Interpreter’s Bible.*, p. 801.

he pleases since he is responsible for its existence. It is precisely because of this fact that his purpose cannot fail. Even nature is aware of this, and although Jeremiah 5:22 is not from the prophet, it does agree with Jeremiah's general thinking: "I placed the sand as a boundary for the sea, a perpetual barrier that it cannot pass; though the waves toss, they cannot prevail, though they roar, they cannot pass over it." This verse may be influenced by Second Isaiah and the wisdom literature, but it is not foreign to Jeremiah. The idea that God created the world and that nature conforms to its creator is most certainly older than any of these writers. The animals will also conform to his will, and this aspect is shown in Jeremiah 8:7: "Even the stork in the heavens knows its times; and the turtledove, swallow, and crane observe the time of their coming." In contrast to this the Book of Jeremiah shows how humanity is the only one to rebel against the created order. If the rest of God's creation were ever to get out of hand, then it would affect the destiny of Israel. Another secondary passage reveals the same thing in Jeremiah 31:36, where the ideas are similar to concepts of creation found in Second Isaiah:⁹ "If this fixed order were ever to cease from my presence, says the LORD, then also the offspring of Israel would cease to be a nation before me forever." Jeremiah 16:19 which is from post-exilic times and written under the influence of Second Isaiah sums up the ultimate idea of creation in Jeremiah's thought: "to you shall the nations come from the ends of the earth." This may be overstated; but then on the other hand, it is not assuming too much to say that if Jeremiah believed that Yahweh was working through history that eventually all nations would return to him. While it might not be feasible to think that all nations would actually conform to the will of God, it is entirely within the realm of possibility that some individuals within all nations might. Jeremiah had a difficult enough time just trying to get Israel to accept the will of God without thinking in terms of all nations. He did see the activity of God in creation and history and to this extent we can assert that this evidence does support Jeremiah's concept of God as monotheistic.

Jeremiah was one of the first prophets in Israel to affirm a God that was free both of Temple and Land. Such a God could be worshiped on alien soil without Ark and Altar. and along with these convictions went

⁹ Hyatt, *Interpreter's Bible*, p. 1040.

the firm belief that God was present and that providence was working itself out for good.¹⁰ There is a distinguishable difference in the monotheism of Jeremiah and previous prophets. With others there lingered a belief in the existence of other Gods, but with Jeremiah every vestige of this superstition is gone, and other gods are consigned to limbo once and for all.¹¹ These other gods were ineffective, or as Jeremiah put it: *unprofitable, nothings, do-nothings, the work of men's hands, lies or frauds, and mere bubbles*.¹² Nevertheless, Yahweh still governs the destinies of such nations as Babylonia and other nations surrounding Judah, even if they do not recognize him; but on the other hand, although Israel recognizes the existence of God, her people have become practical atheists.¹³ Perhaps it is because of the people's rebellion against God that the prophets arose to discover his oneness. The more the prophets were able to see God in moral terms, the more universal became their conception of him. If God is justice, righteousness, and love; then there can be but only one God because justice, righteousness, and love are one. Jeremiah completed the work of earlier prophets and anticipated the final monotheism of the prophets of the exile.¹⁴ Jeremiah's convictions of the character of the God of Israel led him to the conclusion of monotheism. While it is true that he emphasizes the divine love of God, his faithful and yearning for Israel's love in return, and his patient pleading even with delinquent sons and daughters; all of this sets up a real paradox for the prophet, but it also contributes to his growing conviction in the oneness of God.¹⁵

¹⁰ George Adam Smith, *Jeremiah* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1922), p. 367.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 356.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 356.

¹³ Hyatt, *Interpreter's Bible*, p. 49.

¹⁴ Calkins, p. 355.

¹⁵ Smith, pp. 356-357.

CHAPTER TWO

GOD IS RIGHTEOUS

The very basis of personal religion in the life of Jeremiah hinges upon the unerring righteousness of God. The prophet saw the beginning of Israel's faithfulness as having occurred in the Mosaic age, but she fell into a long era of faithlessness after entering Canaan. Jeremiah describes the depth of her sin in chapter two by comparing her to an animal which has broken its yoke (vs. 20a); a harlot (vs. 20b); a vineyard that was planted with choice vines, but produced only wild ones (vs. 21); a person washing himself in vain with lye and soap (vs. 22); a young camel straying from the herd (vs. 23); a wild ass in heat (vs. 24); and finally a thief (vs. 26).¹⁶ Her rebellion must bring inevitable consequences if God is righteous, and this is the assertion Jeremiah 5:9 makes: "Shall I not punish them for these things? says the Lord; and shall I not avenge myself on a nation such as this?"

The certain consequence of sin is reflected by an editor in Jeremiah 4:18, but the spirit of Jeremiah is certainly present: "Your ways and your doings have brought this upon you. This is your doom, and it is bitter; it has reached your very heart."¹⁷ God's righteousness is not without mercy, but he expects his people to submit to a similar morality. If they are unwilling to do so then they must pay the consequence. What makes it so difficult is that Israel is not always willing to admit that she has sinned against God, in fact she claims innocence in Jeremiah 2:35 where the prophet says: "you say, 'I am innocent; surely his anger has turned from me.' Behold, I will bring you to judgment for saying, 'I have not sinned.'" When confronted with a righteous God, the sin of the people must not go unpunished, even when such is not part of the conscious thought of those people.

Israel's inability to recognize her own sin can be attributed to the false prophets of the day; for she was fortified by the specious dreams

¹⁶ Hyatt, *Interpreter's Bible*, p. 819.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 836.

and lies of such prophets. The result was the continuation of sin which must unavoidably meet with certain doom. The worst part of this whole situation was the close connection existing between prophets and priests, both of them being engaged in saying what the people loved to hear. Jeremiah 5:30-31 expresses it in this manner: “An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule as the prophets direct; my people love to have it so, but what will you do when the end comes?” The prophets say what the people desire to hear, and the priests operate according to their false prophecy, and they all proceed toward the destruction that must take place in a moral universe. The reason for such corruption can be seen in Jeremiah 6:13-15:

For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain; and from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, “Peace, peace,” when there is no peace. They acted shamefully, they committed abomination; yet they were not ashamed, they did not know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among those who fall; at the time that I punish them, they shall be overthrown, says the LORD.

The motive for false prophecy is vividly described as “unjust gain” and everyone has become guilty including prophet and priest. It all leads to a kind of false optimism that can only lead to punishment and the judgment of God. The condition of prophecy in the land frightens Jeremiah and causes him to stagger like a drunken man. In Jeremiah 23:9, the prophet says: “Concerning the prophets: “My heart is crushed within me, all my bones shake; I have become like a drunkard, like one overcome by wine, because of the LORD and because of his holy words.” He sees God as righteous and those who are supposed to represent him living completely outside of his essential characteristics.

Jeremiah is frightened because he is able to discern the awful consequence of deviating from the will of Yahweh. It became even more frightening to him as he began to see that God’s chastisement in the life of the people had done little good. In Jeremiah 2:29-30 the Lord says: “Why do you complain against me? ... In vain I have struck down your children; they accepted no correction. Your own sword devoured your prophets like a ravening lion.” Even when the true

message of God was proclaimed the people refused to listen. In fact the more Israel's rebellion is made known the more she resists the promptings of God. Jeremiah brings this out in Jeremiah 5:3: "You have struck them, but they felt no anguish; you have consumed them, but they refused to take correction. They have made their faces harder than rock; they have refused to turn back." Since these people have not learned from the chastisements of God, neither will they listen to the prophecy of Jeremiah. The result of disobedience to God is very serious; and therefore, the task of Jeremiah will be very difficult. Yet he is told in 7:27-28:

So you shall speak all these words to them, but they will not listen to you. You shall call to them, but they will not answer you. You shall say to them: This is the nation that did not obey the voice of the LORD their God, and did not accept discipline; truth has perished; it is cut off from their lips.

The result of such rebellion against God and his true prophets can only be self-destruction. Naturally this affirmation is derived out of belief in the morality of God. All that can come from such a God is judgment, and this is the affirmation of Jeremiah 9:11: "I will make Jerusalem a heap of ruins, a lair of jackals; and I will make the towns of Judah a desolation, without inhabitant." The threat of destruction is declared out of familiarity with the moral condition of the people and the events that have already occurred.¹⁸ However, the consequence of Israel's sin is not without hope; and the mercy of God can be seen in Jeremiah 18:7-8:

At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it.

While the above quotation is in Deuteronomic phraseology, there is no reason to believe that it is not within the spirit of Jeremiah. God's righteousness must be expressed in justice, but such justice is not without mercy. Israel is given every opportunity to return to the Lord,

¹⁸ Hyatt, *Interpreter's Bible*, p. 891.

but if she is unwilling then she must be ready to accept the fate she has chosen.

Jeremiah says that God does not demand sacrifice and ritual, but repentance and obedience, which issues in righteous living. His insight into the demands of God reveal his understanding that God is righteous. The attitude of God toward sacrifice and ritual are given in Jeremiah 6:20: “Of what use to me is frankincense that comes from Sheba, or sweet cane from a distant land? Your burnt offerings are not acceptable, nor are your sacrifices pleasing to me.” There is also a poetic fragment in Jeremiah 11:15 that shows the inadequacy of sacrifice without repentance.

What right has my beloved in my house,
when she has done vile deeds?
Can vows and sacrificial flesh
avert your doom?

Because of some difficulties with the original text, the above is a reconstruction of James Philip Hyatt.¹⁹ John Skinner prefers the superior text of the *Septuagint* because it enables us to recover the general idea, although any rendering given is uncertain concerning the details.²⁰ The poem reflects Jeremiah’s private interpretation of the new attitude of the people to the temple and its worship. As he stands in the crowded court beholding the people at their devotions, his mind is stirred by the question that rises to his lips. What do they mean by it? What can God think of it? Could these people be so oblivious of the nature of God that they can imagine that the performance of sacrificial rites in a sacred place will answer His demands and avert His wrath?²¹ Jeremiah seems to be saying that if Israel knew the nature of God she would not waste her time with ritual and sacrifice, but would become more concerned with justice and righteousness. The nature of God should be reflected in the lives of his people. This is the way it was in

¹⁹ Hyatt, *Interpreter’s Bible*, p. 911.

²⁰ Skinner, p. 167.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

the beginning and this is the way that it was meant to be in the lives of the people of God today.

Perhaps the most penetrating portion of Jeremiah that speaks to the idea of justice and righteousness as the requirement of God is Jeremiah 7:22-23:

For in the day that I brought your ancestors out of the land of Egypt, I did not speak to them or command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices. But this command I gave them, “Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people; and walk only in the way that I command you, so that it may be well with you.”

This passage expresses Jeremiah’s basic concept of religion, but it does more than that—it expresses one of his most important concepts concerning the nature of God. God requires moral obedience rather than sacrifices, and these verses will not allow us to escape this plain message. Some writers have tried to assert that moral obedience is primary and that sacrifice is secondary, but the prophet is not asking for a purification or moralization of the sacrificial system. He is plainly stating that the whole thing is inadequate. The priests may as well eat the burnt-offerings because in God’s sight they are but mere flesh. The priests never got to the source of the problem and all they could do was to offer a religion of superstition. To Jeremiah the whole sacrificial system was created by human beings and not willed by God. He rejected it on the basis that ceremony and sacrifice have nothing to do with the religion of Moses and the true worship of Israel. In Moses’ time God did not lay down requirements for sacrifice but for moral obedience. In taking this position, Jeremiah sets himself against the view that Moses commanded sacrifice, and modern research verifies this position to a large extent. It shows that much of the sacrificial system was of Canaanite origin, though a few practices may have been offered in the time of Moses. At any rate, all this was not a part of Yahweh’s covenant with Israel when he brought them out of the land of Egypt, and when the right spirit comes into the lives of the people the sacrificial system becomes irrelevant, if not idolatrous.²²

²² Hyatt, *Interpreter’s Bible*, pp. 874-875.

Yahweh is concerned about righteousness to the extent that he says in Jeremiah 23:5-6:

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."

The authenticity of the above passage is open to question, but it is maintained by some. John Skinner, for example, favors its genuineness with the following arguments. First the prediction is not of a world conquering military hero, but rather of a just and righteous king of the Davidic dynasty. Secondly the title "the LORD is our righteousness" can be interpreted as a play on the name of King Zedekiah, which in Hebrew means "Yahweh is my righteousness." He may well have meant that a future king or series of kings might fulfill the promises of Zedekiah's name. Finally he says that the epithet Branch is a messianic title in Zechariah 3:8, and 6:12. It is argued by some scholars that the word *Branch* must have acquired a messianic meaning before Zechariah, and therefore must go back at least to the time of Jeremiah.²³ This king will come out of the Davidic line, and he shall deal wisely, executing justice and righteousness in the land. Outside of such relationships there can be neither security, nor justice, nor righteousness.²⁴ Jeremiah conceives of God as being very much concerned with righteousness; and since he is concerned about it, then it must be part of his very essence.

²³ Hyatt, *Interpreter's Bible*, pp. 988-989.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 988-989.

CHAPTER THREE

GOD IS JUDGE

In Jeremiah 1:11 the prophet said: “I see a branch (rod) of an almond tree.” In other sections of the Old Testament the rod is a symbol of judgment or of the wrath of God. It is true of the staff (rod) of Aaron in Numbers 17:1-11; of that in Ezekiel 7:10 (rod); and perhaps of the rods of Zechariah 11:7, 10, 14 (staff). The rod (or branch or staff) symbolizes the judgment of God against his rebellious people, and this interpretation finds further support in Jeremiah 1:12: “I am watching over my word to perform it.” In Jeremiah 44:27 God watches over the people “for harm and not for good.” Jeremiah 1:12 should be taken as a threat that Yahweh will carry out his judgment upon Israel if they do not return to him.²⁵

Gerhard Von Rad indicates that political predictions and threats of judgment, as outlined by earlier prophets, are not as prominent in Jeremiah.²⁶ It is Judah that brings the chastisements upon herself through her apostasy, as can be seen in Jeremiah 2:35: “You say, ‘I am innocent; surely his anger has turned from me.’ Now I am bringing you to judgment for saying, ‘I have not sinned.’” Since she has sinned there can be no escaping the inevitable punishment that she brought down upon herself. It will not even do any good to seek help from Egypt for Jeremiah 2:36 concludes that she “shall be put to shame by Egypt” as she has already been put to shame by Assyria. When a nation is guilty of apostasy there is no escaping the judgment of God, for Yahweh will use history itself to carry out his chastisements.

It is not until the war poems that we find genuine prediction in the old prophetic style, which was running headlong towards judgment.²⁷

²⁵ Hyatt, *Interpreter's Bible*, p. 807.

²⁶ Gerhard Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. II (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1965, p. 195.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

These poems give a warning of the coming destruction that is a result of Israel's sin. We find one of these in Jeremiah 4:5-8:

Declare in Judah, and proclaim in Jerusalem, and say: Blow the trumpet through the land; shout aloud and say, "Gather together, and let us go into the fortified cities!" Raise a standard toward Zion, flee for safety, do not delay, for I am bringing evil from the north, and a great destruction. A lion has gone up from its thicket, a destroyer of nations has set out; he has gone out from his place to make your land a waste; your cities will be ruins without inhabitant. Because of this put on sackcloth, lament and wail: "The fierce anger of the LORD has not turned away from us."

The agent from the north seems to be the instrument sent by God to punish the Israelites for their sins.²⁸ We must be careful to point out that Yahweh was not only punishing Israel for her sin, but He had Jeremiah deliver oracles of destruction to a number of other nations such as the Egyptians, Philistines, Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Syrians, Arabs, Elamites, and Babylonians.²⁹ Such judgment will sweep over these disobedient people like a "hot wind from the bare heights in the desert" toward Judah and "not to winnow or cleanse" for this wind is too full. The judgment of Yahweh has reached the point of inevitability. The hot wind described is the sirocco, which is a dry wind coming off the eastern desert, which usually brings a suffocating heat into Palestine.³⁰ The judgment of Yahweh is described in Jeremiah 4:23-26, a passage that is in dispute by some, but it is also accepted by such scholars as Duhm and Cornhill. Cornhill declares it as one of the most powerful pieces in the whole of prophetic literature:³¹

I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light. I looked on the mountains, and

²⁸ Hyatt, *Interpreter's Bible*, p. 835.

²⁹ Von Rad, p. 199.

³⁰ Hyatt, *Interpreter's Bible*, p. 836.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 840.

lo, they were quaking, and all the hills moved to and fro. I looked, and lo, there was no one at all, and all the birds of the air had fled. I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert, and all its cities were laid in ruins before the LORD, before his fierce anger.

The theme of chapter 5 is the utter sinfulness of the Israelites which makes it impossible for God to show mercy. In Jeremiah 5:1 the prophet is told to seek a single upright man in Jerusalem: “Search its squares and see if you can find one person who acts justly and seeks truth—so that I may pardon Jerusalem.” The thought of this passage is similar to the agreement between God and Abraham that if ten righteous men could be found in Sodom that the city would be spared. This passage is found in Genesis 18:23-33. Jeremiah protests to the Lord that his chastening has not helped, that the people have refused to repent, and have made their faces harder than rock. Jeremiah is not successful in his search for a just man among the poor, but he feels that they should not be expected to know God’s law. Therefore he extends his search to the great, the officials, priests, prophets and others who would be expected to know God’s requirements, but even this ends up in vain, since they too have thrown off God’s yoke. God’s response is given in Jeremiah 5:7: “How can I pardon you? Your children have forsaken me, and have sworn by those who are no gods. When I fed them to the full, they committed adultery and trooped to the houses of prostitutes.” Forgiveness can not be given when the people refuse to turn to Yahweh, and so according to Jeremiah 5:9 there is no alternative left: “Shall I not punish them for these things? says the LORD; and shall I not bring retribution on a nation such as this?” The reason for judgment is clear. Jeremiah saw it as he was convinced of the ethical necessity of wrath, for Judah had committed the gravest sin of all. She had committed sin in the very face of God’s love and despite all of his pleading; and for this reason, both Jeremiah and Hosea see the sin against love as the most hopeless and unpardonable sin, and this people have sinned to the utmost.³² Moreover it was not only clear that Judah both deserved and needed punishment, but it was equally clear that the boiling North held the potentiality through which such punishment could take place.

³² Smith, p. 357.

Jeremiah 5:15-17 is a description of the instrument which God intends to use in exercising his judgment over Israel. The description of the nation is general enough to fit any number of nations, but most scholars believe that the writer is referring either to the Scythians or the Babylonians. Herodotus reports: "The Scythians say that theirs is the youngest of all nations." The Hebrews however would hardly have considered them a nation and because of their youthfulness the prophet is probably referring to Babylonia. The passage is similar to Deuteronomy 28:49-51 and Volz is convinced that it is dependent upon the Deuteronomic source, but James Philip Hyatt asserts that the dependence is more likely to be the other way around.³³ This passage is of some importance in regard to the instrument God intends to use to carry out his judgment and so we shall quote it:

I am going to bring upon you a nation from far away, O house of Israel, says the LORD. It is an enduring nation, it is an ancient nation, a nation whose language you do not know, nor can you understand what they say. Their quiver is like an open tomb; all of them are mighty warriors. They shall eat up your harvest and your food; they shall eat up your sons and your daughters; they shall eat up your flocks and your herds; they shall eat up your vines and your fig trees; they shall destroy with the sword your fortified cities in which you trust.

The reason for this judgment is certainly the fault of Israel, and God must exercise his wrath in order to be ethical himself. The sins of Israel have accomplished no more than to drag her deeper and deeper into sin. Jeremiah 5:25 is only secondary, but it does express the theology of Jeremiah when the author reports: "Your iniquities have turned these away, and your sins have deprived you of good." It is Israel's sin that brings about the destruction of her nation, but even at that, her sin costs God more pain than anger, for he says in Jeremiah 5:18: "But even in those days, says the LORD, I will not make a full end of you."

Jeremiah is to continue his search for an upright man; but such a search proves to be quite disappointing. He finds nothing but a cold response from the people which reaches its climax in Jeremiah 20:7-18. Jeremiah did not want to pronounce judgment on his people,

³³ Hyatt, *Interpreter's Bible*, p. 850.

but he was filled with wrath as a result of his search for justice in the land. In Jeremiah 6:11 this idea is reflected: “But I am full of the wrath of the LORD; I am weary of holding it in.” However, he has no choice because he is speaking under the direction of God, who says: “ Pour it out on the children in the street, and on the gatherings of young men as well; both husband and wife shall be taken, the old folk and the very aged.” God intends to stretch out his hand against the inhabitants of the land and turn their houses over to others, and he intends to do this through his instrument from the north.

At times Jeremiah feels as though he is forsaken by God. In Jeremiah 15:18 he reacts by saying: “Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Truly, you are to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail.” Jeremiah had earlier compared God to a never-failing fountain of living water, but now he accuses him of disappointing him. He even considered throwing off the burden of his prophetic responsibility, but that would only aggravate his suffering. The word of the Lord had been an outward reproach, but to throw it off would mean inward torture.³⁴ Jeremiah believes at times that he has been deceived or enticed by the “demonic” in God, and made a laughingstock of all humanity. He is burdened with a message of doom, but when he desires to remain silent, he finds that he cannot. It is significant that Jeremiah never doubted the reality of his divine commission even when confronted with inner struggles and outward persecution. Jeremiah 20:7-9 declares that in spite of the fact that he felt forsaken by God, that he could not forsake the divine task to which God had sent him:

O LORD, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me. For whenever I speak, I must cry out, I must shout, “Violence and destruction!” For the word of the LORD has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. If I say, “I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,” then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.

³⁴ Skinner, p. 212.

Jeremiah did not want to preach a message of doom, but because of its ethical necessity, he could do no other.

Jeremiah was willing to prophesy contradictory to his personal sympathies because he believed that God was acting in history. In Jeremiah 21:10 we read in Deuteronomic language, which is not inconsistent with the attitude of Jeremiah; that the Lord has set his “face against this city for evil and not for good...it shall be given into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall burn it with fire.” The prophet had advised the king to surrender to Babylon, but he would not accept this avenue of safety. Instead he chose to rebel, and Jeremiah was arrested on a charge of desertion to the enemy. It is clear that Jeremiah took his position because he believed Nebuchadrezzar to be an agent of Yahweh’s will. Jeremiah proved that he was not a traitor to the country by choosing to remain in Palestine after the capture of Jerusalem.³⁵ One part of the above passage seems rather confusing, and that is that the Lord has set his face against this city for evil rather than for good. It is not that God is exercising wrath for the sake of judgment alone, but he desires Israel to repent. Therefore his wrath has a purpose that may not be clear at the moment, but in the end it shall be revealed. Jeremiah 23:19-20 expands upon the coming judgement, and it ends with a few words about the ultimate purpose of the wrath of God.

Look, the storm of the LORD! Wrath has gone forth, a whirling tempest; it will burst upon the head of the wicked. The anger of the LORD will not turn back until he has executed and accomplished the intents of his mind. In the latter days you will understand it clearly.

These same verses are seen in Jeremiah 30:23-24. While some commentators consider them an insertion from chapter 30, there are others such as Rudolph, who believe that they should be interpreted as the content of the true word of God as Jeremiah understood it. The passage has a closer connection with the context here than in chapter 30, and so it is more likely that the editor of chapter 30 has taken over these verses and inserted them in the latter part of the book.³⁶

³⁵ Hyatt, *Interpreter’s Bible*, p. 978.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 933.

In chapter 25 we find a summary of the warning given to Judah. The work is not from Baruch, but is probably a conclusion by the Deuteronomic editor as to what he believed was on the scroll of Baruch, written under Jeremiah's dictation. The reason for judgment is given in Jeremiah 25:8-5:³⁷

Therefore thus says the LORD of hosts: Because you have not obeyed my words, I am going to send for all the tribes of the north, says the LORD, even for King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon, my servant, and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants, and against all these nations around; I will utterly destroy them, and make them an object of horror and of hissing, and an everlasting disgrace.

Judgment is only given because of disobedience, and Nebuchadrezzar is only used because he represents an already existing situation that can be used as an instrument of God's wrath. The judgement of God will eventually fall upon Babylonia also, as Jeremiah asserts in Jeremiah 25:12: "Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, says the LORD, making the land an everlasting waste." The seventy years is not to be taken literally as it merely represents a rounded off or perfect number, perhaps the length of a persons's lifetime.³⁸ The seventy year period could not give much comfort to those in exile because they could not be expected to live to see the punishment of Babylonia. Much of the material in Jeremiah 25 may be secondary, but Jeremiah 25:15-16 may form a nucleus that is authentic and derived from a vision of Jeremiah.³⁹ They show that Jeremiah's concept of God, in regard to judgment, is not limited to Judah, but extends to any nation that will not live in obedience to Yahweh:

For thus the LORD, the God of Israel, said to me: "Take from my hand this cup of the wine of wrath, and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it. They shall drink and

³⁷ Hyatt, *Interpreter's Bible*, p. 999.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1000.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1002.

stagger and go out of their minds because of the sword that I am sending among them.”

Judgment falls upon Jeremiah’s generation because they have fallen away from God and have begun to love falsehood, slander, impurity, treachery, and greedy violence. God, for this reason, being justice and truth, is forced to judge and condemn them.⁴⁰ As a result of the necessity of judgment, a drastic reorganization of world history was in order. It meant that the destruction of Israel was inevitable. The whole attitude of judgment is revealed in Jeremiah 45:4-5:

Thus says the LORD: I am going to break down what I have built, and pluck up what I have planted—that is, the whole land. And you, do you seek great things for yourself? Do not seek them; for I am going to bring disaster upon all flesh, says the LORD; but I will give you your life as a prize of war in every place to which you may go.

There is an undertone of sadness within these words of Yahweh, but it was clear that Judah both deserved and needed punishment. It was also clear that the boiling north held the potentialities to deliver the necessary punishment, and all this was gradually shaping and irrevocably approaching.⁴¹ This meant that Jeremiah’s message had to be starved of hope, and yet even though Jeremiah had to predict his people’s ruin, he did so with a great deal of pain. His sober counsel was directed toward the acceptance of a fate which would ultimately lead to a long and tedious exile until the Lord’s time of deliverance.⁴²

The modern mind may rebel against the idea of linking physical and political disasters with the wrath of God against sin, but we must not forget that the prophet was convinced of the ethical necessity of such wrath and of its judgments on Judah. He was convinced through his close observation of the political conditions of the world and the character of his people, that judgment was essential if justice was to

⁴⁰ Smith, p. 357.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 359.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 354.

operate. Perhaps herein lies the chief glory of Jeremiah. He saw, as no other prophet, the just wrath of God upon sin; but he also saw that his people's sin costs God more pain than anger.⁴³ Yet forgiveness is not easily granted by God, nor is it cheaply gained. It pained God to pull down what his own hands had built up, but in times of judgment God is forced to tear down what he has built up in order to reorganize history. Judgment has to happen as a result of humanity's sin against love, for such a sin is the most hopeless and unpardonable sin that is possible, and it is this kind of sin that Judah has committed.⁴⁴

⁴³ Smith, p. 361.

⁴⁴ Von Rad, p. 208.

CHAPTER FOUR

GOD IS SOVEREIGN

In dealing with Jeremiah's concept of God as sovereign, we are confronted with two problematic assumptions. The first of these is God's sovereignty, and the second is in regard to human freedom. Sovereignty and freedom are important interrelated concepts, and they will dominate most of our discussion on the sovereignty of God. God is sovereign, his word is law, his purpose is unchangeable; and he is the absolute ruler over the universe. A God who is not these things is no god at all, for a defeated god could never hope to retain the respect of human intellect. Yet people must be free. If people are not free then their consciousness is perpetually deceiving them, for they think that they are free. People feel free and their daily experience demonstrates to them that they possess at least a degree of freedom.⁴⁵ What really needs reconciliation is the activity of God in history with the life of his people. Jeremiah, more than any other prophet, sees God entering the historical scene, and he see this first in his own life. He is told in Jeremiah 16:2: "You shall not take a wife, nor shall you have sons or daughters in this place." Jeremiah is willing to yield to the sovereign will of God in his own life, but when he recognizes the power and transcendence of God it does not leave him trembling in awe. Yahweh overpowers him making him a prophet even though he does not wish to be one, and the inevitable result is that of questioning, confusion, doubt, and rebellion.⁴⁶ Yet Jeremiah discovers that in spite of his confusion and doubts, that he cannot escape being a prophet. In Jeremiah 20:7-9 we catch a glimpse of his questioning along with his intense desire to speak on behalf of Yahweh.

⁴⁵ Charles E. Jefferson, *Cardinal Ideas of Jeremiah* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1928), p. 92.

⁴⁶ James Philip Hyatt, *Jeremiah, Prophet of Courage and Hope* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1958), pp. 76-69.

O LORD, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me. For whenever I speak, I must cry out, I must shout, "Violence and destruction!" For the word of the LORD has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. If I say, "I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name," then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.

In Jeremiah's letter to the Exiles, he has a word of hope and encouragement that reflects his basic trust in God's ultimate purpose as that of being good. He dictated to Baruch in Jeremiah 29:11: "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope." Jeremiah became convinced of this through his own experiences with God, and his concept of the sovereignty of God for good comes out best in the story of the potter. Here Jeremiah see God choosing to make Israel a vessel of honor.⁴⁷

The story of the potter is found in Jeremiah 18:1-12. Perhaps a few remarks about the background of the potter are in order. The potter's house was his workshop or factory in which he made his vessels. This particular workshop was located south of Jerusalem, somewhere in the Hinnom Valley, where it had access to the drainage of the valley and to the pools of Siloam. Such a factory would naturally include the potter's workshop, a field for storing and treating clay, a kiln for the vessels, and a dump for the discards. The potter's wheel consisted of two stone discs, the heavier one was below to give momentum while the lighter one above shaped the clay.⁴⁸

The figure of the potter was not original with Jeremiah. The original concept can be found in Isaiah 29:16:

You turn things upside down! Shall the potter be regarded as the clay? Shall the thing made say of its maker, "He did not

⁴⁷ Hyatt, *Jeremiah, Prophet of Courage and Hope*, p. 100.

⁴⁸ Hyatt, *Interpreter's Bible*, p. 961,

make me”; or the thing formed say of the one who formed it, “He has no understanding”?

Isaiah used the figure of the potter to express God’s activity in molding Israel according to his own purpose. In his concept he combines the concept of the divine sovereignty with human freedom and teaches the idea of divine patience as well as divine sovereignty. The concept of the potter implies that God is a free person who works with other free persons; but that his good purposes for them will be worked out, even in the face of their disobedience to his ultimate purpose.⁴⁹ Jeremiah makes more of the idea of the potter than does Isaiah by elaborating upon it, and it is to this concept of Jeremiah that we must now turn.

Jeremiah’s elaboration of the potter’s experience must be understood in the light of what he saw happening in the potter’s workshop. What attracted the prophet’s attention that day was the way in which the potter was thwarted in his work. Sometimes the clay would not become what he desired it to be; and it seemed to be stubborn, refusing to bend according to the potter’s will. It became stiff and obstinate, and had a lump in it of some foreign substance. This pebble like substance hindered the progress of the potter. What really impressed Jeremiah was the patience of the potter. He was never disgusted by the refractory attitude of the clay, and in spite of discouragement he did not destroy the clay or throw it away. He would simply crush the clay into a shapeless mass and proceed to make something else. If he could not make it the way he originally intended, he would make it another way which would be equally serviceable. When the end of the day came he would have a product that was satisfactory and complete. He had been thwarted in his work but not defeated.⁵⁰

The story of the potter and the clay deals with the problem of reconciling the divine sovereignty of God with the freedom of the human will. What must be realized in the beginning is the fact that Jeremiah, as well as all the other Hebrew prophets, was a predestinarian to a large extent. At least he believed that God was

⁴⁹ Hyatt, *Jeremiah, Prophet of Courage and Hope*, p. 85.

⁵⁰ Jefferson, p. 105.

supreme, and that his purposes are eternal and unchangeable.⁵¹ The problem that arises is how to reconcile sovereignty with freedom, for if the designs of God will be ultimately carried out, then what does this actually do to the concept of human freedom? If there is no freedom, then virtue is rendered as meaningless; and we might just as well be a machine, for machines are neither virtuous nor vicious.⁵²

The conception of the potter and the clay is one of the best figures in our possession for reconciling predestination with freedom. It sets up some very difficult questions, but it makes a very advanced effort to solve the problem. Two such questions arise that seem to create a very difficult problem. First, how can God foreordain an event which is contingent on the choice of free creatures; and then, how can God be sure that his purposes will ultimately prevail if human beings are free moral agents? In other words, how can God predestinate individuals or nations to accomplish his tasks when he has made both human beings and nations free?⁵³ The parable of the potter is a classical illustration of the highest concept human beings can form of the divine sovereignty in relation to human freedom. In this picture the will of God is conditional and dependent upon the repentance and rebellion of human beings. The section teaches not only divine sovereignty and freedom, but also the idea of divine patience. The purpose of the potter is thwarted but he is patient enough to persist until the result is a serviceable and beautiful piece of work. The real key to the reconciliation of sovereignty and freedom lies in the fact that the potter has the good of the vessel in mind throughout the ordeal.

Jeremiah sees Yahweh as the potter and Israel as the clay in his hand, but paradoxically enough he sees Israel as being accountable to him and his action in her history is determined by her conduct.⁵⁴ Even though Israel was stubborn, rebellious, and perverse in refusing to do

⁵¹ Jefferson, p. 91.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁵⁴ "Jeremiah," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. III (New York, Abingdon Press, 1962), p. 829.

what she ought to do, it seems like an abuse of human freedom to crush her through suffering and exile. What must not be forgotten is that Israel was but a lump in the clay. God never intended to throw the clay away. The city would be destroyed but another city would arise from the ashes. There would be a new Jerusalem. The temple would be burned, but a new temple would arise. The old covenant written on stone would emerge as a new one written on the heart. Through Jeremiah a fresh revelation had been given to the human mind.⁵⁵

If Israel had repented and conformed to the design of her maker, then it would not have been necessary to break her. If the clay is still malleable, then the Maker can still fashion it into a vessel of usefulness; but if the clay has already hardened ad set, then it must be crushed. The fingers of Yahweh had been pressing upon Judah more and more firmly; but she had become hardened and set, and for this reason had to fall.⁵⁶ This is vividly described in Jeremiah 18:4: “The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.” Although Jeremiah probably was making this application to Israel in particular, the lesson of the potter could apply to all nations. History is the result of the interrelations of the will of God and the free choices of human beings.⁵⁷ God does not coerce a nation to pursue his desired course, but he will crush that nation if it is rebellious. We must not misunderstand Jeremiah at this point, for he is saying that God will not ignore or trample on the human will; but if humankind is perverse and foolish it must suffer again and again for its disobedience. Thus nations will have to endure the consequences of their own foolishness unless they are willing to repent and be remolded according to God’s purpose and their own good. The real point of this story is not only that God is patient with Israel in spite of her disobedience, but that because of Israel’s thwarting of the will of God she is to be crushed in order that a new vessel may emerge. The quality of the clay determines what the potter can do with it, and the quality of the people determines what

⁵⁵ Jefferson, p. 106.

⁵⁶ Hyatt, *Interpreter’s Bible*, p. 961.

⁵⁷ Hyatt, *Jeremiah, Prophet of Courage and Hope*, p. 113.

God can do with them. If Israel repents she can avoid disaster, but at present she is moving on a collision course.⁵⁸ God does not surrender his ideal, nor will he ever give up his plan. His eternal purpose will eventually be carried out for his hands are still on the clay. If they were not then the future would be hopeless. It is only because God is sovereign that human beings have a free choice, for if God did not control events according to justice and righteousness, then human beings would be living in chaos in which freedom becomes impossible. It is because God is in control of history that there can be a reconciliation between sovereignty and freedom. It not only becomes God's will that human beings bear his image, it now becomes a possibility. Human beings have the power to choose whether or not they want to conform to the purpose of God or be thrown into the rubbish heap. If they choose to thwart the plan of God they must be prepared to accept self-destruction. God's hand is on the clay for good, and when human beings do not desire to be molded in that fashion, there is only one other alternative. Israel chose that alternative, and it is at this point the inevitability of her ruin becomes certain.

God expresses his sovereignty through his activity in the history of the nations of the world. Yahweh is the controller of history. He controls the history of the Hebrew people from the time of their election right up through the time he commissions Nebuchadnezzar to rule over Judah and the surrounding nations. The crucial passage is Jeremiah 27:6-7:

Now I have given all these lands into the hand of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, my servant, and I have given him even the wild animals of the field to serve him. All the nations shall serve him and his son and his grandson, until the time of his own land comes; then many nations and great kings shall make him their slave.

Nebuchadnezzar is described as the servant of God, but this does not mean that he serves God. He is simply the instrument of Yahweh's purpose. This foe from the north becomes the divine judgment against

⁵⁸ John Bright, "Jeremiah," *The Anchor Bible*, vol. III, p. 830.

Israel.⁵⁹ Nebuchadnezzar does not worship God; but simply carries out God's judgment, which eventually will turn back on him. However, Jeremiah 27:7 may be an addition to the original text made in the latter part of the Exile; and we can make this assertion because it is missing in the Septuagint. It may have been omitted because it was never literally fulfilled. The last king of the Neo-Babylonian Empire was Nabonidus (556-539 B.C.E.) who was the fourth king in succession following Nebuchadnezzar and he was not a blood relative.⁶⁰ There is another reference to the inevitable doom of Babylon, but it possesses an attitude foreign to Jeremiah. It is found in Jeremiah 50:8-9:

Flee from Babylon, and go out of the land of the Chaldeans, and be like male goats leading the flock. For I am going to stir up and bring against Babylon a company of great nations from the land of the north; and they shall array themselves against her; from there she shall be taken.

John Bright admits that the above passage is part of a group of poems that are anonymous, but that the idea of overthrowing Babylon is in keeping with the attitude of Jeremiah. He points out that Jeremiah clearly expected the ultimate overthrow of Babylon and that there is no reason to doubt the authenticity of Jeremiah 51:59-64 where the downfall of Babylon is foretold. These predictions of Babylon's overthrow can hardly have been written after her fall because they paint an awful picture of slaughter and destruction. History informs us that Cyrus entered Babylon without a fight, and that he refrained from harming it in any way. Its citizens were treated with the utmost of consideration. For these reasons it seems unthinkable to assume that such prophecy could have been composed after the event of Babylon's fall.⁶¹

However, Nebuchadnezzar was used prior to the fall of Babylon to bring about the fall of Judah; and because God has chosen him to be his agent, whether he is conscious of his mission or not, the

⁵⁹ *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. III, p. 830.

⁶⁰ Hyatt, *Interpreter's Bible*, p. 1011.

⁶¹ Bright, pp. 359-360.

Babylonians will be successful in subduing Jerusalem.⁶² Nothing could stop this from happening except the repentance and return of Judah to Yahweh, and at this late date it seemed impossible. Jeremiah 32:5b is not in the Septuagint but it does express the feeling of Jeremiah in regard to what Judah should do, for it says: “though you fight against the Chaldeans, you shall not succeed?” Neither is Jeremiah 37:9-10 from Jeremiah, but it does express the view that Jeremiah expected the capture of Jerusalem by the Chaldeans as the will of God.⁶³

Do not deceive yourselves, saying, “The Chaldeans will surely go away from us,” for they will not go away. Even if you defeated the whole army of Chaldeans who are fighting against you, and there remained of them only wounded men in their tents, they would rise up and burn this city with fire

Jeremiah did believe that the capture of Jerusalem was inevitable as long as Judah was unwilling to repent and conform to the will of God. This is vividly expressed in his encounter with Hananiah in Jeremiah 28:13-14; where he is told by God to inform Hananiah that it will do little good to revolt against Babylon:

Go, tell Hananiah, Thus says the LORD: You have broken wooden bars only to forge iron bars in place of them! For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: I have put an iron yoke on the neck of all these nations so that they may serve King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, and they shall indeed serve him; I have even given him the wild animals.

The only thing that is comforting from the above is that Babylon too will eventually be humbled before the sovereignty of God. It is difficult to see in all this the activity of God in history because so much seems to be senseless and without purpose, but if it can be remembered that God is trying to mold the clay according to his will and for the good of the vessel it somehow begins to make sense. The total picture must be viewed. God is sovereign but there is a limitation on his sovereignty. That limitation is human freedom, and although human freedom itself

⁶² Hyatt, *Jeremiah, Prophet of Courage and Hope*, p. 82.

⁶³ Hyatt, *Interpreter's Bible*, p. 1070.

is limited; it would be impossible for freedom to exist apart from God's sovereignty, which ultimately controls the future. God does not merely work with patience at the potter's wheel, but he works in absolute certainty with his purpose in mind. When the clay becomes unworkable it must be either destroyed or reworked. If this were not the case then everything would be chaos and humanity would lose all hope for freedom.

CHAPTER FIVE

GOD IS PERSONAL

The personality of God can be seen in his relationship with the Hebrew people, but this relationship was not centered in privilege for Israel but responsibility. It was through this race that all the nations of the earth were to be blessed. Therefore, God takes the first step in choosing his people. He calls them. They do not call him. He chooses nations. Nations do not choose him. In the case of Israel, she was selected out of many races to do a specific work for God. The fact that God chose Israel has been demonstrated by her entire history, for God delivered her from Egypt and gave her the land of Canaan. Moreover he not only defended them against their foes but gave them victory on the battlefield, but God did all this to reveal himself and his will to humankind through Israel.⁶⁴ Jeremiah believed that Israel was the chosen people of Yahweh, and he describes her as the “first fruits of his harvest” (Jeremiah 2:3), the “choice vine of the purest stock” (Jeremiah 2:21), “my beloved” (Jeremiah 11:15 and 12:7), “my heritage” (Jeremiah 12:7, 9), “my vineyard” (12:10), “the Lord’s flock” (Jeremiah 13:17), and “my first born” (Jeremiah 31:9).⁶⁵ The idea that God is working through a particular nation and people to reveal himself to the world cannot help but lead to the concept of a personal God. In analyzing Jeremiah’s concept of a personal God, working in the life of his nation as well as himself, is vividly described throughout the book of Jeremiah. We shall proceed by lifting up some of these passages that describe the nature of Jeremiah’s personal God.

In Jeremiah 1:5-10 we find at least eight references to a personal relationship between the prophet and God. This passage which is the call of Jeremiah, illustrates very well the involvement of God in his life. Below are eight references:⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Jefferson, p. 95.

⁶⁵ *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. III, p. 829.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 829.

I knew you
I consecrated you
I appointed you
I send you
I command you
I am with you
I have put my words in your mouth
I have set you over nations

Jeremiah 1:5 needs some explanation. It reads: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.” “I knew you” means “I chose you.” The word “know” was equivalent to the word “chose.”⁶⁷ This is significant because it is not just a matter of knowing who Jeremiah is, but God was entering into a definite relationship with him. He gave to him a mission from which Jeremiah would rather renege, but the word comes back from the Lord in Jeremiah 1:8: “Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you.” Being chosen to a position of such responsibility frightened Jeremiah, but after going through a struggle with God he discovered that the presence of God is indeed his strength. In Jeremiah 1:9, the prophet recognizes that he has been filled with the sense of an inward presence of God:

Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, “Now I have put my words in your mouth.”

There were times of course when Jeremiah felt as though God was not with him, but to offset such times, we read such passages as Jeremiah 15:16:

Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart...

The call of Jeremiah definitely reveals the personality of God in that he relates with his people in the personal involvement of their lives and their destinies, and such involvement does not deal with individuals alone but with whole nations. The mission is overwhelming but God assures Jeremiah of his personal involvement when he says to him in

⁶⁷ Hyatt, *Interpreter's Bible*, p. 801.

Jeremiah 1:19, “They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the LORD, to deliver you.”

The personality of God is portrayed in Jeremiah’s description of Israel’s faithfulness as a bride. Jeremiah idealizes the wilderness sojourn as a time when Israel’s relationship to Yahweh was perfect, and to this extent he shows God’s involvement in her early life. Jeremiah 2:2 is the crucial verse: “I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown.” Here Yahweh is described as a husband figure and Israel as the bride. The Hebrew word “hesed” is rendered into the English as “devotion.” Usually this word is not used to describe a quality of love that is exhibited toward God, but in this case, it is conditioned by the figure of marriage employed to describe the covenant relationship between Yahweh and Israel. In the days of her wilderness wandering she is described as having been devotedly loyal to him.⁶⁸ Usually “hesed” is reserved to show God’s gracious favor toward his people, or the favor of person to person; but Jeremiah is attempting to tell how Yahweh participated in Israel’s life by remembering the devotion of her youth or her love as a bride. The importance of this passage lies in its attempt to show the personal relationship that existed between Yahweh and Israel and the hope that it would exist once again. Jeremiah is aware of its possibility and it is to this end that he is prophesying.

Another phrase that is used to show this personal relationship is the one found in Jeremiah 3:19, where God hopefully speaks to Israel saying: “I thought you would call me, My Father, and would not turn from following me.” God expects them to do more than call him father. He desires that they match their words with deeds.⁶⁹ It is only as they do this that he is able to enter into a personal relationship with them. Jeremiah’s purpose here is to call Israel to return to God so that a real relationship can be established, and this concept is important to Jeremiah because it reveals God’s willingness to become involved in a personal relationship with his people. This relationship is expressed here in terms of a father-son symbolism.

⁶⁸ Bright, p. 14.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

A third figure of speech that vividly reveals the reality of God in the life of Jeremiah is found in Jeremiah 2:13, where God is described as “the fountain of living waters.” Since the climate of Palestine is such that its rainfall is not very dependable, this figure of speech is very meaningful in such an environment. The people had to depend upon artificial cisterns to catch and store the annual rainfall average of less than 26 inches. Cistern water had a tendency to become stale, but the living water of the fountain was always fresh. Comparing Israel’s God to a fountain of living waters meant that he was living, dependable, and ever available; whereas, the Canaanite deities, on which many Israelites were depending, were broken cisterns that could not hold living water.⁷⁰ However, even though Yahweh was available, invigorating, and creative at times; there were also times when Jeremiah spoke of him as a “deceitful brook.” In Jeremiah 15:18 he complains in one of his depressive moods that God is like waters that fail: “Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Truly, you are to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail.” Although there were times in the life of Jeremiah when he felt as though God had let him down, he nevertheless sees God as one who is personally involved within his life and one to whom he can pray and be heard.

There are many references in Jeremiah to God’s presence in the midst of Israel. One such reference is in Jeremiah 14:9: “Yet you, O LORD, are in the midst of us, and we are called by your name; do not forsake us!” Moreover he thought of God as being “a God at hand” and “a God afar off” as seen in Jeremiah 23:23-24, which would be to say that God is both immanent and transcendent.

Am I a God near by, says the LORD, and not a God far off?
Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them? says
the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and earth? says the LORD.

The meaning of the above passage is not that God is far away, but that he is no local deity from whom one might conceivably hide. He is a God who is in heaven and is therefore able to see everything. A similar thought is found in the fourteenth-century B.C.E. Hymn to *Aten* from Egypt: “Thou hast made the distant sky in order to rise therein, in order

⁷⁰ Hyatt, *Jeremiah, Prophet of Courage and Hope*, p. 85.

to see all that thou dost make.”⁷¹ God is both transcendent and immanent, but Jeremiah is placing the emphasis upon his transcendence only to make his immanence more vividly felt.

Jeremiah tries to promote personal religion in various ways. Religion could be personal because Yahweh was personally involved with his people, and that meant that religion was not dependent upon the existence of the temple in Jerusalem, the land of Palestine, or the rite of circumcision. People could seek him wherever they might happen to be living—even in Babylon, and for this reason he says in Jeremiah 29:13-14:

When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

This reference points to the fact that God is as near to the devout Israelite in Babylon as in Jerusalem, and that he still has a share in his purpose and that he may approach him through prayer. The emancipation of the spirit of religion from that of national worship could not be more clearly enunciated than in Jeremiah’s exhortation to the exiles in Babylon.⁷²

Obedience to Yahweh was necessary in order for a genuine relationship to exist with Israel; and in Jeremiah, the word “covenant” emerges as the underlying attitude in the relationship between Yahweh and Israel. It is a new covenant that will be made with the nation; but its implications serve to increase the importance of individuals, their motives and their relationship to God.⁷³ We catch a glimpse of the covenant relationship in Jeremiah 31:1 where the Lord says: “At that time...I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be

⁷¹ Bright, pp. 152-153.

⁷² Skinner, p. 289.

⁷³ Hyatt, *Interpreter’s Bible*, p. 785.

my people.” The high point of Jeremiah’s theology of a personal concept of God can be seen in Jeremiah 31:34:

No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

This passage is disputed, but Skinner says that the theological insight is so profoundly spiritual and personal that it is hardly conceivable that anyone else but Jeremiah could have written it.⁷⁴ On the other hand, they could be interpreted in a trivial and formal sense which would stamp them as being unmistakably the composition of a late Jewish legalist.⁷⁵ However, the idea of a new covenant seems to be in keeping with Jeremiah’s concept of God; and to show how this is true we must analyze the structure of the new covenant. By a new covenant, Jeremiah means a new religious relationship; and it is to this relationship that we must now turn. John Skinner constructs the content of the covenant as follows:⁷⁶

The Covenant formula is “I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people.” (1) There are conditions to be fulfilled by Israel, viz. (a) exclusive allegiance to Yahwe, (b) obedience to His will as expressed in His Law (Torah), and in the continuous revelation of prophecy. (iii) The promises on the part of Yahwe are (a) to treat Israel as His peculiar people, and (b) to secure it in the possession of the land of Canaan.

The positive features of the new religious relationship to be established by the new covenant are threefold: (1) Inwardness: “I will put my law in their inward part;” (2) Individualism: “all shall know me” (3) Forgiveness of sins: “their sins I will remember no more.”⁷⁷ The new covenant makes the promise that everyone will know Yahweh as the

⁷⁴ Skinner, p. 320.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 320.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 328.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 329.

prophets had known him, and the prophets know him directly, intimately, and personally. It is through forgiveness of sin that restoration into the fellowship of God is made possible, and this relationship had been broken when the old covenant was broken.⁷⁸ It is this possibility of reconciliation that motivates Jeremiah, and enables us to say that he believed that one could be involved in a personal relationship with God.

To sum up Jeremiah's concept of a personal God we must make a passing comparison of his call with that of Isaiah's call. In Jeremiah there is no Throne, Appearance, Majesty, or overwhelming sense of Holiness and Glory. The deity simply talks to Jeremiah man to man. There is no sense of awe, but rather the question, "What do you see?" The nature of his encounter lies in the branch of an almond tree and a boiling pot.⁷⁹ Jeremiah believed in the majesty and transcendence of Yahweh, but this did not leave him adoring God in awe; but rather, it helped him to see God as an immediate, personal, spiritual presence with whom he could enter into full and intimate communion.⁸⁰ Thus Jeremiah becomes one of the most subjective of the prophets, but he is still able to keep a perspective between transcendence and immanence. He retained a vivid consciousness of the self over against the divine.⁸¹

Jeremiah talked with God with such familiarity that it seems to border upon irreverence at many points, and his prayers reveal a most intimate outpouring of the heart, which is in the closest fellowship with God.⁸² It is precisely this struggle that he had with God that enabled him to see God's concern for his people and place his faith in the power of the goodness of Yahweh. This does not keep him from struggling and wrestling with God. He recoils from the terrible office of a prophet and cries out perplexed and defiant in Jeremiah 20:7: "you

⁷⁸ Hyatt, *Interpreter's Bible*, p. 1040.

⁷⁹ Smith, pp. 351-352.

⁸⁰ Calkins, p. 356.

⁸¹ Hyatt, *Interpreter's Bible*, p. 782.

⁸² Calkins, p. 355.

have overpowered me, and you have prevailed.” The whole religious experience of Jeremiah was a struggle with the divine *will*, which left him not adoring but amazed and perplexed. There was no strength left in Jeremiah to glory in the nature of God, which existed behind his divine will.⁸³

Yet it was Jeremiah’s struggle with Yahweh that led him to see the great significance of the individual in God’s sight, and consequently to see the intimate relationship that is possible between humanity and God. Accepting his role as a prophet he felt himself cut off from fellowship with other religious personalities, but it helped him by forcing him into a personal relationship with God that might have been impossible under any other circumstances. Through such a struggle there issued a faith more sure of God, even if there did not seem to be the same awe and high wonder which fell upon Israel through the other prophets.⁸⁴ Jeremiah’s contemporaries seemed to place their belief in God from the foundation of unquestioned tradition, history, and the teachings of the past; and although this was certainly part of Jeremiah’s spiritual inheritance, he also had his own powerful and exquisite experience of God, so convincing that he could no more doubt the being of God than he could doubt the reality of existence itself.⁸⁵ To him God was a fact of immediate and indubitable experience; and therefore, his conception of a personal God was not derived from knowledge about God, but from acquaintance with him.⁸⁶

⁸³ Smith, pp. 352-353.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

⁸⁵ Calkins, p. 135.

⁸⁶ Hyatt, *Jeremiah the Prophet of Courage and Hope*, p. 75.

CHAPTER SIX

GOD IS STEADFAST LOVE

Much of what could be covered in this chapter has already been discussed in preceding chapters, and so we shall make an attempt to show the underlying motive of Yahweh's activity in Israel's history. What is significant at the outset is the fact that Jeremiah does not say anything about God expressing love to him directly, but he does speak of Yahweh expressing mercy to Israel.⁸⁷ From the time Jeremiah was called, he saw the double aspect of judgment and renewal, doom and promise; and it became the determining power in human affairs as it was released through the prophet both "to wreck and to ruin" and "to build and to plant." Jeremiah's preaching, in the days when others were seeking the protection of false securities, was devoted to announcing the day of doom; but he never lost sight of the truth that God's purpose was not merely to overthrow, but also to build up. He understood with keen insight that the ground would have to be swept clean of all false foundations so that God would be able to plant anew. He kept his eyes steadily on the vision of the New People and the New Age that lay on the other side of disaster.⁸⁸ Much of this last section will deal with the idea of the restoration of Israel, and it is from this idea that we conclude with Jeremiah's concept of a God of mercy. It is not that this God expressed any love to Jeremiah in particular, but Jeremiah saw this love being expressed to Israel.

There are several passages that are quite striking in regard to the steadfast love of Yahweh. The first of these is Jeremiah 3:12, where the following is recorded: "Return, faithless Israel, says the LORD. I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful, says the LORD; I will not be angry forever." This particular reference seems to add to Jeremiah's passionate plea for repentance, the assurance that Yahweh is full of

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p, 82.

⁸⁸ Bernard W. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1957), p. 351.

mercy to the unfaithful when they return to him.⁸⁹ The critical word here is “hasidh” which is an adjective describing the activity of one who shows “hesed” or “steadfast love.” The word “hasidh” is used to describe God’s love in this reference, but the only other place it is used in reference to God is in Psalm 145:17. It has been used quite frequently of persons in the Psalms, where it may be translated “godly,” “saint,” or “holy.” Yahweh is “hasidh” in that he manifests his “steadfast love” toward Israel. George Adam Smith renders it as “loyal-in-love” but the New Revised Standard Version usually translate it as “merciful” whenever it refers to God. A full translation of the line in Jeremiah 3:12 could be rendered as follows: “I am merciful.”⁹⁰

This concept of “steadfast love” or “I am the one who expressed steadfast love [mercy]” is the essence of God in Jeremiah’s concept of religion. To know God is to be likeminded with God, to have a sympathetic understanding of His will and nature. The mind of God is declared in Jeremiah 9:23-24 which, whether written by Jeremiah or not, sums up his conception of what religion is:

Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; but let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the LORD; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the LORD.

The word rendered as “steadfast love” is the Hebrew word “hesed.” Hence if we ask, in what religion consists, the answer could not be in anything external, nor in the possession of a written book, nor in the observance of traditional rules, but in the heart where steadfast love emerges. However, we must guard against any such idea that a persons’ heart can generate the true knowledge of God; for in reality it is Yahweh who shows kindness and mercy and takes the initiative in making himself known.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Bright, p. 25.

⁹⁰ Hyatt, *Jeremiah, Prophet of Courage and Hope*, p. 83.

⁹¹ Skinner, p. 122.

In Jeremiah 31:2-3 we find the word “hesed” used in parallelism with everlasting love.”

The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness; when Israel sought for rest, the LORD appeared to him from far away. I have loved you with an *everlasting love*; therefore I have continued my *faithfulness* to you.

In this passage “hesed” is translated as “faithfulness,” but it is in parallel with “everlasting love.” Jeremiah is assuring the Israelites that Yahweh’s love and faithfulness are not temporary, but ephemeral; and this love for Israel is still available to her, being the very basis of his promise to build them up again. The first part of this reference shows how God bestowed his steadfast love on Israel by delivering her from the sword of the Pharaoh at the Red Sea.⁹² The above is a figurative description of the present condition of the people in exile, and its impending restoration through the inexhaustible grace and kindness of Yahweh.⁹³ This concept is very much in line with the prophet after the fall of Jerusalem, for Jeremiah decided to stay in Judah rather than to go to Babylon where he might have received kind treatment. He stayed to support Gedaliah, the new governor, in his attempt to restore and build up the land.

In chapter 31 there is the prediction of the immediate return of the people from the many lands to which they have been exiled. In this section there are many phrases that are clearly Second Isaiah and since the return is concerned with the whole Diaspora, everything seems to indicate that the writer is later than Jeremiah.⁹⁴ The symbolism of a highway is described as the means by which the people are to return to their homeland, and this is described in Jeremiah 31:9, which possesses at least a portion of Jeremiah’s thought: “I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.” The last part of this verse is probably from Jeremiah because it is highly unlikely that

⁹² Hyatt, *Jeremiah, Prophet of Courage and Hope*, p. 84.

⁹³ Skinner, p. 304.

⁹⁴ Hyatt, *Interpreter’s Bible*, p. 1030.

any postexilic writer would consider Ephraim rather than Judah as the firstborn.⁹⁵ In Jeremiah 31:20-21 Ephraim is reminded of the way she went into exile and told to give careful attention to this highway in order that she may return. The exiles are to remember the difficulties that led to the exile, so that they might have greater ambition to repent and return.

Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he the child I delight in? As often as I speak against him, I still remember him. Therefore I am deeply moved for him; I will surely have mercy on him, says the LORD. Set up road markers for yourself, make yourself guideposts; consider well the highway, the road by which you went. Return, O virgin Israel, return to these your cities.

It is the prophet who is exhorting the people to return, but he is speaking for Yahweh. God may have destroyed them for their repeated rebellions against him, but in the future he desires to establish his “new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.”⁹⁶

There is one final episode in the life of Jeremiah that clearly illustrates the essence of his message. It is the purchase of his family estate. Jeremiah was in prison while the Babylonian army was pounding at the walls of Jerusalem, and the people were beginning to resort to cannibalism, since bread was so scarce. It was only a matter of hours until doom would fall, but Jeremiah is able to think of the future, at a time when most people were driven to despair. Word was brought to Jeremiah that he had an opportunity to purchase his cousin’s field in the city of Anathoth. He carried out this transaction while he was still in prison. All the proper legalities were taken care of and the deeds were put away for safekeeping. This might have seemed like sheer madness, but to Jeremiah it was a sign from Yahweh that the people of Israel would be given a future in the Promised land, as stated in Jeremiah 32:15: “Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.”⁹⁷ Jeremiah interpreted his opportunity to purchase

⁹⁵ Hyatt, *Interpreter’s Bible*, p. 1030.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1030.

⁹⁷ Anderson, p. 351.

land as a sign from God that beyond the impending tragedy, normal life would one day be resumed in this land. In view of this passage, the authenticity of which is unquestionable, one does not need to ask whether or not Jeremiah held out hope for the future. All that remains is the form that this hope would take.⁹⁸ The reason that Jeremiah could hold out hope for the future is because he understood the nature of God as being that of “steadfast love.” The conditions may not have been so bright when Jeremiah purchased his land, but he knew that a brighter day lay ahead because of the faithfulness of God. In spite of the fact that Jeremiah 33:1-11 is from the Deuteronomic editor, it still depicts the thought of Jeremiah’s hope for the future:

Thus says the LORD: In this place of which you say, “It is a waste without human beings or animals,” in the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem that are desolate, without inhabitants, human or animal, there shall once more be heard the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voices of those who sing, as they bring thank offerings to the house of the LORD:

Give thanks to the LORD of hosts,
for the LORD is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever!

⁹⁸ Bright, p. 239.

PART TWO

THE TRUE PROPHET

*God is bound to break from prophets
who spurn his love and his law.*

CHAPTER ONE

THE TEXTS

Jeremiah 28:5-11

A brief comparison will be made of the Septuagint, Peshitta, and Masoretic text. We shall first quote the verse under consideration from the Septuagint and then begin our discussion by comparing that with the other versions. Our reason for doing it in this way is simply that the Septuagint is the oldest version. We recognize that this does not necessarily make it the most accurate; but we shall take this approach anyway, if only for the sake of having some kind of order. Before analyzing our text, we shall describe each of these ancient texts.

The Septuagint is the oldest Greek Version of the Old Testament. Although its exact date is unknown, the Pentateuch was probably translated in Alexandria by the middle of the third century B.C.E.; and the completion of the Old Testament was probably accomplished by the end of the second century B.C.E. This Greek translation of Jeremiah seems to be based on a Hebrew text which is at variance with the Masoretic text. Not only is there a difference in content, but also in regard to chronology. For this reason the Septuagint is of considerable value in the restoration of a Hebrew base.⁹⁹ The Peshitta, which means “simple,” can be contrasted to the elaborate forms of the Syriac text. The Old Testament was the work of many hands, and the Pentateuch was probably finished around the second or third century B.C.E. The text follows the Masoretic text very closely, but some books have been revised to conform to the Septuagint.¹⁰⁰ The Masoretic text was established from the fifth to the tenth centuries B.C.E. by several generations of Jewish scholars, most of whom were called Masoretes.

⁹⁹ J.W. Wevers, “Septuagint,” *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. IV (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), pp. 273-277.

¹⁰⁰ B.H. Metzger, “Versions, Ancient,” *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. IV (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), p. 754,

These scholars were committed to the safeguarding and transmission of the traditional text.¹⁰¹ It is interesting to note that when the New Testament authors quote from the Old Testament, most of them quote from the Septuagint or other Greek version rather than from the original Hebrew.¹⁰²

Jeremiah 28:5: (septuagint)

Then Jeremias spoke to Ananias in the sight of all the people, and in the sight of the priests that stood in the house of the Lord.

In the Pishitta we find “the false prophet Hananiah” included; whereas, in the Septuagint it is simply “Ananias.” The word “prophet” is also inserted before Jeremiah in the Pishitta while it does not appear in the Septuagint at all. In the Masoretic text the word “prophet” occurs before Jeremiah and Hananiah, but the word “false” does not appear as an adjective describing Hananiah. The King James and the New Revised Standard Versions both follow the Masoretic text at this point by including simply the word “prophet” before the personal names of Jeremiah and Hananiah. Neither of the English versions insert the adjective “false” to describe Hananiah.

Jeremiah 28:6: (septuagint)

and Jeremias said, May the Lord indeed do thus; may he confirm thy word which thou dost prophesy, to return the vessels of the house of the Lord, and all the captivity, out of Babylon to this place.

The Peshitta leaves out the personal adjective “prophet” before the name of Jeremiah, as does the Septuagint; but it adds the word “Amen,” which is absent in the Septuagint. In the Masoretic text we find both the words : “Amen” and “prophet” included. The King James and the New Revised Standard Versions follow the Masoretic text by including both the words “Amen” and “prophet.”

¹⁰¹ Arthur Jeffery, “Text and Ancient Versions of the Old Testament,” *The Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1956), p. 46.

¹⁰² Metzger, p. 750.

Jeremiah 28:7: (septuagint)

Nevertheless hear ye the word of the Lord which I speak in your ears, and in the ears of all the people.

Both the Pishitta and the Masoretic text simply say “this word” rather than “the word of the Lord” as found in the Septuagint. The King James and the New Revised Standard Versions adhere to the Masoretic text rather than the Septuagint.

Jeremiah 28:8: (septuagint)

The prophets that were before me and before you of old, also prophesied over many a country, and against great kingdoms, concerning war.

The Septuagint does not insert “of evil and of pestilence” as do both the Peshitta and the Masoretic text. The King James Version inserts “of evil and of pestilence,” but the New Revised Standard Version translates it as “famine and pestilence.” According to George Adam Smith, the word “evil” could be changed to “famine” by changing only one letter in the Hebrew.¹⁰³ Apparently, the translators of the New Revised Standard Version believed that the Hebrew word meant “famine” rather than “evil.” They could not find help in the Greek since the Septuagint ends with the word “war.”

Jeremiah 28:9: (septuagint)

As for the prophet that has prophesied for peace, when the word has come to pass, they shall know the prophet whom the Lord has sent them in truth.

The Pishitta and the Masoretic text both include “of the prophet” following “when the word.” The King James and the New Revised Standard Versions also add “of the prophet” remaining faithful to the Masoretic text over the Septuagint.

¹⁰³ George Adam Smith, *Jeremiah* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1922), p. 252.

Jeremiah 28:10: (septuagint)

Then Ananias took the yokes from the neck of Jeremias in the sight of all the people, and broke them to pieces.

Both the Pishitta and the Masoretic text do not include “in the sight of all the people.” The Pishitta describes Hananiah as “the false prophet” and is the only text which does this. The King James and the New Revised Standard Versions are the same as the Masoretic text. Neither one follow the Pishitta or the Septuagint. However, the New Revised Standard Version does follow the Septuagint at one point in this verse. The Septuagint makes yoke plural and the Pishitta expands upon it by making it to read, “the bands of the yoke.” The King James Version follows the Masoretic text where “yoke” appears as a singular noun. On the other hand, the Revised Standard Version makes an interesting combination by referring to “yoke” in the singular and “bars” in the plural, and so we see it appear as “yoke-bars.” The New Revised Standard Version eliminates “bars” and makes the “yoke” singular.

Jeremiah 28:11: (septuagint)

And Ananias spoke in the presence of all the people, saying, Thus said the Lord; Thus will I break the yoke of the king of Babylon from the necks of all the nations. And Jeremias went his way.

The Septuagint differs from the Pishitta and the Masoretic text in that it omits “of Nebuchadrezzar” and “within two full years.” The King James Version reads the same as the Masoretic text, but the New Revised Standard Version differs slightly. Instead of saying “within the space of two full years” it simply says “within two years.” The difference may not be significant but there is a difference. A final difference lies in the use of the adjective “prophet” in the Pishitta, the Masoretic text, the King James and the New Revised Standard Versions. The Septuagint does not use it while all the others do.

The Septuagint is the shorter version, but the King James and the New Revised Standard Versions show a tendency to be more faithful to the Masoretic text. The New Revised Standard does follow the Septuagint more often than does the King James Version; but in regard to these passages, the differences are only slight. We can conclude that our English translations are more heavily influenced by the Hebrew

texts than the Greek. In the case of Jeremiah 28:5-11 the differences do not seem to be crucial. The portions left out by the Septuagint are usually self-evident when one considers the context of the material under consideration. These omissions do not seriously take away from the message being transmitted to the reader.

The New Revised Standard Version

Jeremiah 28:5: Then the prophet Jeremiah spoke to the prophet Hananiah in the presence of the priests and all the people who were standing in the house of the LORD;

Jeremiah 28:6: and the prophet Jeremiah said, “Amen! May the LORD do so; may the LORD fulfill the words that you have prophesied, and bring back to this place from Babylon the vessels of the house of the LORD, and all the exiles.

Jeremiah 28:7: But listen now to this word that I speak in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people.

Jeremiah 28:8: The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms.

Jeremiah 28:9: As for the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of that prophet comes true, then it will be known that the LORD

Jeremiah 28:10: Then the prophet Hananiah took the yoke from the neck of the prophet Jeremiah, and broke it.

Jeremiah 28:11: And Hananiah spoke in the presence of all the people, saying, “Thus says the LORD: This is how I will break the yoke of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon from the neck of all the nations within two years.” At this, the prophet Jeremiah went his way.

CHAPTER TWO

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Egypt and Babylonia were the major powers. The crucial Battle of Carchemish in 605 B.C.E. dealt a severe blow to the Egyptians and their allies, from which they would never recover.¹⁰⁴ The Chaldean Nabopolassar led a successful attack on Nineveh and then died shortly after the Battle of Carchemish. He was succeeded by his son Nebuchadrezzar II in 605 B.C.E. Countries once under Assyrian control passed to the Babylonian yoke. Before the Battle of Carchemish, the Egyptians had placed Jehoiakim on the throne in Judah; but after this crucial battle, Jehoiakim had no choice but to become a vassal to the Babylonian grip. His vacillation in paying tribute to the Babylonians brought two invasions to Judah, one taking place in 602 B.C.E. and the other in 598 B.C.E. during which he died a natural death. Upon the death of Jehoiakim, his son Jehoiachin succeeded him to the throne. He ruled for three months and then surrendered to Nebuchadrezzar. Upon the surrender of Jerusalem, Nebuchadrezzar did not take the independence of Judah away, but appointed another king. The one chosen was Zedekiah, son of Josiah.¹⁰⁵

In 597 B.C.E. the first deportation occurred. In it a large number of the population was taken to Babylon, including Jehoiachin. The record of this captivity is given in 2 Kings 24:14:

He carried away all Jerusalem, all the officials, all the warriors, ten thousand captives, all the artisans and the smiths; no one remained, except the poorest people of the land.

While there may be disagreements in regard to the exact number of people that were taken, it is safe to assume that a large number were

¹⁰⁴ James Philip Hyatt, "Exegesis," *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. V (New York: Abingdon Press, 1956), p. 777.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 778.

taken and that Babylon had shown its power. Zedekiah may have been king, but it was only by sufferance.¹⁰⁶

Zedekiah is portrayed in the biblical records as a weak, vacillating king who was willing to listen to the counsels of revolt. He ruled for eleven years, ten of which he followed a pro-Babylonian policy.¹⁰⁷ Finally he gave in to the pro-Egyptian faction in Jerusalem and withheld tribute from Babylonia. The real turning point came in 593 B.C.E., when Necho was replaced by Psamtik as Pharaoh of Egypt. Egypt, the main power in the South, began to stir up revolt among the smaller states of the Palestinian and Mediterranean areas. This was not difficult to do since there was some antagonism felt toward the Chaldeans, and this was particularly true in Judah where many of their people were exiles under subjection. Egypt desired that Edom, Moab, Ammon, Judah and the Phoenician city-states of Tyre and Sidon join in a conspiracy to throw off the Chaldean yoke.¹⁰⁸ Jeremiah 27:3 implies that the kings of Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre, and Sidon sent envoys to Jerusalem for a conference with Zedekiah to either persuade him to rebel or plan the strategy for such a rebellion. At this time Jeremiah appeared to make his position clear. These nations ought to submit to the yoke of Babylonia, for Yahweh has given all of them into the hand of Nebuchadrezzar, who is his servant.¹⁰⁹ It is at this point that Jeremiah meets Hananiah and our text becomes relevant.

In Jeremiah 28:1 we are told that Jeremiah met Hananiah “at the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah king of Judah, in the fifth month of the fourth year.” The Hebrew text has “at the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah,” and has probably been erroneously influenced by Jeremiah 26:1, and 27:1. The Septuagint has “in the fourth year of Zedekiah king of Judah, in the fifth month” and is more than likely to be correct. James Philip Hyatt indicates that the fifth month is that of Tebet, which

¹⁰⁶ J.R. Dummelow, *A Commentary on the Holy Bible* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1944), p. 471.

¹⁰⁷ Hyatt, “Exegesis,” *The Interpreter’s Bible*, p. 778.

¹⁰⁸ Elmer A. Leslie, *Jeremiah* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1954), p. 218.

¹⁰⁹ Hyatt, “Exegesis,” *The Interpreter’s Bible*, p. 1010.

places the time somewhere between December and January;¹¹⁰ but Elmer A. Leslie asserts that the fifth month falls somewhere between July and August.¹¹¹ At any rate, the time was approximately 594 B.C.E. and the place was apparently in the Temple area, for many priests and people seemed to have been present.¹¹² Zedekiah had been on the throne only four years and now he and the kings of the surrounding nations were considering a rebellion against Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. Hananiah encourages this rebellion with his prophecy in Jeremiah 28:2-4:

Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. Within two years I will bring back to this place all the vessels of the LORD'S house, which King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon took away from this place and carried to Babylon. I will also bring back to this place King Jeconiah son of Jehoiakim of Judah, and all the exiles from Judah who went to Babylon, says the LORD, for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon.

This prophet of hope is a fellow tribesman of Jeremiah and was from Gibeon, one of the four Levitical cities of the tribe of Benjamin. Jeremiah, who is wearing a symbolic yoke, faces Hananiah the prophet; Benjamite against Benjamite.¹¹³ Hananiah was a representative of the “prophets of weal” who continually prophesied peace, but his predictions about the exiles and the vessels proved to be wrong.¹¹⁴

The vessels, about which he speaks, consisted of three different types of objects that were valuable to the Babylonians because of the metal they contained. First there were the pillars, which were made of

¹¹⁰ Hyatt, “Exegesis,” *The Interpreter’s Bible*, p. 1014.

¹¹¹ Leslie, p. 222.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 222.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

¹¹⁴ Hyatt, “Exegesis,” *The Interpreter’s Bible*, p. 1014.

bronze and stood in front of the Temple. These were described in 1 Kings 7:15. In 1 Kings 7:23-26 there is a description of the sea, which was a great bronze basin standing in the Temple court. Finally, there were the stands as described in 1 King 7:27-37, which were the objects on wheels.¹¹⁵

Jeremiah is slightly older than fifty years of age when he confronts Hananiah. He received a prophetic revelation from God to make a wooden yoke and harness it to his neck with thongs and bars, as would be done to a plowing or threshing ox.¹¹⁶ According to C.M. Wolf, the single yoke-bar with two loops of rope or nooses for the necks was used, as this was the most simple form.¹¹⁷ With the symbolic yoke he stands before the foreign statesmen delivering a symbolic message even in silence. He tries to turn these emissaries aside to prevent a revolt against Babylonia. He knows that if they submit to the Chaldean yoke, although it may mean a subservience lasting many years, that they at least will not be carried into exile. It would mean that the remaining Jews would remain unmolested upon their own land to till their own soil.¹¹⁸

Even though Jeremiah evidently sensed that rebellion against Babylonia would be unsuccessful, his reasons were basically religious. Nebuchadrezzar was being used by the hand of God and rebellion against him would be futile. There is no record of any rebellion taking place at this time, and perhaps Jeremiah's counsel may have been an influential factor in preventing it. It was probably the pro-Egyptian party in Jerusalem that favored rebellion at this time, but even this factor was most likely encouraged by the accession of Psamtik II as Pharaoh of Egypt. Later this faction did gain the upper hand with Zedekiah and it brought about a revolt which resulted in the destruction

¹¹⁵ Hyatt, "Exegesis," *The Interpreter's Bible*, p. 1013.

¹¹⁶ Leslie, p. 218.

¹¹⁷ C.U. Wolf, "Yoke," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. iv (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962). p. 924.

¹¹⁸ Leslie, p. 219.

of Jerusalem in 587 B.C.,E.¹¹⁹ The king was taken into captivity, and many more Jews were exiled. This time Judah was made a province of the Babylonian Empire; and instead of being allowed an independent king, they were given a governor. The governor became Gedaliah, who was from a highly respectable Jewish family. After ruling for about five years he was assassinated by Ishmael, who was a member of the royal family under the goading of the Ammonites. Fearing Babylonian reprisal, many of the Jews fled to Egypt and took Jeremiah with them. Little is known of the history of the Babylonian province of Judah after the death of Gedaliah, its governor.¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Hyatt, "Exegesis," *The Interpreter's Bible*, p. 1010.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 778.

CHAPTER THREE

THE AUTHENTICITY

Chapters 27 and 28 belong together, but while chapter 27 is in the first person, chapter 28 is in the third person. This could mean that chapter 28 is a biographical account.¹²¹ Since the narrative is in the third person it would be a reasonable assumption that it is taken from Baruch's memoirs.¹²² In chapter 27 there is some trace of the Deuteronomic editor; but chapter 28 seems relatively free of his editing. His diction is evident especially in Jeremiah 27:5, 8, and 13. There is considerable content omitted in the Septuagint, but it has to do primarily with the return of the Jews from exile and the temple objects. It seems possible that the Septuagint represents an earlier text, and that the additions found in the Masoretic text were made near the end of the Babylonian exile or after it was over.¹²³ There is no reason to doubt that Baruch was the author of the biographical data recorded in chapter 28,

However we cannot say that there is no doubt in regard to authorship, for Sigmund Mowinckel denies Baruch's authorship of this work and assigns it a date after Jeremiah's death. According to him it was composed in Egypt somewhere around 580-480 B.C.E.¹²⁴ On the other hand, John Bright arrives at the conclusion that it was probably Baruch who is the author. He admits that it cannot be proven, but that it seems entirely likely. He asserts that it could hardly have been one who was not a contemporary of Jeremiah, for he must have been an eyewitness of the events that are recorded. Chapter 45 is cited as one

¹²¹ John Bright, "Jeremiah," *The Anchor Bible*, Vol. XXI (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1965), p. 202.

¹²² H.H. Rowley, *Peake's Commentary on the Bible* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1962), p. 554.

¹²³ Hyatt, "Exegesis," *The Interpreter's Bible*, p. 1010.

¹²⁴ *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. II, p. 832.

which could hardly have had another source; and in addition to this evidence, the biographies cover the period from 609 B.C.E. to the end of Jeremiah's career in Judah. Baruch is known to have been with Jeremiah from 605 B.C.E. (Jeremiah 36) until after 587 B.C.E. (Jeremiah 43:3).¹²⁵

The best evidence given for rejecting Baruch's authorship is offered by H. G. May. The best we can hope to do here is to briefly summarize his position. He begins by showing that there is not even the slightest evidence that any part of the book was ever written by Baruch. The question of the movement from first person to third person is not too significant, since it can be explained by the fact that even the biographical sections are probably dependent upon autobiographical sources. The argument is derived mainly from a complete study of the diction, ideology, and literary parallels of the biographer; and his conclusion is that it is impossible for a contemporary of Jeremiah to have written the biographical sections.

First, let us analyze his evidence in regard to the diction. According to May it is expansive, repetitious, and even redundant. Jeremiah 25:3ff is quoted and the following expressions are listed:

sent all his servants the prophets to you early and late
early and late
land which Yahweh gave to you and your fathers
you and your fathers
in order to vex
to vex Yahweh with the work of your hands
your fathers neither listened nor bent their ears to listen
turn now each from his evil ways
to follow after other gods

What is most significant about the above quotations is that no less than twenty-two chapters and fifty-four verses contain these few expressions. There is also found in these biographical sections the

¹²⁵ John Bright, "The Book of Jeremiah, Its Structure, Its Problems and Their Significance," *Interpretation* (A Journal of Bible and Theology, July 1955), p. 266.

listing of words or phrases in a peculiar way, as illustrated by the following passage in Jeremiah 8:1:

the bones of the kings of Judah, the bones of its princes,
the bones of its priests, the bones of its prophets, and
the bones of the citizens of Jerusalem.

The second evidence is in regard to the ideology. May believes that the author lived at least one century after Jeremiah, for he feels that the message of Jeremiah was also for future generations. He clearly states in Jeremiah 30:2-3 the motive of the prophet for writing these accounts down.

Write in a book all the words that I have spoken to you. For the days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will restore the fortunes of my people, Israel and Judah, says the LORD, and I will bring them back to the land that I gave to their ancestors and they shall take possession of it.

Other examples are given, but one should suffice to illustrate the strength of the evidence.

Finally, literary parallels help to determine the date. According to May, the earliest possible date is the first half of the fifth century B.C.E. He gives this date because it seems to be written in the style of the Deuteronomic school. Both literary style and ideology show the influence of Second Isaiah, and there are similarities with the diction and ideology of the redactor of first Zechariah. Analogies and associations can also be made with the redactor of Ezekiel and Obadiah, Ezra, and Nehemiah. Because of the above reasons, H.G. May rejects the possibility of the biographical sections as being written by Baruch, and chapter 28 happens to be within the context of biography. However, we must mention that none of the evidence given seems to have been drawn from our passage under consideration; but this in itself does not prove that it was written by Baruch. We must conclude that there is no proof that Baruch is the writer; but there does not seem to be very strong proof to disprove it, even though there is more proof against his authorship than for it.¹²⁶

¹²⁶ H.G. May, "The Biographer of Jeremiah," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. LXI, (1942), pp. 139-155.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE MEANING

Chapter 28 tells of the encounter between Jeremiah and Hananiah; who boldly prophesies that God will break the yoke of Babylon. Jeremiah reacts to Hananiah's proclamation; and it is at this point that we shall attempt to discover the meaning of this passage.

Jeremiah sympathizes with Hananiah

The verses of Jeremiah 28:5-6 can be grouped together since they represent the feeling of Jeremiah concerning the prophecy of Hananiah. We shall quote these verses from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

Then the prophet Jeremiah spoke to the prophet Hananiah in the presence of the priests and all the people who were standing in the house of the LORD; and the prophet Jeremiah said, "Amen! May the LORD do so; may the LORD fulfill the words that you have prophesied, and bring back to this place from Babylon the vessels of the house of the LORD, and all the exiles.

In the Pishitta Hananiah is designated as a "false prophet" while the Septuagint simply leaves out the adjective. First let us analyze the word "prophet." The Hebrew word for prophet is "nabi," which has the literal meaning of "spokesman." The prophet is a spokesman for God to the people of his own time. He denounces them for their sins and pleads with them to return to God. He gives people encouragement to follow the will of God in all phases of their lives.¹²⁷ Jeremiah is considered a prophet; but Hananiah, at least by the Pishitta, is considered to be a false prophet. A false prophet is one who does not speak for God, but is influenced by the flattery of popular opinion or speaks to issues which are no longer relevant. It could even degenerate

¹²⁷ James Philip Hyatt, *Jeremiah, Prophet of Courage and Hope* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1958), p. 9.

into becoming a means of livelihood.¹²⁸ Hananiah is not so much a false prophet as he is a fallen prophet. He sincerely believes that he is speaking for God, but he makes promises in God's name, which are inconsistent with the moral condition of the people.¹²⁹

These two prophets meet with messages that are in direct contradiction to one another, yet both of them claim to be spokesmen for God. As Jeremiah is confronted with this opposing view he expresses his sympathy toward Hananiah by saying, "Amen! May the Lord do so..." He probably uttered these words with regret rather than out of sarcasm or mockery. He actually shared the desire of Hananiah, but could not share the prophetic conviction. Hananiah's prophecy fell short because it omitted the necessity of repentance before fulfillment could become a reality. Jeremiah felt under compulsion to deliver a message that was not only hard to speak but also hard to receive. It would clash with the more popular prophecy of Hananiah and his own wishes, but then, he was not led astray by his own preferences.¹³⁰ Nevertheless, he allows the prophet the right to speak; but he cannot help but to declare the truth as he knows it. He makes very careful distinctions between mere dreams and hard reality, as is described in Jeremiah 23:28:

Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream,
but let the one who has my word speak my word faithfully.

Jeremiah knew the difference between what he desired and what was actually likely to happen. He therefore uttered his message of God to the priests and the Judean nation as a whole. The priests had been influenced by the nationalistic prophets who had been predicting the return of the exiles along with the cherished vessels. Jeremiah urges the priests to pay no attention to such words, for they have been spoken by prophets to whom the word of the Lord has not been revealed. Their

¹²⁸ John Skinner, *Prophecy and Religion* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1922), p. 187.

¹²⁹ Wevers, p. 210.

¹³⁰ A.S. Peake, "Jeremiah and Lamentations," *The New Century Bible* Vol. II (New York: Oxford University Press, 1911), p. 50.

solution is too simple, and lacks the moral element completely. Let all true prophets urge the people to return to God so that Nebuchadrezzar will leave the remaining vessels of the Temple and palace undisturbed.¹³¹ Jeremiah sees through the prophecy of Hananiah and proceeds to inform the people concerning the fallacies of prophets who predict peace too easily.

Jeremiah's Concept of Prophecy

Jeremiah makes a distinction between two kinds of prophets: (1) the prophet of war, and (2) the prophet of peace. Jeremiah 28:7-8 deals with the prophet of war:

But listen now to this word that I speak in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people. The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms.

Seeing the contradiction, Jeremiah did not proceed to call Hananiah a liar right away; but rather, he pointed out that his words were not in the tradition of the great prophets of Israel.¹³² Jeremiah recognized which of them would enjoy acclaim, The people are always more willing to listen to those who prophesy good; for the prophecy of doom has a way of disturbing people, or else people have a way of closing their ears to the truth.¹³³ The true prophet does not speak smooth things for their own sake. Anyone can do this. The true prophet is compelled to condemn sin even at the risk of his own life and happiness.¹³⁴ This is not to say that the entire message of all the prophets before Jeremiah were messages of doom, for there were certainly messages of hope. In fact the messages of hope are primary, but certain conditions are laid down before these can become a reality. What Jeremiah is saying is

¹³¹ Leslie, p. 221.

¹³² Bright, *The Anchor Bible*, p. 203.

¹³³ Sheldon H. Blank, *Jeremiah, Man and Prophet* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1961), p. 207.

¹³⁴ W.L. Elliott Binns, "The Book of the Prophet Jeremiah," *Westminster Commentaries* (London: Methuen and Company Ltd., 1919), p. 211.

that the usual messages of the early prophets included threats of punishment if conditions were not met. Jeremiah claims to be in the line of the true prophets because his message does not neglect the necessity of repentance. He desires the same things for Judah, but is not blinded by a philosophy of positive thinking.¹³⁵

There are two points which Jeremiah brings out concerning the ancient prophets. First, they prophesied “against many countries and great kingdoms;” and secondly, they prophesied “war, famine, and pestilence.” The Septuagint, as was mentioned earlier, omits “famine and pestilence.” Nevertheless, it seems as though Jeremiah is trying to say that the people should not trust in the promises of prophets who foretell a speedy delivery from the yoke of Babylon. The problem will not be resolved that easily. It will take much more than an assertion that God will break the yoke. The problem is basically a moral one. Hananiah’s message does not take into account Judah’s moral condition which patiently calls for the judgment of God. The moral spirit of Judah was at a low ebb, and this was certainly a time when she needed to hear a prophecy of judgment. The true prophets of Israel and Judah were characterized by the note of judgment.¹³⁶ This note of judgment reached beyond the borders of their own country; and Jeremiah shows this in chapter 27 as he warns the various classes of people, both Jew and Gentile, against trusting in the promises of the prophets who foretold a speedy delivery from the bondage of Babylon.¹³⁷ In this we should note the scope of the older prophecy. It is not limited to Israel, for it is intended to embrace many countries and great kingdom.¹³⁸ Such prophecy is universal in nature, and the Jews are called to a place of responsibility in the world. Hananiah, however, does not see the responsibility but only the place of privilege; and because of his blindness, he becomes a fallen prophet.

¹³⁵ Hyatt, “Exegesis,” *The Interpreter’s Bible*, p. 1015.

¹³⁶ Leslie, p. 223.

¹³⁷ Binns, p. 210.

¹³⁸ Peaks, p. 51.

In Jeremiah 28:9 we see the description of the prophet of peace. He cannot appeal to the ancient prophets, but he must prove his prophecy through its own fulfillment.

As for the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of that prophet comes true, then it will be known that the LORD has truly sent the prophet.

When Jeremiah was confronted by Hananiah he was conscious of the fact that he did not have any special revelation with which to prove his case. He had exhausted the terms of his commission and uttered his message. He then was inclined to discredit his opponent on the ground that his prophecy was not in line with the tradition of the great prophets of the past. He expected them to confirm their prophecy, but seemed to think that the prophecy of doom did not need the same confirmation.¹³⁹

It is the prophet of peace that must prove his case. Peace here is meant not in the sense of salvation, but rather in that of civic or national well being. It is that political deliverance out of the exile, which Hananiah promised.¹⁴⁰ Jeremiah challenged this promise of hope that did not seem to require any moral change in the nation. The question becomes one of deciding which prophet is expressing the truth of God. How can you tell a true prophet from a false prophet? Deuteronomy 18:22 supplies the answer.

If a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; do not be frightened by it.

However, if the true prophet can only be revealed after the event has come to confirmation, then of what value is prophecy? Why should the prophet of doom be believed over and above the prophet of peace? It seems as though both types of prophecy would have to undergo the same test.

¹³⁹ Frederick Carl Eiselen, *The Abingdon Bible Commentary* (New York: Abingdon Cokesbury Press, 1929), p. 696.

¹⁴⁰ Theo Laetsch, *Bible Commentary Jeremiah* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1952), p. 9.

The answer to the dilemma lies in Jeremiah's keen insight. He saw the prophecy of doom as being in line with the great prophets, but this never meant that he believed that all prophets predicting true events were sent by God. He would never submit to such an illogical argument. He was only saying that those prophets predicting false events were false prophets.¹⁴¹ It was Jeremiah's inner experience that led him to see the danger in trusting one's own natural disposition to look only at the bright side of things as being of divine origin. He made allowances for prophets who prophesied peace, but such men would only be in line with the great prophets if their predictions were validated by fact. "That was sound history, and in the circumstances of the day it was also sound sense."¹⁴²

Hananiah breaks the Yoke

Hananiah is not impressed with Jeremiah's appeal to experience, and so he reacts immediately and passionately. His reaction is recorded in Jeremiah 28:10-11a:

Then the prophet Hananiah took the yoke from the neck of the prophet Jeremiah, and broke it. And Hananiah spoke in the presence of all the people, saying, "Thus says the LORD: This is how I will break the yoke of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon from the neck of all the nations within two years."

Hananiah is not impressed with Jeremiah's sympathy or his appeal to experience, and so he snaps the yoke. The act is more than a mere symbol. Hananiah attempts to work out his own fulfillment.¹⁴³ There is no reason to doubt Hananiah's sincerity, for he begins his oracular pronouncement with the customary prophetic formula, "Thus says the Lord." To him the symbol of the yoke represented the tyrannous alien power which should be broken by the word of the Lord, but to

¹⁴¹ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations*, trans. John Owen, vol. III (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1950), p. 399.

¹⁴² George Adam Smith, p. 66.

¹⁴³ Peake, p. 51.

Jeremiah it only proved to symbolize the captivity which had to come.¹⁴⁴ It could be said that Hananiah exceeded the limits of his call, but then *such a return out of exile* is stated in unmistakable language by the Lord of the covenant in Deuteronomy 30:1-5. What Hananiah overlooks is that there must be a return to the Lord and a change of heart. Hananiah said nothing of this nor does he mention the need for a change on the part of the nation. All this is an essential prerequisite in any return of the exiles.¹⁴⁵ Hananiah thought too much of divine favor and too little of divine judgment. He did not take all the facts into account, and so the idea of Israel's privilege blinded him to the ideas of Israel's responsibility. He mistook the longings of his own heart and the voice of the people for the voice of God. The true prophet must recognize that he may have to stand in the minority, and that God's will is more important than his own desires.¹⁴⁶ This marks the great differences between Jeremiah and Hananiah.

Jeremiah went His Way

Jeremiah 28:11b is one of the most puzzling verses with which we have to deal. It simply says:

At this, the prophet Jeremiah went his way.

Just why did he leave? It seems surprising that he makes no reply. He might have left the place unwilling to dispute with a violent man, for it is possible that Hananiah had great power in the Temple and that his prophecies were plausible.¹⁴⁷ Jeremiah might have been stricken with fear, for he did not confirm his own prophecy, even though he did express the false declaration of Hananiah.¹⁴⁸ Perhaps the emotional act of Hananiah inspired the crowd and created a dangerous atmosphere

¹⁴⁴ Stanley Romaine Hopper, "Exposition," *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. V (New York: Abingdon Press, 1956), p. 1015.

¹⁴⁵ Laetsch, p. 228.

¹⁴⁶ Rowley, p. 554.

¹⁴⁷ Calvin, p. 403.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 495.

and mood in which it became impossible for Jeremiah to speak. Further protest on the part of Jeremiah would have probably done little good, and now a cooling off period was required, lest faith should fade into fanaticism.¹⁴⁹

When Jeremiah walked away, it may not have been in contempt at all, but simply in an attempt to think out the issues that existed between him and Hananiah. His need for reflection concerning the problem does not reveal doubt about his message, but a sincere effort to weigh opinions that contradict his own. The analysis of opposing opinions is a mark of an honest, patient, and reflective mind that is sincerely seeking the will of God.¹⁵⁰

Nowhere do we find a prophet less sure of himself, or more reluctant to discharge his prophetic duties. Everywhere we see evidence of Jeremiah being impelled by a force not his own and often times against his will. False prophets do not show such sensitivity.¹⁵¹ Such sensitivity required a time for self-recollection in order to regain enough confidence to confront Hananiah with an energy of conviction exceeding his own.¹⁵² What is most remarkable about this prophet is the fact that he only spoke when he was certain, and his times of caution only go to prove the validity of his calling. A prophet of such stature can be trusted. Jeremiah needed time in the presence of God in order to be certain of the message he was to proclaim. He simply could not be certain of that message in the heat of what had just taken place. Therefore, it is not at all surprising that he made no reply; and one can be very much impressed with his calm self-control and patience with Hananiah. He believed in the liberty of prophesying and had no fear of the issues threshed out between them. Such patience was only proof of

¹⁴⁹ Rowley, p. 554.

¹⁵⁰ George Adam Smith, p. 264.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 264.

¹⁵² Skinner, p. 189.

the soundness of a man's convictions, for he was sure that the wheat would eventually be cleared from the straw.¹⁵³

¹⁵³ Leslie, p. 224.

CHAPTER 5

THE RELEVANCE

The main relevance present in this passage is the problem of how to make the distinction between true and false prophecy. Here we have seen two prophets both appealing to religious motives in the support of the policies which they favor.¹⁵⁴ Which of the two is really a spokesman for God? When the two prophets met face to face it seemed as though the confidence of Hananiah staggered Jeremiah. His only appeal was that he was in the prophetic tradition and Hananiah was not, unless his prophecy could stand the test of experience. It is this honest, patient, and reflective mind of Jeremiah's, that was willing to weigh opinions that contradicted his own, which stood out over and above Hananiah's over-confidence. This saved Jeremiah from becoming a false prophet himself. Jeremiah had to search his own mind in the light of the seeming certainty of Hananiah's convictions, and this saved him from an impulsive emotional reaction. He had time to reflect upon the will of God and what he should do and say. Sometimes one needs to give careful consideration to what must be said. Too quick a decision is likely to be one's own will rather than God's. When Jeremiah returns with a prophecy, it is impressive. The anticipated fulfillment must have influenced public sentiment enough that the contemplated rebellion did not materialize for some time. It may have been Jeremiah's preaching that influenced Zedekiah and his counselors to lay aside the Palestinian-Mediterranean bloc.¹⁵⁵ Jeremiah had won the day for a time because his prophecy was in line with the great prophets and met the test of experience, but the revolt that eventually occurred just went to prove that Zedekiah did not really see this as the working out of God's will. If he did, then he consciously chose to oppose God and go his own way. In the long run, the test of prophetic fulfillment failed to meet the real issues.

¹⁵⁴ Adam C. Welch, *Jeremiah* (London: Oxford University Press, 1928), p. 201.

¹⁵⁵ Leslie, p. 224.

We shall discuss briefly four ways of analyzing the prophetic announcement in an attempt to show the relevancy of this passage. Whenever a prophet expects people to follow his announcement as the will of God, he must be able to show how this idea is superior to that of possible opposition. To do this we have listed four tests that must be met.

The Test of Motivation

Hananiah was responding more to the prestige of his office and the wishful hopes of the people. It was Jeremiah who brought these motivations out into the open.¹⁵⁶ Whether or not one can say that Hananiah was conscious of this is open to question. One thing is certain and that is that he was a prophetic dreamer, and the Lord has much to say about that in Jeremiah 23:32:

See, I am against those who prophesy lying dreams, says the LORD, and who tell them, and who lead my people astray by their lies and their recklessness, when I did not send them or appoint them; so they do not profit this people at all, says the LORD.

Hananiah was certainly reckless with his prophecy, but whether he was deluded or dishonest is another question. He was a dreamer and stood within the context of foreshortened perspectives. He went beyond the limit of true prophecy. He was more responsive to the wishful thinking of the court and the people than he was to God. The prophet who allows the voice of the people, convention, or even orthodoxy to become the voice of God is certain to distort the will of God and this is true whether he is conscious of doing it or not. The tragic thing about it is that God must allow him to be deceived even if he is sincere in his motivation.¹⁵⁷ Yet God still holds a prophet responsible for prophesying lying dreams and recklessness, and here exists the great distinction between Jeremiah and Hananiah. Jeremiah was prophesying against his own wishes, and whenever he spoke he took time to discover the will of God. He did not want to be a prophet, but he was

¹⁵⁶ Hopper, p. 1016.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1015.

ready to be faithful to the divine will, even when it went in direct opposition to the desires of the people. The motivation of the prophet has much to do with the validity of the prophetic announcement.

The Test of Fulfillment

Jeremiah demands that Hananiah's prophecy of peace must meet the test of fulfillment before he can claim that he is speaking for God. However, both men must meet that same test; and it is inadequate for Jeremiah to resort to his being in line with the traditional prophets of doom. The main difficulty here is that it is impossible to discriminate between the true and false prophet before the time of fulfillment has come. The false prophet is bound to come up with the truth occasionally, and the true prophet is likely to be wrong. It is true that one can be certain that the prophet of peace is speaking for God after his prophecy is fulfilled, but then one never really can be certain of just how long that peace may last. The question really needs to be turned back to Jeremiah. The prophet of doom is not necessarily speaking for God either, even if he is in line with the prophets. Fulfillment for him could be just as accidental as it is for the false prophet who hits upon the truth occasionally. Being a prophet of disaster is no insurance that you are speaking the truth. What is needed is a way to discover who is speaking the truth at the moment, rather than to wait for the fulfillment to verify the truth of the proclamation. By the time fulfillment comes, it may be too late.

The Test of Morality

God is bound to break from prophets who spurn his love and his law. Jeremiah 23:14-15 reveals the nature of the false prophet:

But in the prophets of Jerusalem I have seen a more shocking thing: they commit adultery and walk in lies; they strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that no one turns from wickedness; all of them have become like Sodom to me, and its inhabitants like Gomorrah. Therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts concerning the prophets: "I am going to make them eat wormwood, and give them poisoned water to drink; for from the prophets of Jerusalem ungodliness has spread throughout the land.

The prophet is not false because he makes an announcement that is false, but because he is misled by a false heart. The prophets themselves are false and to them no true revelation of God can be given. They are incapable of receiving it. They may hit upon the truth from time to time, but they are basically “out of tune with the infinite” and the moral principles of the universe.¹⁵⁸ However, it is difficult to accuse Hananiah of immorality, for there is no indication in the scripture that would support it. All we can go on is the fact that he does not lay down any condition of repentance for the return of the exiles and the vessels. He simply asserts that they will return and that the yoke of Babylon will be crushed. The expectation of divine favor without the condition of repentance in itself is immoral. Herein lies another great difference between Hananiah and Jeremiah.

The Test of Repentance

The teaching of false prophets are bound to reflect their true character. Theirs was a message of peace to all, without regard to moral conditions. Their whole effort was to produce a false sense of security by proclaiming peace, peace, when there could be no peace. Laxity of moral conviction and a readiness to prophesy smooth things had to go together.¹⁵⁹ Such prophets were blinded by their own patriotism. They tried to cling to tradition, dogma, and to things that had been true in past generations; but they failed to realize that these ideas were no longer true for the present generation. They failed to attach conditions to their dreams, and they delivered their mere desires as absolute and final. Not only did Jeremiah prophesy with certain conditional factors, but these conditions were in harmony with the fundamental moral laws of God and his universe.¹⁶⁰ Perhaps the false prophets did not realize it, but it was their indifference to sin that gave positive encouragement to the evil doers. They might have only been guilty of being guided by dreams rather than reality, but it was their ignorance of the seriousness of sin that led them astray. It was

¹⁵⁸ Skinner, p. 198.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 192-193.

¹⁶⁰ George Adam Smith, pp. 262-263.

Jeremiah's recognition of the severity of sin that saved him from prophesying peace when peace was impossible. It also gave him an insight into the nature of God that was lacking in Hananiah.

Perhaps the most relevant part of this passage is Jeremiah's understanding of God's activity in history. The scene is set when he approaches Zedekiah still wearing the yoke, to give him two alternatives. (1) He can participate in a revolt, with its loss of life in battle, and from famine and pestilence which would follow the invasion; or (2) honorable subservience to Babylon. Actually, he sees more in this than simply military strategy, and he warns Zedekiah against heeding the nationalistic prophets.¹⁶¹ The argument that he is making is not primarily political but religious, for he sees into the nature of God. He sees him as Lord of all nations and all humanity, and this same Lord has given world dominion to Nebuchadrezzar, even though it is to be limited to approximately two generations.¹⁶² What we have here is a request for submission, not to Nebuchadrezzar as conqueror; but to Nebuchadrezzar, the instrument of God.¹⁶³ Therefore, Hananiah's failure to see this makes him rebellious, not to Nebuchadrezzar, but against Yahweh himself. Such a prophet not only perverts the word of the Lord, but makes the people trust in a lie.¹⁶⁴ To resist the will of God by trying to break the yoke of wood would not accomplish anything but to cause God to use a yoke of iron. This does not mean that Jeremiah views the God worshiped by the Judeans as impotent, but rather as omnipotent; for even while the king of Babylon reigns over the Near East, God is still Lord of him and all his people. God rules over all nations and uses the Chaldeans as his unknowing instrument to bring about his own purposes in history.¹⁶⁵ The distinction made here is very difficult to see by persons who are

¹⁶¹ Leslie, p. 220.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 219.

¹⁶³ Hopper, p. 1013.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1016.

¹⁶⁵ Leslie, p. 219.

existing under the yoke of bondage, for to them the prophet appears as unpatriotic; but in reality, Jeremiah is the only one who is really able to see behind the rise and fall of temporal powers the moving chastisements of God.¹⁶⁶ Jeremiah is the true prophet because he alone is patriotic by being obedient to God who rules over all the kings and kingdoms of the world. He has seen God working his will out in history, and this cannot help but be relevant to us today.

¹⁶⁶ Peake, p. 1013.

PART THREE

**THE INSTRUCTION
OF THE EXILE**

*The Exile was a terrible,
but transforming Experience.*

CHAPTER ONE

THE FALL OF JERUSALEM

Date of the Exilic Period

In dating the exilic period, we must first decide whether it should begin during the first or second deportation. John Bright simply asserts that it begins with the second deportation without giving any reference to the first.¹⁶⁷ Other sources, such as the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, suggest that its beginning should date with the first deportation in 598 B.C.E.¹⁶⁸ In this work we shall attempt to include both of these dates, but we shall tend to accept the date of the first deportation as the beginning of the exilic period. The end of the period is easier to determine as we must date it either in 538 B.C.E., at which time the Edict of Cyrus gave the exiles an opportunity to return to Jerusalem; or at the time of the completion of the new Temple in 515 B.C.E.¹⁶⁹ We shall go beyond the date of the new Temple.

Judah's Last Kings

At the death of Ashurbanipal, the last great king of Assyria, we see the end of effective Assyrian dominance over Judah. Soon the Neo-Babylonian Empire would fill the power gap, but first Egypt and Judah would try to take advantage of this respite. Judah's ambitions were checked in the battle of Megiddo Pass when Josiah was killed and with him went the hope of reuniting and strengthening Israel. Egypt enjoyed a more lengthy period in which she possessed some dominance over

¹⁶⁷ John Bright, *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1959), p. 324.

¹⁶⁸ George Arthur Buttrick, ed., *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. I (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962).

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

Judah, but she was soon defeated by Nebuchadnezzar at Carchemish in May or June of 605 B.C.E.¹⁷⁰

With the death of Josiah at Megiddo Pass, we see the close of an era that had enjoyed spiritual revival and the beginning of a period in Israelite History in which four kings were to nullify his spiritual impact through their idolatry. We shall describe briefly the role each of these kings had to play in the exilic period.

Jehoahaz (Josiah's Second Son)

Charles Franklin Pfeiffer gives us the best description of these kings. After the death of Josiah, Jehoahaz, his second son became the ruler of Judah; but his rule was cut short to about three months in 609 B.C.E., as the Egyptian Pharaoh, whose name was Necho, deposed him and placed him in prison at Riblah. Eventually he died in Egypt and Necho appointed Jehoahaz's older brother, Jehoiakim, to rule Judah. Jehoiakim was pro-Egyptian and ready to become a vassal to Egypt, and this is probably the reason why Jehoahaz was named ruler of Judah over his older brother. The people expected Jehoahaz to maintain the policy of friendship with Babylon and political independence for Judah. This attitude proved to be his downfall as Egypt, who had been responsible for Josiah's death, desired to dominate the little buffer state of Judah.¹⁷¹

Jehoiakim (Josiah's First Son)

Jehoiakim began his eleven year reign in 609 B.C.E. and due to his pro-Egyptian policies, Judah was forced to pay a heavy tribute, which proved to be an extremely heavy drain on the national economy. The expensive paint and costly cedar used in building himself a new palace added to the ruination of Judah's economy. As the armies of Nebuchadnezzar moved closer defeating the Egyptians in 605 B.C.E., Jehoiakim willingly became a vassal to Babylonia out of expediency rather than loyalty. As soon as Nebuchadnezzar suffered a reversal Jehoiakim rebelled at the urge of the pro-Egyptian party, but by December of 598 B.C.E., the Babylonian armies were ready to march

¹⁷⁰ Buttrick, p. 187.

¹⁷¹ Pfeiffer, p. 19.

against Judah. During the siege on Jerusalem, Jehoiakim died, probably the result of murder by his own courtiers who hoped to gain some favor from Nebuchadnezzar.¹⁷²

Jehoiachin (Jehoiakim's Son)

The son of Jehoiakim took over the throne at the tender age of eighteen, and within three months Jerusalem was lost to the Babylonians. The young king, Jehoiachin was taken to Babylon along with his mother, the palace officials, artisans and other significant leaders including the great prophet of the exile, Ezekiel. He was actually succeeded by his uncle Zedekiah, but the people regarded him as the legitimate king though he was a captive in Babylon for the next thirty-seven years. Evil-Merodach, Nebuchadnezzar's successor, was to befriend him later and free him from prison. He spoke kindly of him and gave him a seat above the seats of the kings that were with him in Babylon.¹⁷³

Zedekiah (Josiah's Third Son)

Zedekiah, the third son of Josiah, was set on the throne as a puppet king; and his rule endured for eleven years, beginning in March of 597 B.C.E. and continuing through July of 587 B.C.E.¹⁷⁴ At first it seemed as though he had good intentions, but he soon fell prey to the pro-Egyptian party which gained his support. By the fourth year of his reign he was receiving counsel from the ambassadors of Tyre, Sidon, Edom, Ammon and Moab; all of which were anti-Babylonian. Zedekiah journeyed to Babylon where he convinced Nebuchadnezzar of his loyalty, but it was not long before he gave reason for the Babylonian king to be suspicious of that loyalty. By 588 B.C.E. a new Pharaoh named Apries came to power in Egypt, and he was determined to invade Palestine in order to establish Egyptian suzerainty there. Nebuchadnezzar suspected Zedekiah's disloyalty and dispatched his army into Judah until everything was under his control except the cities

¹⁷² Pfeiffer., pp. 20-21.

¹⁷³ *Ibid*, p. 21.

¹⁷⁴ Buttrick, p. 187.

of Lachish, and Jerusalem. Egypt made an attempt to come to the aid of Judah but was unable to help very much as the Babylonian armies drove them back. This delayed Nebuchadnezzar's siege on Jerusalem but it was finally resumed. After Jerusalem fell in July of 587 B.C.E., Zedekiah was captured while fleeing to Ammon and taken to Nebuchadnezzar at Riblah in central Syria, where he witnessed the execution of his sons. He was then blinded and taken to Babylon in chains.¹⁷⁵

Jeremiah's Role in Jerusalem

Charles Pfeiffer tells us that Jeremiah, a native of Anathoth which is a city in Benjamin near the northern boundary of Jerusalem, answered the call of God during the reign of Josiah. He probably attempted to carry forth the message of Josiah's reform to his home town of Anathoth, but was destined to spend years of loneliness as he attempted to proclaim God's message in a time when the people were rebellious and restless. Jeremiah was to stand against prophets, priests, and even kings in carrying out the message of God. He was condemned a traitor for daring to predict the defeat of Jerusalem at the hand of her enemy. As Jehoiakim came to power Jeremiah attempted to convince him that Judah's only hope was in the recognition of Babylonian power. The other religious leaders were sympathetic with Jehoiakim's pro-Egyptian policies, for had not God delivered Jerusalem from the hands of Sennacherib? The Holy City was thought to be inviolable. Jeremiah accused Judah of idolatry as he delivered his famous Temple address at the gate of the Sanctuary, and for this it was felt that he deserved death for daring to prophesy against Jerusalem. The prophets were expected to predict good things and help build up the morale of the people.¹⁷⁶

When Zedekiah took over the throne, we are told that he sought the counsel of Jeremiah; however, the pro-Egyptian party was not dead and its prophets declared that Jehoiachin would return from the exile within two years. Jeremiah's reaction was threefold: First, the exiles would remain in Babylon for seventy years; secondly, he wrote a letter

¹⁷⁵ Pfeiffer, p. 23.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 31-33.

to them informing them to build homes, marry, and to raise families in their new surroundings; and finally, he told them that God would bring them back but urged them to seek the welfare of that city until that day should come.¹⁷⁷

Jeremiah was finally placed in prison but because of Zedekiah's fear and respect for him, he was removed to the court of the guard which was probably a better place of confinement. On many occasions the king sought his advice but Jeremiah always replied by informing him that he would be delivered into the hands of the king of Babylon. As the armies of Nebuchadnezzar approached Jerusalem, many of the nobles went into turmoil and threw Jeremiah into a deep cistern because they feared he was doing them harm. Had it not been for the Ethiopian eunuch named Ebed-melech who pleaded with the king for his release, Jeremiah probably would have died. He was then placed back into the court of the guard until Nebuchadnezzar released him during the fall of Jerusalem. Jeremiah was not deported to Babylon, but he was forced to flee to Egypt. After Jerusalem fell, Gedaliah was appointed to serve as governor at Mizpah; however in spite of a warning, he was murdered by Ishmael who had ambitions to take over as ruler himself. Because of a fear that Nebuchadnezzar would take revenge upon them, the remnant forced Jeremiah and Baruch to flee with them to the Egyptian city of Tahsyanphes.¹⁷⁸

The Fall of Jerusalem

From 598 to 597 B.C.E., Nebuchadnezzar mobilized his army for a full scale invasion of Judah; and within three months of his rule, Jehoiachin was forced to capitulate. After Jerusalem's surrender and Jehoiachin's exile to Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar appointed Zedekiah to rule in Jerusalem. Jeremiah urged the new king to remain loyal to Nebuchadnezzar, but the pro-Egyptian party in court called for rebellion. Since most loyal Judeans thought of Nebuchadnezzar as the

¹⁷⁷ Theodore H. Robinson, *A History of Israel*, Vol. I (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1932), p. 34.

¹⁷⁸ Pfeiffer, pp. 35-36.

oppressor, including the false prophets. Zedekiah gave in to these pressures.¹⁷⁹

At the death of Psammetichus II in 588 B.C.E. Apries became the new Pharaoh and his policy was much more energetic in the way of participation in Asiatic affairs. It wasn't long after he had gained control over the Phoenician cities that he began to encourage a league of Palestinian states to resist the power of Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar's reaction to this new policy was swift and by January of 588 B.C.E., Jerusalem was under siege by his armies. The only glimmer of hope that Jerusalem possessed was that Egypt would send an army to her rescue. Egypt made an attempt to send an army northward but all she could do was to delay the siege for a time.¹⁸⁰

Only Jeremiah predicted the defeat of Judah and he proved to be right as the Babylonian armies turned the Egyptians back so that they could resume their siege of Jerusalem. The end came in the summer of 587 B.C.E. as Nebuchadnezzar's army breached the walls. The Babylonian king's patience was exhausted and so he sent Nebuzaradan, his commander, to destroy Jerusalem; and the city was stripped of her Temple treasures as the walls were reduced to rubble.¹⁸¹

Zedekiah attempted to flee for his life by escaping to Ammon, but he was caught near Jericho and taken to Nebuchadnezzar's headquarters at Riblah where he watched his sons being executed and then he himself was blinded and taken to Babylon in chains. Only the poor peasants were permitted to remain in Jerusalem. Gedalia was appointed to keep order and govern the remnant of Judah from the city of Mizpah, which was located just north of the ruins of Jerusalem. Ishmael regarded Gedaliah as a collaborationist and thereby set out to assassinate him. He succeeded not only in killing him in Mizpah but along with him he murdered an entire Babylonian garrison stationed there. Ishmael managed to escape to Ammon and along with other

¹⁷⁹ Pfeiffer, p. 15.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

surviving Judeans, who feared a quick reprisal by Nebuchadnezzar, fled to Egypt forcing Jeremiah to accompany them.¹⁸²

¹⁸² Pfeiffer, p. 17.

CHAPTER TWO

DEPORTATION FROM JERUSALEM

In all there were three deportations, and an extract from some anonymous official's document of the exile gives the total number for the three deportations as 4,600. John Bright also seems to think that though life was disrupted in Judah, total deportation leaving much of the land empty and void is an erroneous concept and it just did not occur.¹⁸³ However, the recent discoveries of Lachish, Ostraca and the contemporary fortress towns of Debir, Lachish and Beth-shemesh have given much evidence that Judah suffered a sizable defeat from 598 B.C.E. forward and they also testify to the pitiable state to which she succumbed in that period.¹⁸⁴ Some authorities, such as Bright, do not believe that everyone that left Judah went into captivity in Babylon. Many fled to Egypt prior to the time that Jeremiah was forced to flee, and many others may have fled to Moab, Edom or Ammon.¹⁸⁵

The First Deportation (598 B.C.E.)

The first deportation took place in about 598 B.C.E., and Jehoiachin was taken in this deportation along with his mother, many of the nobles, royal officials, and the prophet Ezekiel. The Temple and palace treasures were taken and so only the very poor remained in Judah. In all about 3,023 persons were taken to Babylon at this time. Zedekiah was put on the throne in Jerusalem and at first it seemed as though it would be impossible for Jerusalem to rebel. When Nebuchadnezzar made annual trips back to Babylon for the New Year festivals, Egypt realized that she had some strength. Because of this, Zedekiah and his nobles gained the courage to rebel against the Babylonian yoke. However, this rebellion led to a second deportation.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸³ Bright, p. 324

¹⁸⁴ Buttrick, p. 187.

¹⁸⁵ Bright, p. 327.

¹⁸⁶ Buttrick, p. 187.

The Second Deportation (587 B.C.E.)

The second deportation took place in August of 587 B.C.E. and this time the Temple, palace and even some private homes were burned. The walls of the city suffered destruction and the Temple treasures were completely confiscated. In all about 832 persons were taken in this second trip to Babylon. For those who remained, Nebuchadnezzar appointed Gedaliah, former mayor of the palace, to be the new governor of Judah. He had his headquarters in the village of Mizpah until his assassination. The remaining Jews fled to Egypt with Jeremiah in order to avoid revenge by the Babylonians as a result of the assassination.¹⁸⁷

The Third Deportation (582)

The final deportation took place as a reprisal for the assassination of Gedaliah in 582 B.C.E., and in this last group we find about 745 persons exiled. Some scholars such as Theodore Robinson have given dates that vary for the three deportations. Robinson says that they took place in 597, 586, and 581 B.C.E.¹⁸⁸ Bernard Anderson believes that the exile involved only the Jewish leadership, with the poorer elements left behind to harvest the crops. In this way, Nebuchadnezzar was able to remove the threat of national revival since the country was paralyzed without this leadership. The land that remained was in such a mess that even under favorable conditions it would have taken years to recover, and so those who found economical and political conditions unbearable, migrated to Egypt and started life anew. This left only a handful in the environment around the ruins of Jerusalem.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁷ Buttrick, p. 187.

¹⁸⁸ Robinson, p. 453.

¹⁸⁹ Bernard Ward Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1937), pp. 375-377.

CHAPTER THREE

LIFE DURING THE EXILE

Judah during the Exile

The history of Judah during the sixth century is almost a blank, archaeologically speaking. We do know however that there were a few small farmers that remained and for a while it seemed as though the land was going to recover under Gedaliah, a member of a Judean princely house in Mizpah. However, after he was assassinated by Ishmael, the provinces that Gedaliah had ruled were abolished and incorporated into the neighboring province of Samaria.¹⁹⁰ There is some controversy as to whether or not any real break took place in the life of Judah and this idea is founded upon the idea that only a few nobles were taken into exile. Those scholars who accept this idea would have to view the accounts in Kings, Ezekiel, and Ezra-Nehemiah as exaggerations.¹⁹¹

Archaeology throws considerable light on life in Palestine during this period and it seems to reveal that some decisive break did occur. Following 587 B.C.E., we find that there was no town in Judah that was continually occupied throughout the entire exilic period. This is not true of the areas that border Judah on the north and south. Excavations revealed that there are some sites within this period that were not in use. They came to this conclusion as they studied layers which date earlier than the sixth century. It was only during this period of the exile that large numbers of sites permanently ceased to be occupied in Judah.¹⁹² One reason for the lack of occupation within many cities in Judah was the fact that the Babylonians did not make it a policy to repopulate any land that they had conquered. Judah was

¹⁹⁰ Nolan B. Harmon, ed., *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol I (New York: Abingdon Press, 1952), p. 287.

¹⁹¹ Pfeiffer, p. 43.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 44.

finally repopulated by some neighboring tribes but very little is known about this. The Jews that did remain during the exile had much in common with the Samaritans since they both worshiped Yahweh and gave assent to the Mosaic Law. At least it appears that relations were amiable. Many of the Jews intermarried with the Samaritans. We shall deal further with this relationship as we discuss the return of the exiles to their native land.¹⁹³

Life among the Exiles

From the book of Jeremiah we learn that the prophet informed the exiles that their stay in Babylonia would be for a period of about seventy years.¹⁹⁴ Since many of them were convinced that they would spend the rest of their lives in Babylon, they settled down and took part in the life of their new home, though they never really were absorbed into the general population.¹⁹⁵ Actually things did not go badly for those Jews who were exiled. They were given social freedom and economic opportunity; and within the next century, we find that many of them held controlling interests in business concerns. Anderson gives us an example in the concern of Murashu and sons in the city of Nippur, which was controlled by those in exile. Life was pretty good for them as anti-Semitism was unknown during this period of history.¹⁹⁶

Not much is known about Tel-abib, except that it was located on the river Chebar and this was one of the important canals located southeast of the city. This section lacked the splendor of Babylon but the land was at least irrigated making it possible for gardens near the country homes. The main function of the canals around Babylon was in

¹⁹³ Pfeiffer., p. 45.

¹⁹⁴ Herbert G. May, ed., *The Oxford Annotated Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962) p. 950.

¹⁹⁵ Harmon, p. 287.

¹⁹⁶ Anderson, p. 377.

controlling the flood waters of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.¹⁹⁷ We have a description of one of these gardens that was irrigated by these rivers. The garden belonged to Morodach-baladan, who was of royal lineage. The description of his garden gives us an indication as to what kind of food was eaten in this time period. The following items made up this royal garden: date palms, apricots, plums, peaches, figs, pomegranates, gourds, melons, garlic, onions, leeks, mint, saffron, coriander, rue, thyme, pistachio, lettuce, fennel, lentils, beets, and kohlrabi.¹⁹⁸

The people in this area built houses with bricks of clay that were mixed with finely chopped straw. Such bricks were placed in molds and dried in the sun, and when they were three quarters dry they were put together with mortar made of diluted clay. Houses were built around a central courtyard and each room had a narrow door leading into the street. The floors, made of beaten earth, sloped to the center so that rain water would drain away into terra-cotta conduits, which carried the water into underground cesspools. The kitchen range was placed along the courtyard wall in order that the smoke could leave the room either by way of a hole in the wall or through an open door or window. Water was kept in earthen jars half sunk into the courtyard and grain was hung from the wall out of the reach of rats and mice. The wealthy people had beds with one end built up to from a bolster in which they could sleep; while the middle and poorer classes had to sleep on mats, rages, or plain mattresses for beds. The poor sat on stools of palm wood and ate from raised trays while the wealthy were able to have chairs and ate from a high table. The roof of the house was made of planks of palm wood and arranged to span the rooms. Reeds and palm leaves covered the wood with a layer of earth leveled and packed tightly with the use of a stone roller. The only problem they had with this type of roof was that it was in need of repair following every storm.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁷ Pfeiffer, p. 50.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 50-51.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 51-52.

The canals were used for other purposes than irrigation and flood control. Pfeiffer gives an excellent description of how cargo was shipped on a kelek, which was a raft made of strong reeds or wood. The under surfaces of the raft were given support by inflated goatskins which gave buoyancy and enabled the raft to carry a heavy load. When individuals desired to cross the rivers they did so with the use of one of these inflated goatskins. One could also see along these rivers and canals smaller boats that were propelled by poles and sometimes sails made of matting with an oar at the stern serving as the rudder. Such boats could be rented for use by the common people.²⁰⁰

While the Jews were in exile they were forced to learn Aramaic in order to communicate with their non-Jewish neighbors. When they returned to Jerusalem they carried this language with them and it was destined to become the language of the New Testament period. We can even find certain Old Testament writings written in Aramaic. Such writings are as follows: Daniel 2:4b—7:28; Ezra 4:8—6:18; and Ezra 7:12—26:35.²⁰¹

The Jews also developed a calendar while they were in exile that has become the foundation for their present calendar with a few refinements dating from the fourth century B.C.E.²⁰²

Religious Adjustment

This probably was the most difficult adjustment for the exiles to make, since they had been oriented to the land of Palestine, the inheritance of Yahweh, and the Temple in Jerusalem. Great danger arose that their Jewish faith might diminish in this culture which seemed superior to the simple farming and grazing land of Judah. Babylonia seemed to be a thriving agricultural and teeming industrial center. The wonders of Babylon must have caused the exiles to wonder

²⁰⁰ Pfeiffer, pp. 52-53.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 53.

wether or not this was all due to the superiority of Babylonian religion over their own traditional faith.²⁰³

The main problem in adjustment, that the Jews faced, was the idea that Yahweh could only be worshiped in the Temple at Jerusalem. How could they worship Him here in a strange land, where other gods seemed to be in control. We find in the teachings of certain prophets during this time that Yahweh was not bound to the Temple in Jerusalem. Jeremiah's letter to the Jews in exile insists that even in a faraway land, where there was no Temple to Yahweh, people could still have access to him through prayer.²⁰⁴ Some of the people began to realize that they could turn to Yahweh anywhere with confidence that he would be near. We see this expressed in a number of prayers in the Book of Psalms, which were composed by some unknown authors.²⁰⁵ This is not to say that the prophets were of one opinion as to how such a concept could be expressed, but at least we see the idea springing up again and again. Jeremiah looked for a spiritual faith that was independent of the Temple and the Ark.²⁰⁶ On the other hand, Ezekiel looked for the erection of a visible sanctuary as the center of the nation's religious life, and his reasoning found its basis in the fact that he believed that religion was bound up with careful and systematic organization in worship. Members of the Holy community were held responsible for their contributions. This is what gave to Ezekiel the title, "Father of Judaism."²⁰⁷

Nevertheless, the characteristics of their religion did go through a change which began when they first held simple meetings beside the rivers or canals for the purpose of common prayer, and then later for

²⁰³ Anderson, p. 377.

²⁰⁴ May, p. 950.

²⁰⁵ Anderson, p. 379.

²⁰⁶ May, p. 912.

²⁰⁷ R.L. Ottley, *The Religion of Israel* (Cambridge: University Press, 1905), p. 113.

the reading of the law.²⁰⁸ This was the beginning which gradually developed into a more elaborate instruction that can be found in their scriptural traditions. Often it has been suggested that this was the origin of the synagogue; although in spite of the opinion that this seemed to be the purpose of the synagogue, such authorities as Anderson do not believe that there is any real evidence to support such an assumption. The word synagogue means “bringing together” for worship and teaching. Anderson believes that the synagogues arose much later, but it was indeed in response to the experience of being separated from their land and Temple.²⁰⁹

Although one would expect the religion of Yahweh to become mixed with Babylonian culture, Anderson tells us that the sense of belonging to the covenant community was intensified rather than weakened by life under the Babylonian captivity. The Jews of this period studied and searched their tradition intensively for its meaning, and then they carefully preserved their sacred writings for all future generations. However, it took such priests as Ezekiel, who knew the tradition by heart or brought some sacred writings with them. The task of these priests was to give people the Torah, which taught the people how to worship and serve Yahweh.²¹⁰

Daniel during the Exile

One of the best examples of a person who rose to a high position in Babylon and yet held fast to his traditional Jewish beliefs is Daniel. Born during the time of Josiah, he grew up in complete faithfulness to his God during the reign of Jehoiakim. When Jerusalem was lost in the third year of Jehoiakim’s reign, he was exiled with a group to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar had the best young men of Jerusalem transported to Babylon where they received excellent treatment, only it was a form of modern brainwashing. Instead of torture they gave them

²⁰⁸ *Otley*, p. 108.

²⁰⁹ Anderson, p. 379.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 379-380.

encouragement to forget all their past loyalties and become integrated Babylonians.²¹¹

The king taught these young Jewish men the letters and language of the Chaldeans along with their religion, science, and cultural traditions. They were even to receive the best foods such as that which was fed only to the king and those of high royalty. Daniel wasn't satisfied with this since he was aware of the fact that the kitchens didn't particularly care about the Levitical regulations. He managed to side-step the issue by asking for a ten day testing period in which he and his companions would be placed on a strict vegetarian diet. At the end of a certain period they were found to be in better health than those who ate the king's food, and they were excused from eating that which their Law forbade them to eat.²¹²

Daniel won favor with Nebuchadnezzar by interpreting a dream, which no one else could interpret. Daniel not only interpreted the dream, but also told him what it was since the king had already forgotten it. The Babylonian monarch was told that he would rise to his greatness only to be followed by three inferior kings. At the close of this period, God would set up a kingdom that would never be destroyed and that God would have the last word in regard to the human scene. For Daniel's ability to interpret Nebuchadnezzar's dream, he was made governor of the province of Babylon and given a place of residence at the royal court, and the king even recognized his God. Nebuchadnezzar saw in a second dream a great tree rising to the heavens, and the tree was cut down leaving only a stump which was bound with a band of iron and left with the grass of the field. Daniel said that he would be humbled and become insane and live like the beasts of the field until he would give due glory to God. One year later this prophecy was supposed to come true. Daniel is not heard from again until the fall of

²¹¹ Pfeiffer, p. 89.

²¹² *Ibid.*, p. 91.

Babylon and as we come into this discussion we will again make reference to him.²¹³

Deutero-Isaiah during the Exile

Deutero-Isaiah begins where the other prophets had left off by giving words of consolation in saying, “Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people, saith your God.” Ottley continues to point out how Deutero-Isaiah’s mission was to proclaim the words of Yahweh to Israel as the living Savior of the helpless and oppressed. The message of Deutero-Isaiah played a very important role in enlarging Israel’s mental horizon and in expanding its creed into a world embracing faith. Anderson relates the message of this prophet in terms of his method, motive and objective in the deliverance of the exiles. The method was found in the use of a heathen prince who was entrusted by Yahweh with the deliverance of his people, and thereby we see that even the despised Gentiles bore an unconscious part in the advancement of the divine kingdom. Love was Jahweh’s motive. His method was to use people of his choice to make his love known to the nations. The objective of Jahweh’s love was to invite people from all nations to look to Jahweh for their salvation. The Israelite God is represented as King and Savior of the heathen world; and He is manifested through His chosen servant Israel, who is thus charged with the mission to all humanity. Such a vocation can only be fulfilled by the humiliation and suffering that is revealed in Isaiah 53. This passage seems to concentrate on the individual figure and characterization of the ideal Israel—its faithfulness, constancy, and its zeal for Yahweh’s honor. The suffering servant is spoken of but always in view of the triumphant accomplishment of Yahweh’s ultimate purpose. It is through death, that the servant passes onto life, that his sufferings are found to have atoning value. They will move Israel into making a penitent confession, and the redeemer of Israel will be acknowledged as the Savior of the world. The religious effect of the prophet’s conception about a new and profound doctrine leads to the meaning of suffering

²¹³ Pfeiffer, p. 92. It must be pointed out that it is unlikely that Daniel existed as a real person. The *Book of Daniel* was written during the second century B.C.E. in order to encourage Jews under oppression.

and also the presentation of the universalistic ideal.²¹⁴ In summary, Deutero-Isaiah understood the exile as the instrument of Yahweh's righteous judgment on the sins of Israel, but this did not involve the surrendering of His people. Yahweh's intention, after purging Israel, was to redeem all the earth through His people, who would make known the fact that all things take place in the purpose and power of Yahweh, who alone is God of the Universe.²¹⁵

Ezekiel During the Exile

Ezekiel was deported to Babylon during the time of Jehoiachin's captivity which occurred eleven years before the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C.E. He had ministered in the Temple at Jerusalem and was familiar with both the ritual and the moral law of Israel. This gave him much understanding in the background of Israel and her idolatry that made her ripe for the exile.²¹⁶

While he was living in Tel-abib along the river Chebar, Ezekiel married and lived in a house of his own until his wife was taken from him. He used this incident to relate to his countrymen that God was about to bring judgment upon the Temple and upon their loved ones back in Judah. After receiving a vision and commission from God to speak to His rebellious House of Israel, Ezekiel proceeded to draw the city plan of Jerusalem on a clay tablet and this was done in such a way as to show that the city was to be besieged. He laid down on his left side for 390 days to symbolize punishment for the House of Israel, and forty days for the punishment of the House of Judah.²¹⁷

Next, Ezekiel shaved his head and beard in order to weigh them in balance. One third of the population of Jerusalem would die through the consumption of pestilence and famine. A second third would fall by the sword, and this Ezekiel symbolized by striking the hair with a sword outside of the city. Finally he scattered the remaining hair to the

²¹⁴ Ottley, pp. 121-126.

²¹⁵ Bright, p. 337.

²¹⁶ Pfeiffer, p. 95.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 95-97.

winds. This signified that the remaining third of the population would be scattered.²¹⁸

In the following year Ezekiel was transported in spirit to Jerusalem at the north gate of the inner Temple court, and there he was shown the image of jealousy which signified that God was a jealous God and that such abominations, of which Israel was guilty, were driving Him from his sanctuary, which He did not desire to leave. After Ezekiel was shown examples of Israel's idolatry, he dared to say that God would forsake Zion in spite of the fact that previous prophets had said that the heathen could never take Jerusalem because Yahweh dwelt there. They were wrong in assuming God's presence among rebellious and idolatrous people.²¹⁹

By another symbol Ezekiel intimated that the king of Judah would go as a captive to Babylon, but that he would not be able to see the land. The prophecies that he was proclaiming did not find much acceptance among the false prophets who gave optimistic predictions for a quick return. When Jerusalem fell, the predictions of Ezekiel took on a new emphasis as he began proclaiming the hope of a restored Jerusalem and a new Temple where the sacrifices would be offered once again. The last eight chapters of his book are dedicated to describing the restoration of Jerusalem, the city which shall bear the name, "The Lord is There."²²⁰

²¹⁸ Pfeiffer, p. 98.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 98-99.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 99-100.

CHAPTER FOUR

RETURN OF THE EXILES

Babylon's Last Kings

Amel Marduk (562-560 B.C.E.)

After the death of Nebuchadnezzar, Babylon fell into the hands of three ineffective rulers who lost the empire to Cyrus who was the ruler of Persia. The first of these Babylonian emperors was Amel Marduk who ruled from 562 to 560 B.C.E. During his reign he released Jehoiachin from prison and gave him a more suitable place of confinement where he could have find garments and good meals. In spite of this act of mercy, he is described by Berossus as an extremely tyrannical ruler who despised the laws of his own people. He was finally assassinated in the second year of his reign by his sister's husband who usurped the throne.²²¹

Neriglissar (560-556 B.C.E.)

Neriglissar, a leading prince in the Babylonian court, took the throne from Amel Marduk and his reign lasted from 560 to 556 B.C.E. He held high political office and had been with the armies of Nebuchadnezzar as they entered Jerusalem. He had a part in releasing Jeremiah and entrusting him to the hands of Gedaliah. The reason why he considered himself a legal successor to the throne is because of his marriage to the daughter of Nebuchadnezzar. While Neriglissar reigned, no wars were fought. He spent his time adorning Babylon and repairing his palace with expensive brick and cedar. He named his son, Laboshi-Marduk, as his successor, but it was all in vain. After a nine month reign, he was murdered, and a more satisfactory candidate, acceptable to the priestly party, took over as the new king.²²²

²²¹ Pfeiffer, p. 83.

²²² *Ibid.*, p. 84.

Nabonidus (556-539)

The new king was Nabonidus whose reign lasted from 556 to 539 B.C.E. His chief energies were used in building and restoring Temples, and his main problem was that he often neglected the shrines of Babylon while he went to great expense in rebuilding other shrines and Temples. At times he would use the entire resources of the empire to import materials from distant countries such as Lebanon. His interests in religion might not have affected him so much if he had not neglected the affairs of state; but he chose to live at Tema, an oasis in the Hejaz region of Arabia, and appointed his son Belshazzar to be the co-regent at Babylon. When Daniel interpreted the second dream for Nebuchadnezzar, it is believed that he was really speaking of Nabonidus and that the cause of the mistake was due to a scribal error which associated the incident with Nebuchadnezzar whose name was more familiar. It seems to make more sense that it was Nabonidus who went insane and had to live for some time as an animal until he would acknowledge the sovereignty of Yahweh in order to be restored to his throne.²²³

Belshazzar

Belshazzar was co-regent for his father Nabonidus and actually functioned as the king though he was not a very strong ruler and is probably best known for the feast which was going on while the Persian armies were approaching Babylon. While he was drinking wine out of the very vessels that had been used in the Temple at Jerusalem, the fingers of a hand wrote an inscription on the wall which spelled out his doom. Daniel was sent for and his interpretation was given informing him that his days were numbered and that the kingdom was about to be divided between the Medes and Persians. That very night the Persian armies entered the city and Belshazzar was killed, yet the city was not destroyed and Cyrus proclaimed that he had delivered the Babylonians from the misrule of Nabonidus and Belshazzar.²²⁴

²²³ Pfeiffer, pp. 86-87.

²²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 93.

Return of the Exiles

After the fall of Babylon in 539 B.C.E., Cyrus entered Babylon and was welcomed by much of the populace. He proclaimed peace and allowed many of the former government officials to carry on at their posts. He made every attempt to make the transition over to Persian rule as painless as possible.²²⁵ During the first year of his reign he issued a decree authorizing the release of the Jews in exile so that they could return home to rebuild their Temple. He had the gold and silver vessels restored to them and provided for the necessary expenses to be taken from the royal treasury.²²⁶

The first group to return was led by Zerubbabel and a high priest named Joshua, although Pfeiffer seems to leave the impression that a very small remnant might have preceded this larger group led by Zerubbabel. The man who led the first smaller group was a Jewish noble named Shesh-bazzar who might even have been Zerubbabel himself or he might have been the uncle of Zerubbabel. The relationship between these two is quite uncertain. Many of the Jews had married and bought houses, and were in the process of making a profitable living; therefore, the uncertainty of a land that had been destroyed was not too appealing to them. Many were not willing to return, but in this first group, we find that about 50,000 thousand were willing to make the journey, including 42,360 free citizens with about 7,337 servants and 200 Temple singers.²²⁷

Upon arriving in Jerusalem the first responsibility was to erect a sanctuary and restore Levitical worship. The prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah argued for the speedy rebuilding of the Temple, and this was finally accomplished in 515 B.C.E.²²⁸ This is a much longer story though and upon their arrival they built an altar and gave burnt offerings daily under the direction of Joshua who was the high priest

²²⁵ Pfeiffer, p. 103.

²²⁶ Buttrick, p. 87.

²²⁷ Pfeiffer, pp. 103-105.

²²⁸ Buttrick, p. 188.

and grandson of Seriah, who served as the last high priest before the destruction of Jerusalem.²²⁹

The building of the Temple

The Samaritans offered to help in the building of the Temple, but the Jews just out of exile, declined the offer on the grounds that the Samaritans merely added the worship of Yahweh to the gods they brought with them from other lands. There was a strong determination that the post-exilic nation should not be corrupted by heathen practices. The Samaritans became openly hostile toward the Jews and actually prevented them from completing the Temple until the reign of Darius. Throughout this period we can see that many international upheavals were taking place, and some felt that the Messianic age was at hand. Judah was still under the Persian Empire but she placed her hope in the day when a Davidic King would rule from a new Jerusalem. Haggai and Zechariah placed a heavy emphasis on such hopes and exhorted the people to take seriously the task of rebuilding the Temple, which had been neglected. The Samaritan leaders tried to convince the Persian leader Tattinai that the Jews were about to initiate an insurrection. When Tattinai began to investigate the situation he was told by the Jews that a decree had been issued by Cyrus that the Temple should be restored; therefore he investigated the claim and upon finding the decree, Darius ordered Tattenai to expedite the work of the Jews and to meet the cost from the royal treasury. In March of 515 B.C.E. the second Temple was dedicated and there was great rejoicing even though the Temple was smaller than Solomon's Temple. What was most significant was that it became the rallying point for post-exilic Israel.²³⁰

The Building of the Walls

Back in Babylon Ezra appealed to Artaxerxes to make it possible for another company of exiles to return. The request was granted and he was authorized to take with him offerings for the Jerusalem Temple sent by Artaxerxes and the Jewish community. Ezra went as a

²²⁹ Pfeiffer, p. 105.

²³⁰ Ibid., p. 107.

representative of the Persian government, and he took with him 1,800 men and their families. After making a special appeal, 38 priests and 220 Temple servants joined the party. They left from Ahava without any military escort to protect them from robbers, since they felt that Yahweh could protect them. The gold and silver was entrusted to the priests and levites. When Ezra returned he found the population impure and it seemed as if they had forgotten all about the Law. Therefore, upon his return he informed them that it was time for the Feast of Tabernacles and they all built booths for themselves and began to observe all the ancient feasts once again. Ezra, through re-establishing the Law of Moses, became somewhat a second lawgiver.²³¹ Carl Knopf does not seem to think that Ezra actually existed. Knopf concludes: “...Ezra is a personification of the essence of legalistic, scribal Judaism — a literary character created by another writer, the Chronicler.”²³²

Nehemiah, a cup bearer and intimate friend of Artaxerxes, heard about the efforts in Jerusalem with the Temple and the fact that the city had no walls. He asked for a leave of absence so that he could go to Jerusalem to help with the building of the city walls. He was granted the leave of absence and made governor of Judah, separating the province from Samaria. This of course caused a conflict between Nehemiah and Sanballat who was governor of Samaria and also the one who was making accusations against the Jews for being rebellious against Persia. Nevertheless, Nehemiah pressed on with the idea of building the walls; and he accomplished this by dividing people up into labor battalions from all walks of life. Sanballat and his allies planned to send guerrilla bands to hinder the work but Nehemiah armed the workers with weapons and they slept each night with their clothes on ready for an attack that never really came off. The walls were finally finished within two months, but it was to take another two years and four months to properly strengthen them with the battlements and gates. Nehemiah appointed his brother, Hanani and Hananiah, the governor of the castle, to assume the responsibility for the welfare of Jerusalem. The completion of the walls called for a great celebration

²³¹ Pfeiffer, pp. 1089-111.

²³² Carl Sumner Knopf, *The Old Testament Speaks* (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1933), p. 303.

and two processions were formed to move around the walls in opposite directions with Nehemiah and Ezra leading. They met near the Temple where people gave expression of their joy by offering the appropriate sacrifices. Nehemiah then returned to the Persian court but in a very short time had to request another leave of absence in order to return to Jerusalem, since Jewish life was rapidly deteriorating through intermarriage and the misuse of the Sabbath. The decay was so bad that the Levites had to go into the fields to make a living, because they were not receiving their allowances for performing their work in the Temple.²³³

²³³ Pfeiffer, pp. 113-116.

CHAPTER FIVE

IMPORTANCE OF THE EXILE

Literary Activity

William Irwin, in an article in the *Interpreter's Bible*, says that the exile was the Great Divide in Hebrew history as it was at once a terrible but transforming experience. The course of literature was diverted and the Hebrew people attained a literary consciousness that made them the people of the book. It was the labor of this period that later produced the Mishnah, the Midrashim and a great bulk of other great writings. However, the prime treasure of this period can be found in the Book of Psalms.²³⁴ The exile was a time of religious activity which gave much attention to Israel's heritage, and much of the editing of the prophetic and historical literature was done by anonymous redactors who have long since been forgotten, but in reality are nevertheless interpreters that believed that the sacred heritage was relevant for their own time.²³⁵

The exile was one of those remarkable periods for prophetic and literary activity, and the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* makes at least six statements in regard to its importance not only in Judaism, but also in the Christian faith.

1. First, the prophets, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Deutero-Isaiah were in remarkable agreement over theological issues and about the importance of Judah and her experience in the calamity and defeat of the exile.
2. Secondly, this event was understood as a sign of divine judgment which if accepted by faith would become a revelation of God's love and commitment forever.

²³⁴ Harmon, p. 182.

²³⁵ Anderson, p. 380.

3. Thirdly, out of this experience would arise a new covenant born of the divine judgment to bind the people to God in the role of a servant and witness to the world.
4. Next we consider the many oracles and poems that were penned during this period and we see their value in interpreting the sufferings and the offering of encouragement to the exiles.
5. Furthermore, priestly activity in Babylonia produced a reappraisal of the Yahwistic culture in order to rid it of any element that might have evoked the divine judgment of the exile, and so we are now able to observe the birth of Judaism out of the exile.
6. Finally, the exile is the heart of any biblical understanding of divine judgment or revelation; it was the crucible of Israel's faith and the foundation stone in any understanding of the cross within the Christian faith.²³⁶

What Israel Learned

R. L. Ottley notes first that though there did exist a need to augment their faith in exile, they did this through the use of a fellowship of prayer and study without the use of any Temple. It is his belief that the synagogue was developed at this point and became the community center for Jewish life. Secondly, the institution of the Sabbath, which had been neglected to a great extent in the pre-exilic community, became the hallmark of Judaism in the exilic period. In conclusion he suggests that Israel learned three significant facts through their experience in the exile.

1. The first of these is the fact that the advance of God's kingdom was dependent upon the submission of the Jewish people to undergo unmerited suffering.
2. Next we see that the privileges of Israel were granted within the view of the welfare for all humankind.

²³⁶ Buttrick, p. 188.

3. Finally, Israel was chosen for the glory of God to proclaim His name and set forth His praise throughout all the earth.²³⁷

Forces Reflected in the Period

Theodore Robinson has listed five forces that seem to have reflected the thought of the period of the exile.

1. First, the immediate effect of the fall of Jerusalem was that of pessimism as she recognized the doom of what had befallen her. In spite of all that has happened she also is able to see beyond this initial pessimism, and so the best means of expressing her understanding of this event is found in the simple word of judgment and grace.
2. Secondly, we find within the period the whole of Israel's past history from Moses to the present period had been revised and edited in order to reconcile the tragic past in the light of a moral sovereignty within history.
3. Thirdly, we see that due to the fact that Israel felt her land had been taken away from her, she began to explore a deeper answer to the consequences of sin than the pre-exilic prophets had predicted. She became aware of a deepening sense of sin as a result of her having broken the covenant.
4. Fourthly, we see developing a more personal religion as a result of the experiences of Jeremiah as he came to grasp the reality of fellowship with God. What could not be readily explained in terms of the solidarity of the community could be more readily understood in the life of individuals. Jeremiah and Ezekiel were at one in discovering the individual person as the source of hope and meaning, and personal religion received a new and profound emphasis.
5. Finally, we see a new continuity and structure that has given to Israel something beyond the confusion and chaos

²³⁷ Ottley, pp. 126-127.

that followed in 587 B.C.E.; and this prompted certain prophets and priests to observe the present in a more spacious and revealing context of the tradition beginning with the Exodus, finding its origin in the story of creation.²³⁸

Importance of the Exile

Perhaps Carl Knopf has best summarized the importance of the period in ten short points that he has suggested in his book, *The Old Testament Speaks*:

1. The state was eliminated;
2. religion became the focal point;
3. Yahweh ceased to be a local deity;
4. the individual responsibility was emphasized;
5. prophecy became a concern in literary and doctrinal activity;
6. the Messianic hope was stimulated;
7. a much greater emphasis was placed in written works or scripture;
8. there was more interest in Jewish destiny;
9. groups of interpreters arose;
10. and finally, the synagogue was developed.²³⁹

Knopf has listed his points very briefly but it seems as though he has made an excellent summary of the importance of the period and at the same time he has shown how Israel came back from the exile, not as a nation, but with a mission.²⁴⁰ God called a people to bring light to the

²³⁸ Harmon, p. 331.

²³⁹ Knopf, p. 289.

²⁴⁰ May, p. 873.

nations that are groping in the darkness of ignorance and this is best expressed by Deutero-Isaiah in Isaiah 42:6-7 (NRSV).

I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

OUTLINE OF JEREMIAH'S CONCEPT OF GOD

1. God is Monotheistic

- Foreign gods are idols
- God is over all nations
- God is creator of the world
- God is moral and righteous

2. God is Righteous

- Sin must be punished
- Israel will not listen
- Prophets must be faithful
- God chastises Israel
- Israel must repent
- Ritual and sacrifice are inadequate
- God requires obedience
- The Lord is our righteousness

3. God is Judge

- Judgment is inevitable
- Judgment is universal
- Judgment occurs through history
- Judgment is proclaimed by the prophet
- Judgment takes place through Babylonia
- Judgment is the reorganization of history
- Judgment causes God pain

4. God is Sovereign

- Sovereign and freedom are problematic
- God is the potter
- Israel is the clay
- The good of the vessel is important
- Freedom depends on sovereignty
 - Limited sovereignty
 - Limited freedom

5. God is Personal

God chooses nations and peoples
God's presence is felt by people
Jeremiah uses figures of speech
 Yahweh is a Husband
 Yahweh is a Father
 Yahweh is a Fountain
God establishes the New Covenant
Jeremiah's questioning leads to a relationship

6. God is Steadfast Love

God will restore Israel
God expresses steadfast love
Steadfast Love is Everlasting
Israel is invited to return
Jeremiah expresses faith in God's mercy

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

I appreciate Jeremiah more than any other prophet. Jeremiah didn't want to be a prophet. He came out of a priestly family, and he wanted to be a priest, but God called him to be a prophet. In his confrontation with Hananiah, he agreed with Hananiah. He wanted to prophesy what the people wanted to hear, but God's Word was like a fire in his belly. He could only prophesy God's Word.

Jeremiah's message was optimistic because it contained the truth. That's why I consider him a true prophet. He refused to cry peace when peace was impossible. It was impossible because the people refused to repent and turn away from their idolatry. Hananiah didn't talk about repentance and that's why his prophecies lack truth; and consequently, he made himself into a false prophet. He cried peace when there was no peace. Peace and justice can only follow repentance.

The Exile seemed like punishment, but it was at the same time a period of instruction. It lasted a person's lifetime, which was approximately 70 years. What did it teach them? It taught them that they did not need a Temple or a Land to worship God; although, they continued to want both. Prior to the Exile they were a people with a Temple and a Land, but they came out of the Exile with a Faith and a Book. They gathered together to pray and to hear God's Word read from the Torah. That became their order of worship in the Synagogue.

They wanted a Temple, but no Temple was needed. Jesus referred to himself as a Temple, and Paul pointed out that we are all Temples of the Holy Spirit. In Revelation 21:22, John says, "I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb."

Most of all, Jeremiah teaches us about the nature of God, connecting the Old and New Testament concepts of God together. I find no inconsistency between Jeremiah's concept of God and Jesus' concept of God. While we might want God to be *only* love, Jeremiah reminds us that the nature of God includes more than love. Jesus first words, as he began his ministry, were, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." (Mark 1:14) At the end of his ministry, while dying on the

cross, he said to the repentant thief, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in [Paradise](#).” (Luke 23:43)

I encourage comments and criticism. Please direct them to me via email.

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