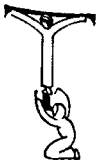


J E R E M Y

BY

MARGARET SMITH



HE popular notion of Jeremy (otherwise known as Jeremias) is that of a gaunt, sorrow-seared figure thundering the wrath of God through the desolate ruins of Jerusalem. He is the prophet of grief, his message and his life full of warning and a submission that in its vehemence seems to be despair. Perhaps it is because the only quotation from his teachings used in the New Testament is: 'A voice was heard on high of lamentation, of great mourning and weeping, of Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted for them for they are not'. 'Refusing to be comforted'; Jeremy would allow no mitigation. In days of great violence he was a compelling character, he would not suffer his burning message to be quenched by the evil of those who were called the chosen of God. Yet behind this woe and foretelling of desolation there is a human being who loved his people, the race that had gone astray, who often was wearied with this high vocation, who who afraid. To us today to whom a prophet is a rather alarming figure of antiquity, who have lost the idea of symbolism, who are frightened of fanaticism, Jeremy is a mysterious figure. And yet he is part of our history, and as the continuing chosen race his message is ours.

It is necessary to see a little of the history of Jeremy's time to appreciate the magnitude of his task and estimate the greatness of his character. Israel was in sore need of a prophet. The words of Isaias had ceased to ring in the ears of the people and forgetful of their position they had lapsed into idolatry, and in particular into the worship of the Queen of Heaven. Under Josias, of the same age as the prophet, the book of the law containing Mosaic custom and regulation was discovered. This encouraged Josias in his determination to rouse the Jewish race and bring them back to an acceptance of the stringencies of a law which would serve as the frame for the life of both the individual and the nation, a life pleasing to God. Unfortunately Josias's foreign policy was not as enlightened as his home policy, and he attempted to stem an Egyptian advance against what in the eyes of the people was the common enemy, Babylon. He was killed at the battle of Mageddo and the people explained away the catastrophe by declaring that while he was an upright man he had been mistaken in his interpretation of Yahwe's will and therefore had suffered death. He was succeeded by one of his sons, Joachaz, who was

deposed after a brief but evil reign of three months. He was succeeded in turn by Joachim, Josias's second son, a wicked king placed on the throne by Necho the ruling Pharaoh. He naturally allied himself with Egypt and thereby committed himself to a policy aimed against Babylon. At the battle of Carchemesh Egypt and Juda were overthrown; Joachim was led into captivity where he died. He was succeeded by Joachin, his son, who ruled for three months and then surrendered to Nabuchadonozor and was carried off to Babylon. His uncle Sedecias ruled in his place. He was a weak king and wavered between submission to Babylon and rebellion. The troops of the king of Babylon laid siege to Jerusalem and took the city in 586 B.C., Sedecias being taken to Babylon with many of his people; the remnant fled to Egypt and Jerusalem was left empty.

But all this history has been related without a mention of Jeremy, for while the current of events was surging onward to defeat and destruction the prophet had vainly been struggling to preach submission and a return through hardship and shame to the glory of serving Yahwe. His vocation as a prophet is the strangest in the Old Testament for he shares with John the Baptist the privilege of being called before birth: 'The word of the Lord came to me saying, "Before I formed thee in the womb of thy mother I knew thee, and before thou camest forth I sanctified thee and made thee a prophet unto the nations".' The young Jeremy pleaded his youth as an excuse for his reluctance to accept so high a privilege but God strengthened him and gave him the recognised sign of inspiration: 'The Lord put forth his hand and touched my mouth, and the Lord said to me "Behold I have given my words in thy mouth".' So Jeremy leaves his life of seclusion and scholarship to take up the more hazardous career of prophet and persecuted. With Josias as king and with the discovery of the book of the law momentarily effecting a superficial religious revival in Jerusalem, Jeremy's true vocation had hardly begun. It was at the death of Josias and the accession of Joachim that Jeremy became a political figure. He mourned the death of Josias with a lamentation 'all the singing men and women repeat unto this day'. But he denounced Joachaz, Joachim and Joachin in no uncertain manner: 'Thus saith the Lord concerning Joachim, the son of Josias, king of Juda: "They shall not mourn for him alas my brother and alas my sister; they shall not lament for him, alas my lord, and alas my noble one'. He shall be buried with the burial of an ass, rotten and cast forth without the gates of Jerusalem'.

Nor was his prophecy false, for as he had seen in his first vision

an almond tree, the sign of Yahwe's watchfulness, and the cauldron with the flame in the north, peril from Babylon, so it was to be fulfilled. While Joachim was allying his country with Egypt against Babylon Jeremy was to assume the role of the holy traitor for his message was submission to Babylon. He had to try to make the Jews see that God had regarded the evil of their ways and was to save them by the purgation of captivity. He offered no hope of salvation but a period of shame and subjection from which Israel would arise gloriously. His mission was 'to root up and to pull down, to waste and to destroy, to build and to plant'. There was much that was destruction for the edifice of idolatry that the Jews had built up was as tall as Babel and precious as the golden calf. The prophet gives a graphic account of the insidious evil that had wormed its way into the very stuff of domestic life: 'The children gather wood and the fathers kindle fire and the women knead the dough to make cakes to the Queen of Heaven'. The purgation must proportionately be as great, the destruction of Jerusalem and captivity; 'Weep not for him that is dead nor bemoan him with your tears nor lament for him that goeth away for he shall return no more, nor see his native country'. The people of Jerusalem, instead of being encouraged in this time of danger, told of the glories of their city, the invincibility of the chosen race; now when the enemy is at hand the prophet of God does not lead into battle for the honour of Israel but asks to surrender to the might of Babylon, to embrace their fate, their defeat and shame as the will of Yahwe, his plan for his chosen people. It is little wonder that when the book of Jeremy's prophecies, dictated to Baruch, were read to the king he tore them up and threw them into the fire. Even his own kinsmen and the men of his birthplace, Anathoth, plotted against him: 'Come and let us invent devices against Jeremias . . . come and let us strike him with the tongue, and let us give no heed at all to his words'. Even his symbolic actions and figures, the dramatic dashing to the ground of the earthenware jar to demonstrate God's design to break the proud people who for all their wilfulness and heedlessness are as clay in his hands, and also the figure of the linen girdle worn close to a man, close as the chosen people to Yahwe, that when dug up after its sojourn in the earth was found to be rotten and cast away, were ignored or misunderstood.

So definite and unerring a message was the cause of Jeremy's persecution: he was often in prison, in hiding, the object of scorn and hate. He stays behind when others are taken off to Babylon, stays with the people who hate him, whom he loves, preaching a message that none will listen to. When Joachim is dead and

Sedecias is in power, the prophet's position is even more uncertain, because the king at one moment listens to him, then to the evil counsellors or false prophets like Hananias, and not even when Jeremy shows forth his power by predicting Hananias's death, is he accepted. No possible analogy can fully describe the catastrophe when the siege of Jerusalem ends: 'And in the eleventh year of the city was opened and all the princes of the king of Babylon Sedecias, in the fourth month, and the fifth day of the month, came in and sat at the middle gate'.

Sedecias, Yahwe's representative on earth, is ignominiously captured by the enemy as he leaves Jerusalem by the back door. The number of people taken off to Babylon is greater than ever. Jeremy seems to have commanded respect among the enemy, perhaps because they too had heard his message which proclaimed them instruments of Yahwe and the legitimate victor of the chosen people. He refuses their offer of security and respect in Babylon and instead remains with the Jewish community in Jerusalem which under Godolias band together at Musphat. Dom Hubert Van Zeller has a particularly vivid paragraph in which he seeks to describe that tiny remnant: 'It would be as if the whole Catholic population of England today were reduced to an indiscriminate handful under the undefined leadership of a scribe—someone like Mr Arnold Lunn—and confined to the limits of Hampstead Heath. No bishops, no societies, no bazaars, and only a few disused army huts to serve as a metropolitan cathedral (and with Fr Vincent McNabb as the one remaining prophet in the land)'. But even from this position the Jews were ousted when a rival killed Godolias and despite the warnings of Jeremy they went into Egypt.

How Jeremy died is not certain, but there is a strong tradition that the Jews rose up against him and stoned him. For of him who wept over the fate of Jerusalem and upbraided the people for their unfaithfulness, who allowed his love for them to give him no respite, of him it was to be said by Christ whom he so closely resembles: 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, that killest the prophets and stonest them that are sent to thee, how often would I have gathered thy children as the hen doth her brood under her wings . . . and thou wouldst not'.

'And stonest them that are sent to thee'; there is a very strong sense of vocation and mission in Jeremy from the very first when he pleaded youth as an excuse, until the bitterness of maturity when he found it so difficult to maintain his faith in a message which appealed to none and which made him an object of hatred to his own people. He cries out against his isolation and fear: 'Be

not thou a terror unto me . . . let them be confounded that persecute . . . let them be afraid and let not me be afraid'; and the despair of his vocation, 'For I am speaking now this long time, crying out against iniquity, and I often proclaim devastation and the word of the Lord is made a reproach to me and a derision all the day. Then I said: I will not make mention of him nor speak any more his name. And there came in my heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was wearied not being able to bear it', the supernatural straining and tearing the natural, the vocation versus volition, the loneliness of the man who has a mission directed against those whom he loves, of whom he is part, his own ones.

The context of his immediate prophecy was the main cause for failure in the natural sphere. Isaias had preached: 'Blessed be my people of Egypt and the work of my hands to the Assyrian, but Israel is my inheritance'. The temple was to stand inviolate. But Jeremy had to preach the weakness of Israel and the strength of Babylon, he had to foretell the destruction of the temple, and all the time he was attacking the national pride of Israel. Jerusalem had to fall before it could be renewed: 'And I will make Jerusalem to be a heap of sand and dens of dragons and I will make the cities of Juda desolate for want of an inhabitant'. He describes the terrors of ransacked Jerusalem, 'Her Nazarites were whiter than snow, purer than milk, more ruddy than the old ivory, fairer than the sapphire. Their faces now made blacker than coals and they are not known in the streets: their skin has stuck to their bones. It is withered and has become like wood'. All this because Israel had forgotten Yahwe, they had not bowed down to his commands so now 'bend down your necks under the yoke of the king of Babylon and serve him'.

The prophecy was not only to be destructive. Jeremy was not only 'to pull down, to waste and to destroy', but 'to build and to plant'. Yahwe was to break the people as a potter breaks an earthenware jar that has a flaw, he was to find them rotten as the linen girdle dug in the ground but finally they were to be restored. And it is here that the prophecy becomes Messianic: 'Behold the day is come saith the Lord and I will raise up to David a just branch. And a king shall reign, and shall be wise, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth'. And again, 'I will make the bud of justice to spring forth unto David: and he shall do judgment and justice in the earth. In those days shall Juda be saved and Jerusalem shall dwell securely. And this is the name that they shall call him the Lord our just one. Jerusalem is restored to more than its former glory and has become the centre of the earth, 'Jerusalem shall be called the throne of the Lord: and all nations shall be gathered

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together to it, in the name of the Lord'. It is now that Jeremy is joyful, 'For thus saith the Lord: rejoice ye in the joy of Jacob, and neigh before the head of the Gentiles. Shout ye and sing and say: save O Lord thy people, the remnant of Israel'. And Rachel is answered, 'Let thy voice cease from weeping and thy eyes from tears, for there is a reward for thy work saith the Lord: and thy return out of the land of the enemy'. This new Jerusalem in turn becomes the new Jerusalem of the Apocalypse and all is completed. All purgation, shame, sorrow and down-stooping is the prelude to renewal and resurrection. Jerusalem renewed shall rise and the Redeemer shall enter in.

Messianic prophecies, while being explicit, are more than supplemented by the prophecy implicit in the life of Jeremy. Like Christ he had to preach a message of submission to a people eager for political dominance. In Christ's time the Jews were looking for a leader who would overthrow the power of Rome and triumphantly inaugurate an era of Jewish power, yet Christ had to teach them that the kingdom was of a spiritual order, the preparation for it death and shame. Jeremy faced a people who were looking for a general who would lead them against Babylon and overthrow the armies massed against them. Instead he taught submission and shame as the glorious way of life. Both Christ and Jeremy, though they were a scourge to the chosen people, loved them, 'You rebellious children', as Jeremy calls them. Yet of the Jerusalem of both eras it could be said upbraidingly, 'If thou also hadst known the things that are to thy peace, but now they are hidden from thy eyes . . . because thou hast not known the time of thy visitation'. Both stand as mediator between God and man. Jeremy wants to unite in himself all Israel so that when he worships Yahwe all the people will be represented in him, a type of Christ's perfect sacrifice and prayer which includes the whole of his mystical body.

In the details of his personal history this likeness to Christ is apparent. Both are despised and rejected by the people they have come to save, 'they have devised counsels against me to cut me off from the land of the living', the same constant undercurrent of hatred, the same desire to silence the preaching of both. The false prophets and bad priests of Jeremy's time are a counterpart of the Scribes and Pharisees of Christ's time. Both Christ and the prophet have reason to cry out against the abuse of the sanctity of the temple and in much the same words. 'Is this house, then, in which my name has been called upon, in your eyes become a den of robbers', or 'My house is to be called a house of prayer and you have made it a den of thieves'. Both weep over Jerusalem

who saw not the time of her visitation. Both were the victims of their friends, and humbly suffered injustice; Jeremy, 'a meek lamb that is carried to be a victim', is so not only because of his own life, but so as to be a type of the Eternal Lamb of God.

Little details in Jeremy's life are very like those of Christ's. Sedecias is the perfect type of Pilate. He seeks out Jeremy in prison and asks him what Yahwe has to say to the people, thus affirming his half-hearted belief in the prophet, but he cannot bring himself to set him free, saying to the people, 'Behold he is in your hands. For it is not lawful for the king to deny you anything', just as Pilate delivered Christ to the Jews. As Christ was made to fall beneath the cross and die, so in a figure Jeremy is thrown into the cistern, as Joseph into the well, Daniel in the lion's den, Samson in Delilah's lap, to show the sinking to rise, the crucifixion before the resurrection. And as Joseph of Arimathea was not an immediate follower of Christ, so Abdemelech, the Ethiopian, a Good Samaritan, rescues Jeremy from the bowels of the earth. . . .

But once this imaginative correlation has begun its limits are infinity. we wander in the realms of mystical numbers, a higher mathematics, into spiritual geography, apocalyptic history. Without it, it is obvious that Jeremy is a prophet in word and in work. Superimposed on the ordinary structure of a human life is a life of supernatural significance which gives every action a hidden meaning, and draws, however painfully, each human word and deed to infinity. Jeremy was the mouth of God, speaking of destruction and shame but foretelling rebirth and glory and if his life seems to us full of sorrow and despair it is only because 'They that sow in tears shall reap in joy. Casting their seed, they wept when going forth; but coming, they shall return with joyfulness'.