

JEREMIAH

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lightly revised by David C F Wright

The late Arthur Cundall gave me full permission to reproduce his study notes and approved of some minor edits. As this project was pursued as a labour of love with no monetary considerations, a few typographical mistakes may have crept in.

Introduction and chapter one

Jeremiah must be the most maligned godly character in the Bible. His name has been associated with being a misery, a depressive and the weeping prophet of doom and gloom.

In fact, he was a very courageous man called to a difficult task foretelling God's judgment upon Judah. He was dedicated to this task for forty years, and was subject to resentment and persecution. He was a tender-hearted man who loved his people and loved God. He knew the prophecy of Hosea delivered to Israel some hundred year before, and both men preached the unfaithfulness of the Jews towards God, and one wonders today why the Jews were so anti-God and ungrateful for His love, mercy and dedication towards them.

There is confusion in how his book is set out, as it is not in chronological order. Jeremiah prophesied in the reigns of five different kings

Josiah (640- 609 BC)	chapters 1 to 6
Jehoahaz (3 months in 609 BC)	nothing but see 22.11f
Jehoiakim (609- 597 BC)	chapters 7 to 20 (except 13.18f) 22 1-23, 23, 26, 35 36, 45
Jehoiachin (3 months in 597 BC)	13. 18, 22.22.24-30 see also 52.31-34
Zedekiah (597-587 BC)	Warnings 24. 27-29, 51. 59-60 Promises 30-33 The last siege 21, 34,37 to 39 After the fall of Jerusalem 40 to 54 Prophecies against the nations 46 to 51 Historical finale 52. 1 to 30

Jeremiah was called by God, chosen to be God's man in a dark day.

The seventh century was a disastrous one for Judah. It began brightly enough with the closing years of the reformer-king, Hezekiah (715 -687 BC), but his son, Manasseh, was the worst king of Judah and

during his long reign (687-642 BC) the land was filled with violence and corruption, true religion almost ceased and the Temple fell into disrepair (2 Kings 21. 1-18 and 23. 3-7). He was succeeded by Amon, a king of equally, evil repute whose reign was cut short by an uprising (2 Kings 21. 19-26).

But Josiah, an eight-year old king, began his reign with two colossal disadvantages. He had a father and grandfather who were the two worst kings of Judah and he lived in the dark days of the nation.

God is never bound by circumstances and He worked in the tender heart of the young king with a reformation which was in three parts. When Josiah was sixteen, he had a personal experience of God, which we could call a conversion (2 Chronicles 34.3), Four years later, he began a sweeping purge of idolatrous practices in Judah even extending to the northern kingdom of Israel. There was also a decline in the power of Assyria who had been Judah's overlord for more than a century which enabled Josiah to go ahead with his reforms.

One year later in 627 or 626 BC, God called Jeremiah. It may be that Josiah's reforms had inspired him as God knew that the valiant attempts of the king might hold back the floods of ungodliness but only for a while.

The word youth for Jeremiah (verse 6) indicates a person without full rights in the community and may refer to someone between the ages of seventeen and twenty. Was he expecting this call? He only protested on the account of his age and for no other reason. God wanted a man with a tender loving heart and gentleness and in Jeremiah found a man who had these qualities in full measure. Of course, God chose the right man.

In verse 5, God tells Jeremiah that before he was born God knew him and had sanctified him to be a prophet to the nations. Jeremiah's protest was only on account of his age. He did not say that he would not be a prophet for God. God told the young man not to complain about his youth but rely on God who will send him wherever He wills and give him the words to speak and not to be afraid since God would always be with him.

Jeremiah was of a priestly family that lived at Anathoth a few miles north east of Jerusalem. He may have been a descendant of Abiathar, David's priest and friend, whom Solomon banished during his early reign (1 Kings 2.26f). There is no evidence that Jeremiah ever practised as a priest but he was called by God as was John the Baptist (Luke 1.15) and Paul (Galatians 1.15)

Jeremiah's call was confirmed by two visions. Firstly, the rod, or branch, of the almond tree (verse 11f). In Hebrew, the word almond often symbolises watching. The almond was one of the earliest to bloom in the spring time and this would remind Jeremiah that God is always watching and wakeful. Secondly, there is the vision of the boiling pot (13f) which speaks of judgment coming out of the north. Some commentators thought this to be a Sychian invasion but it refers to the Babylonians who finally destroyed Jerusalem.

It has been said that Jeremiah's prophecy is two thirds judgment and one third upbuilding 1.10 and 31.28 and he was promised superhuman strength in his task which lasted for forty years and God found him to be steadfast and loyal.

Chapter two

Chapters 3 and 4 date from the earliest days of Josiah's reforms and the prophet was promoting an inward and spiritual response by which heathenism was being removed. Jeremiah looked back over the years in the wilderness (2, verses 2 and 3) and with some nostalgia in marked contrast to the psalmist (Psalm 95, 8 to 11) and Hosea regards this time as one of purity (Hosea 9. 10, 11.1).

God looks at the present situation and asks, Was the fault mine?, but then answers it by referring to His people's ingratitude which led the nation to go astray (verse 5-7). They had forgotten His mighty acts, and the leaders, both civic and religious, seemed to be involved in a deliberate conspiracy against God (verse 8). Because of this God charges His people with an unnatural crime, unparalleled among the heathen, of changing their gods.

Cyprus (verse 10) was the most western-point of Judah's territory while Kedar was a desert tribe in the east and so the appeal is from the west to the east, that is to say anywhere. A fountain of living waters (verse 13) was an extremely rare luxury in Palestine where the water supply was dependent upon the seasonal rains. But Judah had forsaken this divine provision and instead, and with energy, was seeking an inferior substitute, a quest that was quite illusive (verse 13). There are still those who cannot accept that salvation is a free gift of God to be accepted by faith (Ephesians 2 verse 4-9) and, like the Galatians, seek to add a religion of their own making (Galatians 3. 1-5. 4.8ff). Not only was Judah disappointed, she was also impoverished by attacks from surrounding nations (verse 14ff) and, even here, instead of seeking the Lord, she was attempting to remedy the situation by a policy of alliance with Egypt and Assyrian (verse 18). Judah was a servant turned rebel, a harlot and a degenerate vine (verse 20). The guilt expressed in these metaphors was more than skin-deep. It could not be washed away by soap and human energy. Only true repentance matched with the grace of God could restore the relationship shattered by Judah's sin (compare Joel 2.12ff).

How insidious are the effects of compromise. Israel, under the leadership of Moses, approached the Promised Land with a strong faith in God who delivered them from Egypt and made a covenant with them. Warning after warnings were given to them concerning the dangers they would face in Canaan. Specific instructions were given to them to deal uncompromisingly with the nature-cults of the Canaanites (Deuteronomy 12, 1-3). But little by little through mixed marriages (Judges 3.6) and because it was deemed wise to show deference to the Baal-gods who were supposed to control fertility in nature, the high standards of the Mosaic law crumbled. The end product was that God was worshipped in name only, the form of worship being identical with that of the surrounding nations and yet Jeremiah's contemporaries were apparently unaware of this and protested that they had not forsaken the Lord (verses 23 and 35). There are many references to one of the most prominent aspects of Canaanite religion which was that of sexual gratification where male and female prostitutes were connected with the sanctuaries (verses 23-27).

Another aspect is set out in verse 27. At each Canaanite shrine there was an asherah, probably a wooden pillar a substitute for a sacred tree representing the female sexual element and a mazzabah or stone pillar indicating the male element. Ironically Jeremiah inverts the genders. Added to this rank idolatry of verse 28 were there the sins of rebellion (29ff) and the forgetfulness of God (verse 32), their cruel treatment of the poor (verse 34) and their frantic quest for alliances with their more powerful neighbours which was always. But the Lord has more power than regarded by the prophets as an act of disloyalty to God than those in whom His people trusted.

The prophet gives many examples (24ff). The ass sniffs at the wind at her pleasure, the thief is ashamed when he is caught, accepting as father a stock or stone and God asks where are the gods in whom they had put their trust and why does the people not talk to God who has put correction upon His people. A bride would not forget her wedding dress and yet Judah had not only forgotten the Lord but transgressed against Him and said that they had not sinned against the Lord. Egypt and Assyria would be of no use to them and would not provide confidence or prosperity.

And yet God still pleads with His people (verse 9)

Chapter three

This deals mainly with God's faithfulness in contrast to the unfaithfulness of His people. If a man puts away his wife and she leaves him should he then take her back? Judah had played the harlot with many lovers and yet God pleads with them to return to Him and experience His mercy. The land is polluted with whoredoms and showers of rain have been withheld by God as a warning, and yet the people refused to be repentant and ashamed. They would not acknowledge that God was their guide and, in His mercy, He would not keep His anger for ever in spite of the many evil and cruel things Judah had said against Him.

Jeremiah was aware of the historical events of the end of the northern kingdom of Israel in 721 BC, but the significance of this act of judgment was prophesied by Hosea, who was like Jeremiah in that both men knew the loneliness and heartache in their ministries and both viewed the apostasy of the people as spiritual adultery. But Jeremiah points out that Judah was the more blameworthy for her sin which was a brazen defiance of the stark warning provided by the fate of Israel a century before. In verse 10 there is an allusion to the superficial response of the nation to Josiah's reformation.

Verses 12-20 speaks of God's promises and we notice the numerous occasions of the word faithless being used. And yet God was willing to forgive and restore His people on one condition that they repent of their guilt (verse 13). The gracious, merciful love of the Father (verse 19) shines out the more against the dark, sombre background of such national apostasy. Here Jeremiah speaks of a return to the land which would include even the exiled Israelites, although verse 14 indicates a limited response. Wise leadership and an absence of reliance upon outward forms, an effective ministry to the nations and a new unity were to be the features of the future Messianic kingdom (verse 15-18).

A confession is referred to in verse 21 and 24 f. If only... How often we have used these words in vain self-estimation. But here it has no real substance. If only Judah had listened to the prophet who tried to prick their conscience into making a full and frank confession, Jerusalem and its temple would not have been destroyed, Judah would not have been devastated and there would have been no exile. How dearly Judah was to pay for her continued rebellion Sin is never slack in paying its wages. spoiling, scarring and destroying (Romans 6. 23 f).

Verse 22f is a prayer which the nation ought to have prayed in response to the gracious invitation of God. But it was never prayed. Nor was Hosea's similar appeal to his people heeded (Hosea 14. 1 f). There is no hope for any nation or individual which, when confronted with its sin, and is given an opportunity to repent, prefers to go blindly on its pathway to self-destruction.

Chapter four

This section marks one of the turning-points in Jeremiah's prophecy. Up to this point he has concentrated on exposing the nature of Judah's sin and appealing for her to repent and return to the Lord. His evangelical appeals to repentance continue throughout the remainder of his ministry (4.18, 18. 11) but now a sterner note of impending judgment enters in. We have noted a plausible connection between chapters 2 and 3 and the opening phases of Josiah's massive reforms which, at least, has two hints that, for the majority of the people, the reform movement was a matter of words only (3, 5 and 8). Now in the opening verses of chapter four, he comes out in a direct frontal attack upon Josiah's reforms as being purely superficial. They were not returning to the Lord since they were retaining their abominations and all their idolatrous practices and were religious in fits and starts and never sincere. It is obvious that their protestations were not matched by truth, justice and rightness (verse 2) but the real diagnosis in verse 3. The reformation was only on the surface like sowing seed on land that had not been ploughed or which was choked by a rank growth of weeds (Hosea 10.12f). There must be deep ploughing before there can be a bountiful harvest and the eradication of all that hinders

growth both in the realm of the spiritual and in nature. Our Lord's parable of the Sower has its application here (Matthew 13. 3-9, 18-23).

Changing the analogy, Jeremiah shows that the outward, covenant-sign of circumcision was inefficacious unless there was a corresponding inward separation to the Lord (verse 4). As Paul pointed out six centuries later, 'real circumcision is a matter of the heart' (Romans 2.29 compare with Colossians 2.11). Any form of religion, even if it has scriptural endorsement, but which is merely an outward show is unacceptable to the Lord. He abominates the 'whitewashed tombs' type of religion (Matthew 23.27).

On account of this, the prophet sees the approaching judgment (verse s 5-9, 11-18). This is very vivid because he uses the present tense which sees the judgment as already in progress so certain is its fulfilment. At this stage Jeremiah allows the false prophets the same sincerity that he knew, ascribing their easy, complacent message to the same Lord who had inspired him (verse 10). Later on, he was find out the truth (14.13-16, 23).

The theme of impending doom continues but the imagery changes. First, it is viewed as a soaring wind blasting from the desert (4.11), next, as an invasion by a foreign army (4.13, 15-13. 18.29), then by a shattering earthquake, followed by a ghastly silence in which even the song of the birds is stilled (23-26) and, finally, as an encroachment by the predatory beasts of the wilderness in chapter 5.6.

Four things should be noted. This bitter calamity is a result of the nation's sin (4. 18). No matter how stern may be the oracles of doom, now matter how close the twelfth hour, there is always a way of escape upon true repentance (4.14). Thirdly, the Lord and his prophet find no vindictive delight in the misfortunes of the people (19-22). It is well to remember this since many people view God as Shylock anticipating exacting his pound of flesh, whereas God's judgment comes from a heart of love. The agony of spirit reflected here echoes the tender picture of the relationship between God and Israel (Hosea 11. 1-9). Jeremiah himself suffered so much from his people that, humanly speaking, he might be excused from gloating over their miseries when his prophecy came to pass. But Jeremiah was not that kind of man ; he had God's love in his heart and the fourth point is that the coming catastrophe was punitive but purposeful and God would not completely blot out His people (verse 27).

Chapter five

Jeremiah is sent to a search for one righteous man in Jerusalem. As the Lord would have spared Sodom for the sake of ten righteous men (Genesis 18.32) so He would have done for one man in Zion. Large-hearted Jeremiah was prepared to make excuses for the poor (verse 4) but rebellion against God was not confined to class, even the leaders of the nation, who were conversant with divine requirements, had completely cast off restraint (verse 5). The same desperate situation was noted later on by Ezekiel (Ezekiel 22.30). Clearly this was no time for half measures.

The rest of the chapter deals with the rebellious nation and two pictures emerge depicting the depravity of man and the other picture is of the greatness of God which are contrasted here. National and individual sins were certainly written large, including the casting off of all restraint and a wild abandonment to sexual orgies (verse 7f), brasen hearts of unbelief which denied the effective power of God (11f, 22 f.). This led to moral and spiritual insensitivity (verse 21), idolatry (verse 19) and corruption and violence amongst those who should have been giving wise leadership (verses 26-29).

In his diagnosis, Jeremiah puts the blame on the shoulders of the religious leaders (verse 30f). The essential quality of a prophet was that he acted as God's spokesman mediating the divine will to the people (compare the instructive analogy of Exodus 4.15f, 7. 1f). When this was ignored, and prophecy became a crowd-pleasing expediency, every standard of life, moral, social and religious, was bound to suffer. The common people, given every assurance from those in authority (verse 12) could hardly

be blamed for living as if God did not exist. In our age, church leaders of all denominations have the same weighty responsibility as the watch-dogs over every aspect of the national life.

But the grace and greatness of God is shown with equal clarity. In the opening question of verse 7 there is an indication of a loving, merciful heart which yearns to pardon.

He is no weak, tolerant Deity however, but One whose very essence is righteousness, which demands that sin be punished, hence the 'chorus' of verses 9 and 29. God's sovereignty means that He has effective power to fulfil His purposes so that the great world-powers move at His bidding (verse 15 ff, notice the direct quotation from Deuteronomy 28. 49, which envisaged a situation such as this). The last word, however, is not of judgment. God would not obliterate all trace of His people (verses 10 and 18) although exile awaited the surviving remnant (verse 19).

Jeremiah also depicts God as the great Creator (verse 33) and so He is 'the author and giver of all good things' (verse 34). How foolish it was, and is, to turn away from Him! Seeking satisfaction apart from the Lord can only lead to impoverishment (verse 25).

Chapter six

This is the last chapter that can be dated in the reign of good king Josiah, the reformer. In previous chapters, we have seen how Jeremiah did his utmost to foster a true spirit of repentance only to discover that the reformation was in outward form only. The first hints of inevitable judgement appear in chapter 4, becoming more intense in chapter 5 as there was an absence of godly men. Now, in Chapter 6, the note of doom sounds louder and more insistent as the prophet realizes how corrupt and rebellious the nation was. Indeed, in the vividness of his imagination he sees the invasion as already in progress (verses 1 -5), noting the harsh shouts of the attackers as they made their plans, answered by the agonised cries of the defenders (verse 4f). Jeremiah calls upon his own tribe of Benjamin to flee before the invader (verse 1) and for the people south of doomed Jerusalem to be warned. Tekoa was about 12 miles south of Jerusalem. whilst Beth-haccherem was a hill between Tekoa and Bethlehem.

The real tragedy of the situation is laid bare in verse 6 f where the Lord appears to be the general commanding the siege forces. There was no hope for this evil city which had enjoyed immense privileges over a period of four centuries. And yet there, paradoxically, was hope. The end was near but not yet come, so the Lord made a further appeal (verse 8) warning the nation yet again of the precipice over which they were poised. Yet another exhortation follows In verse 16 so that no Jew could complain that the Lord had acted precipitately.

But Jerusalem had gone beyond the point of repentance, as the remainder of the chapter makes clear. They would not hear (verse 10) ; they were completely unashamed (verse 15) and their answer to every advance was "We will not..." (verse 16f). Their sacrificial system, elaborated as it was by costly unspecified innovations, was sheer mockery (verse 20). So heinous was Judah's sin that the Lord, who insists so strongly throughout Scripture upon the care of infants and the aged, is unable to advocate any mercy even for these (verse 11f). Using the picture of a refiner of precious metals (27-30), He shows that the normal processes had been completely inefficacious, the dross still remained, contaminating the whole mass of metal which was, therefore, only fit for the scrap heap.

Chapter seven

A comparison with chapter 26 shows that both chapters relate to the same event, in the opening months of Jehoiakim's reign, i.e. 609/8 BC. In chapter 7 attention is focused on the great Temple sermon itself, whereas in chapter 26, following a brief summary of Jeremiah's message, the main interest is on its sequel. This was Jeremiah's great challenge, which took the form of a searing attack upon the

superstitious faith of his contemporaries. It won few converts but made many enemies especially among the priests and prophets, and probably resulted in his excommunication from the temple (cf 36. 5). But no one was left in any doubt about the views of a true prophet 's contemporary worship.

The miraculous deliverance of Jerusalem from Sennacherib's army (2 Kings 18. 13- 19.37) almost a century earlier had become legendary, and issued in the dogma that the city was inviolable. since it contained the Temple, God's dwelling place. Since only Jerusalem had been delivered, whilst the rest of the land was devastated, the view became current that God was not really interested in His people, but only in His House, therefore, if anyone was in the proximity of the Temple, he was safe. This reduced God to the level of the heathen deities. No doubt the adherents of such a view, clearly revealed in verse 4, 8. 10, could quote such passages as Isaiah 31.5, 33.20, 37.35 in support of their 'orthodoxy '. But a barren orthodoxy, or a cold formalism devoid of true spirituality, is never acceptable to God, especially when accompanied by the misconduct noted in verse 6 and the bare-face idolatry of verses 17f.

The queen of heaven was the Babylonian Ishtar, identified with the planet Venus, whose worship, similar to the cults of the Canaanite goddesses Asherah, Ashtaroth and Anath, was probably introduced into Judah by the apostate king, Manasseh (2 Kings 21. 3ff). Barely suppressed by Josiah's reformation, it re-established itself after his death.. With a strange human perversity, the survivors of God's judgment against the nation for its idolatry blamed the catastrophe upon the neglect of the cult of the queen of heaven (Jeremiah 44. 15-19). Yet Jeremiah made it clear that a judgment. similar to that which befell the ancient sanctuary of Shiloh and the former kingdom of Israel, was about to fall on them (12-15). Shiloh, the central sanctuary of the Judges' period, was almost certainly destroyed after the double defeated Israel by the Philistines at Aphek, where the Israelites had been guilty of a superstitious faith in the ark which paralleled with that of Jeremiah's compatriots (1 Samuel 4). The immensity of Judah's sin, and peril. is indicated in the fact that it was beyond the power of prayer (cf. 11.14. 15.1). Nevertheless, Jeremiah continued to pray, and to plead with his people to the very end.

Judah 's elaborate sacrificial system with its five principal types (burnt offerings, peace offerings, gift offerings, sin and trespass offerings) was time-honoured, stemming as it did from the Mosaic period. The temple sermon (3-15) with its shattering attack on the Jews' attitude to the Temple, was now followed by an equally devastating verbal onslaught on the sacrificial system. Verses 22 f are not a denial of the Mosaic origin of sacrifice but a statement of priorities. God's first word to Israel, newly-emerged from Egypt, was not about sacrifices, as though He needed to be fed. As a matter of historical fact, legislation for the cultus was secondary to the demand for loyal and unquestioning obedience. There is a fearful irony in verse 21. The essential feature of the whole burnt offering was that it was entirely consumed by fire (Leviticus 1. 9 and 13) unlike the other offerings, where, at least, a portion was shared by the priests or the worshippers. God is virtually saying here, "What does it matter to me ; eat the lot!"

Disobedience of the most wilful and stubborn kind, disobedience that shrugged off the Lord's chastisement was characteristic of the nation up to and including the prophet's day. Verse 28 could well be the epitaph for Judah.

Two further examples of the utter degradation of religion are cited. It is easy to pass over verse 30 but let the significance of 2 Kings 23, 4-7 sink in.. In the Temple planned by David and constructed by Solomon were all the trappings of immoral Canaanite fertility cults which Josiah ordered to be removed and burned from the Temple which Solomon had built! It is not known who introduced these Canaanite items into the Temple. It is a fearful warning of the consequences of compromise which had its roots in the judges period. (Judges 2. 1-3. 11. 30f., 2 Kings 3.6 f). Judah in the depths of its apostasy, was but doing the heathen! Tophet probably derives from the Hebrew word for fire-place (cf. Isaiah 30.32). The valley of the son of Himmon was south west of Jerusalem.

Child sacrifice (verse 31), which is so repugnant to the modern reader, was relatively rare in the ancient world, being reserved for occasions requiring desperate measures (Judges 11.30f, 2 Kings 3.27). Parents would make their children walk through the fire to Moloch (2 Kings 23.10).

The desecration of a corpse, verse 33 and 8. 1-3, was considered an awful fate in the ancient world (cf Amos 2.1). There is a gruesome congruity about the bones of the devotees of the heavenly host being openly strewn before their impotent objects of worship.

Chapter eight

Judah refused to accept the correcting of discipline (7. 28) and now we see an indication of her chronic inability to profit from her mistakes (8. 4-7). In contrast to the migratory birds, who had a consistent pattern of life which made for survival, she was utterly inconsistent, and would have to learn the hard way. We note a smugly complacent sense of security in their possession of the sacred Scriptures (verse 8). But when they were distorted in interpretation they afforded no more than a refuge of lies. The multiplicity of cults, all quoting Scripture suitably doctored, or wrenched from its context is a striking modern-day example. The 'wise men' (verse 9) formed the third main group in Israel, together with the priest and the prophets. Their chief function was to relate the principles in the law to the details of everyday life. Their successors were the scribes so familiar to us from the New Testament. The fundamental error of each group was the light way in which they glossed over the nation's sin (verse 11f). Drastic surgery, not sticking-plaster, was required.

Jeremiah himself was under no illusion. He foresaw the drastic measures which the Lord would use and, with his sensitive spirit, he lived through the agony which was to burst upon Judah (8. 14- 9. 3). Anticipation of the refugees (verse 14f) at the approach of a ravaging army (verse 16f) caused acute physical and spiritual revulsion. Two metaphors show the seriousness of the situation. Harvest (verse 20) refers to the main cereal harvest, whilst summer refers to the vintage harvest, such as grapes, in early autumn. If one harvest failed, it was possible that the other would see the people through the winter, but if both failed, starvation confronted them. Hence verse 20 became proverbial for a desperate situation. This verse has been used in the preaching of the Gospel with the appeal that time may be running out for people who are not saved in the sense of accepting Christ as Saviour. Further, as the following verse says, not only have they rejected salvation but put their faith and confidence in unprofitable things. The second analogy came from the medical world (8.22) which likens Judah to a desperately ill patient. Yet there was medication available (balm from Gilead, little more than a day's journey away) and a physician, Dr Jeremiah, to apply it. For the nation to refuse the medicine was wanton suicide. All the prophet could do was to lament the certain death of the nation (9.1)

Chapter nine

One of the vital concepts of the O T is that of the covenant. God, in His grace, had bound Israel to Him. This meant that all Israelites were bound to one another, and whilst they were to show loyalty and obedience to God (e.g. Deuteronomy 30.20), they were equally required to display brotherly love to one another. Such sins as those noted in verses 4-8 which repudiated the covenantal obligation, were virtually a denial of the covenant-relationship. The same principle applies to the New Testament dispensation ; hence the frequent exhortations to show love within the fellowship (e.g. John 13.34f., Galatians 6. 10, 1 Thessalonians 4.9 f) with the condemnation of the one who claims to love God but hates his brother (1 John 4.20f). Jeremiah, foreseeing the consequence of such qualities (verse 9), calls for a funeral dirge to be chanted over all Judah. Only the scavengers would be left to haunt the desolate ruins (verse 10f)

But if verse 4-8 show the outward signs of a morally sick society, verse 12ff reveals the root cause of Judah's malaise. Their attitude to each other was wrong because their relationship to God was wrong. In stubborn wilfulness they had rejected the truth and were following the sensual Baal cults.

Again (cf, 10f) there is a forthright condemnation of such sin and a warning of inevitable judgment (verse 15f). The symmetry is also preserved in the calling in of the professional mourners (cf 2 Chronicles 35. 25, Mark 5. 38ff) to lament over the stricken nation (1ff). Note the grim personification of Death as the Reaper (verse 21f)

Judah had plenty of false confidence : in the Temple (7.4,10. 14 and in the Scriptures (8.8). Here we find an equally false trust in wisdom, might and riches (verse 23), shared, one suspects, by men of all races in the twentieth century. Probably there was a trust in circumcision also (25f see note on 4.4.). None of these is a sufficient foundation for life, the only real basis is a personal knowledge of God (cf Matthew 11. 27) accompanied by a display of the ethical qualities noted in verse 24.

A comment should be made about verse 26 'that cut the corners of their hair' (cf. 25.23, 40.32) was a practice in honour of the gods of the heathen and condemned in Leviticus 19.27

Chapter ten

The first sixteen verses declare the greatness of God and the impotence and insignificance of idols, and should be considered in conjunction with other great monotheistic passages (e.g. Deuteronomy 4. 32-40. Psalm 115. 3-8, Isaiah 40. 19-26, 44 9-20, 46.1- 9) There is a threefold contrast here :

1. Contemporary heathen worship attached great importance to the sun, moon and stars (e.g. 2, cf 8.2, 2 Kings 21.5, 23.5, Zephaniah 1.5), but the Lord Himself made the heavens (verse 12)
2. Idols were constructed by men, and were unable to speak or walk (verse 5) and they had to be secured to prevent them from falling (verse 4)! But God and is the King of the nations (verse 7), with such sovereign power that all the peoples trembled before Him (verse 20)
3. One of the great attributes of a deity is effective power to help, but here idols were completely valueless-- no helpful advice could be expected from wood (verse 8). But God was true. living and eternal (verse 10), the Creator (verse 12) and Controller of the forces of nature (verse 13). For skilled craftsmen to misuse their talents in such a way was to prostitute their God-given abilities (verse 14). Man was fashioned in the image of God (Genesis 1.26f; Psalm 8.5) but still demeans himself when he worships anything, or anyone, less than God.

The prophet speaks in verse 17. The warning could relate to an historical occurrence, such as the three month siege of 597BC which issued in the first deportation, but, more likely, it is Jeremiah's vivid imagination which, foreseeing the certainty of such an event, views it as already accomplished. Jerusalem is personified as a tent-dwelling mother, bereft of her children, in verses 19-21 (ct. the reversal of this analogy in Isaiah 54. 1-3).

Prayer, for Jeremiah, was converse with God as verse 23 f illustrates. It is a confession of human frailty and a humble acceptance of divine chastisement which claims the mercy of God, lest our sins, receiving their just desert, bring us to destruction. There is a paradox in the second line of verse 23. Man seems to control his own progress, but the fact is that man, vitiated by sin, is incapable of achieving his own true destiny. He desperately needs God, as the wise man realized (Proverbs 20. 24, cf Psalm 37.23).

It is hard to believe that anyone could or would worship any idol made by man.

Chapter eleven

2 Kings 23 speaks of a covenant between King Josiah, the people, and the Lord, following the discovery of the 'lost book of the covenant ' in 621 BC. Some scholars have viewed Jeremiah 11 verse

1-13 as a powerful sermon preached in support of this covenant, usually known as the 'Josianic covenant'. A powerful sermon it certainly is, but this setting is unlikely. There is evidence of open, uninhibited idolatry in verses 12f which would be impossible in Josiah's reign once the reform was in operation. As 2 Kings 23 shows, heathenism was eradicated by force and not by words. The setting seems to be in the reign of godless Jehoiakim (609-597BC) when every vestige of Josiah's reform had disappeared. Jeremiah, in fact, is calling the nation back to a more fundamental covenant than Josiah's. 'This covenant', (verses 2,3,6 and 8) is the Sinaitic Covenant as verses 4, 5, 7 and 8 show. The nation had shifted from its basic foundation and the prophet saw that it had to go back to the first relationship of loyal obedience. It was a question of retuning to their first love (cf Rev. 2. 4 f). In verse 9, Jeremiah, like Isaiah (Isaiah 1.2), views Judah's sin as a revolt or rebellion, a crime the more vile because it was against a God who continued to love the nation (verse 15). Formal acts of religion were sheer hypocrisy in such circumstances. So the nation, intended to be like a fruitful olive tree, but now producing no fruit, would be destroyed (verse 16, cf John 15. 1-17).

There are certain passages in our prophecy, often called the Confessions of Jeremiah, which may be studied apart from their context to allow us to see the intensity of Jeremiah's spiritual struggle when he was alone with God. They are 11.28, 12 1-6, 15. 10-12, 15-21, 16. 14-18, 18, 19-23, 20. 7-18. The first of these, here in verses 18-20, follows a plot on the prophet's life by his own townsmen of Anathoth. Possibly they resented the fact that one of their number had spoken out strongly against the Temple (7. 1-15). It remains true, as our Lord Himself observed, that 'A prophet is not without honour, except in his own house and among his own kin (Mark 6.4). The Lord, like Jeremiah, faced an attempt on His life by the people of His own city (Luke 4. 29). But, unlike Jeremiah, who prayed that he might see God's vengeance upon his enemies (verse 20), Jesus Christ prayed for the very men that caused His death (Luke 23. 24, cf Isaiah 53. 7, 1 Peter 2.23, Matthew 5.44).

Chapter 12

The problem of an apparent injustice on God's part, which allowed the righteous to suffer misfortune whilst the ungodly appeared to flourish (verse 1f) was not confined to Jeremiah. The psalmist, filled with envious misgivings, questioned the worthwhileness of the morally upright life until, within the sanctuary, he saw things in a different perspective (Psalm 73). The whole book of Job deals with the same problem. Job was convinced of his complete integrity; his companions, Eliphaz, Zophar and Bildad, were equally convinced that such unique misfortune indicated God's judgement upon his sin. Not one of the four, of course, were aware of the behind-the-scenes dialogue between God and the accuser (Job 1 6-12, 2 1-6) which showed that Job's sufferings were for a purpose, to prove that man was capable of trusting God apart from what he could get out of it (cf the sneering accusation of 1.9). The whole book of Jeremiah shows that there is a moral law operating on his life (11.21), and he impatiently clamoured for God to hasten up the process of judgement (verse 3 f). He did not allow God that Divine patience and forbearance which characterizes all His dealings with men. God's answer to this petulant outburst was hardly encouraging. There was worse to come. One day the hand of every man would seem to be against the prophet (e.g. 36.26. 38. 4 ff). The 'jungle of Jordan' (verse 5) was the narrow strip of dense vegetation which bordered the river. The unfailing supply of water and the fierce heat of the rift-valley combined to cause a jungle-like growth that was infested with lions (49.19, 50.44, Zechariah 11.3). Jeremiah had need of the strength that was promised him at the time of his call (1.8, 18ff.)

Nevertheless, judgement was in progress (verses 7-13). The historical background to this passage is probably 2 Kings 24 1-4, when Judah, after Jehoiakim's rebellion against Babylonia in 602 BC, was subject to sporadic attacks by her neighbours, instigated by Babylon, until Jerusalem fell in 597 BC. But notice the personal terms used to describe Judah (verses 7-10), indicating that this was a chastisement regulated by love. In such a context of the persecution by neighbouring states, it is remarkable to observe that these 'evil neighbours' (verse 14) are promised a share in a glorious future,

following a chastisement similar to that inflicted upon His covenant-people, providing they accept the testimony of Judah to her Saviour-God (verses 14-17, cf 46.26. 48.47. 49. 6.39).

Chapter thirteen

Two parables graphically illustrate the condition of Judah and the fate about to overtake her.

In the first (verse 1-11), Jeremiah was commanded to take a loin-cloth, signifying that God's people ought to have clung to Him in loyalty, love and trust (11, cf. Deuteronomy 10.20, 11.22) etc.).The Lord tells Jeremiah to go to the Euphrates. Each trip to the Euphrates would involve a distance of 1,600 miles (Ezra and his company took four months to complete a one-way journey, Ezra 7.9) and because of this it has been said that Jeremiah made only a token journey to some riverside location. There is no hint of this in the narrative, however. The inference is that Mesopotamian influence in religion, introduced during the wicked reign of Manasseh (2 Kings 21), had corrupted the nation to the point of worthlessness. Possibly there is an illusion to the Babylon captivity.

Jeremiah's starting point for his second parable (verse 12 ff) was a conventional platitude expressing the hope of future prosperity, to which the people smugly replied that this is what they were expecting (verse 12).Then followed the devastating revelation that the whole nation would be filled with drunkenness and then destroyed (cf. the similar imagery in 25. 15-28, 51.7). Jeremiah took no delight in this discourse, he could only weep bitterly at a nation which was like a man stumbling over treacherous, mountainous terrain in pitch-blackness (verse 15 ff.).

The king of verse 18f is Jehoiachin, the son of Jehoiakim, who reigned for three months in 597 BC while Jerusalem was besieged by the Babylonians (2 Kings 24, 8-12). As he was only eighteen years old, the queen mother, Nehushta, would have considerable influence on him. Jehoiachin submitted to the Babylonians and he and his mother were taken into captivity (cf. 22. 26, 29. 2, 52. 31-314), The Negeb (verse 19) was the southern region of Judah. The deportation that followed this Babylonian campaign included the rulers, leading citizens and craftsmen (2 Kings 21.14 ff).

The remainder of the chapter (verse 20-27) probably dates from the time when Judah first passed under Babylonian control, in 605 BC. It reveals a nation far from God, with its sin so deeply ingrained that change was virtually impossible (verse 23). Multiplied acts form character, and when those actions are evil, then the resultant character becomes a chain which the grace of God alone can break. Only He come make Jerusalem clean, but this involved drastic measures.

Chapter fourteen

This deals with the great drought.

Palestine was dependent upon the seasonal rainfall. It had few perennial rivers and its hilly and undulating terrain made such complex irrigation systems like those of the Nile and Tigris- Euphrates impossible. There were relatively few springs and wells. If the rains were withheld the consequences would be serious. According to the ancient Jewish traditions, if the ' former rains' had not arrived by the ninth month, Chislev (November- December) then an extraordinary three-day fast was held. Such a fast is indicated in 36.9 and it is possible that this chapter is connected with the same situation, when the whole land was suffering incredible hardship(verses 1-6). Jeremiah's acquaintance with country-life is shown in the aptness of his illustrations ; the hind (verse 5) is a creature renowned for the care of her young ; the wild asses (verse 6) are among the hardiest of animals well able to endure drought.

The prayer of verse 7ff is best regarded as a prayer that Jeremiah prayed. There is a deep humility, a frank confession of sin (7.20), the recognition of past mercies (verse 8) and the pleading of the

covenant relationship (verses 9 and 21). If only the nation had taken up this cry from the heart, and made it its own, God could have shown forgiveness. But supplication cannot 'come before the Lord' where there is unconfessed sin in the life (36. verses 3 and 7). Their trust was not in Him, but in the Baal fertility-gods who were as impotent in rain-making as in all other realms (22. cr 3.1 ff). Even the prayer of the godly was quite unable to avert the divine judgment (verse 11), while fasting (verse 12) was sheer hypocrisy in such circumstances. Judah, with unrestrained feet had wandered away from God into the path of false cults and abominable practices (verse 10).

God's revelation to Jeremiah highlighted the disparity between such a message and the easy assurances prescribed by the false prophets (verse 13). Earlier on (4.10) Jeremiah had accused God of responsibility for these diametrically opposed messages, but now he discovers the true situation (verse 14ff). The authority of the false prophets rose from a source no higher than themselves. Popular they might be, numerous they certainly were, but these advantages were deceitful ; only the real word of God will stand the test of time and experience. In chapter 23 we shall see Jeremiah's final exposure of the 'blind leaders of the blind'.

Chapter fifteen

A nation which is beyond the power of prayer is in a bad way (verse 1).

The reputation of Moses and Samuel as intercessors was built upon such incidents as those noted in Exodus 32, 11-14 and 30-34, Numbers 14 13-19, 1 Samuel 7. 5-9, 12. 19, 23 cf Psalm 99.6. The command here (cf. also 7.16, 14.11) must be regarded as conditional rather than absolute. Jeremiah continued to plead with his people and to pray for them, but whilst they remained adamant (cf 17.1) and unrepentant there could be no forgiveness. Compare the types of destruction in verses 2 f, with those pictorially represented by Ezekiel (Ezekiel 5. 1-4). The reference to Manasseh (verse 4) in whose reign the whole nation was led astray (2 Kings 21), must not be taken in isolation, as Jeremiah's contemporaries did. They excused themselves from moral responsibility by attributing the disasters which overtook them to be due to the sins of their forefathers, but Jeremiah, whilst not overlooking this factor, made clear that the judgment of God was upon them, personally, for their sins (16. 10-13 ; 31,29f., cf. Ezekiel 18. 1-4). Such a visitation, indicated in verses 5-9, was probably the Babylonian raid of 598/7 BC, which was a reprisal for the rebellion of Judah in 602 BC (2 Kings 24. 1, 10ff).

The remainder of the chapter (verse 10-21) is of immense importance in our understanding of the relationship between God and His prophets. Two fallacies are here explained :

1. The view that the prophets were superhuman, men who never faltered in their ministries, no matter how acute the opposition they encountered
2. The view that when God spoke through a man he took such full possession that all traits of human personality were by-passed, the prophet becoming an automation rather than an ambassador.

Jeremiah here lapses into self-pity and launches a bitter attack upon God that it reached perilously close to blasphemy. His message of condemnation alienated him from all men (verse 17) and earned him their bitter reproach (verse 10). It was an impossible task (verse 12). So the prophet who had accused his people of self-deception in hewing out cisterns that could hold no water (2.13) now lays a similar charge against God (verse 18). How gracious was God to His over wrought servant in the face of this querulous outburst! He did not write Jeremiah off as a failure, but showed him the worthlessness of such unfounded accusations. He indicated the way of restoration through repentance (verse 19) and divine strength (verse 20 cf. 1 verses 8 and 18). Compare His gentle dealings with Elijah (1 Kings 19 verses 3-18).

Chapter sixteen

The cost of discipleship is very high. Jeremiah was called up to pay a heavy price because of his ministry as the Lord's spokesman to a rebellious people. We have noted his isolation from his fellow, 'all of them curse me' (15.10), and loneliness, 'I sat alone' (verse 15.17). We see his progressive withdrawal from the sphere of social life. First of all, he was forbidden to marry (verse 2); then he was commanded to take no part in any funeral rite

(verse 5), and, finally, he was debarred from participating in any joyous occasion (verse 8). What this meant to a heart as exquisitely tender as Jeremiah's can only be imagined. In the tightly-knit community of Judah, it was tantamount to a self-imposed excommunication. When it is realised that these acts of sacrifice involved the whole of his ministry, then some conception of the spiritual agony that Jeremiah endured can be gained. Was this the kind of increased difficulty that the Lord foresaw in 12. 5?

A.S. Peake's comment of 15.9 has its application to these apparently onerous demands: 'Unshrinking obedience, rendered without hesitation or complaint, that is the condition imposed by God upon those who aspire to the high dignity of His service. And the reward of faithful service rendered is as in the parable of the pounds.'

But, in the final analysis, the Lord's service is one of immeasurable enrichment, not loss, of J G Whittier penetratingly observes:

Who calls Thy glorious service hard?

Who deems it not its own reward?

Who, for its trials, counts it less

A cause of praise and thankfulness?

Jeremiah's apparently anti-social conduct was to be a witness to the devastation that was about to descend on Judah when all normal activities of a community would cease. The parable of his withdrawn, celibate life was to be supported by plain explanation (verses 10-13). The thoroughness of the impending calamity is shown in verse 16: the 'fishers' would first net the big haul, presumably a reference to deportation, to be followed by the 'hunters' who would ferret out the individual survivors. But the dark night was illuminated by the promise of a miracle, greater than the Exodus, in the return from captivity (verse 14f., cf 23. 7 f). This, together with the divine strength noted in verse 19, must have sustained our lonely prophet during his long, lone vigil.

Chapter seventeen

This is a collection of oracles which seem to have no connection. The first is in verses 1 to 4 and concerns a pen of iron, an implement for cutting inscriptions into rock or stone. The point of the metaphors is not the hardness of the materials used, but the indelible nature of what is written. Two realms are specified; the 'heart' (verse 1) which covers the personal life; their 'altars' which comprehends their worship.

The first part of the Parable of the Two Trees (verses 5-8) may refer to those who had turned away from the Lord (verse 5). The shrub of verse 6 could be a dwarf juniper, stunted and barely alive in the area of low rainfall and poor soil. In contrast, there is the man whose trust is in the Lord (verse 7f.) and who is in touch with an unfailing supply of nourishment which ensures abundant growth, luxuriant foliage and continuing fruitfulness (cf Psalm 1 1-4, John 15 1-17). Sterility or fruitfulness in life is still determined by our relationship to the Lord.

The personal confession of sin found in verse 9 probably resulted from a sudden discovery which Jeremiah made of the secret, turbulent depths of his own heart. They may well have been revealed by the bitter, vindictive outburst of verse 18. If so, then verses 14-17 come into perspective. Jeremiah, appalled at what he finds within himself, and conscious that this is not hidden from the Lord's eye (verse 10), seeks deliverance from the One who can cleanse and heal (verse 14). The provocation which he has endured daily is noted (verse 15) and the Lord is called upon to witness that his better self doesn't exult over the prospect of disaster upon his enemies (verse 16). Jeremiah's attitude when Jerusalem fell shows the triumph of this higher nature. The conflicting emotions which warred within Jeremiah's heart may be compared with Paul's inward struggles (Romans 7). Notice where both found their victory (Jeremiah 17.17 cf. Roman 7.25).

Compare Jeremiah's teaching on the Sabbath (verses 21-27) with Amos 8.4 ff, Nehemiah 10.31, 13 15-22. The Jews were using the Sabbath to bring in their crops, or their wares, in preparation for their domestic or business life of the next week.

Chapter eighteen

The image of the potter's wheel is probably the most familiar of Jeremiah's object-lessons. Just as the potter, seeing that his creation is not working out as he planned it, can reduce the clay to a shapeless mass and begin again, so God, in His absolute sovereignty, can change His plan for a nation and also, of course, for an individual. The concept is capable of gross misunderstanding, as God could be viewed as irresponsible or capricious. Or He could be regarded as 'magnified man' who 'changes His mind'. Or it could be objected that man is not inanimate like clay ; he has a mind, feeling and a will ; and that, therefore, the analogy is inapplicable.

None of these objections is legitimate, and the application here is carefully safeguarded.

God deals graciously and patiently with men, in accordance with moral and spiritual laws which He Himself has integrated into this world. We can yield ourselves to Him in complete confidence, man is never at the mercy of an unfeeling deity ; man has the power to repent (verses 8 and 11) and align himself with God's beneficent purposes. The analogy teaches that God's dealings with mankind are creative and purposeful and that He works in accordance with that law which is the expression of His being.

He is sovereign in His graciousness and judgments, but man's response determines which set of eternal rules shall apply, and, even here, God's longsuffering allows every man a chance. Judah's stubbornness (verse 12-17) in forsaking the Lord and following other gods was something unparalleled in the ancient world (cf 2. 9-13). Small wonder, then, that the nation had lost its way (verse 15).

"So it was of old, so it is today.

When the heart is estranged from God, and devoted to some meaner pursuit than the advancement of His glory, it soon deserts the straight road of virtue, the highway of honour, and falls into the crooked and uneven paths of fraud and hypocrisy, of oppression and vice."

So wrote C J Bell in the Expositors Bible.

Note carefully the cardinal role of prophecy which is enunciated here.... that both the promises and threats of God are not absolute but conditional. Judah so often presumed on the divine promises, viewing them from the point of view of privilege and not of responsibility, in spite of prophetic warnings of the disaster that overtake such an attitude. The apparently unconditional promises concerning the Davidic line e g 2 Samuel 7 12-16, Psalm 89. 3f were qualified by such expressions

as in 1 Kings 12. 4, 3.14, 6.12, 9. 4-9. Conversely, there was forgiveness for even repentant Nineveh (Jonah 4. 11). Consider carefully the conditional element in Matthew 6.12, 14f and 18.35.

The men of Judah, having rejected Jeremiah's message (verse 12), now set about silencing the messenger himself (verses 18, 20 and 23). They resented the claim, implicit in his prophecies, to have greater discernment than the three traditional groups of spiritual counsellors : priests, prophets and the wise (verse 18).

Official religion was united in opposition to Jeremiah. The outburst of verses 21 ff is capable of two explanations. It is just possible, since the nation had refused his message and spurned the divine call to repentance (verse 12), that Jeremiah is here judicially delivering up the nation to the inevitable consequences of their chosen course (verse 15) without any vindictiveness on his part. But verse 23 does not tally with such a view. More preferable, then, is the view that this is another passionate outburst rising from the wounded spirit of the prophet. Perhaps at this point we may detect the poignancy of his mental agony. He loved his people ;he interceded for them (verse 20); but in his other moments there was pleasurable anticipation of revenge (17.16); he wept over the fate which awaited them (9.1, 13.17). But their relentless opposition and wilful misunderstanding of his motives drew from him these demands for harsh vengeance, in sharp antagonism to his true self. One feels a deep sympathy with him, but this unveiling of the bitter conflict within his heart underlines the weakness of the human spirit, even that of a great prophet. Only in the love of Christ can we overcome evil with good (Romans 12, 14-21, cf. Matthew 5. 43-46)

Chapter nineteen

This contains another acted parable concerning the shattering judgment that was to come. The prophet is told to take an potter's earthenware jar, an item that was very expensive and this shows how precious God's people was to Him. The valley of the son of Hinnom (verse 2) is probably the present Wadi-el-Rababi connected with the worship of Moloch which included the offering of children as sacrifices making them walk through the fire (verse 4f and 2 Kings 16. 3, 21.6). Tophet (verses 6.11 and 13 cf. Isaiah 30.33) derives from a word that means fire-place). The name Potsherd gate probably can be identified with the Dung Gate. The prophet repeats the words of the Lord who has brought them to this evil place so that their ears may tingle. The reminder is that His people have forsaken Him and burned incense to other gods and worshipped Baal and the fertility gods and the astral worship and that, hereafter, this valley would be known as the valley of slaughter. Judah with its capital of Jerusalem will look like a graveyard (verse 7) and passers by will hiss contempt upon the desolate city. Things will be so severe in the siege of Jerusalem that people will even eat the flesh of their children. The people will be broken like a potter's vessel. Jeremiah stood later in the court of the Temple to again pronounce God's judgment on the sin of the people.

Chapter twenty

Jeremiah's speech in the temple courts was cut short unceremoniously by the invention of Pashur, the officer responsible for law and order in the 'church' (cf. Luke 22.52, Acts 4.1, 5.24). The beatings involved forty lashes across the soles of the feet and the stocks secured feet, hands and neck (cf. 29.26) which would bend his body almost double. Such a cramped position, which was maintained all night, may have been the customary punishment inflicted upon false prophets (cf. 2 Chronicles 16. 7-20). Any man held up to such public ridicule and outrage would be wary about speaking out of turn after such treatment. But Jeremiah was not cowed by the superior rank and their ability to inflict even harsher punishment (verses 3-6).

The new name for Pashur was Magormissabib which means terror on every side.

The structure of verse 7 -18, in which a short hymn of praise (verse 13) is sandwiched between two sections of acute depression, has likened many to assume that verses 14-18 should stand before verses 7-12. Certainly this makes good sense, and allows this, the last passage which reveals Jeremiah's private agony of heart before God, to end in praise and victory. It has often been observed that Jeremiah's doubts were never expressed in public. Outwardly, he was the unyielding prophet of the Lord, conveying faithfully the divine will to His people. But when alone with God, the tensions of his position were revealed. We cannot be but grateful for this revelation, for we too suffer misunderstanding, resentment, ostracism and persecution from those to whom we speak in the Lord's name.

Following the reconstruction suggested above, Jeremiah, after his day and night of discomfort and shame, felt that he had been an utter failure, and that it would have been better had he never been born (verses 14-18, cf. 1 Kings 19.4). He accused God of involving him in such general resentment, for whenever he spoke it was about judgment--- an unpopular theme to a complacent people (verse 7 f). But silence, the natural expedient in such a situation, was impossible, for he was so convinced that the message was of the Lord that it could not be contained (verse 9), no matter how bitter the antagonism he encountered (verse 10). A new serenity appears in verse 11f., silencing his indignant outburst, strengthening him against all opposition and enabling him to triumph over physical persecution. The powerful Lord, the discernor of the thoughts and intents of every heart (verse 12) was with him and victory was secured-- was assured -- hence the final psalm of praise (verse 13). Compare Jeremiah's experience with that of Paul and Silas, which ended in a midnight prayer and praise session in a Philippian jail (Acts 16. 25).

Chapter twenty one

This chapter takes us forward, being out of chronological sequence. We are in the last years of the reign of Zedekiah when Jerusalem was besieged by the Babylonians (588-587 BC). Zedekiah was a weak, indecisive king completely dominated by his nobles, who advocated a pro-Egyptian, anti-Babylonian policy. His authority was undermined by the fact that the Jews still regarded Jehoiachin, who had been taken captive in 597BC, as their rightful king, and looked towards his speedy return from captivity to resume his reign (e.g 28. 4).

The king was really looking for a miracle to help him out of his predicament (verse 2). God had worked wonders before. Was there any chance of a repeat performance? The truth was that neither Zedekiah, nor the nation, had any right to expect such an intervention. Jeremiah made it plain that the wrath of God was coming upon them for their social, moral and religious corruption (verse 12, cf. 22. 1-9). His forecast concerning Jerusalem's future was uncompromisingly pessimistic (verses 3 - 7), for not only Nebuchadnezzar, but God Himself, was fighting against them. The only hope was to flee the doomed city before it fell and desert to the Babylonians (verse 7-10). We can understand how Jeremiah's contemporaries would regard him as a traitor and a fifth-columnist (cf. 38.4). But he was not pro-Babylon but pro-God and he saw that Jerusalem's only recourse was to submit to God's righteous chastisement. This the favoured city would not do. Arrogantly secure in her own estimation, because of the great deliverance of 702BC when Sennacherib's host was turned away (13, see note on 7. 1-20), she was unaware that her conduct made it impossible for the Lord to deliver her on this occasion (verse 14). Samson 'did not know that the Lord had left him' (Judges 16.20) ; Jerusalem was also totally unaware of this tragic fact (cf. Paul's deep concern in 1 Corinthians 9.27).

Chapter twenty two

This chapter contains a series of oracles, most of which are directed at the kings of Judah.

The first (verses 1 -8) is directed at the Davidic dynasty itself. We have already observed (see note on 18. 5-11) the conditional nature of the promises about the permanence of the royal line. Jeremiah was convinced, because of the sins of the ruling kings of his time, that the royal house was about to

fall (verses 5 and 30). The reference to the shedding of innocent blood (verse 3) suggests that this prophecy was delivered in the reign of Jehoiakim (cf. 17, 2 Kings 24. 4).

The second (verse 10ff.) may be dated in the early month's of Jehoiakim's reign (609-597 BC). Josiah, killed in a battle with the Egyptians at Megiddo in 609 BC

(2 Kings 23.29), was 'him who was dead'. His son, Shallum, whose throne name was Jehoahaz, was the popular choice as his successor, but he was deposed by the Egyptians and taken captive after a three month reign (2 Kings 23. 30-33). Thus, he was 'him who goes away'.

The third oracle (verses 13-19) concerns Jehoiakim, another son of Josiah. whom the Egyptians placed on the throne instead of his brother, Shallum, faced with a crippling tax imposed by the Egyptians, he extracted this from his subjects by heavy taxation (2 Kings 23.33ff.) and then embarked on a lavish palace-building scheme, forcing his subjects to work for nothing. This Jeremiah vigorously condemned (verse 13 ff.). The reference to Josiah (verse 15f.) shows Jeremiah's great respect for this godly, reforming king. The oracle concerning Jehoiakim's fate (verse 18f. cf. 36.29) is the most outspoken against any ruling king. Was it literally fulfilled? 2 Kings 24.6 gives no hint of this, but Jehoiakim's death occurred whilst Jerusalem was besieged by the Babylonians because of his rebellion. There is plausible support for a palace revolt, when the king was assassinated and his body thrown over a wall, indicating that Jerusalem dissociated itself from his rebellious policy. Certain it is that Jerusalem escaped relatively lightly when it eventually surrendered,

The fourth oracle (verses 20-23) personifies Jerusalem at the time of this distress (597BC).

The fifth (verses 24-30) deals with Coniah, the shortened form of Jehoiachin, the son of Jehoiakim, who submitted to the Babylonians after a three-month reign. He was taken into captivity (2 Kings 24,12-15), never to return, in spite of popular prophecy to the contrary (28. 4 cf. 52.31-34). Although his grandson, Zerubbabel, became the governor of post-exilic Jerusalem (Ezra 2. 2, 8, 4.2, 5.2) no descendant of Jehoiachin actually succeeded to the throne.

Chapter twenty three

This chapter deals with false prophets and the marks of false prophets.

Prophetic guilds were a feature of other nations long before they were introduced to Israel. Their first mention in the Bible is in connection with Samuel, who appears as their leader (1 Samuel 10. 5,19,20). Later on, the great prophets Elijah and Elisha, in the northern kingdom of Israel, had strong links with them (2 Kings 2; 4, 1, 38-44, 6. 1-7, 9.1). No doubt the members of these guilds were schooled under godly leaders, acted as an extension of their ministry, broadcasting the true teaching concerning God and His moral and spiritual demands.

But with passing of the years the prophetic guilds had degenerated, possibly under the influence of surrounding nations. They had attached themselves to the royal court, and their prophecies became allied to political factors (e.g. 1 Kings 22.5 f). By the time of Jeremiah, they were no more than time-servers (cf. Micah 3.5) giving the type of messages they felt the king and the people wanted. Yet Jeremiah, initially, regarded them as sincere, and attributed the difference between his message and theirs to be the deception of the Lord

(4.10). Later on (14.13-16), he realised his enormous mistake and discovered the true nature of this false prophecy. He launches a full-scale assault on these false prophets, who were misleading the people and were partially responsible for the calamities that awaited Judah. In verses 1 - 4, other classes including the priests, princes and probably the king himself, are included. But from verse 9 the main attacks falls upon the prophets. The prophets of Samaria (i.e. Israel, verse 13) were bad

enough but their counterparts in Judah had exceeded them in their immorality (verses 9-15). Their lives were a complete travesty of the prophetic office.

Jeremiah obviously felt a deep sympathy for the ordinary people of the land. Like the Saviour, ' he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd' (Matthew 9.36). In faith, he anticipated when the Lord would raise up true shepherds over His flock (verse 3f). The return from exile is clearly discernible in verses 7f., but verse 5f go far beyond any application to a post-exilic leader. Zerubbabel was hailed in such language (Haggai 2.20-23, Zechariah 3.8, 4. 6-10, 6. 12f), but the final fulfilment is in Christ, who is both the Good Shepherd (John 10.14) and the embodiment of the Messianic ideal (Isaiah 9. 6 f., 11. 1-9),

The prophet continues his scathing indictment of the popular cult-prophets. Added to the immorality of their lives (verses 10-15) we note the following characteristics :

1. A light view of sin (16f cf 6.14). Instead of taking the people to task for their sin they proclaimed a glib message which condoned sin, thus giving a feeling of easy assurance (cf. verse 14)
2. Their message arose from a source no higher than their own hearts (verses 1, 26). They had never been face to face with the Lord receiving His word in personal encounter (verses 18. 22), nor had they ever received a Divine commission (verses 21, 32).

They showed a complete lack of originality, mouthing platitudes borrowed from others (verse 30), or deriving their prophecies from their own dreams (verses 25-27).

By implication, the true prophet was a man whose character matched his calling and his words. A man commissioned, he has spent his time in secret with the Lord that he might discern His will. His ministry which will treat sin seriously, is directed to turning men away from their ungodliness. The words of such, reinforced by the power of the Spirit of God, will be like a burning fire or hammer-blow (verse 29). These qualities are as vital in the Christian era as they were in Old Testament days. False prophets will abound, but they are as unlike the true as straw is to wheat (verse 28).

The Septuagint correctly renders verse 23 as a statement, not a question ' I am a God at hand....' The false prophets could not hide from His penetrating gaze (verse 24).

The final sections (verses 33-40) contains a long and involved play on the word 'burden'. This was normally a synonym for the prophetic oracles (e.g. Nahum 1.1., Habakkuk 1.1) as weighty, divine pronouncement. Jeremiah had much to say of a serious nature, so much so that an expression had come to be a term of mocking contempt on the lips of those who greeted him with ' What's the heavy word from the Lord today ? ' The prophetic oracles, God declares, would cease, and the people themselves now became burdensome to the Lord, and would be flung away from Him. A man dare not mock God.

Chapter twenty four

The opening verse enables us to date this incident soon after 597 BC when Jehoiachin and the leading citizens, the ' cream of the land ' were deported. An understanding of this helps solve one of the minor problems of the book of Jeremiah, viz. the princes in chapter 26, which may be dated 608 BC, treat Jeremiah fairly, whereas in chapter 23, which dates c. 587 BC, the princes appear most vindictive towards him. The answer is that they are a completely different set of men, those remaining in the land after the deportation of 597 BC, being markedly inferior, as the chapter suggests.

It may be that those who had escaped deportation were priding themselves on this fact, and perhaps ascribing it to their superior virtue. If so, God's word through Jeremiah quickly demolished their

pretensions. The vision of Jeremiah may be compared with that of Amos (8. 1-3) but the significance in the latter depends on word play (see the RSV), whereas here the symbolism is visual and obvious. First-ripe figs, available about the end of June, were a much-prized delicacy. But fruit deteriorates very rapidly in the hot summer of Palestine, unless it is dried properly. The clear statement is that the hope for the future lay with the group who had gone into captivity. History shows the truth of this insight. The captives, augmented by further deportations in 587 and 582 BC (52. 29f), turned to the Lord in repentance and under Ezekiel's leadership, a new kind of faith, loyal to the covenant-relationship with God, was forged. Those who remained in the land became largely semi-heathen, and a source of trouble to those who returned with Zerubbabel in 538 BC.

Note verse 8 'those who dwell in the land of Egypt.' This may refer to those deported together with Jehoahaz (2 Kings 23. 31f.) but, more likely, it refers to those who had fled to Egypt to escape the Babylonians.

Chapter twenty five

From 628 BC (the thirteenth year of Josiah, verse 3, cf. 1. 2) until 605/4 BC, the 'fourth year of Jehoiakim', Jeremiah had kept hammering away at his country-men. His message was a consistent one : forsake idolatry ; repent of sin ; worship the Lord in purity and keep His commandments from the heart. Otherwise judgment would surely fall. He was to continue his warning, exhortatory ministry for a further eighteen years. But the people, with seared conscience and hardened hearts, paid as little attention to him as they had to the prophets who proceeded him (verse 4). God's longsuffering, which allowed Judah ample time for repentance, was about to give way to direct chastisement. Just a few months before this prophecy Egypt and Babylonia had clashed at Carchemish, a major ford at the river Euphrates, with Babylonia emerging as a decisive victor. Shortly after this, Nebuchadnezzar succeeded to the throne. Jeremiah now hails this new world-power as the means by which God would chastise His people (verses 8 - 11) with Nebuchadnezzar, the mightiest man on earth, fulfilling the subordinate role of 'My servant' cf. 27.6. 43.10). Historically, this prophecy was fulfilled when the Babylonians marched south and Judah passed under their control. According to Daniel 1. verses 1 - 4, the temple treasures were seized and hostages taken (the slight difference in date is caused by a different mode of reckoning).

Jeremiah set a limit of seventy years upon this period of Babylonian supremacy (11f. 29.10). If this may be taken from the time of this prophecy (605 BC), then it was reasonably accurate, since the Babylonian yoke was broken in 539 BC. Others suggest the period between 587 BC when the Temple was destroyed, to 515 BC, when the second Temple was dedicated (Ezra 6.15 f.). The chronicler views these seventy years as sabbath years (2 Chronicles 36.21), in lieu of a period of 490 years in which the Mosaic laws concerning sabbatical years had not been kept (Leviticus 25, 2-7, Deuteronomy 15, 1 ff.). Babylonia, however, was no pure agent of justice; she was a cruel, avaricious heathen-power, subject herself to the judgment of God (verse 12, Isaiah 10 verses 12 -19).

Note verse 10 'the grinding of the millstones', a characteristic sound in the East, indicating the daily chore or replenishing the supply of meal. Every home, would have its mill. Jeremiah graphically highlights the unnatural silence and the frightening darkness of a desolate Judah.

When God called Jeremiah, he appointed him 'a prophet to the nations' (1. 5). Some have objected to this title, believing that Jeremiah was simply God's messenger to his own nation, but such an objection seems quite unwarranted. Clearly, Jeremiah was principally concerned with Judah, but Judah was caught up in the vortex of international events. The prophet lived through the period when Assyrian power declined, a period of Egyptian occupation and a period of Babylonian supremacy, including three separate occupations of Jerusalem. During the later period (605 - 587 BC) there were constant anti-Babylonian intrigues and alliances between small nations. Jeremiah discerned the chastening hand of God in this complex pattern of events : Nebuchadnezzar was God's servant (25.

9) and the minor kingdoms of Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre, Sidon and Judah were warned not to rebel against Nebuchadnezzar (27 verses 1-15).

The limits set to Babylonian power, and the moral judgment upon her (25 verse 12f) strengthens the picture that Jeremiah presents of a Sovereign God of universal power. In the closing chapters of his book (46 - 51) are grouped his oracles against foreign nations, including one significant section (48. verses 11f) where God's treatment of Moab compares with his fatherly concern for Judah. Notice also Jeremiah's advice to the exiles in Babylon to pray for their oppressors (29. 7). God was concerned for all nations.

The Septuagint places chapters 46 - 51 between verses 13 and 15 of this chapter omitting verse 14, but this interrupts a continuity of theme between the two halves of the chapter. The first half notes a judgement on the nations at the hands of Babylon, followed by the judgement of Babylon herself (verses 9 - 12), a pattern repeated in the second half where Babylon (verse 26, Sheshach is a Hebrew cipher for Babylon) is the last to drink the cup of the Lord's wrath. the imagery must not be pressed, and any suggestion that Jeremiah actually went to these nations and cities, or forced their representatives to drink, is unnecessary.

Apart from this, the chapter is self-explanatory. It is never pleasant to read of destruction, but this is the corollary of the Lord's righteousness. It must also be remembered that it was anticipatory and thus allowed the nations concerned to repent. God is never arbitrary in His judgements nor hasty in His decisions.

Chapter twenty six

Chapter 7 verses 1-20 deal with the same events as this chapter and it would be helpful to reread it and the corresponding notes. Here the emphasis is on the sequel to Jeremiah's Temple Sermon, with only a brief summary of the message itself (verses 2-6). The religious leaders, including priests and prophets, were foremost in the opposition to Jeremiah's outspoken criticism, with the people, easily aroused, following their lead (cf Matthew 27.20), and note the hypocrisy of the priestly accusation in Luke 23.5. In verse 8, the prophet is arraigned having been captured by the priests and the prophets who say that he should die. The princes, on the contrary, gave Jeremiah a fair hearing (verses 10-19) but it is significant to note the sobering influence effect it had on the populace who no longer sided with the religious leaders (verse 16). But no prejudice is as blind as that which appears from religion. Note the admirable courage and quiet dignity of Jeremiah (verses 12 -15). There was no modification of his message to create a less-prejudicial atmosphere, for he was convinced of the divine source of his message (cf. Luke 12.11f).

Support for a verdict of 'not guilty' was drawn from the precedent of Micah(verse 18) over a century before. From the legal point of view, such a use of precedent in reaching a decision is of great interest. From the point of view of Scripture, it shows how the words of the great prophets were treasured, and so remembered that they could be quoted readily.

From the historical point of view, the importance of this incident is equally as great.

The prophecy concerned comes from Micah 3.12, and is shown to have had a decisive effect upon king Hezekiah, possibly even being the starting point of his reform (2 Kings 18 verse 3 - 6).

Not all the prophetic oracles fell on deaf ears!

The case of Urijah (verse 20) illustrates the danger in which Jeremiah lived throughout the reign of the vindictive Jehoiakim (cf 36.26). Urijah was a prophet who had to flee into Egypt to escape persecution. This also underlines the courage of Jeremiah, who did not run away. How many more

prophets were frightened into silence we do not know. Apparently, there were rights of extradition between Egypt and Judah at this time (verse 22f). The final verse (verse 24) shows that Jeremiah was still in danger even after his acquittal. His protector, Ahikam, who had been associated with Josiah in his reform (2 Kings 22.12) was the father of Gedaliah, the governor appointed by the Babylonians after the fall of Jerusalem (40 verse 5). Jeremiah was not absolutely friendless (cf. 38 verse 7-13).

Chapter twenty seven

Verses 1 to 11 are messages to foreign ambassadors. The first verse should read Zedekiah not Jehoiakim, as the remainder of the chapter makes clear (e.g. verses 3, 12 and 20). The date, 594/3 BC is indicated more precisely in chapter 28 verse 1. It is clear that the envoys of the nations had assembled in Jerusalem to hatch a scheme for rebellion against Babylon. In chapter 51 verse 59 we discover that Zedekiah was summoned to Babylon in this same year, probably to give an account of his part in the plot which came to nothing. Jeremiah saw that Babylonian supremacy was allowed by a Sovereign God (verses 5 -7) and that failure to submit to this yoke was unutterable folly--- man can resist man but cannot fight against the will of God (verses 8-11).

We see here something of the divine concern for other nations. So sure was Jeremiah of the truth of his God-given message that he was prepared to set himself against the complete array of prophets, diviners, dreamers, soothsayers and sorcerers (verse 9f.). Only a man who is sure of God can do this.

The message to the king is in verses 12 - 15. What did Zedekiah think when Jeremiah appeared before him complete with the 'thongs and yoke-bars (verse 20) ? Judging by the frequency which he consulted this prophet he did not consider him merely an eccentric, but on the other hand, he did not follow his advice, so intimidated was he by his advisers. Jeremiah gave the same solemn warning to the king ; security lay in submission to the Babylonian yoke, not in hearkening to the false prophets, who sought to fan the flames of a misguided patriotism.

The message to the priest and the people follows in verse 16-22. Once more the realistic Jeremiah sought to quench the prevailing false optimism. Normally a conqueror would take the idols of the countries he defeated and place them in the sanctuary of his own god, but as Judah's faith was imageless the Temple vessels had been taken in lieu. (2 Kings 24.13 suggests that some had been melted down).

The remaining vessels had acquired a great significance in the light of this, and their return was a point of honour. How chilling Jeremiah's words must have seemed, when he foretold that the vessels, which had been left by Nebuchadnezzar in the Temple, would also join the Babylonian hoard (verses 19-22). But God was not indifferent to this situation and He would vindicate His honour in his own way (verse 22b). See Ezra 1. 7-11 for the thrilling way in which God moved the heart of a heathen emperor to fulfil this prophecy.

Chapter twenty eight

We do not know how long Jeremiah had his 'visual aid ' of a wooden yoke about his neck and had been walking the streets of Jerusalem. But the presence of the priests and all the people (verse 1) suggests that this was a contrived occasion, designed to challenge Jeremiah's exhortation to bow to Babylonian supremacy, and, if possible, to discredit him. Hananiah, a time-serving prophet was the chosen one to make the challenge. Notice how he could honour God with his lips to the standard introductory formula to his oracle (verse 2). This was a crowd-pleasing statement typical of false prophecy, the kind of thing the people wanted to bolster up their sagging morale. Hananiah gave it to them in full measure ; not only would the Temple treasures be returned (cf. 27. 16) but Jehoiachin and all the exiles would return from a shattered Babylonia (verse 3 f.).

Jeremiah's ' Amen ' represents the deepest longing of his heart. Humanly speaking, there was nothing he yearned for more than the prosperity of his people, but he knew that that could never be, and that events would demonstrate this (verses 5 - 9). The appeal is to the direction of Deuteronomy 18 verses 20-22 (see also Deuteronomy 13 verses 1 - 5) which teaches that any prophet who caused the people to apostasize, whether his oracles were fulfilled or not, was to be put to death.

The quiet dignity of Jeremiah's utterance goaded Hananiah into the use of physical violence ; often the resort of those whose arguments are weak (verse 10f.). Jeremiah accepted this meekly, and offered no immediate retaliation (cf. 1 Peter 2.23). The people probably thought that Hananiah's action most impressive and voted him the victor. But the last word was not from Hananiah and not even from a publicly humiliated Jeremiah, anxious to hit back, but from the Lord (verses 12 -16). A symbolic wooden yoke could be broken, but the people having rejected the wooden yoke of Babylonian overlordship was laid on Judah because of their sins and they would find the iron yoke of servitude infinitely more uncomfortable. But Hananiah would not live to see the falsity of his predictions, for God views this kind of sin, which leads a whole nation astray, with peculiar abhorrence. Hananiah, in fact, survived only two months (cf. verses 17 and 1)

Chapter twenty nine

Jeremiah's first letter to the exiles in Babylon was probably sent early in the reign of Zedekiah, c. 596 BC. The fact that it was sent with Zedekiah's own envoys (verse 3) suggests that it had his approval. Perhaps he wished to douce the anti-Babylonian sentiments that were plainly as apparent in Babylonia as in Jerusalem, since they were associated with the return and re-enthronment of his predecessor, Jehoiachin (e.g. 28. 4). The occasion may have been the annual payment of tribute. Jeremiah first gave good advice to the exiles (verse 4-7), urging them to settle down and live a normal life. Most likely, in expectation of a brief sojourn in captivity, there were wary of acquiring house, houses, land and even children, since these would be encumbrances in the event of a return journey to Jerusalem. Most remarkable is Jeremiah's exhortation to pray for their captors and seek their well-being (verse 7). False prophecy was also flourishing in Babylon, like a rank weed (verses 8f 15, 21 ff). Its theme was the same, sanguine one as in the homeland, viz. a swift return.

The abysmal depths of the men who proclaimed it paralleled those of the false prophets of Jerusalem (verse 23, cf. 23.10f.,14f). As in the case of Hananiah, God would make a signal example of His displeasure (verse 21f).

Verses 16 -19 interrupt the sequence (cf. verses 15, 20), and their anti-monarchical sentiments are unlikely in correspondence taken by the king's own envoys. Probably they were a part of a second letter in which Jeremiah made clear the principles underlying the divine judgement, thus destroying any delusions which the captives may have cherished concerning Jerusalem's inviolability. Before there can be a true building-up there must be a clearing away of the shoddy erections of godless jerry-builders. Soon after this, in 592 BC, God raised up a prophet in exile, Ezekiel, (Ezekiel 1. 2f.) who heralded forth the same notes as Jeremiah.

There was a certain section in Babylon who objected to Jeremiah's ' interference ' in their affairs. They regarded his letter as the ramblings of a maniac and attempted to engineer official reprisals against him (verses 24-28). What a pity that, in their narrowness of outlook, they overlooked the beautiful promises in his letter (verses 10-14). Fortunately for Jeremiah, they chose the wrong man, Zephaniah, described in 52.24 (cf. 2 Kings 25.18) as the 'second priest' (i.e. between deputy to the high priest Seraiah) who twice acted as a link-man between Zedekiah and Jeremiah (21.1 ; 37.3). Instead of acting on Shemaiah's suggestion he allowed Jeremiah to read the letter.

The prophet's third letter to Babylon, in which he exposed Shemaiah's hypocrisy, was addressed to all the exiles (verse 31f.), suggested that Shemaiah may have been the spokesman for a considerable group.

Chapter thirty

The book referred to in verse 2 probably includes chapters 30-32, all of which deal with the future restoration of Israel and Judah (cf verse 3). It is of crucial importance to realize when the prophecies were uttered and grouped in this permanent form to witness to future generations. The historical context is clearly indicated in 32. 1f. (cf. 33.1). Jerusalem was in the final stages of an eighteen-month siege which ended with the destruction of the city by Babylon. The other cities of Judah had already fallen to the invaders, who had wrought a systematic devastation in retribution for the rebellion. In all probability, the temporary relief which came when the Egyptian army made its own gesture of intervention (37. 4f.) had ended in disillusionment, and the realization that Jerusalem was completely on its own. The situation, humanely speaking, could not have been darker, but at this very point, God commands Jeremiah to speak out concerning the future. Never is the Lord taken by surprise ; nor is He just one move ahead ; rather, He sees the end from the beginning and all His dealings are purposeful. The bitter chastisement of the downfall of the nation, its capital, its Temple and its ruling house were all regulated by His love, matched properly by His righteousness (verse 11, Hebrews 12 verse 5-11, Revelation 3. 19). So, in the darkest hour of Judah's national life, these prophecies pierced the gloom and threw a glorious light on the future beyond the immediate chastisement. The themes of punishment for sin and future blessing are often found in juxtaposition in the prophets, especially in Isaiah (e.g. Isaiah 1 verses 24- 2.4).

Notice the absence of a narrow nationalism in Jeremiah, for the northern kingdom of Israel is in his oracles of restoration (verse 3f, cf. Ezekiel 37 verses 15-23). Sin is shown to be the fundamental cause of the catastrophe (verses 14b and 15b), which could not be averted by her 'lovers'(verse 14a) probably an allusion to abortive foreign alliances principally with Egypt, by which Judah had sought security. There is a sixfold restoration ; of health (verse 17); of the exiles to the homeland(3.10) ; of Jerusalem (verse 18b); of the Davidic line (verse 9 and 21); of prosperity (verse 18ff.) ; of true worship and fellowship (verse 22). Before this could be achieved, however, there must be the Lord's righteous judgement. Nebuchadnezzar's armies might be battering at the walls of Jerusalem, but the real Agent is graphically revealed in verse 23 ff.

Chapter thirty one

The assurance of mercy and consolation appear in this chapter which contains two interesting connections with other great prophets. As Jeremiah surveys the past, there are unmistakable connections with Hosea.' From afar ' (or, of old, verse 3) probably relates to the revelation at Sinai, when God entered into a covenant with His people and gave them the law. Verse 3 and 20 echo the tender sentiments of Hosea 11 verse 1-9, 14.4 where Israel is viewed as a virgin (verse 4), and once more linked to her Lord in a relationship as fresh as the day.

He brought her out of Egypt (cf. 2,2f, Hosea 2. 14-23). Both prophets insisted strongly on the need for repentance, and that not of a superficial kind, before there could be any reconciliation or restoration(18f. cf Hosea 14.1 ff). The reference to the mountains of Samaria (verse 5), the hill country of Ephraim(verse 6, cf. 9 18 and 20) and the centralising of worship in Jerusalem (verses 6 and 12) show that Jeremiah envisages the unity that existed before the disastrous rupture between North and South.(1 Kings 12).

But as Jeremiah contemplated the future there are equally clear links with Isaiah. Rachel, the mother of Joseph and Benjamin, is pictured as weeping in despair over the exiled tribes (verse 15). To her comes the comforting assurance that her children will be miraculously returned to her (verse 16f, cf. Isaiah 49 verses 14, 18-26, 54 verses 1-10). The prophecy of a joyous triumphant return to Jerusalem, with a complete transformation of nature and a new prosperity (verse 7-9, 11-14,) is echoed in Isaiah 35. 5 ff, 41. 18f, 42.16 43, 19ff etc. Notice, too, the exhortation to the exiles to return (verse 21 f.) another characteristic feature of Isaiah's prophecy(e.g. 48.20, 52.1 f).

There are two problems which merit consideration.

The reference in verse 22 where, in this new situation ' a women protects (Hebrew ' compasses ') a man ' is best interpreted as signifying the absolute security Israel will enjoy. The menfolk will be able to get on with their work, for the risk of attack will be so minimal that security can be safely left to the 'weaker sex'!

The second (verse 26) has been held to indicate that Jeremiah received this oracle in a dream. But since he seems unrelentingly opposed to this form of revelation (e.g 23. 25-28), it is best interpreted in the spirit of Psalm 126. 1. Such a miracle was almost unbelievable and far too good to be true! But if it were to come true, it would be due to the grace of God.

Two great concepts now emerge. The first (verses 27-30) concerns individual responsibility. The Jews were absolving themselves of responsibility for their misfortunes by blaming them on the sins of their fathers (cf. the proverb of verse 29). This led to an apathy which crippled a moral response in repentance and reformation.

Jeremiah (cf Ezekiel 18) hit hard at this fallacy and insisted that the present generation was itself personally responsible (verse 30). Hereditary and environment factors cannot be overlooked, but nor must be the place of the human will or, above all, the grace of God.

The second great conception concerns the New Covenant (verses 31-34). As observed in Isaiah 52.13-45. 12, this is one of the most significant of all the tremendous insights which the Old testament provides. It is Jeremiah's ultimate word, not only to his own people but to the whole wide world. It sprang from all the disappointments of his own forty-year ministry. Religion, he had long foreseen, involved a personal knowledge of God (9.24, 24.70, but his own teaching of this truth to others (cf verse 34) had resulted only in frustrating fruitlessness. Wherein lay the weakness ? God was still God, gracious and faithful, and the people has His righteous law and were bound to Him by covenant. There was no fault in God (observe the tender reference to Him as ' their husband', 32, cf Hosea 2.16) but there was a fundamental weakness in man, who lacked the inward dynamic to make faith effective. The New Covenant, Jeremiah realised, must be inward, not external and it must provide adequate power to fulfil all that was evident, but rarely realised, on the Old Covenant. In this new relationship, sin would be dealt with so completely that even an all-knowing God would remember it no more (verse 34b). Jeremiah had observed not only his own failure to move the people but also the impotence of Josiah's massive reformation. His vision of the miracle which was necessary (Ezekiel 36. 26 f.) was not to be fulfilled until the New Testament period. Our Lord accepted and sealed this New Covenant but by the shedding of His own precious blood (Matthew 26, 28) and His followers worked out the details of His ministry against the background of Jeremiah's prophecy (Hebrews 8, verse 7 to 13). We live in an age when the promise s of God, so certain of fulfilment (verse 35-40) have been realised in Christ. Then let us enjoy and live by our privileges.

Chapter thirty two

The siege of Jerusalem was now well advanced by the time and future prospects were bleak (see notes on chapter 30). Jeremiah's imprisonment is attributed to the princes in chapter 38 verses 4- 6, but as noted in 38.13, even after Ebed-melech's compassionate act, the old prophet was still retained in custody. This was probably due to the king's express command, as noted in verse 3. No doubt the king shared the resentment of the princes at what was considered to be Jeremiah's subversive prophecies, especially as they involved him personally(verse 3ff cf. 38 verses 1-4).

At this point Hanamel came to Jeremiah. Why did he come with this particular request for Jeremiah to but his field in Anathoth ? (verse 8). It has been suggested that Hanamel was short of money due to the siege and this sale was an obvious solution to his need. But the land itself, at Anathoth, was

utterly worthless, since it was already in the hands of the Babylonians and Jerusalem's days were numbered. Only a fool would buy, or expect another to buy, in such circumstances! The decisive clue is our knowledge of the antagonism which Jeremiah endured from his own family (11.21f). Doubtless they knew of his prophecies of a glorious future. and Hanamel's action was a challenge to match optimistic utterances with corresponding actions. Had Jeremiah refused, then he would have been discredited. It seemed foolish to buy land in such a situation, but the transaction was a visible expression of confidence in God, in the prophetic word, and in the future (verse 17). So Jeremiah was to discern God's hand in this (Verse 6f, 8b), even though Hanamel's motives were suspect. The form of the transaction is interesting (cf Leviticus 25 verse 25 -28), particularly the storage of the deeds of purchase in earthenware jars to ensure their preservation, a feature vividly illustrated in the preservation of the Dead Sea Scrolls in similar containers for over 2,000 years. This is the first mention of Baruch, who figures prominently from this point onwards in the book of Jeremiah (verse 12 f.). He was the brother of Seriah, a very important official (verse 12, cf 51. verse 59).

Were Hanamel's eyebrows arched in incredulity at his kinsman's gullibility ? Was there a ring of mocking bystanders at this 'take down ' of an unpopular prophet ? Did Jeremiah have a twinge of doubt after he had parted with seventeen shekels of silver (verse 9) for a field that was absolutely worthless in the circumstances ? If he did, he was but human, it is instructive to observe how he rolled the burden of responsibility upon the Lord (Psalm 55.22) and fortified his own faith in prayer. In his recollection that God was the great Creator, and that nothing was too hard for him (verse 17) he links with others who were confronted with impossible situations (e.g 2 Chronicles 20. 6 f, Isaiah 37.16, Acts 4. 24). Then he pleads the character of God, especially His faithfulness within His covenant-relationship with His people (verse 18f). Next he remembers God's gracious deeds in the past, in particular His grand work of deliverance from Egypt (verse 20ff.) This is followed by a frank confession of Israel's unworthiness and the rightness of God's judgements (verse 23f.). It is not difficult to see how these things relate to our own prayer-life and attitude to God. He is still sovereign and gracious and we are bound to Him in a covenant based upon the redemptive act of His Son, Jesus Christ. There is nothing too hard for him!

God's answer to Jeremiah's prayer begins at this very point (verse 27). There is an amplification of the sin of Judah which has caused His displeasure, and an assertion of the inevitability of judgement (verses 28-35). The accusation of verse 34 indicates that the cult symbols and worship of the gods of Canaan and Mesopotamia expelled from the Temple in Josiah' reform (2 Kings 23 verse 4 and 6) had been allowed to return in the two decades of apostasy which followed his death. The national religious life had been thoroughly corrupted. But God looked beyond the immediate judgement to the time when a righteous remnant would return from Exile to a new security in which everyday life would be resumed (verses 37, 41-44). Most wonderful of all, in terms which parallel those of the New Covenant (31 verses 31-34), there would be a new unity between the people and their God, matched by a new righteousness in daily life (verse 38ff.)

Chapter thirty three

This is the final chapter of promises. In the remainder of the book the prophet tells us of historical events concerning Jerusalem during the final siege and subsequently, and adds the oracles against other nations. Before we begin to consider the final overthrow of the rebellious city, it is as well to ponder carefully these promises which look beyond that desolation. The invitation in verses. 2 f. is akin to Malachi's 'put Me to the test' (Mal. 3.10). It links with the comforting assurance of the previous chapter (32.17,27). Notice the five great promises:

- I. The restoration of the people and Jerusalem (4-9). The desolation about to descend is viewed as divine surgery which would ultimately bring health to a chronically ill society (6). Israel and Judah would return, and Jerusalem, from which He had hidden His face (5), would become so glorious that the nations would tremble (9).

2. The restoration of the land (10-13). v.10 anticipates the tragic state of Jerusalem as though it were already accomplished. But then the normal round of life and worship would be resumed.

There is an idyllic pastoral scene in vs. 11 ff., where the shepherds tend their flocks, or count them into the sheep-fold at night — a wonderful picture of security.

3. The restoration of the line of David, and
4. The restoration of the Levitical priesthood (14-22). In a limited sense these oracles had fulfilment in the return from Exile in Zerubbabel and Shesh-bazzar, both of the royal house of David (Ezra 1.8 f.; 2.2, etc.) At the same time a special appeal was made for the Levites to return (Ezra 2.40 ff., cf. 8.15-20). In time, however, both Levitical and kingly offices disappeared, but the hopes of the prophet and the nation were realized in Christ, the substance of every type in the O.T. He was great David's greater Son and our great High Priest!
5. The restoration of confidence (23-26). In answer to the lament of the people that they had been forsaken God replies that this is as unlikely as a change in the ordinances of day or night or the constitution of the universe itself. When God-says, I will, (26b), He means it!

After Jeremiah's oracles concerning the city were proved to be true, the chastened remnant took up these prophecies of restoration and treasured them. A later generation rejoiced in their fulfilment (cf. v. 11 with Ezra 3.11).

Chapter thirty four

Archaeology has provided us with a graphic commentary on v. 7. At Lachish, twenty-one ostraca (i.e. broken pieces of potter used for writing lists, letters, etc.) have been discovered dating from the time of the Babylonian invasion. One of them (Ostrakon iv) reads '...we are watching for the signals of Lachish, according to all the indications which my lord hath given, for we cannot see Azekah'. This is usually taken as an allusion that Azekah, had just fallen to the Babylonians, and that the smoke-signal or beacon, indicating that the city was still holding out, was no longer made. Only Jerusalem and Lachish were uncaptured, so the Babylonian campaign was marginally further advanced than in our chapter.

The key to the understanding of ch. 34 is v. 22. The Babylonians had temporarily lifted the siege (ch. 37 provides greater detail). Jeremiah's personal oracle to Zedekiah (2-5) was probably designed to quench any optimism that this respite may have raised, the doom of the city was certain, although Zedekiah's life would be spared.

The remainder of the chapter uncovers an acute moral situation. Possibly as a result of the kind of exhortation in 21.12, some attempt had been made at reform in the beleaguered city. The king himself had taken the lead and a solemn covenant had been ratified in the Lord's name in the Temple (8-15). The particular point at issue concerned Jewish slaves who were by law to be granted their freedom in the Year of Jubilee (Exod. 21.2-11; Lev. 25.39-46; Deut. 15.12-18). It is impossible to imagine anything more binding than this form of covenant. But it had been broken (16), doubtless when the threat of Jerusalem's fall seemed to have been averted. A vow made in the hour of crisis had been hypocritically repudiated. It was a double-dealing expediency which dishonoured the Lord's name (16). The adoption of a religious attitude to get one out of a dilemma is repugnant to the Lord, and only judgement can fall upon such (17-22). The Bible teaches that vows made to the Lord are to be treated seriously (Deut. 23.21ff.; Eccl. 5.2,416). 'Do not be deceived; God is not mocked...' (Gal. 6.7).

Chapter thirty five

The Rechabites were an extremist sect originating with Jonadab, the son of Rechab, in Israel about 842 B.C. (2 Kings 10.15-23). At that time Baal-worship was very widespread, and the Rechabites were a Puritan protest group against the excesses of the Canaanite civilization. They advocated a return to the nomadic way of life, exemplified by living in tents, which was characteristic of Israel in the pre-Canaanite period. Houses, agriculture and the cultivation of vineyards, which required sedentary occupation, were banned. Possibly the group transferred itself to the more conservative Judah, either before or after the fall of Samaria in 721 B.C.. Most likely they were a voluntary sect rather than the literal descendants of Jonadab, and 'our father' (8) is to be understood in this way. The present emergency (reference to a Babylonian invasion in Jehoiakim's reign, v. 11, suggests a date c.598 B.C.) had driven them into the unusual environment of a city.

Jeremiah was commanded to offer them wine publicly, which they refused, whereupon their loyalty became the basis of an oracle. There is no suggestion that God was commending the content of their vows; such passages as Deut. 6.10 ff. ; 7.12 f.; 8.7-10 make it quite clear that the land was His gift to Israel and that the nation was to settle down and enjoy it to the full. But such loyalty, even if it was to something occasioned by circumstances rather than directly required by God, was praiseworthy, especially when compared with Judah's disobedience to a revelation fully supported by God's divinely commissioned prophets (13-16). Judah's disloyalty merited punishment therefore (17), but the Rechabites would be rewarded (18 f.). 'To stand before' (19) is a technical expression which includes a sense of privilege in the very act of serving. It is used of prophets (e.g. I Kings 17.1), of priests (Num. 16.9; Deut. 10.8, etc.), and kings (1 Kings 10.8). The Christian, in his enjoyment of the divine presence and favour whilst he serves, realizes this privilege in its fullest measure.

Chapter 36 (part one) 1-10

This is the only description, the Word of God, that we have of the actual way in which a prophetic book came into being. It is hardly necessary to point out that every single word contained in Scripture has come to us through human instrumentality. The pen would be made from a split reed, kept sharp by a pen-knife (cf. 23); the ink was probably made from soot mixed with a watery gum; the scroll could be of leather, vellum or papyrus, but again, the context is determinative. A scroll of papyrus was formed by pasting individual sheets together and this is clearly the kind of roll which Jehoiakim destroyed (23). The burning of the other materials, leather or vellum, on an open fire would cause a most offensive smell! Jeremiah did not write the scroll himself, but employed a scribe, Baruch (4). But behind the men and the materials there was the inspiration of God Himself (2,4,6). The essential feature of scripture is that 'men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God' (2 Pet. 1.21).

It appears that Jeremiah was excommunicated from the Temple because of his outspoken comment in his Temple sermon (chs. 7,26). The word 'debarred' ('shut up', AV [KJV]) could indicate ritual defilement, but this was usually for a limited period and there seems to have been no immediate urgency to read the scroll (6). The extraordinary fast of v. 9 (cf. note on ch. 14) was probably in connection with a severe drought. Alternatively, it could have been concerned with the approach of the Babylonian army following its victory over the Egyptians at Carchemish the previous year, 605 B.C. ('the fourth year of Jehoiakim', 1, cf. 46.2). Possibly, there was a combination of reasons, but the contents of this chapter show that there was no genuine desire to meet with God. Supplication does not 'come before the Lord' (7) unless the heart is right.

The purpose of the whole Word of God is revealed in this chapter. The wrath of God against the sin of His people (7b) and the certainty of divine judgement (3a,29b) are shown. In spite of this, there comes the call to true repentance in the twice-repeated 'that every one may turn from his evil way' (3,7), and there is also the assurance of a merciful God when there is such repentance (3b). The truths

that God is 'a devouring fire' (Deut.4.24; Heb. 12.29) and yet One who 'delights in steadfast love' (Mic. 7.18) are held in perfect balance in the Scriptures.

Chapter 36. (part two) 11-32

Jeremiah's scroll was read three times. The first time, on a great public occasion, was probably from a room overlooking the Temple court, thus making an effective pulpit (10). There is no indication of any response. The second (11-19) was to the princes, whose response reflected creditably upon them. They were obviously concerned with the contents of the scroll, which foretold the divine judgement, and they knew enough of Jehoiakim to anticipate that his reactions would be violently unfavourable. Yet such was their sense of honour and obligation that they felt compelled to report the matter to him (16). There was an equal concern, in which their goodwill is apparent, towards Jeremiah and Baruch, and pre-cautionary measures were taken for their safety (19). The wisdom of this is shown in v. 26. Three of these princes were courageous enough to protest against the king's burning of the scroll (25).

The third reading, before Jehoiakim himself, provoked a completely different response (20-26). The king seems deliberately to have repudiated the reformation of his father Josiah. His actions were not the result of a passing fit of anger but a calculated act of contempt for the prophet and his prophecies of judgement. This was the second time in Jeremiah's lifetime that a portion of God's Word had been read to a reigning king, but how different was Josiah's reaction (2 Kings 22.11--20)! Having destroyed the scroll, the vindictive Jehoiakim sought to silence those responsible for it, but in vain (26).

Here was a king who set himself in opposition to the Lord. But the words of God which he thought he had destroyed are preserved for us today (27 f., 32). Doubtless this scroll, which included Jeremiah's prophecies up to this date, formed the nucleus of our present book. Some scholars believe that ch. 25 (note the date in 25.1) was the final chapter in this original draft. This was not the last attack on the Word of God. Kings and governments have set themselves against it; sceptics and liberal scholars have sought to discredit or dismember it; but it remains indestructible. The man who acts as Jehoiakim did will be judged (29 ff., see note on 22.18 f.), but 'the word of the Lord abides for ever' (1 Pet. 1.25).

Chapter thirty seven

The RSV makes it clear that it was Zedekiah, not Coniah or Jehoiakim, whom Nebuchadnezzar appointed as king (1). We have already noted (ch. 34) the shameful episode which followed the temporary lifting of the siege of Jerusalem narrated in vs. 1-15. Pharaoh Hophra had undoubtedly prompted Zedekiah to rebel against Babylon, and when, following the appearance of the Egyptian army, the Babylonians were forced to withdraw, it seemed a vindication of this policy. Zedekiah evidently thought that even Jeremiah might have to revise his forecast as a result of these encouraging events. Hence he sent to him a second time (3,7, cf, 21.1-7), Zephaniah again acting as one of the messengers. Jeremiah's message must have had the effect of a bucket of water on the fire of hope that had been kindled in the king's heart! Optimism was unwarranted, for the Babylonians would return; indeed, so certain was their victory that, even if their army were destroyed, the surviving wounded would still be sufficient to overcome Jerusalem (7-10).

It is obvious that many who heard Jeremiah followed his advice to desert to the Babylonians (38.2, cf. 38.19; 39.9; 52.15), which would hardly increase his popularity with the military authorities. It was natural, then, that Irijah should suspect Jeremiah himself of desertion (11-15), although a certain vindictiveness is also apparent. The prophet could now be maltreated with impunity since his prophecies, with the withdrawal of the Babylonians, seemed to be proven false. The purpose of Jeremiah's visit to Anathoth (12) is obscure, but possibly it was connected with the early stages of the transaction noted in 32.1-15. After Jeremiah had languished for a considerable period (v. 19 indicates that the siege had been resumed) in a temporary prison in Jonathan's house (15) he was

brought before the king, who enquired of him a third time (16-20). He may have imagined that Jeremiah, broken in spirit by brutal treatment, would be more likely to give a favourable oracle. But a prophet who had faithfully proclaimed the Word of God, in the face of intense antagonism, for forty years, was not likely to crack under this kind of pressure. His message was as uncompromising as before (17). He also took the opportunity to point out that the false prophets had already been discredited (19), and to plead for better conditions for himself (20).

Chapter thirty eight

The chapter is remarkable for the courage shown by Ebed-melech, and the monumental indecision of Zedekiah the king. Hope of effective Egyptian intervention was now non-existent, for the Babylonians were again firmly entrenched about the city. There was hope for individuals if they deserted (2), and the city could escape complete devastation if it surrendered (17). No hope of reprieve remained for the pro-Egyptian princes who completely dominated Zedekiah, and they were prepared to fight to the last (cf. 39.6b). Jeremiah was cruelly accused of fifth-columnist activities and indifference to the welfare of the people (a). The weakness of the king is revealed in his compliance with the request of v. 4. The princes, stopping short of making a violent end to Jeremiah, threw him unceremoniously into a disused water-cistern, with the obvious intention of causing his death either by exposure or starvation. Anyone who spoke out for Jeremiah would face their anger.

No protest at this brutal treatment came from any prince, priest or prophet, or indeed any Jew. The lone voice raised was that of an Ethiopian palace slave, we cannot even be sure that Ebed-melech ('servant of the king') was his proper name. The fact that he risked his life by interceding for Jeremiah (cf. 39.17) prompted the king into taking the only vigorous action recorded of him, apart from his final flight (39.4). The 'three men' (10, RSV) would be sufficient to lift an emaciated prophet from the cistern, but the 'thirty men' of the AV (KJV) may be preferable, indicating a considerable bodyguard to discourage any intervention on the part of the princes. It is instructive that Ebed-melech went about his work of deliverance in a thoughtful, compassionate way knowing how the naked ropes would cut into the limbs of a half-starved Jeremiah (11-13). Would that all the 'servants of the King' in our generation went about their ministry in the same considerate manner! Note the sequel to this incident (39.15-18).

For the fourth time Zedekiah sought Jeremiah's counsel (14-28). One gains the impression that he wanted to follow the prophet's advice, but his own personal fears (19) and the intimidation of the princes seem to have paralysed his will. He was a king with a wish-bone instead of a back-bone. It is not enough to know the will of God, one must also do it (cf. Matt. 7.24-27; Jas. 1.22-25). Jeremiah's unpopular advice, if followed, would have saved Jerusalem from the fearful fate which overtook it.

Chapter thirty nine

The city of Jerusalem has a long and blood-stained history, but possibly only the Roman destruction of A.D. 70 can have been more gruesome than this one in 587 B.C. The narrative, a condensation of ch. 52, tells its own grisly story of the capture of the city after an eighteen-month siege. According to 52.29, only 832 survivors of the stricken city were taken into captivity, although this figure may relate to men only, or be reduced because of the high mortality rate during the long trek to Babylonia. Zedekiah's attempt to escape was thwarted by the vigilance of the Babylonians (4 f.) and a peculiarly terrible fate befell him. His eyes were put out, but he lived on, with the slaughter of his sons remaining as the last image of his sight (6 f.). Special attention was given to the anti-Babylonian nobles (6b). Nergal-sharezer (or Neriglissar, 3), the son-in-law of Nebuchadnezzar, was to succeed to the throne in 560-556 B.C. The Rabсарis was the 'chief court official', the Rabmag was another high official whose precise function is unknown. Humanly speaking, it seemed the end of the road for Judah, for its land was devastated and occupied, its Temple and capital were destroyed, and its royal line was

taken into captivity. But this catastrophe, caused by Judah's apostasy and intransigence, was strictly controlled by God, who purposed not the end but a new beginning.

The reputation of Jeremiah, known to the Babylonians through the deserters, may have convinced them that he was on their side. Certainty, after an initial period at Ramah, north of Jerusalem (40.1), they treated him favourably (11-14). Since Nebuchadnezzar was at Riblah (6) at the time it is likely that the case of Jeremiah was referred to him for special consideration.

The oracle concerning Ebed-melech, out of place chronologically, is included here to indicate its fulfilment. Probably it was originally between vs. 13 and 14 of ch. 38. Events were happening on an international scale, but the God who controls nations also cares for individuals, and Ebed-melech's courageous action (38.7-13) had not escaped His notice. Notice also that one man, besides Jeremiah, had his confidence in the right place (18b). Was he one of the despised prophet's few 'converts'?

Chapter forty

One of the greatest things about Jeremiah was his continued love for his people. Few men have been so maligned, mistreated and misunderstood as was this lonely prophet during the forty years of his vigil. Now his prophecy of utter destruction had come to pass and he, personally, was vindicated. Not many could have relinquished the opportunity to press home the bitter truth with such words as, 'I told you so', or, 'You've made your bed, now you can lie on it'. But Jeremiah was not a vindictive man, nor did he feel the slightest elation at the downfall of his adversaries. They were his people, he loved them and he wept bitterly for them, as the book of Lamentations shows. In this he reminds us of Christ.

After the Babylonian victory Jeremiah was one of the few completely free men left in the land (1-6). Given the opportunity of an honourable and comfortable retirement in Babylon, where he was regarded as a friend (4), he chose instead to remain with the poor despised remnant in Judah (6). His true greatness of character and largeness of heart are movingly revealed in this choice.

The Babylonian choice of Gedaliah, the son of an old friend and protector of Jeremiah (cf. 26.24), was a wise one. He immediately set about re-ordering the life of the community (7-12). Under his encouragement the leaders of the guerrilla forces and their followers settled down, and the refugees returned from the surrounding kingdoms (11 f.). A limited security and prosperity seemed assured (12). But then Gedaliah received warning of an assassination attempt (13-10). Ishmael (14) was probably prompted by jealousy, since he was a member of the royal line. He may also have represented a minority who objected to Gedaliah's policy of co-operation with Babylon. But Baalis, possibly playing on these motives, was using him as a tool for his own ends (1a); a weak Judah would allow him to extend his own territory. Gedaliah, who appears as an honourable man, had the defect of being too trusting, which caused him to overlook sensible precautions which might have prevented the second tragic chapter which was about to come.

Chapter forty one

Jerusalem fell on the ninth day of the fourth month (39.2; 52.6) and just one month afterwards, on the tenth day of the fifth month (52.12), Nebuzaradan arrived to superintend operations. Since the events of ch. 40, especially v. 12, indicate a considerable lapse of time before Gedaliah's assassination, it is likely that the seventh month (41.1) does not relate to the same year. Another deportation in 582 B.C. (52.30) was almost certainly in reprisal for the death of Gedaliah and the Babylonian troops (41.3), so the events of our chapter may be dated 583/2 B.C. Ishmael was one of those men who are able to destroy but not to build up. Since the sharing of a meal was regarded as a covenant of brotherhood (cf. Psa. 41.9; John 13.18,26-30) the treachery of his act would be the more

reprehensible (1b). It is subsequently made clear (10) that only the immediate entourage of Gedaliah was slain (3).

We have considered the possible motives for Ishmael's action, but there can be no justification for the senseless murder of a group of pilgrims. Two points are of particular historical interest: First, the cities named (5), all from the old northern kingdom of Israel, suggest the effects of the reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah in this area (2 Kings 23.15-20; 2 Chron. 30.1-12). Secondly, it is obvious that devastated Jerusalem still continued to act as the focal point of worship, although Mizpah was now the administrative centre. Ishmael showed himself to be hypocritical (6), brutal (7) and avaricious (8). Moreover, since the water supply is so precious in Palestine, the fouling of a cistern was a peculiarly irresponsible act of vandalism (7,9). No wonder that the people whom he carried away as hostages or prisoners were glad to be rescued from him (10-13)! Johanan, whose good advice had been disregarded by Gedaliah (40.13-16), was thoroughly competent to deal with a situation involving military skill, but his only thought subsequently was to escape to Egypt from what he imagined to be the inevitable Babylonian reprisals (17 f.). In this policy he was to clash with Jeremiah.

Chapter forty two

We do not know what Jeremiah was doing at the time of Gedaliah's murder, or whether he and Baruch were amongst those taken captive by Ishmael. But in this crisis, with the threat of savage Babylonian revenge hanging over them, the whole populace (1) came to secure an oracle from him; something which had never happened in the forty years before Jerusalem fell. Did their reference to 'the Lord your God' (2) indicate that they no longer felt in living touch with God themselves? If so, then Jeremiah's use of 'the Lord your God' (4) in his reply may have encouraged them to use the more personal form in v. 6.

Were they sincere in their request or had they already made up their minds? A firm intention to seek refuge in Egypt is certainly evident in 41.17 f., and Jeremiah's words (14) are probably quoted from the apparently excellent reasons generally advanced in support of such a policy. Probably they were sincere but they were absolutely sure in their own minds concerning the right course, and they could not imagine that the prophet's advice would so flatly contradict the conclusions of their own sound lessening. What they were really looking for was confirmation of a pre-determined course. It is as easy today to deceive ourselves in prayer, to seek a rubber-stamp from the Lord for the policies we devise, saying, if not in so many words, 'Lord, show me Your will, but make it this way!'.

The ten days which Jeremiah took before he felt able to pronounce the divine oracle (7) must have seemed interminable to the Jews, living as they were in such apparent danger. Surely time was the essence of the contract! But Jeremiah refused to be hustled, for he was anxious not to confuse the will of the Lord with what either he or the people wanted to do. Taking time to ascertain the Lord's will is not wasting time. The reply, when it came, was not welcome, for it advocated remaining in the land and put strong sanctions against flight to Egypt. The people heard Jeremiah out (43.1) but before he had finished he was made aware of their hostility, and he knew that he, as a prophet, was being rejected once more (20 ff.).

Chapter forty three

Fear can blind the mind and distort the judgement. It was fear of the Babylonians which caused Azariah, Johanan and company to see only one course of action, namely, to seek sanctuary in Egypt. Jeremiah's advice was so unacceptable to them that they refused to recognise its divine origin and instead accused him of lying to them. This bare statement was modified by the assertion that he was unduly influenced by Baruch, who had been his close companion for at least twenty years (32.9-16; 36.4-8,26-32; 45). Just what Baruch stood to gain by exerting such influence is not clear. To have remained and faced Babylonian anger called for an unusual degree of reliance upon the power of the

Lord to preserve them, and they were incapable of such trust. It could have been argued that they stood a good chance of placating their overlords, since they themselves had dealt so speedily and convincingly with the assassins of Gedaliah (41.11-16). And, moreover, the Lord was trustworthy. But the arm of flesh (Egypt) seemed a greater guarantee of safety than the arm of the Lord. so a large company came to Tahpanhes, in the eastern part of the delta, just inside the Egyptian border (7). Presumably Jeremiah and Baruch, who had advocated remaining in Judah, were taken there against their will (6).

Once more Jeremiah found himself in opposition to contemporary thought, and once more he displayed conspicuous courage-in his forthright opposition. The significance of v. 9 is obscured by considerable divergences in the principal texts, but the structure erected by Jeremiah was probably a kind of pedestal or platform upon which the throne of Nebuchadnezzar could be placed (10). The inference of the oracle (10-13) is that the Jews in Egypt would not be safe from the Babylonians, but we have little historical data concerning its actual fulfilment. Nebuchadnezzar did invade Egypt in 568 B.C., when Amasis was Pharaoh. No record is preserved of the extent of his success, but Egypt remained independent throughout the Babylonian period. One thing is sure, the future of Judaism did not lie with the Jewish community in Egypt, which had rejected the Lord a second time.

Chapter forty four

Here we have the last recorded oracles of Jeremiah.

The place names mentioned in v. 1 indicate a wide dispersment of the Jews in Egypt: Migdol was on the north-eastern frontier; Memphis (Noph, AV [KJV]) was a few miles south of modern Cairo; 'the land of Pathros' refers to Upper Egypt. This dispersion must have taken some years and a date c. 580 B.C. is not improbable. Jeremiah, by this time, must have been in his mid-sixties; he had been a prophet for about forty-seven years (see notes on 1.1-8), during which period he had faced unrelenting opposition and endured severe hardship. He had seen his nation decline from a relatively strong independent state to the point of near extinction, and little fruit seemed to have been borne by his ministry. Yet, in these final words, his utter faith in an omnipotent God, and his perception of fundamental truths, are as clear as ever. The first fourteen verses are a repetition, on a smaller scale, of his condemnation of Jerusalem. The sin of the nation, its rejection of God and His prophets was reproduced in Egypt, so the calamity which befell Judah would have its parallel amongst the Jewish refugees there. Only a handful would survive to tell the tale (14,28).

Jeremiah's assessment of the situation was flatly contradicted by his hearers, many of whom had lived through the same events. They blamed their misfortune on Josiah's reformation, which had eliminated the worship of Ishtar, the queen of heaven (15-19, cf. note on 7. 1-20)! Since that day, they complained, nothing had gone right. Jeremiah countered this by pointing out that it was this idolatrous attitude which had precipitated God's desolating judgement (20-23), and that the same pattern would be reproduced-in Egypt (24-28). No doubt the Jews remained unconvinced, but history underlines the fact that Jeremiah's appraisal of the fate of his people was correct. The future of Judaism lay with the small group of exiles in Babylon who accepted the national catastrophe as God's judgement, and who sought a new future in conformity with His requirements. Pharaoh Hophra of Egypt was displaced as sole ruler by one of his officials, Amasis. For a period the two men ruled together, but eventually, & friction between them mounted, Amasis had Hophra put to death and became undisputed king in 569 B.C. It is unlikely that Jeremiah survived to this time, but the fulfilment of his words concerning Hophra (29 f.) would sound the death-knell of any hopes still cherished by the Jews in Egypt.

Chapter forty five

This chapter takes us back to 605 B.C. and connects with the events of ch. 36. It will be remembered that Jeremiah and Baruch were in great danger due to the vicious antagonism of King Jehoiakim. Baruch obviously did not take kindly to the universal opposition, spearheaded by the king himself, which seemed to be his lot as Jeremiah's scribe and companion. Notice the self-centredness of his attitude indicated by the five personal pronouns in v. 3 (cf. the same number in the Pharisee's self-congratulatory prayer, Luke 18.11 f.). Baruch was positively wallowing in self-pity! We have noted frequently (e.g. 15.15-21) that Jeremiah was faced with the same problem. Baruch, like his master, doubtless loved his people and found the role of being in unyielding opposition to the popular opinions and standards an extremely distasteful one. Jeremiah had a sharp lesson to learn (15.19) and so had Baruch, if he were to continue in the Lord's service.

The first lesson was that the heartache of Baruch was nothing when compared with the spiritual agony in the heart of God Himself (cf. Hos. 11.1-9). His judgement upon the nation involved the shattering of that which had been built and planted, laboriously and lovingly, over centuries (4). Such demolition, inevitable because of Judah's sin, was none the less painful to Him; indeed, Baruch's suffering was infinitesimal in comparison. The second lesson was that if Baruch were to be a true servant of the Lord, then self must be resolutely thrust into the background (5). Did he perhaps wish that he and Jeremiah could join the ranks of the professional prophets, whose crowd-pleasing oracles ensured for them the popular acclaim? To do this would mean the forfeiting of any right to represent God. He requires the surrender of self, so that His will becomes our delight (cf. Psa. 40.8). Christ Himself is the supreme example of such selflessness. For Baruch the way ahead would be rough. Like Jeremiah he would be misrepresented (e.g. 43.3), persecuted (36.26) and eventually taken into Egypt against his will (43.6). Are we prepared to share likewise, in some small measure, in the suffering and rejection of our Master (cf. Luke 9.23-25; Phil. 3.10; I Pet. 2.19-23)?

Chapter forty six part one

Jeremiah was contemporary with four of the kings of Egypt, Psammetichus I (663-609 B.C.), Neco II (609-593 B.C.), Psammetichus II (593-588 B.C.) and Hophra (588-569 B.C.), all of whom belonged to the XXV Dynasty. When Assyrian power declined, about the time of Jeremiah's call, Egypt was encouraged to contemplate a revival of her power over the neighbouring small kingdoms, including Judah. It was to combat these plans that Josiah led his people against the Egyptians at Megiddo in 609 B.C., a battle in which he lost his life (2 Kings 23.29 f.). Thereafter, for four years, Judah passed under direct Egyptian control. But the rising world-power was Babylonia, not Egypt, which was frequently torn by internal dissensions, and lacked sufficient power to maintain an empire. The battle at Carchemish (2) in 605 B.C. was decisive in transferring the balance of power to Babylonia. Jeremiah ironically depicts the well-equipped (3 f.) and boastful, highly-skilled (7-9) forces of Egypt and contrasts this with the sequel of an overwhelming defeat and a shameful flight (5 f., 10 ff.). This episode, historically, was typical of Egypt, who promised so much and realised so little. So often she encouraged the smaller nations to rebel against their overlord, whether it was Assyria, or later on Babylonia, promising them help which was rarely forthcoming and never adequate. Instead of a staff which her allies could lean upon she proved to be no more than a broken reed (2 Kings 18.21; Ezek. 29.6 f.). Israel's prophets were discerning enough to observe this, and with their own assurance that the Lord Himself was able to preserve His own people, they roundly condemned alliances with Egypt (e.g. Hos. 7.11; 11.2.1; Isa. 30.1-5; 31.1 ff.).

The connection of vs. 13-26, which foretell an invasion of Egypt by Nebuchadnezzar, is uncertain. If it is to be connected with the earlier part of the chapter, then it prophesies that the Babylonians would follow up their victory at Carchemish by occupying Egypt. The degree of penetration is indicated by the reference to Amon of Thebes (25), which was about 330 miles upstream from modern Cairo. But no such occupation took place at this time. Alternatively, the prophecy could be linked with the events

of ch. 43, which we have dated about 582 B.C., in which case the reference would be to the Babylonian attack on Egypt in 568 B.C. one thing is clear, Jeremiah envisaged the decline of Egypt as an international power, and this was certainly fulfilled.

Chapter 46.27 to chapter 47

The first brief oracle (46.27 f.) is identical with 30.10 f. It was probably included again at this point to contrast the future salvation of Israel with the impending overthrow of Egypt (46.1-26). Chapter 47 depicts the overthrow of Philistia, but two distinct phases are discernible. In v.1 the reference is to Pharaoh Neco's campaign of 609 B.C., which had a twofold purpose: to prop up a tottering Assyria against a powerful Babylonia, thus maintaining the balance of power; to extend his own empire in a time of international chaos. This movement threatened the sovereignty of the small states like Judah and Philistia, and we have already observed that Josiah died in attempting to impede Neco's advance. The Greek historian Herodotus records a tradition that after the battle at Megiddo, Neco overthrew Kadytis, which is usually identified with the Philistine city of Gaza.

The reference to 'waters are rising out of the north' (2) shows that the remainder of the chapter is concerned with the Babylonian invasion, the inference being that the Egyptian campaign would shrink into insignificance in comparison. Tyre and Sidon (4) were Phoenician, not Philistine, cities, but they were probably in a desperate alliance with the Philistines against the overwhelming might of Babylonia. Compare Jeremiah's description of the Babylonian flood (2) with Isaiah's prophecy of the Assyrian torrent (Isa. 8.7 f.). The shaving of the hair of the head and self-mutilation (5, cf. 45.37) were signs of mourning which were forbidden in Israel (Deut. 14.1). The fate of the 'remnant of the Anakim' (5, RSV) is of peculiar interest, since this aboriginal race of giant-like people was exterminated in Israel and survived only in a few Philistine cities, as noted in Josh. 11.21 f. (cf. Num. 13.22,28,32 f.). Jeremiah's anguished protest of 'How long...?' (6), which reflects his humanitarian outlook, is answered in v. 7. Judgement is never a pleasant thing, either to experience or to witness. But neither is the sin which causes the sword of judgement to fall. We may rest assured that God's judgement is in perfect equity.

Chapter forty eight

Moab, which was related ethnically to Israel (cf. Gen. 19.37), settled in the area south-east of the Dead Sea shortly before Israel's conquest of Canaan. The alternation between friendship and enmity which existed from the earliest times is illustrated in Jeremiah's own lifetime: bands of Moabites, attacking under Babylonian orders, ravaged Judah soon after 602 B.C. (2 Kings 24.2) but by 594 B.C. Moab was implicated with Judah in an anti-Babylonian alliance (27 3). Geographically, Moab was more isolated than Israel and Judah, which were on the main trade-routes and were also surrounded by other kingdoms. Moab's isolation enabled her to escape many of the international upheavals which weakened her neighbours (11), and she was often able to strengthen herself at their expense. Some of the large number of cities mentioned in this prophecy were originally in the tribal portion of Reuben.

Notice the three-fold trust of the Moabites in v. 7; in their fortresses, their riches, and their god Chemosh. To this must be added a confidence in their own fighting qualities (14). All this encouraged an arrogant pride which became characteristic of Moab (26,29 f., 42, cf. Isa. 16.6; Zeph. 2.8-11). The picture which this chapter conveys is the shattering of such complacent self-sufficiency in a massive invasion, with its brutal accompaniments: looting, slaughter, captivity, untold misery and bitter lamentation. Jeremiah, like Isaiah, shows a genuine sympathy with Moab's predicament (17,36, cf. Isa. 15.5; 16.9,11). V. 11 suggests that the Lord's dealings with her are moral and remedial, as with Judah, which will lead to future restoration (47). V. 10, described by A. S. Peake as 'This bloodthirsty verse' and regarded by him as an interpolation, is not to be interpreted literally, but as a hyperbolic

statement of the completeness of the judgement about to fall. Such an event inevitably involves bloodshed, but the Lord takes no delight in the death of the most rebellious sinner (cf. 2 Pet. 3.9).

Chapter forty nine (part one) 1-22

The prophecy against Ammon (1-6) is a reproduction in miniature of the one against Moab in the preceding chapter. Ammon, like Moab, was related to Israel (Gen. 19.38; Deut. 2.19), and settled between the Arnon and Jabbok rivers at about the same time. The encroachment on the territory of Gad (1) is probably to be connected with the campaign of Tiglath Pileser III in 733 B.C. (2 Kings 15.29), when there was a wholesale deportation of Israelites from this area. Ammon, like Moab, was involved in raids on Judah about 602 B.C. (2 Kings 24.2), and in the anti-Babylonian alliance less than a decade later (Jer. 27.3). Her national deity was Milcom (the RSV rendering, supported by the Septuagint and other versions, is preferable to the Malcam of the Hebrew text). Ammon's trust was in her riches and in the extremely fertile valleys which were the main feature of her territory (4). Jeremiah prophesied her destruction, which would enable Israel to regain its rightful territory (2), but with an eventual restoration (6).

No such hope of restoration attaches to the prophecy against Edom (7-22), another of the small kingdoms which, like Moab, was settled about fifty years before Israel's occupation of the Promised Land. Edom, traditionally regarded as descended from Esau, had even closer links with Israel than Moab and Ammon (e.g. Deut. 23.7 f.) but her attitude during the Babylonian invasion of Judah, when she actively assisted the aggressor, was the cause of bitter reproach from subsequent Jewish prophets (e.g. Lam. 4.21 f.; Psa. 137.7; Ezek. 25.12 ff.; 35; Obad; Joel 3.19; Mal. 1.2 ffr). Notice the extremely close connection between verses. 14 ff. and Obad. 1-4 and between verses. 9,10a and Obad. 5 f. Probably Obadiah was quoting from Jeremiah, or both may have used a common original. Edom was renowned for her wisdom (7); her cruelty (16a); and the strength of her natural fortresses (10a,16). Sela, her capital, was one of the most impregnable cities of the ancient world. But nothing could shield Edom from the complete desolation about to descend, for she, above all the nations, merited judgement (12).

Chapter forty nine (part two).23-39

The prophecy against Damascus (23-27), probably representative of all Syria, is surprising in this context. Syria had been the dominant power in the entire region during the ninth century, and Israel, in particular, had suffered at her hands (e.g. 2 Kings 10.32 f.; 13.3 f., 7,22), but crippling defeats by Assyria c. 805-803 B.C. had made her a second-rate power. All three of the towns mentioned in v. 23 fell to the boastful Sennacherib a century later (2 Kings 18.34; 19.13; Isa. 10.9). The main point of the prophecy is the fear engendered by the Babylonian advance (23 f.). Jeremiah borrowed v. 27 from Amos 1.4, whilst v. 26 is repeated in 50.30.

Jeremiah next turns his attention to the inhabitants of the desert (28-33) whose security lay in their power to strike quickly and then melt away into the inaccessible reaches of the desert. Such mobility enabled them to capitalize on the misfortunes of their sedentary neighbours during the international upheavals of the period. The Babylonians took firm steps to control these predatory tribes. Josephus makes a passing reference to a conquest of Arabia by Nebuchadnezzar (28,30), a later Babylonian king, Nabonidus. Kedar (28) was the name of an Arabian tribe inhabiting the desert east of Palestine. The location of Hazor (28,30,33) is not known. It is probably a collective name for the tent-villages of the semi-nomadic Arabs.

Elam (34-39), a powerful kingdom more than 200 miles east of Babylonia, was the most distant nation referred to by Jeremiah. Some Elamites had been deported to Samaria by the Assyrians (Ezra 4.9 f.). The Elamites were renowned as warriors (Ezek. 32.24) and archers (35, cf. Isa. 22.6). Clearly, Judah was hoping that the Babylonians would be diverted from their westward campaigns by a

preoccupation with mighty Elam, their eastern neighbour. Jeremiah shattered this false hope; Elam would prove no lasting barrier to the rising power of Babylonia. The reference to a restoration (39) was fulfilled in that Elam, with her capital, Susa, later became the centre of the Persian Empire (Dan. 8.2; Neh. 1.1).

Chapter fifty (part one).1-20

This chapter and the following chapters are concerned with the overthrow of Babylon. The only direct clue as to the date is given in 51.59 f., the fourth year of Zedekiah, i.e. 594/3 B.C. Objections have been made to the dating of all these oracles at this particular time, but none of them is really valid. It is true that Jeremiah appears to refer to the destruction of the Temple (50.28; 51.11), which took place in 587 B.C., but, in fact, Jeremiah had been foretelling this since 608 B.C. (26.1,6). Similarly, there is a reference to the Exile in 50.4, 33 f., but again, Jeremiah had warned his people of this calamity, unless they repented, as early as 608 B.C.. (7.15). Indeed, some of his countrymen had already been taken away in the deportation of 597 B.C. (24.1). It is equally unrealistic to assert that Jeremiah was pro-Babylonia, because of his prophecies of the certainty of their victory (e.g. 34.2), and that therefore these anti-Babylonian oracles must come after Jerusalem fell, when Jeremiah was disillusioned by Babylonian cruelty. Jeremiah was no more pro-Babylon than he was anti-Judah; he simply saw with stark clarity that Judah must be punished for her transgression and that Babylonia was the Lord's chosen instrument to effect this. A precedent for Jeremiah's oracles against Babylon is to be found in Isaiah, who envisaged both the Lord's use and overthrow of Assyria (Isa. 10.5-19). Jeremiah, in our passage, actually links these two events (17 f.). There is no reason, therefore, to deny these prophecies to him, or to give them a date after the events which they describe.

The concept of the shepherd of Israel is prominent (6,19) but there is nothing weakly sentimental about this, there must be a genuine repentance (4 f.) and the elimination of sin (20) before the nation could be restored. Babylon's overthrow was to come through an enemy from the north (3,9), a probable allusion to Media (cf. 51.11,28).

Chapter 50 (part two).21-46

The theme of Babylon's downfall continues in this section. There is a subtle word-play in v. 21. Merathaim, which means 'double rebellion' or 'double bitterness', is a modification of 'The Land of the Bitter River', the name of a district in southern Babylonia. Pekod, meaning 'visitation', or 'punishment', derives from the name of an eastern Babylonian tribe, the Puqudr. These two names sum up the essence of Jeremiah's prophecy; Babylon had been guilty of rebellion against the Lord (24,29), therefore the Lord would punish her (27,31). The elements in this moral visitation include:

- the cruelty of Babylonia (29);
- her heartless attitude towards her captives (33),
- and her idolatry (38).

Throughout the chapter the complete destruction of Babylon, resulting from a massive invasion, is envisaged. Those critical scholars who reject the possibility of such a foretelling of the future, and who would put these chapters after Babylon's fall in 539 B.C., face an insurmountable problem. If these words were written after the event, they would surely correspond more accurately with the events themselves. But while Babylonia did fall to the invincible power of the Medes and the Persians, so complete was its decline, moral and spiritual as well as political, that, following a pitched battle outside the city, Babylon itself fell almost without a struggle and was quietly taken over by its conquerors with a minimum of destruction. Such prophecies as vs. 39 f. were fulfilled much later. Verses. 44 ff. are almost identical, apart from the names, with 49.19-21.

God as the Redeemer of His people (33 f.) is a favourite concept of the second portion of Isaiah, where it occurs no fewer than fifteen times (e.g. Isa. 41.14; 43.14; 44.6, etc.). The redeemer-kinsman in Israel was 'responsible for redeeming alienated property (e.g. Ruth 4.1-6, cf. Lev. 25.25) or relatives (Lev. 25.47 ff.), and for the avenging of blood (e.g. Deut. 19.4-6)'. From this there followed the thought that the Lord, the Kinsman of His covenant-people, had effective power to act on their behalf and carry through His purposes. They could have confidence in Him.

Chapter fifty one (part one) 1-26

We continue our study of this extended oracle against Babylon, the great world-power of Jeremiah's age. Alternating with passages depicting the helplessness of her inhabitants and the certainty of her overthrow, there are sections which reveal the Lord as He exercises His sovereign control of the nations. This included His own people, who seemed as significant in these international conflicts as a pawn in a game of chess. They were reminded that these events did not mean that the Lord had forsaken them (5a). The emendation of 'their land' (5b, AV [KJV]) to 'the land of the Chaldeans' (RSV) is unnecessary. Israel and Judah are in mind, apparently forsaken because of their sin. But the overthrow of Babylon would coincide with the moment of their release and vindication (10). The imagery of the cup (7) recalls Jeremiah's parable of 25.15-29, but in the latter it was a cup of judgement, whereas in the former it is the cup of evil example and influence (cf. the remarkable parallel in Rev. 17.4). In the other oracles against the foreign nations, we have noted the things in which they boasted; the strongholds and treasures of the Moabites (4t.1 ; the fertile valleys and wealth of Ammon (49.4); the impregnability of Edom (49.16) the isolation of the nomadic tribes (49.31). Part of Babylon's security lay in the fact that it was surrounded by waterways, including the Euphrates, and an elaborate system of canals; hence such references as v. 13; 50.38. But these would prove ineffective (51.32).

Verses. 15-19 repeat, with minor modifications, the oracle of 10.12-16. They paint a word-picture of a God who is sovereign in His might and magnificent in all His conceptions. Babylon, and every other world-power, would perish, but He knows no such fallibility.

To whom do verses. 20-23 refer? Since 50.23 describes Babylon as 'the hammer of the whole earth' it seems best to refer this section to her also. But because of her sin, especially against the Lord's people (24), she would incur His implacable judgement (25 f.). Compare Isa. 10.5-19; Ezek.31.1-14. 'For dominion belongs to the Lord, and He rules over the nations' (Psa. 22.28).

Chapter fifty one (part two) 27-64

The destruction and desolation of Babylon dominates verses 27-58. The nations are marshalled against her (27 f.), including the three groups noted (27), who had been brought by conquest into the Medo-Babylonian alliance. The death-throes of the land; the collapse of the soldiers' morale; and the frantic scurrying of messengers bearing the evil news, are graphically depicted (29-32). Babylon, described in v. 26 as a desolate waste, is now represented as in the final stages of harvest (33). The imagery varies in the remaining oracles in the section but the death-knell of Babylon sounds in them all. For instance, in verses. 38 ff., its inhabitants, likened to lions' whelps growling for their food, are to be given a meal, but not of the kind they desired. It will transform the savagery of lions into the docility of domesticated animals.

But within this major theme, there persists the minor theme of the vindication of Judah and Jerusalem in this act of judgement upon the aggressor (34-37,49-57). Nebuchadnezzar, who initiated this period of Babylonian dominance over Judah, becomes its symbol (34), but when the Lord, the Champion of His people, steps into the arena of history then proud Babylon is vanquished (36 f., 54-58). The lament of v. 51 arises from the fact that the desecration of the Temple appeared to involve Yahweh's inferiority, but the desolation of Babylon would reveal the utter impotence of her idols (52, cf. 47).

The historical note which concludes the chapter (59-64) allows us to date all the prophecies against Babylon (cf. comment on 50.1-20). In the note on ch. 27 we suggested that this visit of Zedekiah was the aftermath of an abortive attempt at rebellion by an alliance of states, including Judah, to which Jeremiah was diametrically opposed. It is significant that at the very time when he was counselling submission to Babylon he could also foretell, in such uncompromising terms, her ultimate overthrow. But the timing, Jeremiah saw, as well as the means, was in God's control. Man must not seek to wrest the initiative from Him.

Chapter fifty two

There are only slight variations between this chapter and 2 Kings 24.18-25.30. The account of Gedaliah's governorship and assassination, and the subsequent flight to Egypt, already dealt with in 40.5-43.7, are omitted (cf. 2 Kings 25.22-26). Far greater detail concerning the Temple treasures is given in Jeremiah 52.17-23 (cf. 2 Kings 25.13-17), perhaps to emphasize that, instead of the return of the vessels taken by Nebuchadnezzar in 597 B.C. (as predicted by the false prophets, e.g. 27-.16; 28.3), they had lost those that remained (cf. 27.18-22). There is nothing in 2 Kings which corresponds with Jeremiah's list of the three deportations (28 ff.). Much of the historical detail given here is to be found in 39.1-10.

Three minor points call for comment.

1. The apparent contradiction between vs. 12 and 29 is readily explained; in the former the accession year of Nebuchadnezzar has been included, in the latter it has not.
2. The attention given to the priests-three orders are noted-in the official reprisals of v. 24 may suggest the prominent part they played in the anti-Babylonian revolt.
3. For the historical background of v. 30 see the note on ch. 41.

The inclusion of a section from the official records is certainly appropriate. In a precise, factual manner the end of a chapter in the national life of God's people is told. This was the result of their rejection of true religion, in spite of repeated warnings by true prophets like Jeremiah. The official history, contained in the books of Samuel and Kings, was formed from earlier sources by men of the next generation, who had suffered themselves as a result of the nation's disobedience. They had taken heed to the neglected prophets of earlier generations, as the editorial comment of v. 3 shows. It was too late to avert the national disaster, but in the Lord's mercy, it was to prove the beginning of a new chapter in which a remnant, chastened in spirit, sought Him in contrition. Moreover, dark as the days seemed to be, there came the remembrance of other prophecies which looked beyond the judgement to a glorious future, so there was an undying hope in their hearts. The elevation of Jehoiachin in 561 B.C., noted in the appendix of vs. 31-34, might encourage a nationalistic hope, but the real future lay in such a spiritual community.

Jeremiah may have failed in his strenuous efforts to turn his people back to the Lord, but in his conception of true religion as a vital, inward relationship with a living God (e.g. 9.24) he was to set the necessary standard, not only for the immediate future, but for all time.

(25,811)