

JEREMIAH
A PROPHET TO THE NATIONS

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FOREWORD

I HAVE been asked to write a devotional book for Lent. I want to suggest that this year we change our usual practice and study a book of the Bible. By this I mean the actual text of scripture, not merely a devotional book about the Bible. I plan, therefore, in this book to give a series of studies in Jeremiah, simply as an aid and a stimulus to our reading of the actual text.

In some ways Jeremiah is one of the most difficult books in the Bible to study, and yet it contains the personal history and spiritual experience of a very great man, who lived in days not unlike our own.

The book is difficult because the arrangement of the chapters in our English version is not in any chronological order. Many chapters are dated by their opening verses, giving the actual year of the king on the throne, but many other chapters are undated and can only be fitted into a chronological order from internal evidence, which does not always carry us very far.

I give below a suggested and approximate grouping of the chapters according to the reigning kings. I say "approximate," because while some chapters are clearly dated, others may belong to different periods and cannot be classified with any degree of accuracy.

Our method will be to see Jeremiah as a prophet of his own day and to understand his message in the light of the World Powers of that period—Assyria, Babylon and Egypt. This is basic to any accurate study of the Scriptures. But having done this we shall try and see Jeremiah as a prophet with a vital message for our own day.

I suggest, therefore, that those who adopt my book for their Lenten reading should decide to study in detail the

book of Jeremiah itself. The simplest way to begin is to read Jeremiah through several times first in the order given in the Authorized Version, and then in the order given on pages 23-31. Students should have a note-book at hand and commence by making a simple synopsis of each chapter. After the book has been read once or twice the reader will settle down to a more detailed examination of Jeremiah, and notes will quickly accumulate on the prophet himself, his character, and his message. Many sidelights will be thrown on the age in which he lived, the kings of the period and the political situation.

My reason for selecting Jeremiah is that it is a comparatively little-known book. Few people ever read it and fewer still attempt to make a study of it. The initial difficulties put people off. But once these have been surmounted, a study of the old prophet will give a rewarding experience. Jeremiah has been described as "the healthiest, strongest, bravest, grandest man in Old Testament history." Let me give at the outset one main clue to a study of this part of history. The Old Testament differs from other ancient history in the picture it unfolds of God, as personally present in the affairs of the world. God, in fact, is shown in the Old Testament as the chief Actor in history. We, therefore, see history from a divine angle. There is one God, says Jeremiah: He is working to a purpose; He is righteous and He demands righteousness of us. Jeremiah shows how God, while offering to help mankind, does so on certain conditions implicit in the observance of His moral law. It is in Jeremiah that we see this idea best taught and explained. The prophet's point of view is that there is a genuine connection between history and religion. He rebukes idolatry, immorality and forgetfulness of God. He summons people to repent as he himself repents. He suffers in the sufferings of his people. He is thwarted but not in despair. His prophecies are torn

to shreds by the King, and with unfailing patience he writes them again. He is threatened with death, and with indomitable courage he continues his work. There is a grandeur in this man and his message that will grip our imaginations if—yes, if—we will take time to study his prophecies.

CHAPTER I

JEREMIAH—THE MAN

OUR first study must be the man behind the book.

I suggest therefore that those who use this guide to their studies should read through the book of Jeremiah, marking with a pencil any passage that throws light on the prophet, his call, his message, his sermon illustrations, his national and international outlook, and above all his spiritual life. In this way the reader will dig into the actual text of scripture, and such a study will whet his appetite for a further and fuller search into this most remarkable of all the prophets of the Old Testament.

Professor Wheeler Robinson, in his book, *The Cross of Jeremiah*, says, “If we want to know the meaning of personal religion at its finest and highest in the Old Testament, we must become, like Baruch, disciples of Jeremiah.”

Jeremiah was born at Anathoth, a small village on the eastern slopes of the Mount Scopus. It was given as a place of residence to the Levites (see Joshua xxi, 18). There is a small pastoral community still living on the same site. It is situated on high ground and commands a wonderful view. To the north, the old highway along the backbone of Palestine stretches away towards Samaria and Syria, to the east it looks out upon the great Jordan valley, the Dead Sea and the mountains of Moab beyond.

Anathoth was the home of Abiathar (1 Kings ii, 26) and a priestly centre. It is necessary at the outset to mention these details, because they have an important bearing upon the future career of the prophet. Jeremiah, as far as is known, came of a priestly family and in all probability was himself destined for the priesthood. We can imagine, therefore, his upbringing in a religious home,

and his training as a boy in all the venerable and sacred traditions of the Temple, its worship and ritual. Such a position among the Judæan hills would create in most people a narrowness of outlook. Had Jeremiah been like other men he would have developed as a priest of the Temple with little vision of the outside world and the great purposes of God for mankind. But other influences helped to open the boy's mind and to compel him to think out afresh the place of Judah in the world of his day. From his home there stretched out before him an ever-changing panorama of hills and valleys, inseparably linked to the history of his own country. The great highway from the north was a busy thoroughfare and people of many races travelled along it to Jerusalem. The armies of great World Powers had used it in aggressive invasion of the country. Smaller nations to the east had combined from time to time to attack the sacred city, while to the south, Jeremiah looked towards Egypt, the home of a powerful Pharaoh who constantly menaced Jerusalem.

The geography of Palestine must have awakened him to the perilous position of Judah, as a buffer state between Assyria and Egypt. He seems at this stage in his young manhood to have turned to the writings of earlier prophets for light upon the baffling problems with which he was faced. He shows an indebtedness to Amos (compare *Jer. xlix, 23-7*, with *Amos i, 3-5*); to Hosea, Obadiah, Micah and other prophets. Amos, the herdman of Tekoa, is the rugged Judæan type of character, who seems to fit into the landscape of South Palestine. But Jeremiah had lived a secluded life, sheltered from storms in a quiet, priestly home. He grew up thoughtful, and sensitive, shy and retiring. He hated publicity and shrank from controversy. Subsequently he used this desert environment as an illustration, when he says, "O generation, see ye the word of the Lord. Have I been a wilderness unto Israel?"

(Jer. ii, 31). In Chapter iv, 11, he speaks of "a scorching wind of the high places in the wilderness." How well he knew the sweeping, biting winds coming across the hills from the east, and he refers to them when he says, "His chariots shall be as a whirlwind" (Jer. iv, 13). His study of the history of Israel and Judah seems to have had a profound influence upon him. He reads of the fall of Samaria and of Hosea's prophecies connected with it, and he must have asked himself why Jerusalem should be inviolate if Samaria could become a heap of ruins. However it came about, Jeremiah began to search into the influences of religion on history. Others were doing the same, as contemporary prophets show. He grew to manhood with an increasing concern for his country. He was a patriot who saw his people heading for disaster. What was he to do? If he went forward to the priestly office he would be restricted and unable to express the message that was beginning to burn within him. Was he to be a prophet? Everything in him made him exclaim, God forbid! The work of a prophet was the last thing he ever wished to do. We see him in young manhood, a student of history, deeply religious, versed in the prophetic writings, a realist with a growing conception of God, a patriot with a deep love for his country. He certainly had a poetic temperament and a spiritual devotion to God. He was a man with a very tender heart, but one who was too honest to accept current, popular opinion as necessarily correct.

It was in the year 626 B.C. when Josiah had been King of Judah for thirteen years that the call came to Jeremiah. He was then about eighteen years of age.

Let us imagine him meditating upon the religious condition of his country and upon the political situation of the day. He refused to follow the line of least resistance. He saw his nation drifting to disaster. Temple worship

seemed to him to be detached from all moral leadership ; the priests preached smooth things about the sacredness and inviolability of the Temple ; he watched the nation being lulled to sleep by the promises of a false security in the privileged position of the Temple. He grew alarmed as he discovered the growing idolatry and syncretism of the national leaders. The religious life around him was hollow and unreal, and he was stirred by the lack of moral righteousness and the social evils that met him at every turn. Where is God, he would ask, to allow this robbery of the poor, this injustice to the weak, this growing immorality ?

While he meditated the Call came. Jeremiah had no sudden conversion. His action was no hasty impulse. It was the climax of a long and growing spiritual experience. He had what the Quakers would describe a "concern" for the welfare of his country. The record simply begins thus. "The words of Jeremiah to whom the word of the Lord came." Isaiah was in the Temple when his call came (see Isaiah vi, 1). Ezekiel was by the river Euphrates, in exile, when he felt a whirlwind rushing over him and a great cloud blinding him, out of which came a vision of God and a call to service. No such dramatic event marks the call of Jeremiah. In the quietness of his home and while in deep meditation God summons him to the prophetic office. God says : "I formed thee, I knew thee, I sanctified thee, I ordained thee a prophet to the nations" (Jer. i, 4-5).

It is an interesting study to watch Jeremiah's immediate reactions. "I cannot speak" (i, 6), he exclaimed. He met the call with a sense of utter weakness, inadequacy, and unfitness. These characteristics mark the whole of his life. He never grew in self-confidence. He was always the sensitive man who nevertheless sets his face like a flint. He lived in deep dependence upon God. Thus it was that God not only called, but equipped him. "I have put my

words in thy mouth" (i, 9). His surrender is complete. He knew that for him, for pain or joy, for life or death, he was chosen of God a prophet, endowed with a divine word and endued with power from on high to deliver it.

At this point he saw a vision of an almond tree in blossom, and a seething cauldron (chapter i.). Jeremiah's illustrations are always vivid, but this vision at the opening of his prophetic ministry is of particular importance. The almond tree is the symbol of spring, of new life and hope. It speaks of God at work in His creation, God actively seeking the renewal of the springs of national life. But the cauldron or bowl seethes and boils, and is the symbol of a world at war. Powers were rising in great strength to crush the weaker nations. Aggression was justified by its success. It is hard to realize that this vision of the almond tree and the cauldron dates back to twenty-five centuries ago. It fits so aptly with our own times.

It is probable that the "cauldron" had a primary reference to the Scythian invaders. They were the foe from the north and in the account of the vision we read (i, 13), "I see a seething pot and the face thereof is toward the north." It was in 626 B.C. that the Scythian menace was acute. There is here an interesting play upon words. The almond (Hebrew: *Shaked*) is the first flower to awake in the spring. The vision teaches Jeremiah that Jehovah is not asleep. He will show himself awake (Hebrew: *Shoked*). The play is on the words *shaked* and *shoked*, blossom and wakefulness. God will visit His people in judgment.

In those days Assyria was supreme, a nation organized for total war. When in 612 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar captured Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire, Assyria ceased to be a first-class power, and after a period of decline it passed out of the pages of history for ever. The following year the Pharaoh Necho was defeated by a Babylonian army at Carchemish, in a battle that decided the fate of

Western Asia, thus leaving the King of Babylon master of the world. This was the "cauldron" of Jeremiah's day. The prophet began his work in this world situation. His vision spoke to him in vivid contrast of God and World Power, of blossom and storm, of beauty and terror, of the tender shoots of a plant in spring and the destructions of war. Jeremiah was himself thrown into the cauldron of world affairs as the messenger of God, but he began with a spiritual certitude that God had called him and that the last word in the complicated situation would be with God. He began with no idea of success, but only that he might be a faithful spokesman for Jehovah.

A parallel situation in our own day is to be found in the bombing of Plymouth in 1941. The mother church of the city, St. Andrew's, was destroyed and extensive damage was done to other buildings. When the vicar surveyed the scene of desolation he was seeing something of the cauldron of war, but his faith rose above the immediate havoc. He had the interior of the church cleared, and down the aisles where thousands of worshippers had trodden for centuries he planted gay English flowers. When the spring came round he held services in the roofless shell of his once lovely church, and as the congregation sang praises to God they were surrounded by the symbols of life and hope in the flowers that bloomed. It was the same lesson that was given to Jeremiah. The almond tree blossomed and spoke of hope, the flowers gave colour to a devastated church. Let us listen to the service. "Lift up your hearts" was the call. The response echoed back from the congregation, "We lift them up unto the Lord." The sense of desolation disappeared and again the call came, "Let us give thanks unto our Lord God," and the people replied, "It is meet and right so to do."

Jeremiah's task was a great one, yet he faced it with stern resolve, encouraged by the vision of the almond-blossom

which had taught him that the Lord was "wakeful" over His word to perform it.

As we study this book we shall see the prophet preaching with a growing sense of failure. His message was rejected. Difficulties thickened around him, dangers multiplied and his life was constantly threatened. His written prophecy was cut to shreds by a Jewish king and he himself was thrown into a dungeon. He was accused of being a traitor to his country, a false prophet in the pay of the enemy. But the striking thing is that, when stripped of home, friends and supporters, when his work seemed to be in hopeless ruin, he could still bank upon the fact that God is still God. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—the God of history is his God, and his sense of call never failed him. Whatever happened he seemed to exclaim like Luther, "Here I stand, I can do no other." He continued to preach when forbidden, beaten and threatened.

Our study therefore opens up for us the story of a spiritual pilgrimage, of a great dedication at the call of God. The prophet never took a sword in his hands. He suffered a veritable crucifixion for his faith. But his message came as the rooting up of much in the civilization of the day, as the overthrow of pagan standards, and as the offer of a new world to be built upon the principles of righteousness, justice and truth.

If, as has been suggested, we have begun to study the book of Jeremiah, we shall soon find pages in our notebooks filling up with details about the prophet and his doings. What will stand out in our study will be the sterling qualities of character in Jeremiah. He was one of those rare men who, facing what he knew to be inescapable facts, refuses to find comfort in illusions. As one writer puts it, "Over the whole of his prophetic ministry might be written those words of Ajax in Sophocles' tragedy. 'It is not for a wise physician to wail charms over a wound

which needs the knife.’’ That wound for Jeremiah was the sin of pride, which makes men seek refuge in illusion, because he will not look honestly and steadfastly at the truth—God’s truth.

This gentle, loving and sensitive soul was called to conflict. There was no withdrawal possible for him. He dare not find escape in the routine life of Temple worship. The almond tree always reminded him that God is working to a plan for the good of mankind, but the cauldron ever kept before him the fact that if he was to be true to God he could not avoid strife.

He spent hours and days in meditation, but he was never far from the great world of tragedy which surrounded him. He was careful never to lose touch with world affairs, and more careful still to guard against any indifference to the sufferings of mankind. He began his ministry with deep, heart-searching, personal repentance. It was as if he saw the sins of his nation as the reflection of the sins of his own life. He interpreted God’s way of salvation for Israel by his own experience of God’s dealing with himself. His own temptation to avoid God’s will was extended to the nation, in Judah’s refusal to obey. The strife of the world was an echo of the strife in his own heart. He started life knowing that he must find the answer to the problems of his own life in his experience of God, if he was ever to interpret God to the nation. If it is the sign of a pessimist to face honestly the fact of sin in the human heart, then Jeremiah was the prince of pessimists. This prophet staked his life on the fact that man, left to himself, can never save himself. The civilization of his day crumbled around him. Human security failed and through it all Jeremiah maintained an unswerving faith in God. Such a faith as he displayed meant a refusal, in the face of catastrophe, to doubt either the existence of God or His righteousness. Jeremiah was, as a matter of fact, neither a pessimist nor an optimist.

He was a spiritual realist, who, facing all the known facts of a world that had crashed, maintained his faith in God.

It may truly be said that Jeremiah has a unique message for our own day. A Totalitarian Power has struggled for world domination. Our faith in God has been tested, but to-day there is more true faith in our nation than before the war. God is searching for prophets to the nations, men of unflinching courage and deep sympathy, men who will put first things first. Our notebooks, if we are really studying the book of Jeremiah, should provide us with a deep challenge. God calls us to His service, to a full obedience to His will, to an acceptance of a cross, to faithfulness in the face of conflict, to honesty when assailed by critics, to sincerity when tempted to compromise, and at all times and under all circumstances to loyalty to our commission. "I have ordained thee a prophet unto the nations" (Jer. i, 5).

St. Paul must have faced the same challenge when writing to the Church in Rome. He had been praying that the way might open for him to visit the young Church in the Imperial capital. The Gospel was a tremendous conviction in his experience. He declared that he was not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ because "it is the power of God unto salvation." He therefore appealed to his readers thus, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable unto God." Whenever the apostle asked others to consecrate their lives to God it was a sure sign that he had been passing through some spiritual crisis that had involved him in a new commitment of his life to the purposes and will of God. Little did he realize how his prayer would be answered. Years afterwards he arrived in Rome, but as "an ambassador in bonds." His church was a prison cell and his congregation the *Prætorian Guard*. Later on he appealed to the people of Philippi to pray for

him in his prison-life in Rome, but not for bodily comforts or security. He asked for a "supply of the Spirit of Jesus." St. Paul was never so great as when his faith transcended prison bars and his dedication kept him seeking only the glory of God and the advancement of His Kingdom. It is this same quality, as we shall see, that gave true greatness and nobility of character to Jeremiah.

CHAPTER II

AN OUTLINE STUDY

THE book of Jeremiah, on a first reading, presents peculiar difficulties to the student of scripture. It has, as we have seen, no chronological order. Its prophecies belonging to different periods, they offer no simple method of elucidation. The prophet himself is so varied in his moods and tempers that often he makes himself an enigma to us.

The book of Jeremiah is the longest book in the Bible, and to those who have studied it in detail it is probably the most important and valuable of all the books of the Old Testament.

It is important because it is the bridge between the pre-exilic and the post-exilic prophets. Jeremiah was accused of being a "Quisling" and a traitor to his country, but his book reveals him as the first of all true patriots. He was too honest to delude his fellow-countrymen with vain promises. He was too attached to the Faith of his fathers to allow any syncretistic philosophy to replace the worship of Jehovah. His book is valuable because it reveals the soul of a prophet, who had discovered a rich and ever-growing experience of God, active in the affairs of men and nations. How then are we to approach a study of this book?

I seek to encourage the study of Jeremiah because he is less known than most Old Testament characters, because he is so misunderstood, and because his message is of such importance for our own day.

Jeremiah does not seem to have written anything down until he was commanded to do so about twenty-three years after he began to prophesy. He had lived and worked throughout the reign of Josiah. He had shared in the

reformation in Jerusalem, and had witnessed the purifying of the Temple and the discovery of the law before any of his oracles were written down. In chapter xxxvi, 2, we read, "Take thee a roll of a book and write therein all the words that I have spoken unto thee." His faithful secretary, Baruch, was told to write at Jeremiah's dictation and to take the message to the princes and leaders of the people. This was in the fourth year of Jehoiakim. It is very likely, however, that, before this time, Baruch had been in the habit of writing down what his master said, and thus keeping a record of prophecies and warnings. If so, these would form the earlier part of the book, where we have the account of the prophet's call and his early ministry (see chapters i-vi). When he was commanded to write his message great issues were at stake. Jehoiakim was being summoned to repentance and to maintain the covenant. Jeremiah saw disaster looming ahead if both King and nation persisted in the rejection of God. His soul was stirred as he dictated his message. He pleaded with the people. He warned them that a national religion that has not got Jehovah at its centre is false. The prophet distinguished sharply between the Faith of his fathers and the new cult that had sprung up, a cult of tolerance that sanctioned one law for the rich and another for the poor, that gave licence to people to indulge in every form of immorality, and that countenanced the robbery of the weak and the spoliation of the defenceless. To all this the prophet presented a clear-cut and definite picture of Jehovah, supreme Lord and God, righteous and just, offering mercy to those who turned to Him, but warning all who turned from His law of a judgment to come. It is no wonder therefore that Jehoiakim cut the roll to pieces with his penknife and threw the bits of the first book of Jeremiah in the fire (xxxvi, 23). The prophet was told to make a second record of his prophecies. His words were to be

given a more permanent form. His instructions are set out in chapter xxxvi, 28-32: "Take thee another roll and write in it all the former words that were in the first roll . . . and there were added besides unto them many like words." The second roll was larger and fuller than the first one and was to be a permanent record.

We have, therefore, in chapter xxxvi, the account of the writing of what must still be the main structure of the book. Other chapters were added, fresh prophecies were given and recorded, and in all probability Baruch, while in Egypt with Jeremiah, after the destruction of Jerusalem collected all the prophecies and edited them to form a single volume.

Some years ago I visited the ancient monasteries of Nitria in the western desert of Egypt. One day I was being shown round the various rooms of one of the monasteries by a monk. After visiting the cells, the chapel and the refectory, my guide threw open the door of a room, which was strewn over with old Coptic liturgies and other books. The binding had given way with some of them and loose leaves were lying in disorder on the floor. Had anyone started to arrange the books in orderly fashion he would, in all probability, have mixed up the leaves and put them together in a wrong order. Later on, anyone wishing to use such a book would have had to spend some time in discovering what had happened to the pages and in sorting them out before he could gain any profit from the book.

Something like this must have happened to the book of Jeremiah. Perhaps it was knocked off a shelf and the leaves scattered over the floor. If so, some unknown person must have picked them up and put them together, but alas, not in their right order. Thus we have a collection of prophecies written in the reigns of different kings, but not preserved in any chronological order. This the student

can verify at once by noting down the year and the reigning king as given in a number of chapters. It is this tangle of pages that makes the initial study of the book so difficult. Some chapters are clearly marked as belonging to a particular king and the year of his reign. But others give no indication, except from internal evidence, as to the period to which they belong.

We must begin therefore by trying to discover a working arrangement for our studies, and as far as possible to group the chapters under the three chief kings of the period, Josiah, Jehoiakim and Zedekiah. Each of these reigns will form a separate study, but at present I must try and give the reader an outline of the book. Commentators differ widely as to the dates of some of the chapters, and all I can do is to indicate first where there is certainty as to the date, secondly where there is general agreement or probability, and thirdly where no date can be assigned at all. The following outline makes no claim to originality. It is, broadly speaking, correct, though not necessarily so in all its details. For instance, many commentators will see in a group of verses in the middle of a chapter evidence of a different period from the one in which the chapter was obviously written. As the object of these studies is to create an interest in the book of Jeremiah and to stimulate further reading, I must refer the reader, who wishes to make a more detailed study, to any good commentary on Jeremiah, where he will see the arguments set out for particular dates.

The following plan of study is suggested. It does not go into any detailed analysis of the book of Jeremiah, but it offers an outline, which if adopted will enable the reader to examine first hand the message of the prophet in the reigns of the three kings, Josiah, Jehoiakim and Zedekiah.

I

The Reign of King Josiah, 637-608 B.C.

Relevant chapters i-vi and possibly parts of vii-xii (in particular note xi, 1-8, and xi, 18-xii, 6). For the historical account of this reign read 2 Kings xxii, 1-xxiii, 30. The main feature of Josiah's reign was the reformation. For purposes of study will the reader compare previous reformations in Israel under Asa, Jehoshaphat and Hezekiah. Asa (1 Kings xv, 9-15). The landslide towards a popular paganism was checked at each of these reformations. Each such movement emphasized the centralized worship in Jerusalem as the only true way and Asa and Jehoshaphat are criticized for not carrying out this policy. The records show that not one of the reformers was able to make worship really central. Thousands of people could never go to Jerusalem, and "the High Places" were a demand for local shrines. In each case the political situation played an important part in the reforms carried out. Asa appealed to Assyria for help because of the pressure of surrounding countries, principally Israel.

Jehoshaphat succeeded Asa and sought to carry on the reform movement, and like his father was defeated by the country folk who would not give up their local shrines (1 Kings xxii, 41-3). In both these reformations there appears to have been a moral purging of the nation, and the vices connected with pagan forms of worship were suppressed (1 Kings xv, 9-15).

The next determined attempt at reform was in the reign of King Hezekiah, when Isaiah was the prophet of the day. It was during this period that Samaria was captured and the ten tribes were taken into exile (see 2 Kings xvii, 1-18). The historian takes the opportunity of drawing the moral of this catastrophe (see 2 Kings xvii, 7-17). They had

served other gods and had turned away from Jehovah. The high places were a source of much evil and they had adopted pagan practices. The record says, "There was none left but the tribe of Judah only."

The lesson of all this was not lost on Judah, and Hezekiah seized the opportunity to extend his reforms. He removed the high places, broke down images and made sweeping changes throughout Judæa. He asserted his independence and suffered successfully a siege by the Assyrians. It is interesting to note the propaganda methods of those days, the attempt to sow discord among the people, the open denial of God and the appeal to the nation to save themselves by surrender. Here Isaiah stands forth as the national leader and prophet (see 2 Kings xix, 6).

Lastly come the reforms under Josiah. Here it is necessary that the reader should commence a detailed and systematic study of Jeremiah.

Samaria was captured by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. and a century later the Law was discovered in the Temple during Josiah's reign.

In each reformation the element of fear is an important factor to be considered. Asa feared the King of Israel. Jehoshaphat was pressed on all sides by surrounding nations. Hezekiah witnessed the fall of Samaria and all Judæa was shaken by the event. Similarly, as we shall see, it was the fear of the Scythians that gave the first real impetus to Josiah's reforms. In the study of Jeremiah i-vi will the reader tabulate for himself the religious and moral conditions of Judah in Jeremiah's day? The people were undoubtedly very religious (see Jer. v-vi). The worship of false gods was general throughout the country (see Jer. i-ii). The people were very immoral. Every law of the decalogue appears to have been broken. These sins were practised by all classes of the people. As these studies continue it will be seen that kings and princes

were the leaders in evil (see *Jer. xxi-xxii*), and the priests and the prophets were little better (see chapters *v, xx* and *xxiii*).

In this study it will be necessary to bear in mind that there were other prophets, contemporary with Jeremiah, and they throw a good deal of light on the period. Zephaniah was one of these, and his little book should now be read, note being taken of the threat of judgment in chapter *i*, the call to repentance in chapter *ii*, and the promise of deliverance in chapter *iii*. Zephaniah probably prophesied before Josiah's reformation really began. In one sense the book of Zephaniah gives us the message of Jeremiah in summary form.

Another interesting character to watch is Huldah. *2 Kings xxii* gives an account of her work. She was a prophetess at the time of the Reformation. She was consulted when the book of the Law was found and her prophecy is in line with all that Jeremiah was saying. The question arises, therefore, as to why the leaders consulted her rather than Jeremiah. It is a curious thing that during the Reformation Jeremiah does not seem to come into prominence at all. Why?

II

The Reign of Jehoiakim, 607-597 B.C.

Jehoahaz (or Shallum) reigned three months in 608 B.C. after the death of Josiah, and was deposed by the Pharaoh Necho, who placed Jehoiakim on the throne of Judah (see *Jer. xxii, 10-12* and *Ezek. xix, 1-5*). Judah was then incorporated, as a vassal state, within the Egyptian empire for the next two years (*2 Kings xxiii, 33-4*).

The chapters in the book of Jeremiah connected with the reign of Jehoiakim are given below. They should be read in the order given.

(a) Chapters that are dated :

Chapter xxvi. "In the beginning of the reign of Jehoiakim."

Chapter xxv. "In the fourth year of Jehoiakim."

Chapter xxxvi. "In the fourth year of Jehoiakim."

Chapter xxxv. "In the days of Jehoiakim."

After reading the above chapters, I suggest that the following passages should be read, vii, 1-viii, 3; viii, 4-ix, 1; ix, 2-22 with x, 17-25; xi, 9-17 and xii, 7-17. They show the anti-reformation movement, the opposition of Jehoiakim and the efforts Jeremiah made to maintain the Covenant.

Chapters xiii-xx should follow. They are undated, but from internal evidence they were probably prophecies of this period.

In the study of these chapters the reader will find that the quickest way to obtain a clear view of the events described will be to answer certain specific questions.

Who made Jehoahaz King, and why ?

Who deposed him, and why ?

What became of Jehoahaz ?

Did Jeremiah belong to the pro-Egypt or pro-Babylon party ?

For a reference to the Pharaoh Necho see Jeremiah xlvi, 1-12.

It was during the reign of Jehoiakim (probably before 605 B.C.) that Habakkuk prophesied. I suggest that his prophecies should now be read. He struck the same note as Jeremiah. He announces punishment through the Babylonians. But note Habakkuk i, 12, where the prophet uttered an impassioned appeal to God to punish Babylon. (See also Hab. ii and Jer. I.) Habakkuk iii may be a psalm of unknown date, but it is important as further emphasizing the place given to prayer by the prophets of the old Testa-

ment. (See also Jer. v, 1-3; xii, 1-4; xiv, 7-22; xv, 15-18; xvii, 12-18; xviii, 19-23; xxxii, 16-25).

Habakkuk, like Jeremiah, gives us a dialogue between himself and God. Compare Hab. chapter i with Jer. xiv, 13. (See also Micah vi, 1-7). The prophets use a freedom of expression in prayer that is a mark of their sense of intimate communion with God. Jeremiah said quite definitely that God would use the Chaldaeans as His instruments to punish Jerusalem. But to Habakkuk this offered a serious theological difficulty. His question was "How can a righteous God employ as His servants an idolatrous nation that waged aggressive warfare against God's chosen people?"

Another prophet of this reign is Uriah (see Jer. xxvi, 20). In the study of Jehoiakim and the rejection of the Covenant there are several important points to note.

1. The terrible possibilities of evil in the hands of one who holds the power of sovereignty in a totalitarian way. Does Jeremiah supply sound arguments for a true democracy?
2. The fateful consequences of a rejection of God's warnings through His prophets. Did God give Judah a second chance in the days of Jehoiakim? Is God giving England a second chance to-day?
3. What has Jeremiah to say about the faithfulness and mercy of God?
4. What fresh light do we get on Jeremiah's character during this reign?

III

The Reign of Zedekiah 597-586 B.C.

Before we begin a study of the reign of King Zedekiah, let us note the brief and very tragic reign of Jehoiachin. He was only eighteen years of age when he came to the throne. After a turbulent three months Nebuchadrezzar entered Jerusalem. Jehoiachin, on the advice of his mother,

went out to meet the invader and to surrender the city. Nebuchadrezzar at once dethroned him and removed him and his mother into exile in Babylon (2 Kings xxiv, 8-17). Thirty-five years later we read how kindly the banished king was treated by Nebuchadrezzar's successor (2 Kings xxv, 27-30). There are several prophecies about him in Jeremiah (see xiii, 18-19; xxii, 20-30; lii, 31-4).

The chapters in the book of Jeremiah referring to this reign are the following and should be read in the order given.

Chapter xxiv was written in 597 B.C. after the exiles had been deported. The prophet gives the striking illustration of the two baskets of figs, and addresses this early prophecy in King Zedekiah's reign to the people left behind in Jerusalem. He gives them a solemn warning that as "bad figs" they will not only go into exile, but will be scattered among "all the kingdoms of the earth."

Chapters xxii-xxiii. The parable of the figs was followed by prophecies addressed to the leading classes, kings and prophets. This is, in a very real sense, the prophet's message to the new king, a pronouncement of policy and a call to them to "execute judgment and righteousness and to deliver the spoiled out of the hand of the oppressor." He began his reign with this divine command, "Do no wrong, do no violence to the stranger, the fatherless, nor the widow, neither shed innocent blood in this place."

The two chapters should be studied carefully. They outline a national policy most relevant to our day and in particular to any new world order that may be planned.

Chapters xxvii-xxix. In the fourth year of Zedekiah (see xxvii-1). Note here that there is a transcriber's error. "Jehoiakim" used in verse 1 should read "Zedekiah," as the context clearly shows.

The king had been on the throne nearly four years. Things had not gone well. Discontent in the city and

country was leading to intrigues and revolution. Surrounding countries, gauging the situation, sent envoys to Jerusalem to persuade the king to revolt. Jeremiah came into open conflict with the prophets of the day, and opposed the popular movement against Babylon.

Chapter xxix reproduces a letter which Jeremiah wrote to the exiles in Babylon to advise them to remain quiet and to settle down. It was a warning against underground movements in Jerusalem, that might lead to disaffection among the exiles in Babylon.

Chapter xxi, 1-10 and 13-14. These prophecies were given at the beginning of the siege. Events have moved rapidly. The anti-Babylonian party in Jerusalem has gained the ascendancy. Jeremiah's advice has been rejected, rebellion has broken out and another siege of Jerusalem has commenced. A study of this section of the book gives a characteristic picture of the prophet's courage and conviction. Note in this connection what is said about Jeremiah's prayers (xiv, 11-12). He is forbidden to pray for deliverance after the wilful rejection of God's command.

Chapters xxxvii-xxxviii and xxxiv. The siege was raised for a time when the Babylonian army had to meet a threatened attack by the Egyptians. These three chapters record events and prophecies during this period. The main point to notice is the arrest of Jeremiah as a deserter (xxxvii, 15) and the consequences. Zedekiah consulted the prophet to find out whether there was any hope of permanent deliverance from the Babylonian yoke. Chapter xxxiv underlines again the prophet's summons of king and people to works of repentance. This time he asks for the release of slaves. Were they ever set free?

Chapters xxxii, xxxix, xxxiii, xxx, xxxi. These chapters give us prophecies of restoration during the final investment of the city. They are dated as during the second year of the siege. Jeremiah purchased a field to mark his

confidence in the future. He was again imprisoned, but in spite of everything, he told of the coming fulfilment of God's promise of deliverance. The only times Jeremiah was really optimistic were when the situation both for him personally and for the nation was at its blackest and most dangerous period.

In this section I continue the plan of giving a series of questions connected with the reign of Zedekiah.

1. Who made Zedekiah King.? There are accounts of Zedekiah in Ezekiel xii, 1-16 and xvii, 1-21. These should be read and compared with Jeremiah xxiv. What was the condition of Judah at this time?

2. Jeremiah bought a field—why? See chapters xxxii-xxxiii.

3. We are given a prayer of Jeremiah in xxxii, 17-25. Was this prayer answered, and how?

4. Compare the treatment of Jeremiah by the two kings, Jehoiakim and Zedekiah. In what way do they differ?

5. What is your summing up of the character of Zedekiah?

For this reign let us take Ezekiel as the contemporary prophet. He was a young man when Jeremiah was a veteran. He went into exile in 597 B.C., after the first occupation of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. From 597 B.C., Jeremiah held the fort in Jerusalem, while Ezekiel maintained the Faith on the banks of the Euphrates. As time allows read through the book of Ezekiel to compare his message with that of Jeremiah. Ezekiel, though in captivity, had passed into calm waters and his visions and prophecies reflect this. At the same time Jeremiah was living in great danger. His life was threatened, and he was thrown into a dungeon. He suffered all the horrors of the siege and the destruction of Jerusalem, events that are reflected in his prophecies.

IV

After the fall of Jerusalem 586 B.C.

This section of our study opens with chapter xl, where we have an account of Jeremiah's release from prison and his decision to remain in Jerusalem. Read again also 2 Kings xxiv.

Chapter xli gives the story of Gedaliah's appointment as the first Jewish Governor after the destruction of the city and his assassination.

Chapters xlii–xlv tell of the flight of the remnant into Egypt, when Jeremiah was compelled to go with them. While in Egypt he still uttered his prophecies.

Chapters xlvi–li are prophecies of various dates concerning foreign nations. Readers will remember that Jeremiah was ordained "a prophet to the nations." In what sense is this true?

There are certain specific prophecies that affect not only Judah, but also the nations. See chapters iii, 18, xxxvii, 8, and xxv, 11–12.

Having begun a study of the book of Jeremiah, will the reader now review the material he has gathered and begin to group it under headings? This will help in the studies that follow.

The following is a list of some of the subjects referred to in our reading of these prophecies. Each one will require further investigation.

1. The political situation in the time of Jeremiah, in regard to Assyria, Egypt, Babylon.
2. The moral and religious situation in Judah.
3. Messianic prophecies in Jeremiah.
4. Jeremiah's attitude to Babylon, (a) in his prophecies regarding the fall of Jerusalem, and (b) regarding the future of Babylon itself.
5. Jeremiah and contemporary prophets.

6. The conception of God as given in the book of Jeremiah.
7. Jeremiah's doctrine of man.
8. The teaching about sin and its consequences.
9. The prayers of Jeremiah.
10. An estimate, in the light of the studies so far made, of Jeremiah's character.

B.C. SOME DATES TO REMEMBER

722. The fall of Samaria.
692. Manasseh, King of Judah.
The life of Isaiah in the days of Ahaz and Zedekiah, Kings of Judah.
644. Jeremiah born.
- 637-608. Reign of Josiah.
626. Scythian threat of Jerusalem.
626. The call of Jeremiah.
621. Discovery of the law.
609. The Pharaoh Necho—King of Egypt.
608. Death of Josiah in the battle of Megiddo.
608. Jehoahaz or Shallum reigns three months.
- 607-597. Jehoiakim, King of Judah.
612. Fall of Nineveh. End of the Assyrian Empire.
605. Battle of Carchemish and defeat of Pharaoh.
- 604-561. Nebuchadrezzar, King of Babylon.
604. Jeremiah first commits his prophecies to writing.
603. Jehoiakim destroys the roll and rejects the Covenant.
598. Jehoiakim rebels against Babylon.
597. Death of Jehoiakim.
597. Jehoiachin reigns three months.
597. Surrender of Jerusalem to Babylonians.
- 597-586. Zedekiah, King of Judah.
586. Destruction of Jerusalem.
538. The fall of Babylon.

CHAPTER III

A NATIONAL MISSION OF REPENTANCE

JOSIAH, the king, came to the throne in 637 B.C., when he was a small boy of eight. We know nothing of his early life except that he was brought up in strict accord with the Jewish orthodox faith. At the age of sixteen the boy-king "began to seek after the God of David, his father" (2 Chron. xxxiv, 3). The reform party in the state pinned their faith on the king and hoped for great things. Affairs in the nation were moving to a crisis. Pagan cults had been adopted by the religious leaders and the Temple defiled by many idolatrous symbols. The priests had taken the line of least resistance and had accepted the new religion. The prophets had, to a large extent, lost their message and prophesied smooth things. But to those who valued the true Faith these seemed to be days of apostasy.

Shortly after Josiah was crowned an event occurred that shook the people out of their complacency. An invading horde of wild Scythians poured into the country from the north. They swept along the maritime plains and for a time the people feared that they would turn inland and attack Jerusalem.

There was therefore a stirring in the nation, but no material changes as yet took place.

It was at this stage that a new voice was heard in the nation. In 626 B.C. Jeremiah was called to the prophetic office. It is an interesting fact in Jewish history that so many of the great prophets belonged to the villages rather than the towns. Amos, the herdman of Tekoa, at an earlier period carried his message to the Northern Kingdom. Now a young man in the village of Anathoth begins to prophesy. As we have seen, he never wanted to be a prophet. Know-

ing full well the difficulties of the times, he shrank from all that such a life might involve. But the call of God had come and he turned in obedience to the work that lay before him. His life henceforth was to be one of tension and conflict, of toil and anxiety, of service and sacrifice, of warning and judgments. The King at this time was thirteen years of age and Jeremiah's early message must have played an important part in his spiritual awakening, that took place three years later.

We are studying together in this chapter one of the great spiritual reformations in Jewish history. The scene therefore opens with a young king, a prophet and a reform party ; but also with a dark background of a backsliding nation that has forsaken the God of their fathers. The religious condition of the country is clearly depicted in Jeremiah, chapters I-vi. It is not merely a question of Jewish dogma versus a liberal religious outlook. The essential faith of their fathers was at stake, and both king and prophet must have asked, "Can the nation survive if it rejects God and His law ?" The effect of pagan cults on the nation was seen in growing immorality, increased vice, oppression of the poor, open robbery of the defenceless and the overthrow of God's moral standards. These backslidings were not just a wave of sinful indulgences. They were the direct outcome of pagan worship. Man becomes assimilated to the God he worships, and Israel, by adopting pagan deities and cults, discovered that they had also to adopt pagan standards of life. A flood of evil was let loose on the nation and gave religious sanction to all kinds of social wrongs.

The prophet stood before the people with a vision of an almond tree and a seething cauldron. He seemed to see the promise of life, of spiritual awakening and reform, in the almond tree, but he was too honest to be put off by any easy optimism. There was the other side of the

picture, a small nation in deadly peril from powerful, surrounding empires, a nation desperately in need of God, and yet openly turning away from Him.

The prophet spoke in the Name of God. "My people have committed two evils ; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water" (Jer. ii, 13).

In Jeremiah's day, and in fact right down to A.D. 1920, there was no adequate water supply in Jerusalem. Great reservoirs were cut out of the rock and in the rainy season they were filled with water, which was stored for use during the dry summer months. Jeremiah's illustration was homely and timely. Every house in the city had its cistern. When I lived in Jerusalem there were two such cisterns that supplied my house with water. They had been hewn out of the rock long years before. One very dry summer I was dismayed to find that one of the cisterns was leaking and most of the water had trickled away. Nothing could be done to replenish the supply until the next rains came.

Jeremiah was thinking of just such a situation when he drove home his lesson. The issue, he says, is God or gods, the Jewish Faith or paganism, the Fountain of living Waters or broken cisterns. He was compelling the nation to face reality. No one could be neutral. They must either turn to God or reject Him. His prophecies have two main points, the fact of God, Creator, Sovereign Lord, Righteous and Holy ; and the fact of sin and its consequent estrangement of the people from God. These two points he made in a series of vivid illustrations. "Hath a nation changed their gods, which are yet no gods ?" he exclaimed ; "but my people have changed their glory for that which doth not profit" (Jer. ii, 11). He says, "Thou hast forsaken the Lord thy God when He led thee by the way" (Jer. ii, 17). He likened them to a harlot, to a noble vine that has become a degenerate plant, to a wild ass, to a thief whose

only shame is in being found out. They were frightened and anxious about the future, and turned to gods of wood and stone for help. They pretended that there was really no such thing as sin and declared their innocence (Jer. ii, 35).

The call of God was insistent. He asked them to look back into their history, for there they would find the hand of God. In a striking simile God said, "Have I been a wilderness unto Israel? a land of darkness?" (Jer. ii, 31). No, says the prophet, God had always been their Guide and their Light. He had never sought their punishment. He had ever remained faithful to His covenant. He still sought their good. But if they were to be saved they must return unto the Lord their God.

The prophet made it quite clear that no easy or superficial repentance would be any good. In chapter iii he gives his evangelistic message. It was a call to return, coupled with a promise of forgiveness. God is merciful. He waits to bless. The appeal rang out again and again, and with impassioned fervour he pleaded with the nation, "Return unto Me." The whole message is summed up in chapter vi, 16-20. "Thus saith the Lord, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls."

Some measure of response seems to appear. The people said, "Behold we come unto Thee; for Thou art the Lord our God." "In the Lord our God there is the victory." "We have sinned. We have not obeyed the voice of God" (Jer. iii, 22-3, 25).

Jeremiah was obviously not satisfied. He said, "Break up your fallow ground and sow not among thorns" (Jer. iv, 3). Here for a moment let me digress. So much in Jeremiah's message applies to our own day. The Jews, under fear of the Scythians, began to repent. God was giving them deliverance that, through His manifest mercies to the nation, God's goodness might lead them to repent-

ance. Is not this our position? God in His mercy has been working for us a mighty deliverance. But he sees our nation as it really is, its idolatries and adulteries, its social evils and its wrongs. God's mercies can never be a cloak to hide our true condition. His mercies call us to repentance. There is a great deal of religion, indeterminate and undefined, a dim seeking after God, without any genuine return to God. That is why we are called to "break up the fallow ground", to plough beneath the surface, to bring to light the hidden evils of our national life. Because of our successes in the war we are in danger of thinking that all is well. But is it? The sins Jeremiah denounced are all visible in our national life. Is it not true that as a nation we have turned away from God? We are glad to talk about religion in terms of a Christian ethic to be applied to the nation. But we are summoned to personal action, to a new faith in God, to "break up the fallow ground."

But while in one sense England needs the plough, yet in another sense it is to-day like a ploughed field. The fallow ground has been ploughed up by adversity and sorrow, by war and suffering. There are many seeking religion. The soil waits for the seed. Many forces are bidding for the soul of our nation, and everything will depend on the sowing. It may be that a materialism that is cold and godless will capture the minds of the people, or it may be that the call to repentance will lead to a genuine spiritual awakening. That awakening has not yet come. It may come or it may not. It all depends on the message and witness of the Church. Our great need is to recapture the message of the old prophet and to make people see again the righteousness of God and the sinfulness of sin. We must, in fact, recapture our lost sense of the supernatural.

I return to the days of Jeremiah. The result of the

prophet's preaching was a great national reformation. The King, now twenty-six years of age, placed himself at the head of the movement. For five years the "revival" gathered strength. Its main emphases were—a purified and centralized worship, a Temple cleansed of all taint of paganism and the restoration of the true Faith. This was in many ways a clerical movement, whereas Jeremiah sought for lay initiative in religious reform. The contrast is important. Josiah, as advised by the priests, began by appealing for a national fund for the restoration of the Temple and money poured in. Work commenced and carpenters, builders, and masons were employed (see 2 Kings xxii, 5-6). Jeremiah seems to have stood aside, not wishing to hinder the movement, but uncertain as to its spiritual reality. Its popularity was due in large measure to the necessity for security. It was based on the theory that if the Temple of God were restored other things would follow, and God would keep them safe because of their loyalty to His house. It was here that Jeremiah took issue with them. Temple ritual, he appeared to argue, might be correct, but it was lifeless. The priests certainly were complacent and ready to adopt the popular cry of the day. They talked of peace and security, and to Jeremiah so much of it seemed to be insincere.

Matters had reached this stage; Temple repairs were going ahead, and Jeremiah was preaching personal repentance as distinct from national reforms, when a new event occurred that again altered the whole situation. The Book of the Law was found in the Temple. It was brought to the king, who at once realized that reform meant something far bigger than a restored Temple. A national assembly was called, to which the headmen of all towns and villages were summoned. The Book of the Law was read and king and people solemnly pledged themselves to keep the Covenant. A deeper note was seen in the reforms. They

were no longer only outward and visible. King and people alike accepted the moral demands of the law and agreed that corruption, vice, bribery, injustice and immorality should be abolished.

The slogan of the reformers had been, "one God, one Temple, one people." Jeremiah, although he threw himself into the reformation, never adopted this language. He continued to press home the demand for individual faith in God. To understand the significance of the discovery of the Law, Deuteronomy i-xxvi should be read. If this is done it will at once be seen why the discovery of the law created such a sensation. They learnt that the Temple was no security unless they obeyed God's moral law. Both through the reading of the law and the preaching of Jeremiah they were given a new conception of Israel's God—One, Eternal and Righteous, Creator, Ruler and Judge. Because they had come to see that God alone could be worshipped they accepted His law as the rule of their national life. They entered into a new covenant to obey God and to follow Him.

But the reading of the law went further still. It demanded that they should love God and that this love should be the motive of all human relationships and actions. A right relation to God was also to mean a right relation to one another. The prophet therefore became an interpreter of the Law. He explained that there must be justice between man and man, honest dealing, correct weights and measures, care for the poor, protection for widows and strangers. Such is the story of the great reformation. We shall see in the following chapters how the covenant was rejected by Jehoiakim and how in Zedekiah's reign God gave Jerusalem another chance. At present we must confine our studies to the principles brought out in this movement as they may apply to to-day.

We ask ourselves, Will the sufferings of war lead to

spiritual revival? Will the nation in gratitude and thanksgiving turn to God? No certain answer can be given, because it all depends on our personal repentance and the putting away of sins that are spoiling the nation. When dangers thickened around us we flocked to Church to pray, but when the danger is finally over what will be our reactions? When peace comes shall we seek to plunge into gaiety, to have a good time, or shall we seek God? Mr. Cordell Hull, the U.S.A. Secretary of State, says, "I sometimes wonder whether the trumpet call of the ancient prophets will not be necessary to revive and to restore moral and spiritual ideals. Any permanent governmental structure erected by a free people must rest upon solid, moral and spiritual foundations."

When the first Great War ended in 1918, there was a wild rush for pleasure, moral restraints were thrown to the wind, Christian standards were flouted, and people in their new-found security turned away from God. A cult of ugliness sprang up that was supposed to be realism in art. The beauty of the almond blossom was forgotten in the seething cauldron of world affairs.

As in the days of Jeremiah, so to-day we must distinguish between the "broken cisterns" and the "Living Waters," between the substitute religions and cults, the varied aspects of Christian humanism and the Faith once delivered to the saints. We must distinguish clearly between man-made religions and the revelation of God in Christ. We are facing new problems in our national life and in many ways more serious ones than those of the war. We shall win the war, but can we win the peace?

Some time ago a manifesto was issued signed by the leaders of the Anglican Church and the Free Churches. Its words have a particular application in this stage of our studies. It reads as follows:

"God reigns. This is the fundamental truth. From

heaven He reigns—Creator and Upholder of the world. From the cross He reigns—making defeat itself the stuff of His triumph. From the heart of His people He reigns—extending His rule by the energy of His love constraining them.

“Accordingly :

“ 1. We recognize in the troubles and anxieties of this time a just doom—the consequence, according to God’s laws, of our neglect of His command and defiance of His will.

“ 2. We acknowledge Christ as absolute Lord of Life and Saviour from the sin which brings these evils upon the world. We pledge ourselves and call our fellow christians to penitence for the past and to new loyalty for the future. Especially we confess our acquiescence in social injustice and national jealousies, and we dedicate ourselves to the establishment of economic and international justice and fellowship.

“ 3. We declare that in this allegiance to Jesus Christ we are united to all others, who acknowledge Him, in a fellowship which is unbroken by any earthly divisions and persists beneath even the wraths of war. In this unity in Christ we have both the hope of peace in this world and the foretaste of eternal life in fellowship with God.”

Every word of this manifesto seems to echo the message of Jeremiah, the prophet to the nations. Fearlessly he pronounced judgment on all who turn away from God, whether nations or individuals. He made it very clear that no privilege offered security without moral responsibility. He exposed the people’s sins and called them back to God. Two thousand five hundred years later a group of Christians, representing different Churches, proclaim the same message, but in a Christian setting. But they go further. They dedicate themselves to a new world wherein dwelleth righteousness. They pledge themselves to a new allegiance

to Jesus Christ, that through it they may discover a fellowship world-wide in its range and deep enough to transcend the barriers of race, creed and colour. Thus only do they see the hope of peace.

The battle before us is as stern as it was to Jeremiah, but there is no need to despair. It was in 1848 that Lord Shaftesbury said, "Nothing can save the British Empire from shipwreck"—perhaps he forgot for the moment that "God can." In 1852, the Duke of Wellington lay dying. One of his last remarks was, "I thank God I shall be spared from seeing the consummation of ruin that is gathering about us." Again and again men have faced great national crises, sometimes only seeing ruin and despair, but at other times seeing God, the invisible, calling us to a new hope and faith. Such seems to be the position to-day. The responsibility of the Church is wellnigh overwhelming, but our God is able, so let us copy Jeremiah and turn to Him in earnest prayer for our nation and for the world.

"O God, who hast taught us in Thy holy Word that Thou dost not willingly afflict the children of men : Grant that in the present time of warfare and distress of nations, our people may know Thy presence and obey Thy will. Remove from us all arrogance and feebleness ; give us courage and loyalty, tranquillity and self-control, that we may accomplish that which Thou givest us to do, and endure that which Thou givest us to bear. O Thou who art the hope of all the ends of the earth and of them that remain in the broad seas, hear us in Thy mercy, for His sake who was lifted up on the Cross to draw all men unto Him, Jesus Christ our Lord."

CHAPTER IV

JEHOIAKIM—THE PUPPET KING

WE have studied some of the principles of a great religious revolution. The Temple, the city and the towns of Palestine were purged of idolatry and their pagan impurities. The sweeping reforms had affected the whole life of the nation. Pagan symbols were removed from the Temple and heathen shrines were destroyed. All the high places from Geba to Beersheba were overthrown. We have also noted Jeremiah's anxiety lest religious excitement should be allowed to take the place of repentance, lest zeal for a centralized Temple worship should be thought sufficient to win the favour of Jehovah.

In the midst of this upheaval, as we have seen, the King was slain at Megiddo, 608 B.C., and Jehoiakim was placed on the throne by a victorious Pharaoh. Events in the Middle East were moving rapidly to a climax, such as only comes in the history of the world in a thousand years. We are considering events twenty-five centuries ago. The world was a comparatively small place and its centre was the land from Egypt to Babylon. Assyria had been an all-powerful ruler of the world, a nation organized for war. Its position seemed unassailable, and for centuries no nation had seriously challenged it. A new power was, however, rising and in 612 B.C. Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, was captured by a Babylonian army.

The fall of Assyria shook the world. The old Empire not only ceased to be a first-class power; it disappeared as a nation. It sank into oblivion and its territories were absorbed into Babylon.

Pharaoh, having overthrown the Jewish army at Megiddo, continued to move north to a trial of strength with Nebu-

chadrezzar, and in 605 B.C., the two armies met at Carchemish on the Euphrates, where the Egyptians suffered a disastrous defeat. Nebuchadrezzar was busy for the next four years with operations in Syria. But in 601 B.C. he moved his troops to Jerusalem. Here he discovered that Jehoiakim had been placed on the throne by the defeated Pharaoh. While confirming Jehoiakim as ruler, he made Palestine a vassal state within the Babylonian Empire, and Jehoiakim took a solemn oath of fidelity to Babylon. For three years this puppet-king paid tribute to Nebuchadrezzar and then revolted (2 Kings xxiv, 1).

Such was the political situation when Jeremiah again came forth in his appeal to the nation.

The world Jerusalem knew had crashed. Politically the country was no longer a free nation; religiously it was in a ferment. The civilization of the day had broken down and the reforms were forgotten in the despairs of the hour.

Jeremiah was the one steadfast, religious influence. He never wavered and his message was the same, though it was to be delivered under very different circumstances.

Jeremiah was concerned primarily in maintaining the Covenant, and in continuing the reformation begun by Josiah. He therefore made his appeal to king and nation. It was soon apparent that Jehoiakim had no intention of supporting the reform party, and that his policy was to reverse all that Josiah his father had done. In this he was advised by those who had always wished to see the Jewish faith approximated to the worship of the surrounding nations. To Jeremiah's great concern he saw the king being more and more influenced in favour of a treaty with Egypt and a repudiation of his oath of allegiance to Babylon. There was therefore a serious political crisis before him and it was coupled with religious apostasy in the nation, through which the people returned to all the old pagan rites.

To understand this change and Jeremiah's message, chapters xxvi and xxii, 1-19, should be read as giving the events at the beginning of Jehoiakim's reign. Then for events in the fourth year, chapters xxv, xlvi-xlix, xxxv, xxxvi, and xlv should be read. A study of these chapters will at once show that the issue was God or gods. Jehoiakim re-introduced all the old idolatry. Baal and Ashtoreth were worshipped in the Temple precincts. Human sacrifices found a place in the religious rites that were being observed, and as had happened before, the inrush of paganism meant an increase of cruelty and wrong, oppression and persecution, the crushing of the poor and the failure of justice.

Jeremiah started to tour the country in an appeal to the people themselves to show the fruits of their recent repentance. Even he must have been surprised at the violent national reactions he had to face. The men of Anathoth, his own birthplace, attempted to murder the prophet and he had to leave the village. The prophet proclaimed, "Cursed be the man that obeyeth not the word of the covenant." "Judah hath broken the covenant, therefore will I bring evil upon them." (See chapters xii, 1-6, xxvi and vii.)

It is at this time that Jeremiah began to teach through vivid illustrations. He says the people were "like a tree planted that does not bear fruit." They were "sheep prepared for the slaughter," they were like a lion roaring in the forest, like a vineyard trodden down, like a field once good but in which thorns had been sown. (See chapter xii, 1-10.)

Jeremiah having toured the country returned to the capital, and as recorded in chapter xxvi, preached his famous Temple sermon.

Up to now the whole nation believed that whatever might happen the Temple was inviolate. God would never allow it to be injured. It was because of this fixed, if false, hope

that Jeremiah's task was made doubly difficult. He is commanded to stand in the court of the Lord's House, and to preach to all who came to worship. "If so be they will hearken and turn every man from his evil way, that I may repent me of the evil which I purpose to do unto them because of the evil of their doings." (See chapters xxvi and vii.) The message was driven home as the prophet declared that because they had not obeyed nor hearkened, "I will make this House like Shiloh and will make this only a curse to all the nations of the earth."

An uproar followed and Jeremiah was arrested. Priests, prophets and people combined to silence the prophet. They warn him, "Thou shalt surely die." The scene that followed is incredible, even in the life of this incredible man. The princes immediately brought Jeremiah to trial, and their sentence is, "This man is worthy to die, for he hath prophesied against this city, as ye have heard with your ears" (chapter xxvi, 11). Jeremiah then made his defence. It was no defence of himself. He forgot that he was being tried for his life as a traitor. He forgot himself and remembered only the message of God to the nation. It was in fact the nation that was on trial. He began thus, "The Lord hath sent me to prophesy . . . therefore now amend your ways and your doings and obey the voice of the Lord your God." Then he recollected where he was and added, "As for me, I am in your hands; do with me as seemeth good" (see chapter xxvi, 12-15). The princes were impressed with the obvious sincerity of the prophet and they reversed their verdict and said, "This man is not worthy to die, for he hath spoken to us in the name of the Lord our God." Jeremiah stood alone. This sensitive man who never wished to be a prophet saw his country rushing headlong to its doom. All his affection for his land and people overcame him, yet he stood fearlessly before the Court. He would accept death if necessary but

he would never water down his message to suit the popular taste. He told the people that they were living in a fool's paradise, blinded by a false security. The remarkable thing is that while the priests and religious leaders regarded him as an enemy of Church and State, the princes, from their more secular point of view, recognized in Jeremiah a voice from God. Let us pause to point the lesson of it all for to-day. Jerusalem was never more religious than in the days of its apostasy. Religion the nation demanded : but Jeremiah distinguished between religion and the historic faith of Israel. The God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob was the God of history. Nothing could alter the fact that God was still God. His righteousness had not altered. His moral demands were the same. Nothing could affect the real issue that, however camouflaged, evil was still evil, and oppression, cruelty and wrong were against the law of God. In our day we have witnessed the rise of national cults and ideologies in Germany and other countries. German pastors of the Confessional Church languish in prison. They are charged much in the same way as Jeremiah, with a refusal to make religion a tool of the State. The rugged independence of Jeremiah for the truth of God is the one element in all history that has ever lifted religion above the claims of State. The issue is still God or gods. It is still a question as to whether we shall build the nation on religious principles that are independent of and above all State policies. In other words, whether we can accept the Bible as giving us a standard by which we can judge both ourselves and our nation, or whether our standards of faith are to be based on a modern form of humanism that makes its own standards to suit the policy of the State.

Jeremiah was uncompromising. He said, "Woe to him that buildeth his house by unrighteousness and his chambers by wrong, that useth his neighbours' service without wages and giveth him not for his work."

Here I think we must read Jeremiah, chapter ix. This personal reaction fits into his life at this stage and probably refers to events in Jehoiakim's reign. He told them, "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved" (chapter viii, 20). He was hurt with the hurt of his people. He suffered both for them and with them. He was acutely aware of the doom that was coming, but he stuck to his post that he might share with them the sorrows of his people.

This found expression in chapter ix. 1, where the prophet exclaimed, "O that I might weep day and night." He longed to go away into some quiet spot, to be freed from all intrigues and jealousies, but he knew that he must fulfil his mission. He had to preach even if no one was prepared to listen, even if his message was rejected. Thrown back on God he found strength in the thought of God's faithfulness. "Let him that glorieth glory in this that he knoweth me" (chapter ix, 24). "I am the Lord which exercise loving-kindness, judgment and righteousness. In these things I delight." This vision of God showed him that God's mercy was as unchanging as his judgment.

Jeremiah, after his trial by the princes, reached the momentous decision to commit his prophecies to writing. A record of the prophecies from his call to be a prophet would prove his consistency and the truth of his message. It is important here that chapter xxxvi should be read. Jeremiah was commanded to write, "All the words the Lord had spoken to him against Israel and against Judah and against all the nations." Baruch, his secretary, wrote them down as the prophet dictated them.

On a great feast day when people were assembled in the Temple from all parts of Judæa, Baruch began the reading of the roll containing Jeremiah's prophecies. Reports were quickly carried to the princes as to what was happening.

On the previous occasion they had defended Jeremiah and saved his life. Now they took the roll from Baruch and advised that both the prophet and his secretary should go into hiding. They then went to the palace and reported the incident to Jehoiakim. It was winter time and Jehoiakim was sitting near a fire when the roll was read. As the reader finished a section the king took it from him and cutting it to shreds burned it in the fire. Thus in dramatic fashion the King rejected the prophet and his message. We are given the burden of the prophecies of this period in chapter xxv, where the prophet said that the history of the world depends upon men's attitude to God. The appeal goes forth, "Turn ye. Go not after other gods."

If the reader has studied the chapters in Jeremiah that refer to the reign of Jehoiakim he will be struck by the symbolic actions of the prophet and his vivid illustrations.

In chapter xiii, 1-11, he was charged to buy a linen waist-cloth, and to bury it in a cleft of the rock.

In chapter xviii, he went to the house of a potter and learned there God's Word to Israel. "O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? Behold, as the clay is, in the potter's hands, so are ye in mine hand." God thus proclaimed His divine sovereignty, yet He still refused to compel obedience. His sovereignty and man's freedom are the perplexing pivots, around which all human destiny revolves.

But Jerusalem still rejected the prophet and the symbol took a new form. Jeremiah stood before the people holding an earthenware jar in his hands (chapter xix). He appealed, warned, admonished, but there was no response. Suddenly raising his voice he spoke in the name of God: "Behold I will bring evil upon this place, the which whosoever heareth, his ears shall tingle." He then reviewed their apostasy. "They have forsaken me." "They have filled

this place with the blood of innocent people." "They have built the high places of Baal."

As he recounted their sins he held high the earthenware vessel and suddenly dashed it to the ground in pieces, and exclaimed, "Even so will I break this people and this city, as one breaketh a potter's vessel."

The sequel to this episode was more trouble for Jeremiah. Pashur, "the chief governor of the house of the Lord," struck the prophet and put him in the stocks at the gate of the city. He lay in the stocks all night and the next day, on being released, immediately denounced Pashur, saying, "Thou Pashur and all that dwell in thy house shall go into captivity" (xx, 6).

Again there followed one of those violent reactions of the prophet, and in chapter xx, verse 7, he declares, "O Lord, thou hast deceived me." The word means, "constrained me." St. Paul says, "that I may apprehend that for which I am apprehended." The compelling call of God led both Jeremiah and St. Paul into a service far beyond anything they had anticipated. Jeremiah longed for peace and quiet, but his faithfulness to his calling drove him into increasing dangers and opposition. Savonarola shared this feeling with Jeremiah when in 1494, preaching in Florence, he said, "I was in a safe haven, the life of a prior; I looked at the waves of world and saw therein much fish; with my hook I caught some, that is by my preaching I led a few into the way of salvation. As I took pleasure therein the Lord drove my bark into the open sea. Before me on the vast ocean I see terrible tempests brewing. Behind I have lost sight of my haven; the winds drive me forward, and the Lord forbids my return."¹

While Jeremiah was facing increasing difficulties the political situation again flared up. Jehoiakim, who had always been in his heart pro-Egyptian, refused to continue to

¹ Quoted by Elliott Binns in his commentary, *The Book of Jeremiah*.

pay the indemnity to Babylon and open rebellion followed. While Nebuchadrezzar was moving his army towards Jerusalem, Jehoiakim died and was thus saved from the consequences of his broken word. His son was left to face the wrath of Babylon, which speedily overtook Jerusalem. Jehoiachin (or Coniah as he had formerly been called) had been king only three months, when he was deposed and sent a prisoner to Babylon. Egypt again proved a broken reed and left Jerusalem to its fate. Nebuchadrezzar's policy was to carry the leaders, craftsmen, warriors and others into exile, all who might lead the country to further revolt. He chose Zedekiah to be king, a man of weak character, and withdrew from Jerusalem with his army and his captives.

In the midst of the confusion of invasion and captivity Jeremiah still pursued his way. However much he might suffer, he refused to be intimidated. He compelled the people to face the inescapable truth about God and His righteousness. He made no concessions to the evil practices of the day, though he was under no illusion as to the probable consequences to himself. With the capture of the city by Nebuchadrezzar, the prophet knew that the hour of destiny had struck. He made it clear that even then all was not lost. An acceptance of Babylonian rule would bring them peace and enable the country to recover. Jeremiah was a realist and he sought to compel Jerusalem to face facts. The people had rejected the covenant. They had turned to other gods. Let them repent and be loyal to their treaty obligations to Babylon, and God would still bless them. What had brought disaster upon them was their proud refusal to surrender to God. A cold fatalism gripped the nation. Human security had failed. The Temple had proved no protection. The result was that their faith in God had broken down. What Jeremiah could not bring them to see was that the collapse of their faith was due to their own disobedience and sin.

The lessons of this reign and the rejection of the Covenant can be studied in two directions : first, the effect on Jeremiah himself, his grief and despair, his agony of prayer and his new dedication to God when he visited the house of the potter ; second, the effect on the nation of this deliberate rejection of Jehovah.

War will bring to us many disillusionments. The New World Order, about which we hear so much, will have to be created and won amid years of toil, when the nation will pass through severe tests and trials. Many in the Church will be tempted to despair. What shall our policy be ? How can we prepare to face the future ? Let us follow the example of Jeremiah.

First, let us look to our message. What is our God-given word to the nation to-day ? It must be a message that demands of us repentance and that summons the nation to a like repentance. "Amend your ways and your doings." It must be a sincere message that applies the Gospel to human needs. "If ye oppress not the stranger, the fatherless and the widow, and shed not innocent blood in this place, neither walk after other gods to your hurt, then will I cause you to dwell in this place" (Jer. vii, 6-7). It is, I think, true to say that the future of the British Empire is more in danger now than in the days of Dunkirk. If we fall back into the old ways of complacency, and of trusting to a false security, through which we forget God, we can no more expect to escape God's judgment than did Judah.

Our message therefore must be a call to obey God (Jer. vii, 23). It must be delivered whether it is popular or not. It must carry with it an exposure of sin and a true conception of God, the Righteous and Holy One.

To be faithful to our calling we must know in our own experience the resources of God available for us, the "Living Waters" promised in Jeremiah ii, 13. The resources of God are discovered through prayer. Chapter

xii illustrates this ; Jeremiah prays, “ Righteous art Thou, O Lord, when I plead with Thee. Let me talk with Thee of Thy judgments ” (Jer. xii, 1).

“ Thou, O Lord, knowest me : Thou hast seen me and tried mine heart toward Thee ” (Jer. xii, 1-5). God answered the prophet by warning him of still more difficult days ahead. “ If in the land of peace, wherein thou trustedst, they wearied thee, then how wilt thou do in the swelling of Jordan ? ” The apostasy of Jehoiakim seemed the limit of evil and the end of all hope. But God told the prophet to face life patiently because the coming days would be evil. Jeremiah was overwhelmed. He gave way to grief. “ O that my head were waters and mine eyes a fountain of tears ” (Jer. ix, 1). He turned to definite intercession and said, “ O Lord, though our iniquities testify against us, do Thou it for Thy name’s sake, for our backslidings are many. We have sinned against Thee ” (Jer. xiv, 7). “ O Lord, Thou art in the midst of us, and we are called by Thy name, leave us not ” (Jer. xiv, 9).

The prophet was forbidden to pray for the nation (Jer. xiv, 11). “ Pray not for this people for their good.” “ Though Moses and Samuel stood before Me yet My mind could not be toward this people.” As long as they rejected God and accepted other gods, as long as they continued unrepentant and in sin, prayer could not be answered.

Jeremiah turned again to God for help. “ For Thy sake I have suffered rebuke. Thy words were found and I did eat them. Thy word was unto me a joy and rejoicing of mine heart ” (Jer. xv, 16).

In chapter xvi he again prayed, “ O Lord, my strength and my fortress, my refuge in the day of affliction.” What did he learn in the days of persecution and trial ? He was in touch with God. Prayer brought strength, vision and patience to him. He summed up his experience of the “ Living Waters ” and in chapter xvii, 7-8, said, “ Blessed is

the man that trusteth in the Lord, whose hope the Lord is. For he shall be as a tree planted by the waters, and that spreadeth out her roots by the river, and shall not see when the heat cometh, but her leaf shall be green." The prophet recorded this testimony of God's unfailing resources in heat and drought, in desert and wilderness. He felt his own weakness and sin, his own need. He turned again to prayer (chapter xvii, 14). "Heal me, O Lord, and I shall be healed; save me, and I shall be saved." It was at this point that God called him to a new and utter dedication of his life. He went to the house of the potter. "Cannot I do with you as this potter?" (chapter xviii, 6). The words apply to Jeremiah himself as well as to the nation.

When we see how Jeremiah faced all the lying intrigue, attacks, persecution and imprisonment, we can see how behind it all lay this deep experience of God. It is equally true that if we would face the post-war world in the strength of God, we must begin with ourselves, in a spiritual preparation, in a new surrender of our lives to God and in a much deeper prayer life. Thus, and thus alone, will we be enabled to draw upon God's resources, always available to those who seek nothing for themselves, but only the glory of God. The prophet brought this out when he said, "Thou art my praise." Jeremiah's experience must have been similar to that of Ezekiel when he said, "The Spirit entered into me and set me upon my feet." Jeremiah was set on his feet. He could face the world and make his impact upon it because he sought nothing for himself. What he learned increasingly was that, while he gave his message, the nation reversed the situation and troubles multiplied around him. There is a grand illustration of this to be found in the life of Handel. His biographer says, "His health and his fortunes reached their lowest ebb. His right side had become paralysed and his money was all gone. His creditors seized him and threatened him with

imprisonment. For a brief time he was tempted to give up the fight—but then he rebounded again to compose the greatest of his inspirations, the epic *Messiah*.” It was like this with Jeremiah. Instead of giving in or leaving the city to its doom he found an adequate staying power in his faith in God. At various crises in this war we have said as a nation, “We can take it.” It was true in the days of the bombing of London. The people refused to give way to fear. “We can take it,” they said. This will be our test in the post-war world, and we will only be able to endure—“to take it”—as we see Him who is invisible.

The trials made Jeremiah what he was. In the furnace of affliction he was re-made, a new man of God. As tempered steel his soul was made like a sharp blade. Nothing could break his faith, nothing could dim his vision. Shall we pray that we too may be found faithful? Shall we remember Handel composing the Hallelujah Chorus amid the desolation of poverty and want, ill-health and debt? Let us make an act of faith, “Hallelujah, the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth.”

CHAPTER V

ZEDEKIAH—THE LAST KING (597-586 B.C.)

IN this chapter we come to what may be called the final phase, the reign of King Zedekiah, his revolt and defeat, the capture and destruction of both Temple and city, and the further exile of the people of Jerusalem. The relevant chapters for study are chapters xxii-xxiv, xxvii-xxix, xxx-xxxiv, xxxvii-xxxix, and 1-lvii. The historical setting is given in 2 Kings xxiv.

When Zedekiah was placed on the throne he was but twenty years of age. Intrigues seem to have commenced, in an underground way, from the first. In the fourth year of his reign (594 B.C.), envoys came to Zedekiah from Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre and Sidon to gain the support of Judah for a general rising against Babylon. (See chapters xxvii and xxviii.) Jeremiah, who must have watched this movement with growing alarm, told the people that it was useless for them to try to break the yoke. At the same time he wrote to the exiles bidding them settle down in Babylon (chapter xxix). The revolt seems to have failed, but some word of it must have reached Nebuchadrezzar, for Zedekiah was summoned to Babylon, probably to explain himself.

The revolt proper commenced in 588 B.C. and coincided with a new Pharaoh named Hophra, who gave Zedekiah his support. The siege of Jerusalem began shortly after and went on for over a year before the city was captured. People starved and famine slew more than the sword. At the end Zedekiah sought to escape by a secret exit from the city, but his flight was discovered and he was captured. His sons were slain before his eyes and his own sight was put out. Loaded with chains, he was taken to Babylon.

The Temple was burned together with all the principal houses. The walls of the city were demolished and only the poor and the unfit were left behind.

Where was Jeremiah during these tragic years? Events turned out exactly as he had foretold. From a political point of view the prophet had proved himself a sound student of international affairs and had his advice been carried out by Jehoiakim and Zedekiah, Jerusalem would not have suffered the horrors of siege and pillage.

From a religious point of view it is equally clear that Jeremiah's refusal to accept any shallow optimism was right. His rejection of Temple ritual as a substitute for moral righteousness was a true interpretation of Jewish theology. His determination never to preach smooth things to suit the popular taste led him into many dangers. Up to now his watchword had been, Repent. We have seen how he toured the country as a preacher of the Covenant, how he appealed to King and people to turn to God.

Zedekiah's reign commenced with the exile of nobles, leaders and others, and among them Ezekiel, a younger contemporary of Jeremiah. The two prophets must have shared much of the turmoil and dangers in Jerusalem throughout the reign of Jehoiakim. When the first Judæan captivity took place, Ezekiel must have agreed that he would go to Babylon to minister to the exiles, while Jeremiah remained in Jerusalem. In chapter xxix, we have a letter from Jeremiah to the exiles. These two men were probably both destined for the priesthood. Ezekiel was always priestly-minded, while Jeremiah remained the prophet to the nations. It is interesting to see how the call came to these two men. The reader should at this point read Ezekiel, chapter i, and compare it with Jeremiah, chapter i.

Jeremiah had now been prophesying for about thirty years, and before we begin a study of this period of his life

from 597-586 B.C., let us pause again to consider his message. He definitely pronounced the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple, but he was equally clear that Israel, as God's chosen people, was indestructible. Neither siege nor famine, neither exile nor death could destroy the children of Israel, certainly not in the sense in which Assyria had disappeared from the history of the world.

Jeremiah drew a clear distinction between the fate of the nations and the fate of Israel. There was an element in Israel that must survive, if God's purpose was not to be utterly defeated. That is why he said in chapter xxx, 11, "I will make a full end of all the nations, but I will not make a full end of thee." The prophet's point of view was that the nation could only survive if it did go into exile. He predicted that they would return.

Secondly, Jeremiah was clear in spite of all his sufferings and his nation's backslidings, that God's love had not failed. "I have loved thee with an everlasting love," he said. He does, however, make it clear that worthless kings have brought judgment upon the nation. They had broken their word. They had turned again to idolatry, but in spite of these evils God would vindicate Himself in the end. He would raise up "the Righteous Branch" (chapter xxiii, 5-6).

The word "Branch" is not a good translation: "Shoot" would be better. Israel is like an old tree that has been hewed down, but which sends out new shoots. The illustration is probably borrowed from Isaiah. Compare Isaiah iv, 2, and xi, 1, where two Hebrew words are translated in our English versions by the one word Branch. In Isaiah iv, 2, the word "branch" really means the growth or shooting as seen in the produce of the soil, to be blessed by God in the blissful future. In Isaiah xi, 1, a different Hebrew word is used and it is rightly translated Branch. The idea is that though Israel has been felled like a tree to

its very roots new shoots would appear. The Lord will raise up one who will rule in righteousness, who will be the very embodiment of social justice and truth.

A new day would arise full of joy, secured to them through the righteousness of God. A new Covenant would be made with the nation in which the outward and superficial would be replaced by God's law written in their hearts. The Temple would disappear, but God's presence would remain. Such were the hopes of the prophet. But before he reached these more settled conclusions he had to face yet another reign in which danger and persecution would be intensified. Jeremiah at the commencement of Zedekiah's reign had an accepted place in the life of the city. People had come to recognize that on the whole he had been right. The new king admired him and for a time listened to him. But he was vacillating and unreliable and had little in common with the stern prophet of justice. From the outset there was a clash of party interest. The pro-Egypt party sought to persuade Zedekiah to copy Jehoiakim's example and to rebel against Babylon. The king was young and a very weak character. He seemed to follow the advice of the last person to whom he spoke. Jeremiah set himself to persuade the king to remain loyal to Nebuchadrezzar. His oath, said the prophet, must be kept. This is brought out in a striking manner by his favourite method of symbols. At the beginning of his ministry Jeremiah had a vision of an almond tree and a cauldron. In Jehoiakim's reign he visited the potter and found his message there. Now he appeared with two baskets (see chapter xxiv), one full of good figs and the other full of bad ones. The Jews who had gone into exile were the good figs, he said, and the remnant left in the city were "bad figs." The significance of this for the young king was that those around him could not be relied upon to give him good advice. If he was not careful they would

lead him into a wrong policy. The fact is that Jeremiah saw in the exiled people a real hope for the future. They would return a purified nation. But for those left behind in Jerusalem he had little hope. The burden of this part of his message was that Nebuchadrezzar was strong, but he would treat the Jews fairly if the Jews remained loyal to him. The one thing Babylon would not stand was treachery. Jeremiah's letter to the exiles (chapter xxix) bore this out. He told them to be loyal. The reward of their loyalty would be their ultimate return to Jerusalem. They would return, not in conflict, but in peace, because God was planning for their good and was still working out His purpose, which though delayed would not be frustrated.

Having developed this policy he sought to persuade the king to adopt it, and to his surprise he found himself opposed by the school of the prophets, the very men who ought to have been supporting him.

In chapter xxvii Jeremiah was commanded to make a yoke and to put it on his neck (xxvii, 2). Thus fettered he went out to meet a party of foreign envoys who were coming on a political mission to Zedekiah. As we saw in the outline in chapter ii these envoys were sent by the kings of Moab, Edom, Ammon and other states. This was four years after Zedekiah had come to the throne (594 B.C.). Jeremiah's message to them was to declare in the Name of God, "I have given all these lands to Nebuchadrezzar to serve him" (Jer. xxvii, 6). The plot being hatched was to induce Zedekiah to join the surrounding nations in a general revolt against Babylon. Jeremiah sought to prevent this international bargain, which he knew could only end in disaster, but he was opposed by princes, the priests and the false prophets, who denounced him. They asserted that Babylon would soon be overthrown, and they promised that the vessels of the Temple would be restored and that their restoration would be as a token of divine

favour (chapter xxviii). Jeremiah stood completely alone and replied to these religious leaders, "Thou leadest the people to trust a lie, the Lord hath not sent thee."

Whether it was due to Jeremiah's insistent warning or not we do not know, but the fact is that no revolt then took place. Although everything seemed ready for the suggested rising the envoys returned without achieving their object. It was not until six years later that Zedekiah did actually rebel against his masters at Babylon.

The Church of that day was as divided as it is to-day, and we should do well to take to heart the prophecy of chapter xxiii. Jeremiah was unsparing in his denunciation of those false preachers, who trimmed their sails to the political winds of the day. "Woe be unto the pastors that destroy and scatter the sheep" (chapter xxiii, 1). He wept over the ruin of his cause and said, "My heart within me is broken because of the prophets" (chapter xxiii, 9). This was the climax to a lifelong controversy with the preachers of the day. Both sides claimed they were right. Where exactly did Jeremiah differ from them? He certainly differed from them in his conception of God. The prophets argued that Israel were a privileged people. Because they were God's chosen ones he could never desert them. Jeremiah argued that privilege without responsibility did not spell security. God is holy, he said, and His holiness is absolute. God the righteous One demanded righteousness. Jeremiah thus argued that as long as they refused to preach God's moral demands they were deceiving the people. They were prepared to recommend that Zedekiah should break his oath. Jeremiah argued that it could never be right to compromise with evil. These so-called prophets mis-read world events. They clung to tradition and built their hopes on the security of God's promises, forgetting that they were conditional on their obedience to His moral law.

In chapters xlvi-1 we have a series of prophecies about other nations and they ought to be studied. He preached against Egypt that "cometh up like a flood", against Philistia overwhelmed by a power out of the north like an overflowing stream. Moab was to be absorbed into other nations and the message was, "Let us cut it off from being a nation" (xlviii, 2). Ammon rested in her vain security and Edom in her rock city—a ruin to-day, described as "a rose-coloured city half as old as time." They have adopted a wrong course. They will suffer complete eclipse in their overthrow.

By 588 B.C. the Babylonian army was once more on the move while Jeremiah, unflinching and resolute, stood amid the wreckage of a nation. There are three passages that refer to Jerusalem during the siege of the city—chapters xxi, 1-10; xxxiv, 1-7, and xxxvii, 3-10. As the situation grew more tense Zedekiah sent for Jeremiah and asked him, "Is there hope? Will God deliver?" (chapter xxi, 1-2). No, said Jeremiah, God will fight against you. He predicted destruction, famine, sword and captivity.

Zedekiah visited Jeremiah to let him know that an Egyptian army was coming to their relief and he suggested that Jeremiah should pray for the national cause (see chapter xxxvii). As the Egyptian army drew near, the siege was temporarily raised while the Babylonians prepared to meet this attack from the south. Jeremiah used the opportunity to visit Anathoth. He wanted to give practical evidence of his faith in the future of his country, so he decided to buy land in his native village. As he was passing through the city gate he was arrested on a charge of going over to the Babylonian army. It was the opportunity for which his enemies had been waiting. Now they accused him of being a traitor. He was beaten and thrown into prison where he remained "many days" (chapter xxxvii, 11-16).

Zedekiah, the king, came to the rescue and took Jeremiah from prison and questioned him, "Is there any word from the Lord?" The prophet, suffering from his prison life, and while in very great danger of execution, had to give a reply to the king, who held in his hands the power of life and death. One word from him would have meant his immediate death. What was Jeremiah to answer? Without hesitation he replied, "There is a word from the Lord, Thou shalt be delivered into the hands of the king of Babylon." The king respected the courage of this intrepid preacher and arranged for better prison conditions for him.

Jeremiah's troubles multiplied. Feeling was running high in Jerusalem. The city was again closely besieged and the prophet continued to warn people of a Babylonian victory. The princes who had hitherto tried to befriend him appealed to the king to order Jeremiah's death (chapter xxxviii, 4), and the king, with his characteristic weakness, handed him over to the princes. "Behold he is in your hands," he said. The princes lost no time in carrying into effect their horrible plan. Jeremiah was to be made to suffer before he died. He was cast into a dungeon or deep pit. He was lowered by cords into the mire and left to die of starvation (chapter xxxviii, 4-6). It was a palace slave who this time came to the rescue. He boldly went to the king and explained what had happened. How serious the matter was is seen from the fact that when the king ordered his release it took thirty men to lift him out of this filthy pit. The king, filled with fear, brought Jeremiah into an apartment near the Temple and again questioned him. He no doubt thought that after saving the prophet's life he would at least give some word of comfort. Jeremiah tried to explain that there was no hope whatever for the city. The king had brought this trouble on himself by his treachery. He advised him to throw himself on the mercy of the Babylonian army. If he was prepared to surrender

he might save the city from destruction. Jeremiah still refused to compromise and his last word to the king was, "Obey, I beseech thee, the voice of the Lord which I speak unto thee" (chapter xxxviii, 20). Jeremiah remained in the prison and was supplied with food at the king's order until the city was captured.

The rest of the story can be read in chapter xxxix. The enemy broke through the defences. Zedekiah fled and was captured and Jeremiah was rescued from prison by the captain of the Babylonian army. Nebuchadrezzar gave special orders about the welfare of the prophet. "Take him," he said, "and look well to him and do him no harm."

He was offered a home in Babylon, care and comfort, freedom and liberty. The captain said to him, "Come with me into Babylon; come and I will look well unto thee" (Jer. xl, 4). It was a tempting offer. At last he could resign his prophetic office and retire into the quietness of a home in Babylon. He was still faced with the choice that had presented itself to him all his life. He never hesitated. He looked round the ruined city and the burning temple. His duty was clear. He must remain behind to look after the remnant of the people. He could never forsake Jerusalem. His choice was made, and as ever, made with no thought of self or self-interest.

A friend of Jeremiah's was appointed Governor of Judæa and the scene closed as Jeremiah watched a long line of chained captives starting their desert journey to Babylon. At the head of the procession was the pathetic figure of the king, now blinded and broken, sharing with his people the agony that Jeremiah had spent his life in trying to prevent. All the prophet had said had come true. It is difficult to enter into the feelings of this great man. His sorrows had increased with the passing of the years. He watched his people go out into the desert and he wept, as Christ once wept over Jerusalem. It is so like the way our Lord looked

across to the same city years later and said, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how oft would I have gathered thee as a hen gathereth her chickens, but ye would not."

It is very probable that parts of chapters xxx-xxxiii belong to the reign of Zedekiah. The young manhood of the nation had been swallowed up by the desert as they were driven into exile. Well might those left behind ask, "Where is now thy God?" Chapter xxxi opened with the thought that God is still their God and His word to the people was, "I have loved thee with an everlasting love, therefore with loving kindness have I drawn thee." The prophet foretold the building of the waste places and the restoration of joy and gladness. He promises a return from exile. "They shall come and sing." "My people shall be satisfied with my goodness, saith the Lord" (chapter xxxi, 14) (see also chapter xxxiii, 1-9). Jeremiah was clear that though Assyria, Babylon and other nations will disappear as nations from the face of the earth, Israel will never die. The story of backsliding and disobedience was told all too vividly. But the promise of restoration was clear and definite. It is a strange fulfilment that to-day, after 2,500 years, Assyria, Babylon, and all the smaller states of the Middle East have vanished. The ruins of their cities are the happy hunting grounds of the archæologists, but no living trace is left of these once World Powers. The Jews have survived, though they are again passing through the most bitter of all persecutions as Nazi Germany seeks to exterminate them.

Zedekiah's reign illustrates God's patience. He had offered to Judah the opportunity of saving Jerusalem, of avoiding the destruction of the Temple and the ruin of the country. The offer was rejected, and doom fell as a direct result of the actions of King and nation. They regarded their treaty with Babylon as a scrap of paper. They turned away from the law of God. They refused to listen to the

message of the prophet. Has this situation any bearing upon current world events?

During the past century changes in our history have been many and varied. The nineteenth century opened upon this land like some slow-moving river. Through industrial developments, Empire expansion and increased wealth, the slow-moving river has become a raging torrent. At first a liberal optimism preached the doctrine of inevitable progress and in the first half of the century events seemed to justify it. But the second half showed how ominous clouds were gathering. The Franco-Prussian War of 1870 brought home to this nation the rise to power of a nation preparing for war. We have watched those political events and perhaps forgotten that God still has a hand in shaping the history of the world. His laws are still valid and the message of the prophets comes to us with new meaning and significance. With the growth of scientific discoveries we have watched the harnessing of new forces for total war. We have seen in fact a progressive evil force, using all modern discoveries to conquer the world. These discoveries, placed by God in the hands of men for the good of mankind, have been captured by forces of evil and used for our enslavement. We have been brought to the brink of ruin through the revolt of man against God. If the prophet were here again to speak to us he would no doubt make it clear that security and peace, law and order, depend on something greater than politics and economics. Our greatest danger lies in our refusal to listen to the voice of God. I am trying to catch the echo of the prophet's voice. He would warn us that though we have had this further proof of God's goodness in our deliverance, though we as a nation have had yet another chance, disaster lies before us if we create in the post-war world a civilization which knows not God nor regards His law. Disaster will overtake us in the end if man's ambition and man-made standards

of right and wrong lie at the basis of our civilization. Jeremiah claimed, and history proves him to have been right, that there is a divine moral law, which men break at their peril. As in the seventh century B.C. so in our own day, we see the consequences of man's rejection of God's standards. It is for the church, like Jeremiah of old, to show how utterly unsound its once fashionable theory of its inevitability of progress is. All the events of the past five years seem to show how the world was heading straight towards a triumph of evil and a defeat of good. We watched the development of the new creed—"Blessed are the strong, for they shall inherit the earth." We have fought our fight against organized demonic forces, not merely for democracy, if by that we mean some political theory or principle; nor have we fought for wealth, power or possession. We have fought to defend our homes and our freedom, our scales of value and our civilization. We have fought against tyranny and wrong. We have fought for justice and humanity. One conclusion we reach is that if these evil forces that have sought our destruction are to be conquered something more than a military victory will be required. Only the forces of the spirit will prove adequate permanently to conquer them.

That is why we seek through the Christian Church to give a spiritual basis to all life, to accept responsibility for the ills of mankind and for the welfare of all. We are our brothers' keepers. The great contribution of the Jews to world life has been the conception of God as righteous. This idea was entirely alien from the gods worshipped by Assyria, Babylon, Greece or Rome. This idea, that we seek to recapture to-day of God's righteousness, comes from the Bible and the Bible alone. Because God is righteous man's personality is sacred, for man is the creation of God. The first essential therefore in any new world order is to secure that man is not a mere tool of the State, but a being

having a value within himself. Christianity therefore seeks to make its contribution to the State by creating a fellowship of citizens that maintains the right of the individual, as a child of God. We believe that this relationship to God must govern the State's attitude to its subjects and its treatment of men. The Christian standard is the law of love. The law begins to operate as soon as a single individual surrenders his life to God, because that surrender is made to perfect Love.

We can readily see how this will affect human relations between one individual and another, family relations and the faithfulness of husbands and wives. We can follow it through all social groupings until we see a nation as a family of God, united to promote the welfare of all. In this way men of all races can be knit together by common interests that transcend selfish, national ambitions and greed. Nationality would then stand for something altruistic. It would be a fellowship of service. But on the human plane this has proved to be an impossible ideal. The problem if studied in the light of the Christian revelation bears a very different colour. In Christ there is light and direction. There is a fullness in Him that is inexhaustible, for we have not yet visualized all that His law of love may mean to men and nations. Jeremiah had some idea of all this when he spoke of God's everlasting love.

CHAPTER VI

THE FINAL SCENE

JEREMIAH had elected to remain in Jerusalem. He lived amidst a state of utter confusion. A small number of the inhabitants had survived siege and captivity. They crawled out of their hiding-places. They gathered together dazed by all that had happened. The country was in chaos. The Babylonians, before they withdrew, selected a Jew as Governor and he and Jeremiah agreed to work together in restoring order. Gedaliah, the new Governor, decided to form temporarily a new capital and withdrew to Mizpah. There seemed to open out before the prophet a useful piece of work and he looked forward to further service for the nation. For forty years he had struggled to serve God and to win his people back to repentance. He comes to the conclusion that a nation cannot be changed unless its members are changed. He therefore opens his reconstruction plans by reaffirming the doctrines of the new covenant. The words he had spoken at an earlier date must have come back to people with added force : "Behold the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. This shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; after those days, saith the Lord, I will put My law in their inward parts and write it in their hearts; and will be their God and they shall be My people." We have traced, through the developing message of the prophet, the spiritual advance from the nation to the individual, and it must have all begun in Jeremiah's own spiritual quest.

It was at this point when the first steps in reconstruction were being laid that disaster again overtook him. Gedaliah,

the Governor, was murdered (chapter xli, 1-3), and yet another political rising took place. It was, in fact, impossible as it sounds, a rising by a small remnant against Babylon. The people fled, fearing reprisals and appealed to Jeremiah to tell them what to do. They pledged themselves to obey whatever God commanded. The prophet's advice to them was to remain in the country and not to flee. If they went to Egypt they would perish. If they remained in Judæa they would be safe (see chapter xlii). The immediate reply from the conspirators was "Thou speakest falsely." They decided to flee to Egypt for sanctuary and insisted on Jeremiah accompanying them. The aged prophet therefore found himself in Tahpanhes. Among those who fled was a princess, one of the daughters of the king. It is a curious thing that on an ancient site, about twelve miles from the Suez Canal, there are the ruins of an old town. It is a large mound with the remains of brick buildings and is known among the Arabs at this present time as the palace of the Jew's daughter. Professor Flinders Petrie, who excavated this site, believed it to be Tahpanhes, where Jeremiah lived. This is the only place in all Egypt where tradition says a Jewish princess lived. At the time of Jeremiah it was a fortified frontier post. It is probable too that when Joseph and Mary fled to Egypt with the young child, Jesus, they stayed here on their way. We can reconstruct the scene to some extent. When the refugees poured into the town, a large body of Jews collected to hear the news of what had happened to Jerusalem. Jeremiah used the occasion to explain matters. This is set out in chapter xliv. Why had this catastrophe happened? The answer given by the prophet was the same message as of old. It was because of their wickedness. They served other gods and betrayed Jehovah. They refused to listen to the prophets. Here in Egypt they have a chance of repentance, but the temptation will be to

worship the gods of Egypt. All their tendency to idolatry had revived and Jeremiah's warning is, "I will punish them in Egypt as I have punished them in Jerusalem." The story of the prophet ends here. The closing scene is again one of rejection and failure. The men say, "We will not obey." The women declare that all their troubles have come since they gave up the worship of the Queen of Heaven. The prophet is still the "despised and rejected of men" still "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief."

What happened after this is hidden in obscurity. Legend has woven round his name many stories. He is supposed to have been stoned to death in Tahpanhes for his prophecies against Egypt. Other stories say that he and Baruch, his secretary, returned eventually to Palestine, where the sayings of the prophet were edited and arranged for publication.

We have seen Jeremiah under many conditions. Can we assess his spiritual life and message? George Adam Smith says, "It is possible that the name Jeremiah means, 'Jehovah hurls or shoots forth.' It fully describes the prophet's temper, struggles and fate. For he was like a projectile fired upon a hostile world, with a force not his own, and on a mission from which, from the first, his gifts and affections recoiled, and against which he continued to protest."¹

When he was first called he said, "I cannot speak," and the voice of pain and protest runs through most of his prophecies. Life was like a big question-mark to him. He was baffled by perplexities, and there always seemed to him so much that had no explanation and for which no easy solution could be found. He never seemed to find faith easy because he refused to be superficial. He was too honest ever to be popular. Frankly he never wanted to be a prophet. In one of his prayers (chapter xx, 7) he says,

¹ *Jeremiah*, by George Adam Smith, pp. 317-18.

"Thou wast too strong for me. Thou hast prevailed." In the vision of the almond tree and the cauldron he saw and maintained through life that whatever happened in the world, God would always be King. Man might destroy by wars the face of the earth, but the almond blossom would still appear. God would still work in creative power for His children. But the cauldron was a constant reminder of the grim world in which he lived amid the conflict of evil that boiled like some great cauldron. Against world powers, kings and rulers, he pitted, not his strength, but the strength of his faith, his teaching of the moral law, his demand for true repentance. God's Word was like a fire in his soul. The more power manifest in his message the greater the pain it brought. There is a compelling urge in his message. He said, "Thy word was in my heart as a burning fire, shut up in my bones. I was weary with forbearing and I could not stay." St. Paul felt much the same when he said, "Woe is me if I preach not the Gospel." "The love of Christ constraineth me."

There is a striking contrast between Isaiah and Jeremiah. When the call came to Isaiah the voice said, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?" (see Isaiah, chapter vi). Isaiah jumped eagerly to his task and replied, "Here am I, send me." No such experience came to Jeremiah. He took up the prophetic office under protest. He shrank from what he knew it might mean. He would have been thankful at any time to give it up. He continually felt, "I cannot do it." Yet in spite of his diffidence, humility and sense of genuine inadequacy he never varied, never avoided the cross. He stuck to his post in all weathers and throughout a long ministry he never compromised with evil, never accepted the easy path—never. There was a tenderness of manner which at times reminds one of the words from the servant songs in Isaiah xl-xlv. "A bruised reed shall he not break and a smoking flax shall

he not quench." There was an inflexibility of purpose which made him set his face like a flint. His source of strength was never in himself. It was always in God. When in doubt and difficulties he fell back on the fact that God had called him and commissioned him. Underlying everything there was an ever-deepening spiritual experience of the adequacy of God for all his needs. In his perplexities he always turned to God in prayer, but his prayers fit into no pattern of orthodoxy. They are frequently a frank expression of his moods, his doubts and despairs. He had a way of asking God challenging questions, because he knew that he was safe in expressing his feelings freely to God, who in His understanding sympathy would help. In chapter xii, 1, he exclaimed, "Wherefore doth the way of the wicked prosper?" He can ask God these questions because he has a clear conception of God as righteous. God, he knew, would always be willing to listen to him. He would ever be patient and He would never misunderstand him. That is why he could say, "Let me talk with Thee of Thy judgments." God's touch with his life gave him confidence and so he prayed, "But Thou, O Lord, knowest me. Thou hast seen me and tried my heart towards Thee" (chapter xii, 3).

Jeremiah's life must be regarded as a failure, if the standard of success is to be the ordinary one. He never saw any solid results of his work. In fact, all he worked for crumbled in his hands. He threw himself into the spiritual reform movement in Josiah's day and tried to build a new nation. He saw this stirring of the nation fail and vanish like a morning cloud. He was disillusioned as he realized how quickly popular opinion could change. He was tempted again and again to say, What is the use of further effort? Had he lived in our day he would have said, We have tried every known method of evangelism and without result. We have prayed and the heavens seem

like brass. We have preached and the people will not listen or follow. It is to our generation that Jeremiah speaks to-day, because he never allowed his disillusionment to affect the vitality of his message. He never ceased to proclaim God's mercy and judgment. Kings sought his advice, but never followed it. The popular preachers of the day denounced him as an unreliable and untrue prophet. They therefore sought to forbid his preaching. The priests attacked him for his prophecies against the Temple, and the officials put him in the stocks and sought to stifle his preaching by persecution and violence. His own family betrayed him and he was stoned out of Anathoth. He had, from time to time, to go into hiding because of the imminent danger of death. He was thrown into a pit and left to die of starvation. Such were a few of the many trials of his life. He never set out to be a saint, for he was a very human soul, a man of passion and strong feelings. His temper at times was decidedly raw and his utterances were often hasty. In fact he seemed to have a natural capacity for rubbing people up the wrong way. He was often very impatient and he never suffered fools gladly. He loved deeply and passionately and resented quickly. He could never hide his feelings. He blurted out what was on his mind and at times with biting scorn, as for example when he told Jehoiakim, the king, that he would be buried with the burial of an ass. Yet it is on men like this that God builds His Kingdom. There is something in his character that reminds one of St. Peter.

Jeremiah was a poet with all a poet's love of the beautiful. He was devoted to nature and spoke of birds, trees and streams. He drew his illustrations from the prattle of children, the happiness of a bride and the love of husband and wife. This sensitive soul might have lived in another age and have been regarded as odd or poetic, an extremist

or a fanatic. But living in a crisis—world of the seventh century B.C., he became the man of the hour.

We may well ask, What was the secret of his power? First I would say his faith in God and the conviction that God had chosen him. This is borne out in chapters xviii and xix, where he uses the parable of the potter. “Can I do with you as this potter?” Before such a message could go out to the nation, Jeremiah had to answer the summons himself in a new and deep surrender. Before he could teach he had to be taught.

The second line of enquiry would be Jeremiah’s faith in God’s purposes for the world. He never could detach history from God. There was a divine plan. It was being revealed through succeeding prophets. It was moving to a far-off great event, but in what way he could not foresee.

Thirdly the great secret of his power was his prayer life. It was, as we have seen, marked by sincerity and frankness as he shared his every thought with God. However much he questioned, it is characteristic of him that he always obeyed. The whole book of Jeremiah reveals the prophet’s deepening spiritual experience of God. He grew in knowledge of God and His law. There were times when he felt weary of it all and longed to retire to some quiet nook where the wicked would cease from troubling him and where he would be at rest.

In chapter ix, 2, he expresses something of this, “O that I had in the wilderness a traveller’s lodge, that I might leave my people and go from them.” He was worn out with the people’s deceit, falsehood and betrayals, yet his honesty of purpose held him true to his resolve. He was always prepared to suffer for his message, but he was never willing to compromise one jot of it. He did suffer a great deal for the cause. In fact he offered his life with all its suffering to God on behalf of the nation. In this offering there shone out his deep love and patriotism. Life

was an agony to him as he saw the people he so much loved rushing headlong to disaster, unwilling to listen to him, rejecting his message and threatening him if he said such uncomfortable things any more.

Jeremiah was called to predict doom and disaster. He saw terrible events looming ahead, but he refused to despair because he believed in God. He was most filled with hope when things were at their very worst. He was like Christ in this, and we are reminded of the words, "In the world ye shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." The keynote of his life therefore was suffering love. His loyalty to God and His law made it impossible for him to take a light view of sin. He was not concerned in the least whether his congregations would approve of his preaching or not. He did not stop to ask whether this or that message would bring him a good audience. He was responsible to God alone for his message and he knew that God worked according to His law of righteousness. No privileges of race or ritual, of temple or election could change God's moral law or avert judgment from those who broke it. He dwelt at times on divine love, but he was quite clear that judgment was not the result of the failure of that love. God's love had not altered. God had not altered. Man's sin had brought judgment and separated man from God. Jeremiah's social gospel was thorough and searching. No religion could have God's approval, he said, that did not give people a sense of responsibility for the young, the weak, the poor, the widows, the fatherless and the stranger.

The people in Jeremiah's time divorced God from morals. To worship carried no moral obligations and when Israel found the stern creed of the prophets uncomfortable they turned to the more accommodating gods of the surrounding countries. But Jeremiah stood for a way of life that was

based on God's moral law and on his standards of righteousness.

Jeremiah in preaching righteousness was relating the character of God to the social faith of the prophets. From their standpoint, human life can only be worth while as men accept God and His rule, and love Him with all their hearts and minds. As we have seen, Jeremiah never divorced a social Gospel from personal faith. A good society demanded good people. Josiah's reforms taught him how easy it was to initiate a reformation without necessarily taking one step towards a change in human nature. The prophet touches us at this point because we have talked so much about our social Gospel, and have often forgotten that each generation needs converting.

No one advocated more strongly than he the need for social justice, for help for the poor, the widow and the orphan. He attacked business methods and condemned forced labour and slavery. But all such reforms depended primarily on a right attitude to God. If the people knew God and His law they would quickly discover their responsibility to their neighbours. If they really believed in God they would have no difficulty in knowing the difference between good and evil. The fundamental position of Jeremiah is that if reforms are to come they must begin in God and the knowledge of His righteousness. Dr. Matthews, the Dean of St. Paul's, says, "This idea of social justice differs from most of those which are current to-day in that it is based upon an absolute—upon God. The society of which the prophets think is a theocracy and the primary reason for showing equity and mercy is that they are the will of God. In the prophets . . . we are far away from the conception that social righteousness is good because it is expedient. The utilitarian philosophy has no real support in scripture."

The salient features in the character of Jeremiah were

his loyalty and courage, his stern sense of duty and his hatred of all that is false or a sham. His inflexible purpose and determination was combined with a great love and tenderness. The tragedy of his life was that a man with a passionate love for his country should be treated as a traitor and an enemy of Jerusalem. He appeared in the villages of Palestine, in the court of the King, in the Temple area and in the busy thoroughfare and always as a preacher of righteousness. For more than forty years he preached repentance. He held out no hope at all for city or Temple, nation or people, unless they returned to God. He was completely fearless and treated kings and peasants in exactly the same way.

There is a striking passage in Walter Luthe's book, *In the Time of Earthquake*—a commentary on the book of Amos, where the writer says, "The earth quakes, the people quake, thrones totter, altars shake, governments come and governments go, and nations rise and nations disappear from the map. What was of account yesterday is no longer of account to-day, and to-morrow something else will count. What a race thought, felt, wished, said and wrote yesterday, what it preached and took its oath on, to-day it annuls. We are worshipping once again what we destroyed and destroying what we worshipped. Everything is shaking—the nation, the State, race, society, family, vocation, trade and commerce, art, science, education, even the very thought and feeling of men. But justice remains justice and injustice remains injustice; good continues to be good, and evil evil; true remains true, and false false—because God continues to be God." Although this was written of the days of Amos it has a definite bearing on the later period of Jeremiah. For him the rock on which he found stability was the fact that amid the smoking ruins of his beloved city, God continued to be God. It was this fact that restored faith and hope

to the prophet. "Refrain thy voice from weeping and thine eyes from tears. For thy work shall be rewarded and thy people set free." What is the lesson of it all for us?

Jeremiah says, "Thus saith the Lord, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches." Jeremiah reached out to the ultimate in life—the chief end of man. "Let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth Me, that I am the Lord which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth; for in these things I delight, saith the Lord" (Jer. ix, 24). The man who trusts in humanism, in whatever form it is expressed, will find life a disappointment, rather like Jeremiah's broken cistern, or like a tree not planted by the water-brooks whose leaf withered and whose fruit failed because it had no roots in the river of life. But, said the prophet, the man whose faith was in God drew upon the fountains of living waters. Jeremiah had to maintain faith in an age of doubt. He had to proclaim God in a world of idolatry. He was a preacher of righteousness to those who had divorced morals from religion. He was the predictor of doom to a gay and careless people. He demanded repentance of a nation that said, "I am innocent." He denounced kings for their perfidy and nobles for their thefts. He exposed sin wherever he found it. Yet in his closing prophecies he was the apostle of hope and of springtide when the almond tree should blossom again, for he spoke in God's name to a despairing nation, "I have loved thee with an everlasting love."

CHAPTER VII

A PROPHET TO THE NATIONS

THE time has come when we must draw the threads of our studies together and seek to estimate some salient features in the life of Jeremiah and his period. He prophesied for about forty years. He began his ministry in a crisis when the country was threatened by an invasion of the Scythians, and ever after he passed from one crisis to another, until his task came to an end while he was a refugee in Egypt.

He witnessed, during his lifetime, the fall of the greatest world empire—Assyria—and its total eclipse. He watched the rise of a new power, Babylon, and sought to estimate its future.

He tried to assess the strength and weakness of these World Empires and to discover their place in the purposes of God.

His whole background, family history and training had prepared him for the priestly office. Yet he lived to see the Temple destroyed and its sacrifices and worship brought to an abrupt end.

He grew to manhood with a passionate love of his country and its history, yet he had to witness what was virtually the death of the nation. He suffered from persecution, insult, imprisonment and injury. He was condemned to death as a traitor and reprieved. He was thrown into a pit, left to starve and rescued by a slave. But through it all he never doubted that God was working to a purpose in the history of mankind.

World affairs loomed very large in Jeremiah's work. This is seen, not only in the direct prophecies about other nations, though these throw a flood of light on his political

outlook. His attitude to Jerusalem is largely determined by the activities of other states and their threats of invasion. His prophetic work took shape as he saw that Jehovah was God of the whole earth, and that He had "a controversy with the nations" (chapter xxv, 31). The idea of monotheism was almost non-existent outside Judæa, and even within Palestine numbers of Jews regarded Jehovah only as a national deity. They believed that other nations were protected by other gods, but that Jehovah was the strongest of all. They were careful, however, to seek some favourable consideration from neighbouring deities, for they turned the Temple of Jehovah into a pagan pantheon.

Jeremiah carried on his work with all influences, political, social and religious, increasingly ranged against him. After centuries of religious teaching the people seemed totally ignorant of the real meaning of their religion. Much as to-day we discover to our dismay that the rising generation is growing up in ignorance of the Christian Faith.

The question Jeremiah had to ask and to answer was, were these catastrophes and changes in world life haphazard occurrences due to chance, or was there behind them a divine hand guiding the destinies of men?

The fall of Nineveh brought this question acutely before him. The eclipse of Assyria was a world-shaking event. Had Jehovah had anything to do with it? Another power, Babylon, took its place as master of the world and Jeremiah was baffled by a further question. Is history made up by a succession of great nations, the one conquering the other, each in turn subjugating the rest of mankind? Is there any hope of escape from this vicious circle?

Where was Jeremiah to begin in his study of world affairs? How was he to form any judgment on the nations? He found the answer in his study of the Scriptures. His

conception and experience of God gave him the starting point of all his search. What he believed about God he applied to all relationships of life, and in this he discovered an international standard by which all nations could be judged. He moved a long way in his thinking as the years went by and came to the conclusion that war was not a necessity, if nations and men would listen to God's word to them.

Two facts stand out prominently—the character of God as righteous and the sins of the people, and these two he could not separate, as though sin was of no concern to God and righteousness no obligation on the people.

Behind all the prophet's teaching we can trace the influence of earlier prophets and the law of the covenant. He recounted God's past dealing with His people. He claimed that God had spoken to him and called him to be a prophet. He was therefore speaking, not from the theories of human speculation, but from the certitude of a divine revelation. God revealed Himself in His love and mercy, justice and truth. His word therefore was primarily about the conduct of His people. He was essentially good and merciful, always seeking the best for His creation. This idea of God was the basis of all Israel's relation to Him. Jeremiah does not issue a code like Moses. He was much more the prophet of grace and choice than of command and law. He appealed to the people to return, to repent, and to obey. The relationship he emphasized was never that of master and slave, but rather of father and child. Almost invariably pagan people ascribed to their gods despotic powers, which were exercised without any moral considerations. Jeremiah made it clear that God demands justice and equity, because He Himself is just and righteous. In fact he only explained what God was that man, by God's grace, might become like Him. No words sum up more adequately Jeremiah's conception

of God and its meaning for mankind than our Lord's own quotation, "The first of all commandments is this. The Lord our God is one Lord ; and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, with all thy strength. The second is this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself."

Jeremiah made this the basis of his social message. He saw in it the foundations of a law that could be applied to all nations. He sought to keep the public conscience alive to the evils of aggression and to the need for justice and mercy, especially where the weak and the helpless were concerned. The attitude of aggressive nations was to him simply an enlargement of the treatment meted out by the Jews themselves to the aged, the stranger, the widow and the orphan in their midst. He therefore reduced world problems to the one fact of human sins, greed and selfishness.

The lesson of this for our day is obvious. World events are not fortuitous. They are shaped according as men and nations obey or disobey the laws of God. We reach the conviction therefore that the God of all the earth must have a plan that embraces all nations. His purposes of love must mean that He has a standard by which He will judge the nations and by which they can judge one another.

Jeremiah approached his problem from the angle of Assyria, Babylon and Egypt on the one hand, and the apostasy of Judah on the other. We approach our problem from the angle of modern history and the rejection of God by the nations.

Let us consider this from the history of our own times, say during the past thirty years. This period has been marked by a greater aggression by powerful nations on their weaker neighbours than ever before. More people have been driven into exile than in all previous exiles in history. Cruelty has been as marked a feature in the twentieth century as it was when Assyria invaded Israel.

"We are bound therefore to ask, is there anywhere discoverable an international standard, by which national aggression can be judged? We have seen how in Germany, Italy and Japan, standards of conduct have been set up to justify aggression. Such standards from the point of view of the future peace of the world are worthless. The policy they indicate was the same as in the days of the Judges, when "Every man did that which was right in his own eyes." The fact is that man, acting in independence of God, can never find an international standard of conduct. Jeremiah pointed the way when he summoned his nation to a new acknowledgment of God. Any standard set up by a single nation will, of necessity, be selfish and in the interest of that nation, whereas the law of God seeks the good of all.

When after the present war a peace settlement has to be found we shall either lay the foundations of another war yet to come, or we shall build for the future peace of mankind. An international standard, however good, will only be effective as it is accepted internationally. Judah discovered that whatever their faith and conduct might be there would be no real security as long as great World Powers were influenced by policies of selfish greed and lust of conquest, and herein too lies our problem.

When the Church in the seventh and eight centuries A.D. was being devastated by pagan vikings, Danes, Huns and others, it adopted a missionary policy of converting its enemies, and this surely is still the challenge to the Church. The Christian message must be effective internationally if its standards are to control the conduct of nations.

Jeremiah at the close of his ministry reached much the same point of view. He had lived long enough to see the old covenant fail, to note how bonds, pacts and treaties could be torn up, to realize that some new way of life would be essential if mankind was to be saved from despair

and destruction. He saw too, that only if God took the initiative and acted on man's behalf could salvation ever come to the world. His prophecies broke with a new ray of hope upon the remnant of the people when he said, "Behold the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers . . . which covenant they brake. This shall be the covenant that I will make. I will put My law in their inward parts and write it in their hearts. I will be their God and they shall be My people" (Jer. xxxi, 31).

We look with anxiety upon our post-war problems. Shall we face them as Jeremiah did with a strong faith in God? Shall we seek to begin all our thinking and planning from the standpoint of God's will? Shall we then go on to consider not only what God plans to do, but also what He expects of us? The Church stands at the cross-roads. If it is to be the salt of the earth it must be prepared and equipped for its God-given task. If there is a true spiritual preparation in the parishes and homes of England then the nation will be lifted up to a new spiritual level.

Our minds are filled at the moment with the world situation—war and its inevitable hatreds and cruelties, the clash of armies, nations struggling against nations, and always the long-deferred hope of a new peace. We each see this conflict in relation to the particular country to which we belong, so the problem narrows down to a national issue. For us it is, Will Britain win? But we cannot stop there because Britain is made up of individual people, of families, all of whom are personally affected by the war, so at long last the issue becomes the war and me.

In this way we work through from a world situation to individuals. Jeremiah in his thought process has much to say about Babylon, Egypt, Moab, Ammon and other nations, much about Judah, Jerusalem and the Temple.

But his message is only effective as he brings it home to the individual conscience. National sins can all be found in a single human heart. The root of the whole matter is sin and the prophet therefore was right when he related the righteous demands of a holy God to the sinful ways of His children. He was no theorist, nor does he speak of evil in general terms. His message was quite specific. By sin he meant the greed, lust, theft, adulteries, dishonest dealings, slavery, hatred, cruelty, oppression of the weak, robbery of the poor, injury of widows, orphans and strangers—in fact everything that broke God's royal law of love. Any call to repentance must begin therefore in the putting away of sins, those sins that mar our lives to-day.

But at this point we find ourselves facing yet another difficulty. All agree that we want a new ethical code, a new religious basis to our individual and national life, but, argue some people, why should we have to accept the Christian dogma to discover a true Christian ethic? In Jeremiah's day the same problem arose. Why this rigid attachment to the old Jewish dogma? Why not be broad-minded and let people hold whatever creed they wish as long as the fruits of a sound ethic are produced? The fallacy of this argument is that it confuses dogma with God and His personal relation to human life. Jeremiah began his ministry convinced that God had spoken to him, that he had a message to the nation from God Himself. He sought to bring people to the place where they too would recognize that God was speaking to them. In other words revelation lay at the basis of all the prophet's mission. But let us pursue this thought further. Jeremiah had lived through the great military conquests of Megiddo, Nineveh, Carchemish and Jerusalem. Were these the real turning-points of Jewish history? They were catastrophic events. Empires disappeared, cities were destroyed, cul-

ture and civilization came to an end. No, it can be argued; these battles and victories were incidental. They were not the turning-points of history. If we review the course of events from Josiah to Zedekiah we shall see that the real turning-points were the reformation, under Josiah, the rejection of the covenant by Jehoiakim and the perfidy of Zedekiah. The religious and moral factors decided the issues. This is as true of Assyria as it is of Judæa. When Judæa failed to turn to God and obey Him they started on a road that led to the destruction of every cherished symbol of worship.

The point of it all is that if we are to interpret history aright we must study it from this angle of God's moral law.

This is evident in our own national history. We may contrast for example the Wars of the Roses and the spiritual movement under John Wycliffe and the first efforts to give the Bible to the people in the vernacular. We see the Reformation in contrast to all the military movements of the day, or the religious settlement under Queen Elizabeth and the Spanish Armada. The same analogy may be drawn from the Napoleonic wars and the revival under Wesley and others.

The greatest illustration of this point is of course the contrast between the Roman Empire and the birth of Christ at Bethlehem. In all these historic events it is the religious movements that have had the most permanent influences.

Jeremiah certainly sought to interpret history in terms of religion. His whole life bore this out, but he knew full well that the mere use of the word religion was not enough. In his day there were varied expressions of religion, pagan cults with their human sacrifices, idolatrous worship with their sensual rites, temple ritual that had lost its meaning. No, the real point was not religion in the abstract, but loyalty to Jehovah. Not simply religion but faith in God. In much the same way we are seeking again to interpret

history in terms of religion, but by that we mean the interpretation of religion in terms of Jesus Christ. We look forward to the post-war world. There are many blue-prints of a new world order. But for Christian people something more is needed. We must, like Jeremiah, begin with ourselves and our own need of God. We must summon the nation back to God. But how? we say. First and foremost by interpreting all talk about religion in definite and 'concrete terms of Christ and the historic facts of our Faith. We must take our stand, as Jeremiah did, on the righteousness of God and His standards, refusing to accept anything less for a post-war world. We must not shut our eyes to the sinfulness of sin and the power of evil. Let us recognize our true enemy and fight against all that is impure, dishonest, selfish and unjust.

These things are the necessary elements of any true preparation for revival. Jesus Christ is the Voice of God to the human race. He Himself is the standard of social justice and true peace. He alone holds out any possibility of a brotherhood of nations. He offers to us the answer to aggression and wrong in a new relationship between race and race, based on a new relationship to God. It is through Him and Him alone that God's law can be written in our hearts. He is not a dead hero but a living Saviour, the same yesterday, to-day and for ever.