

CHAPTER XIX

The Poet Preacher--Jeremiah

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Hints to Bible Study
The Colorado College of Divine Science
Denver, 1920.

As Constance in "King John" made Sorrow majestic and bade kings come before it and render it homage, Jeremiah has made Sorrow beautiful. Artists of all ages pay tribute to his genius, and lovers of graceful expression acknowledge themselves his debtors. Jeremiah sings the Doom Song of the Old Order. It is the Swan Song of the national greatness and independence of the Hebrews.

From the last date that we have of Isaiah to the first that we have of Jeremiah is eighty-five years. Like Isaiah's, Jeremiah's ministry is a long one; he saw the successive reigns of five different kings; witnessed the fall of Jerusalem; is thought to have written "Lamentations" after its fall and was abducted to Egypt where we lose sight of him. We know more of Jeremiah than of any other prophet, for he speaks very freely of his life, both private and public. He takes us into the inner sanctum of his soul; tells us what he aspired to do and of the reception of his efforts both by the kings and the people. The latter days of old Jerusalem are inextricably interwoven with the personal life of the prophet.

Nothing more pathetic than the life story of Jeremiah was ever written. Belonging to the orders of both priest and prophet, living at a time when a profligate nation had ceased to respect either of them, he was compelled to submit to ridicule, buffeting, imprisonment and even corporal punishment at the hands of a people he earnestly desired to save.

In sorrow one can never be consistent, his perspective is not *true*, his vision is foreshortened and the vista beyond is therefore not clear. In the breakdown of an old order the new one grows; in fact, it is always the new one growing that batters down the old. Isaiah's vision had ushered in a new era. The horizon had so broadened that henceforth no national boundaries could hold a vision which had become universal. Before we can become distinctively individualistic we must burst through the national consciousness; how else can we represent the universal God? "Jeremiah is the first distinct individualist among the Hebrew prophets--a Huguenot in an age ruled by the Medici, a Savonarola in an age of Alexander VI--execrating himself, at times execrating his age and his people, at other times pleading with them for Jehovah, and with Jehovah for them, with infinite pathos, and amidst the ruins of the old covenant destroyed by Israel's sin and Jehovah's repudiation of it, prophesying a new covenant with the elect individuals saved from the nation's wreck--strange, sad, self-contradictory, a Protestant before Protestantism, a Puritan before Puritanism," is the way that Lyman Abbott sees this unique character.

Should this contradictory seer follow the great vision of Isaiah? And if the history of the race is the history of the individual written large, what is its significance in our personal lives? Absolutely true in our individual unfoldment. The Transfiguration of Jesus preceded Gethsemane and the Crucifixion. The new vision inevitably breaks up the old life, because it makes new conditions; the new wine breaks the old bottles in the fermentation which makes a new being and the environment demanded by that new being for its expression. As Mary wept at the tomb of her dead "Rabboni," *when there was no dead teacher*, so do we mourn and cling to old conditions when the new stand beside us, asking us to recognize them.

In Biblical history, Jeremiah stands where Hamlet does in Shakespearean drama. After the joyous vision of the poet's youth, and the great historic dramas of his manhood, the vision of a spiritual world is breaking through Shakespeare's consciousness. Hamlet is a being that stands astride two worlds, a citizen of neither. The human desires revenge for his father's murder; the spiritual restrains his hand from taking life; indecision of character is the result. Jeremiah is not fully emerged from the spiritual cocoon; he has a great vision but is still held fast in the meshes of the material. Not positively belonging to either world, he is not the power he would be did he not see double. He knows old Jerusalem must go and he sees clearly in his highest moments the return. He too believes in the Messiah that is to be born from the "remnant" who will save the people. Still with all his power he endeavors to save Jerusalem while in his heart he does not believe it can be. "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? *then* may ye also do good who are accustomed to do evil." Every one of us has been in Jeremiah's place of development. Many are still there. If the conviction of the Ethiopian and the leopard were not in our consciousness, we should heal every case that comes to us and nothing would be impossible.

When his "Call" comes to Jeremiah, conditions in Judah have become as bad or worse than in Israel during the time of her four great prophets. Under the shadow of the Temple itself, altars to other gods had been erected; and in the valley of Hinnom on the southwest of Jerusalem the gross immoralities of Canaanitish worship, with its human sacrifices of their children, were flagrantly practiced. "Wherefore I will yet plead with you said the Lord. Hath a nation changed their gods, which yet are no gods? but my people have changed their glory for that which doth not profit. Be astonished, O ye heavens, at this; for 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."

"Cut off thine hair, O Jerusalem, and cast it away, and take up a lamentation on the bare heights; for the Lord hath rejected the generation of his wrath. The children of Judah have done that which is evil in my sight, saith the Lord, they have set their abominations in the house which is called by my name, to defile it. And they have built high places of Tophet which is in the valley of Hinnom, to burn their sons and

their daughters in the fire; which I have commanded not neither came it into my mind."

Modern Man, Up-to-date Lady, from your lofty height of "government by the people and for the people" look not down on these benighted Judeans of an olden time. Are we in this country free from either idol worship or sacrifice of our children? Does not money, or what money buys for us, play a stronger part in our lives than our spiritual development? Are our child labor laws rigidly enforced? The valley of Hinnom was merciful to children compared to the cotton mills of the South, in "Our Own United States." Who would not prefer a quick death to a slow, lingering one? "Take the beam from thine own eye." We shall not be at liberty to criticize these people until spiritual ideals come *first*, and the physical, mental and spiritual development of the young are considered the primal work of the whole nation.

Five years after the Call of Jeremiah, Josiah, the young king, then in his eighteenth year, determined to have Solomon's temple repaired. Since it was over four hundred years old at this time, no doubt it was in great need of it. During the renovation, Hilkiah, the high-priest, found the Book of Deuteronomy. After the Book was read to Josiah, he started upon tremendous reforms. He tore down the altars and symbols of idolatry everywhere--but changing externals can never change anything permanently, if the consciousness is not changed also. Jeremiah believed the reforms to be superficial: Jehovah had given "backsliding Israel a bill of divorcement. Yet for all this her treacherous sister, Judah, hath not returned unto me with her whole heart but feignedly, saith the Lord." Josiah's sons and successors were as profligate as his predecessors had been; so while Deuteronomy made a lasting impression on the few, the nation as a whole quickly returned to idolatry.

Jeremiah resorts to many ingenious methods to attract the attention of the people and convert them. He is a "defenced city, and an iron pillar with brazen wall against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, against the princes thereof, and against the people of the land, and they shall fight against thee; but they shall not prevail against thee." We should not consider this a treatment to give ourselves did we desire to come into unison with others; and it acted as adversely to Jeremiah as it would for any of us. He was put into stocks, lowered into a well, imprisoned, yet that *belief* in divine protection always saved his life; though it was endangered many times.

The people will not listen to him and he well nigh despairs; why talk about Jehovah when nothing but the sound of his own voice is the result: "And if I say, I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in his name then there is in mine heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with forbearing and cannot contain." He must continue, heard or unheard, for Jehovah fills his consciousness so that he must speak; and we love him, and read him for this reason and for the purity and beauty of his prophetic insight into the Divine Nature.

Assyria had been conquered by Babylon, as foretold by Isaiah, and the political parties had changed to those favoring an alliance with Babylon, or those favoring one with Egypt. Palestine had an unfortunate geographical position; she was the battleground of those great rival kingdoms, and Judah was now far too small a nation to exist except under the protection of one or the other of them. Babylon was energetic; Egypt was decadent, slothful and luxurious; and Jeremiah loathed her with all the force of his virile and ascetic nature. He openly advocated submission to Babylon as the one way of saving the national life. For years he wore a yoke, a reminder that only in this way could disaster be averted.

He was thrown into prison; the king favored the Egyptian party, so Jeremiah and his yoke were not popular in Jerusalem. Here, with the aid of Baruch, a scribe, whose brother was chief chamberlain to the king, he wrote a warning of the fall of Jerusalem if they did not come under the protection of Babylon. The book was read to the king as he sat in his winter palace before a burning brassier; but when he had heard a few pages he took a knife, cut the leaves and burned the roll, though members of his court advised against it. He ordered the death of both Jeremiah and Baruch, but they escaped, and Jeremiah dictated another book to Baruch, which we read today.

As predicted by Jeremiah, Babylon conquered Jerusalem. The king, Jeconiah, the chief of the people and the craftsmen, were deported to Babylon. Ezekiel was in this first captivity in the year 597 B.C. The brother of the king was placed on the throne, and left there on sufferance. Zedekiah was a weak king, not strong enough to resist the Egyptian party, although he was more favorable to Jeremiah than his brother had been. So twelve years later the army of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, returned and destroyed Jerusalem. This time the city was sacked and destroyed, and the whole population, excepting the very poor, carried away to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar, in recognition of Jeremiah's advocacy of the Babylonian party, charged his captain, "Look well to him, and do him no harm, but do even as he shall say unto thee." Jeremiah desired to remain in Palestine, and was permitted to do so.

The most charming illustration of Jeremiah's is the potter and the clay. "The word which came to Jeremiah from the Lord saying, Arise and go down to the potter's house and behold, he wrought his work on the wheels. And when the vessel that he made of the clay was marred in the hand of the potter, he made it again another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to make it. Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying, O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? saith the Lord. Behold, as the clay in the potter's hand, so are ye in my hand."

So Judah, just as we each individually must do, lost her life of rebellion and idolatry that she might find the life of obedience to Jehovah. The Potter has his ideal for each child of His, and His purpose in each nation. On the wheel we remain until we learn to yield ourselves without reservation to Him. The clay cannot dictate to the potter, nor can man to God; for He alone knows our final destiny. We save ourselves from being "broken" by training ourselves into pliability.

Jeremiah could see no hope for Judah save the discipline that would come from the captivity, for "We walk after our own devices, and we do every one after the stubbornness of his evil heart." What more could Jehovah do? As he had sent his "Bands of Love" to Israel, he also had sent great prophets to Judah. Isaiah he had sent to the influential people; Micah he had sent to the poor and plain people; Zephaniah had come and seen, "The just Lord is in the midst thereof; he will not do iniquity, every morning doth he bring his judgment to light, he faileth not; but the unjust knoweth no shame." Habbakuk also has stood on the watchtower: "I will stand on my watch, and will set me upon my tower, and I will watch to see what he will say unto me, and what I shall answer when I am reproved. And the Lord answered me, and said, Write the vision, and make it plain upon tables, that he may run that readeth. For the vision is yet for an appointed time, but in the end it shall speak, and not lie; though it tarry, wait for it; because it will come." Nothing more remained for Jehovah to do, he had done all; he must make Judah again another vessel, for it was marred in the hands of the potter.

In a cave, near Jerusalem, Jeremiah, it is thought, wrote his dirge over the fallen city. The city of David lay in ruins before the poet, and he has written a poem of such beauty and pathos that not since has it been excelled:

LAMENTATIONS

"How doth the city sit solitary that was full of people!
How is she become as a widow, she that was great among nations!
Princess among the provinces, how is she become tributary."

Surely, we can all understand the author's great anguish. We have each experienced it, when we have been bowed under a great sorrow, when life seemed desolate--that narrow bridge we all must cross and cross alone--when the old life lies in ruins and the new is not yet clear. We look forth and see that the merry old world goes on as usual; the careless laugh, the busy pass by, each intent on his own work; we are amazed that it can be so, when our world has ceased to be.

"Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by?
Behold and see if there be any sorrow like my sorrow, which is done unto me."
--Modern Reader's Bible.

But the world moves along and carries us with it; each must turn from his sorrow, just as the great dirge ends:

"Turn thou us unto thee, O Lord, and we shall be turned:
Renew our days as of old."

Life is movement, there is no cessation:

*"Weeping may endure for the night,
But joy cometh in the morning."*