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 978-1-316-50957-9 - Jeremiah: The Prophet of Hope
 Dorothea Stephen
 Excerpt
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JEREMIAH THE PROPHET OF HOPE

CHAPTER I

FIRST PERIOD 626–608 B.C.

THE REIGN OF JOSIAH

THERE were several occasions in the history of Judah when the worship of Yahweh was reasserted in the face of idolatry and a reformation carried out in the name of the reigning sovereign. Asa removed the sodomites and the idols¹; Jehoshaphat removed the sodomites²; the priest Jehoiada, acting for the infant Jehoash, broke the images of Baal and killed his priest³, and though no actual reformation is mentioned in the reigns of Uzziah and his son Jotham, both are specially said to have been good kings⁴, but we find that, neither by them nor by their predecessors was anything done to remove the High Places all over the country where the people still sacrificed and burnt incense, as indeed their fathers had always done, the Judges, Samuel and, in later days, Elijah⁵.

¹ I Kings xv. 12.

² *Ib.* xxii. 46.

³ II Kings xi. 18.

⁴ *Ib.* xv. 3, 34.

⁵ I Kings xxii. 43; II Kings xii. 3, xv. 4, 35.

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[More information](#)

2 FIRST PERIOD 626–608 B.C.

This worship at the High Places was, in fact, a very ancient practice and was in accordance with the law given in the Book of the Covenant, that an altar shall be built in every place where the Lord 'recorded his name' or 'caused it to be remembered'¹; but as time passed the feeling of the best part of the nation turned against it because of the corruption that seemed to be inseparable from it. We have a vivid picture of what that corruption was in the writings of Hosea², and we may see the same thing in our own day in any country where people use stones or posts as emblems of fertility, as many do. But though this worship might become gross and corrupt, it was not apostate in the eyes of the worshippers of Yahweh, who was adored under the form of Baal, the Lord of the soil, and the giver of the fruits of the earth. When Rabshakeh came on behalf of Sennacherib in 701 B.C., he reminded the people of this; it was, he said, the High Places of the Lord that Hezekiah had taken away, and it was the Lord who had sent the Assyrians to avenge the sacrilege³.

Hezekiah was, in fact, the first king of Judah who removed the High Places; he broke the 'pillars,' the upright stones representing Baal, and cut down the Asherah, the wooden posts that

¹ Ex. xx. 24.² Hosea ii.³ II Kings xviii. 22.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE REIGN OF JOSIAH 3

accompanied them, and his action marked a new stage in the development of the religion of Israel¹. Old customs die hard and there may have been those among the men on the wall who listened to Rabshakeh who feared that he might be right, and that Yahweh was indeed offended; but they were silent, and soon the destruction of Sennacherib's army, followed by the deliverance of Jerusalem, justified the king before the people.

But Hezekiah's reformation did not survive him; under his son Manasseh, all his work was swept away. For fifty-five years the High Places were restored, Yahweh's presence and blessing were sought in them with the ancient rites, the reformers of Hezekiah's time were persecuted and killed, and not only so, but new forms of worship were introduced; the Queen of Heaven, the great goddess of Assyria and all Western Asia, was worshipped by each family on the house roofs, and Moloch, the great Baal of Tyre, received offerings of children in the valley of Topheth; the king himself sacrificed his son in the fire as his grandfather Ahaz had done before him².

It was towards the end of this reign that Jeremiah was born.

Our knowledge of Jeremiah comes chiefly from the book which bears his name; there is no mention

¹ II Kings xviii. 1-4.² *Ib.* xxi. 6, xvi. 3.

4 FIRST PERIOD 626–608 B.C.

of him in the book of Kings and none in Chronicles till the last chapter, where we are told that he lamented over Josiah and advised Zedekiah in vain. But happily his oracles have been carefully preserved from the first, both by himself and later by his friends and disciples. We have the full account of how he came to collect all his earlier teaching in a book, and how, when that book was destroyed, he wrote it again and added to it¹. The book of Jeremiah itself, as a complete whole with the introduction and explanatory verses, and the occasional historical accounts of events, seems to be the work of his friend and secretary, Baruch. The actual oracles, poems and addresses have been preserved, but not arranged, as we might perhaps have wished they had been, in chronological order, so as to give a consecutive history; they have been grouped according to subject, and if we want to reconstruct the history, we shall have to rearrange the oracles. One of the chief of these groups consists of the oracles on foreign nations, which have been put together at the end of the book² and, valuable as they are, we shall have to follow the example of the original editor, and leave them on one side, so as to confine ourselves to the history of Judah. As actually spoken they were a continual witness to Jeremiah's belief that Yahweh

¹ Jer. xxxvi.

² *Ib.* xlvi to li.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE REIGN OF JOSIAH 5

was the Lord not of Judah only, but of all the world. The oracles on the last four kings of Judah form another group¹. Jehoahaz, Jehoiachim, Jehoiachin and probably Zedekiah are all described and judgment passed on their doings. In one place two oracles are put side by side, apparently because in each of them an earthen bottle is mentioned²; in another place because both are about conspiracies, the one about the conspiracy against the Lord in Jerusalem, the other about a conspiracy against Jeremiah in Anathoth³. The Jews did not care much for the critical study of documents; it seemed to them enough to know that these various oracles had been spoken by the Lord, or by his mouthpiece the prophet; we have learnt by long experience to see that there is value, not only in the actual word, but also in its setting of time and circumstance. It will therefore be our task to take the jewels from the pile one by one and try to place them in their original order; it is often impossible to do this with absolute certainty. Some of the oracles are dated and these will give us something to start from; as for the rest, scholars will never agree in every particular, but the general outline will be clear, and our object will have been gained if we can so arrange our material as to gain a coherent view of Jeremiah's thought, of what it was for

¹ Jer. xxii, xxiii. ² *Ib.* xviii, xix. ³ *Ib.* xi. 9-14, 18-23.

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[More information](#)

6 FIRST PERIOD 626–608 B.C.

which he and his friends lived and fought, and of how far they failed or succeeded. If the oracles are read according to the order suggested in the lists at the end of each chapter, it will be found that a coherent picture of the prophet's life presents itself.

We shall find that a certain number of passages are, by this detailed study, removed altogether from the time of Jeremiah and must be supposed to be from some other writer. For instance in one place, where Jeremiah himself has been speaking, there is a slight change of subject and he is suddenly referred to in the third person; evidently some later writer is enlarging on what he has said. We must judge of such passages as they occur¹.

Jeremiah was a descendant of Abiathar the priest, who had been exiled from Jerusalem to Anathoth by Solomon, while his successful rival, Zadok, stayed at court. The rivalry between Abiathar and Zadok was an old one, we can trace it in the story of David's life. The writer of the book of Samuel tells us that the family of Abiathar lay under a curse, for the weakness of Eli and the wickedness of his sons, and that they should come to beg work of their successors so as to earn a piece of bread²; but it is not very likely that this was the tradition preserved among themselves. In the

¹ Jer. xxv. 12–14.

² I Sam. ii. 27–36, iii. 11–14.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE REIGN OF JOSIAH 7

reign of David, they were the king's friends and on an equality with the Zadokites, but, after his death, they took the wrong side in the dispute between his sons, and fell in the fall of Adonijah¹. We cannot tell whether, when Jeremiah was a child, they still carried on the worship at the High Place of Anathoth; no doubt this was one of the High Places destroyed by Hezekiah, for it was only four miles from Jerusalem. They would have been free to restore it if they chose in the reign of Manasseh, and may conceivably have done so feeling that Yahweh would be better served there than in the desecrated Temple in the capital; or, again, they may have been among those who believed that the corruption of these country sanctuaries made their destruction necessary, and in this case they must have lived for a generation without public worship, and have been glad to escape with their lives from a king who massacred his subjects and burnt his son at Topheth².

While Jeremiah was still a child, Manasseh died, and was succeeded by his son Amon, who followed in his steps for two years, and was then murdered; but with the next king came a change. He too was a child, and those who had charge of him were of a very different temper from his father and grandfather. They began doing or

¹ I Kings ii. 26–27.² II Kings xxi. 6.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 FIRST PERIOD 626–608 B.C.

making him do 'that which was right in the eyes of the Lord,' and at least the terrors of Manasseh's reign were over. The book of Chronicles, which was written much later, after the Exile and the Return, gives a detailed report of his reforming activity in the early part of his reign, before his eighteenth year, but nothing is said of this in the book of Kings¹. At any rate this eighteenth year marked a turning point in his policy.

Meanwhile, Jeremiah was growing up to be a young man, gradually realising the trouble of the times and of the society round him. His mind dwelt on the dream of a bygone golden age of primitive simplicity, when people were poor and lived by their flocks and herds, and on the water and manna miraculously given them in the Wilderness, before they had begun to plant corn and vines or to look to the Baalim for the gifts of the fertile earth. In the thirteenth year of the reign came his call to be a prophet, a destroyer and a restorer to all nations.

Through all Jeremiah's life there is nothing abnormal, he works no wonder, he tells no dream and sees no vision, except for such simple images as might suggest themselves to anyone whether in actual outward fact or in inward fancy, a branch of almond tree, a boiling pot, two baskets of figs.

¹ II Chron. xxxiv. 1–7; II Kings xxii. 1, 2.

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[More information](#)

THE REIGN OF JOSIAH 9

In the account of his call the celestial imagery that surrounded the call of Isaiah is not there. The voice that speaks to him is, as far as we are told, inward, such as any man may hear. Nor does Jeremiah offer himself, as Isaiah did; on the contrary he shrinks and only obeys a direct command. His lips are touched, not by a coal in the hands of a seraph, not by fire from the altar, but by the hand of the Lord. The only miracle he knows is the presence of God and that is constant. Indeed, for anyone who could not see that, there was no other sign to be given in his time.

The thirteenth year of Josiah was 626 B.C., and this was the period of the Scythian invasions. Wild tribes of barbarians came from the north and raided the Assyrian empire, now grown feeble. Judah was still a province of that empire, but there was no longer any protection to be had from Nineveh. The Scythians broke out from Central Asia, driven probably by famine in their own countries, bringing fire and sword, ravaging all the rich lands within their reach and then vanishing again into the deserts beyond the known world. This disaster on such a scale was a new thing in the history of the civilised nations of the world. Robber incursions were common enough, like those of the Midianites or Philistines, who invaded Israel in the time of the Judges, or of Israel itself

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10 FIRST PERIOD 626–608 B.C.

when it conquered Canaan; but these Northern barbarians were different. They were of an unknown race and from an unknown country and they attacked not only one city or state but the whole world. Nineveh itself, the capital of the empire, could not turn them back, the terrible armies that Isaiah had described with their arrows and horses and chariots roaring like lions put no barrier in their way¹. The new invasion seemed to be the end of the world. Zephaniah calls it the day of wrath, and the expectation of it colours Jeremiah's first oracles. He thought judgment had come; that punishment was actually falling on the guilty people, and that all the land would be laid desolate for ever. It was not so. The invasion came in sight, came close and then, it seems, turned aside. We have no record of exactly what happened, but it appears that Judah at any rate was not ravaged. Perhaps the Scythians kept to the coast and contented themselves with plundering the Philistines; perhaps they turned back to the north. We hear of no burnt cities or captives carried off; there was still time for repentance. It was well that there was time, for a few years later an event happened which was, as it turned out, of the very first importance.

In 621, the eighteenth year of Josiah, a book

¹ Isaiah v. 25–30.