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THE BOOK of JEREMIAH

This long and deeply significant Old Testament document has been called a prophetic autobiography because of the way in which the prophet's innermost personality is so vividly portrayed in the context of the message he proclaims. His deep sensitiveness of spirit, and the cost to that spirit of faithfulness to the word of God, are unfolded in such a way as to make the book one of the most profoundly moving to read in the whole Old Testament.

The pages at the end of these Notes, taken from studies in Jeremiah by the Rev Thomas Swanston, of the West Church, Inverness, with our thanks, provides a useful and necessary historical background for our study, and frequent use should be made of it in the course of the readings.

1) 1:1-19

Some outline knowledge of historical background is absolutely essential, if we are to make anything of the large mass of material before us. The judgments foretold on God's people, in this and in other prophecies, were to come upon them through outside nations, and it is in the movement of world power around Judah, as well as the activity within it, that we best understand what was going on. Earlier Bible Notes on the latter chapters of 2 Kings (Oct-Dec 1972) and on the minor prophets, Nahum (Aug 1977), Zephaniah (Sep 1977), and Obadiah (Oct/Nov 1977), will prove helpful. Isaiah prophesied, it will be remembered, in the reigns of Uzziah (791), Jotham (751), Ahaz (736) and Hezekiah (727). At that time the two kingdoms, Israel and Judah, were still in existence but in 721 BC Israel, in the north, was overwhelmed by Assyria, and taken into captivity.

In the south, Manasseh succeeded the good king Hezekiah, and proceeded not only to undo the good influence of his father's reign, but also to drag the nation lower than it had ever been (see Note on 2 Kings 21, 27-29 Dec 1972). Amon his son followed in his footsteps. Then Josiah acceded to the throne, and initiated extensive reforms. The book of the law was discovered (2 Kings 22:8ff), and this led to a spirit of real reform and renewal. It is in this context that Jeremiah's early ministry took place.

2) 1:1-19

Beyond Judah's borders, world power was passing from Assyria, through Egypt to Babylon. Towards the end of Josiah's reign, Pharaoh Necho went up against Assyria (2 Kings 23:28-30, and 2 Chronicles 35:20-27), and Josiah went out with his army to intercept him, attacked, in spite of assurances from Pharaoh that the Egyptians were not concerned with Judah, and was slain at the battle of Megiddo, the 'Flodden-Field' of Judah, in 608 BC. This was the beginning of the end for Judah. A series of evil kings, Jehoahaz (Shallum), Jehoiakim (608-597), Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah (597-586).

In 603 BC, another great and significant battle, this time at Carchamish, saw Babylon crush Pharaoh Necho, and assume supreme power in the ancient world. This was the power that finally crushed Judah: in 597 the first sacking of Jerusalem took place with a deportation of the people, and in 586 the second and final disaster took place (2 Kings 25; 2 Chronicles 36). All was over, and the people of God were taken captive to Babylon.

3) 1:1-19

Jeremiah's prophecy is difficult to analyse for its contents are not arranged in any logical order, but seem to be a gathering together of utterances made at different times, without apparent attempt to put them in chronological order. Commentators give different analyses and divisions of the book, widely different at times. Nevertheless, there does seem to be a general kind of division, and a probable key to this may be seen in 36:9-32, and particularly v 27, 28, 32. This narrative passage records an ugly confrontation between the prophet and king Jehoiakim, in which 'a book of the words of Jeremiah' (10) was read in the temple, the reading of which was reported to the king. This led to the 'book' being thrown in the fire. The prophet was commanded by the Lord to re-write it (27ff), and to this second copy 'many like words' (32) were added. From this, it would seem that the following analysis is at least a possibility:

1. The first 'roll' - 1-20 to which 21-24 were added at a later time,
2. The 'added words' - 25-34, with 35 added as an appendix,
3. A third part - 36-44, mainly narrative, with the addition of 45,
4. A final part - 46-51, Doom on the surrounding nations, with a historical appendix, 52.

The first section substantially belongs to the reign of Josiah, although it includes chapters dealing with later times.

4) 1:1-19

The first chapter records for us the call and commission of the young Jeremiah. Anathoth was a small village, four miles N.E. of Jerusalem. Scholars think that the family of priests referred to in 1 was that of Abiathar, who was descended from Eli and the priesthood of Shiloh (cf 1 Kings 2:26). He was reared therefore in the quiet byways of the land and brought up in quietness and obscurity, like many another prophet of the Lord. In this undistinguished place God had a purpose of grace for this family, and out of it He chose one, Jeremiah. The divine call came to him in the thirteenth year of Josiah's reign (2). The king would therefore be twenty-one years old (cf 2 Kings 22:1). It may well be that Jeremiah was of an age with the young king. G. Adam Smith gives Jeremiah's birth as sometime soon after 650 BC (Josiah was born in 646 BC). These datings serve to give us some idea of how to interpret the word 'child' in 6. 'Lad' or 'youth' would be a better rendering, since Jeremiah was probably about 17 when his call came. At all events, it is his youthfulness and inexperience that he refers to in that heartfelt protestation. It is not surprising that he should have shrunk from such a task, destined as he was to a prophetic ministry covering all of forty years (2, 3). The shrinking was not, indeed, one of unfaith, but the expression of a sensitive and tender spirit, for he was one of the most retiring of men, and the conflict is seen again and again throughout the book. The triumph of duty over inclination is one of the more important lessons to be learned in this whole study.

5) 1:4-10

These verses describe Jeremiah's call. The words in 5, 'before I formed thee...' are deeply significant. If, as we have indicated, Jeremiah was born round about 650 BC, this means that it was right in the middle of one of the wickedest and most fateful reigns, that of Manasseh. And it was in the midst of such a terrible and abandoned situation that Jeremiah was born and that his destiny was planned and ordained. It may be that a hidden remnant, appalled at the moral and spiritual declension of the time, was praying for a man of God to be raised up for the hour. It was Wesley who said that 'the prayers of the saints are the decrees of God beginning to work' and it is hardly surprising that one famous commentator entitles this chapter 'Predestination and Vocation.' It is certainly true that so far as Jeremiah is concerned, the divine purpose for his life was planned in eternity, and that even before his birth he was set apart and ordained for a prophetic ministry. We in our day should think more than we do of this eternal dimension with regard to our children born within the covenant, and seek by earnest prayer and spiritual nurture to fulfil the divine purposes for their lives. It is not a light or casual thing for a child to be born to Christian parents, for such a child is already bespoke for a destiny of salvation and a life of service in the kingdom of God.

6) 1:4-10

As a further comment on the 'dimension of eternity' mentioned in the previous Note we include some moving words from 'The Dawn of World Redemption' by Erich Sauer: 'The historical unfolding of this eternal decree of redemption, thus conceived in God, becomes in time the covenants and testaments of God with mankind; of which the goal is the 'eternal covenant' which the blood of God's Son has dedicated (Hebrews 13:20). 'Father, I will that they whom thou hast given me may be with Me where I am' (John 17:24).

'But all these mighty words stand in the Scriptures not for the satisfaction of curious inquisitiveness, nor even only for the intellectual completion of our picture of the history of the world's salvation, but in order to show us the greatness of the divine love. Even before all the ages of time the Highest concerned Himself with your glory and with mine. Before the sea raged and swelled, before the earth was built or its foundations were sunk, yea, before those morning stars exulted and those sons of God shouted for joy, God, the Almighty, even then had thoughts on me. On me, the worm of the earth, who have given Him so much trouble and labour with all my sins; on me, He Who is God, the Ancient of Days. Truly these are depths not to be fathomed, and which the heart of every man despairs of being able to describe in words. Here we can only bow and worship, and lay our life at the feet of Him, the All-loving.'

7) 1:4-10

The contrast between the 'then said I' (6) and the 'say not' (7) is an important and significant one for spiritual experience, for it means that over against our natural, human situation, with all its weakness and frailty there is set the divine word of the God Who 'calleth those things which be not as though they were' (Romans 4:17). This is the only endowment that is of any use in the service of the kingdom, but it is a wholly sufficient one. As we read through this prophecy we shall see how clearly that commission was fulfilled and ratified. It is significant that in 20:9 we read 'then I said, I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in his name. But his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay'. The words in 7, 8 were no empty gesture from God, for he not only put words in Jeremiah's mouth but also fire in his bones and in his heart, to enable him to fulfil all that was appointed for him in his ministry (10). This is what we should pray for the men who occupy our pulpits today, that God will put His hand upon their lips to give them a message and put such a fire within them that they will speak it and not be able to forbear.

8) 1:11-16

The vision of the almond tree bears a deeply eloquent message. The AV conceals a play upon words, the Hebrew word for 'almond tree' ('shaqed') being very similar to the Hebrew for 'hasten' or 'watch' in 12 (shoqed). The almond was spoken of as the 'wakeful tree', because it was the first of all the trees to wake up and throw its buds at the touch and promise of spring. Jeremiah saw in the wintertime an almond tree beginning to bud, and God said to him 'You are watching the wakeful tree, and I also am wakeful, watching over My word to perform it'. It was a word of assurance (very like that given in Psalm 121, 'He slumbers not nor sleeps') that grim and terrible as Jeremiah's ministry was to be, God was in control, and very much awake, and that events would not be surprising Him or catching Him unawares. But it has often been thought that there is more than this in the vision of the almond tree. If it is the first to show signs of life at the approach of spring, then there may also be the assurance that evil was not to have the last word in the life of the people of God, and that after the dark winter of their captivity resurrection and restoration would follow. There is also another thought. The almond rod would conjure up a specific Old Testament reference for Jeremiah - the story of Aaron's rod that budded. In that remarkable story in Numbers 17, the rod that blossomed was to signify the man whom God had chosen to be His priest. It was God's way of saying 'Aaron is My man', and here God was saying that Jeremiah was His man, the one who bore the divine authority.

9) 1:11-19

The message of the next vision (13-16), that of the seething cauldron, is surely plain and clear. The historical background shows that at this precise moment, in the thirteenth year of Josiah, the might of Assyria was about to crumble. The whole north was a seething cauldron of intrigue and revolt following the death of Assurbanipal, and anything was liable to happen, most of it spelling foreboding for the south. It was as if God were saying to him, 'Yes, your reading of the political situation is perfectly right, it is going to erupt and sweep to the very gates of Jerusalem, and nothing will stop it'. It was important surely for Jeremiah that this second vision should have followed that of the almond tree rather than preceded it, otherwise it might have plunged him into complete despair. But he now had the assurance that, however grim and convulsive the world situation might prove to be for Judah, God was in control, and would fulfil His will in it all. Hence the command in 17 to be courageous and resolute. It is one thing to be trembling before the presence of the Lord, but we must not allow this to get out of hand. When God says He will commission us and be our enabling and our utter protection (18, 19) we dare not shrink, for with such empowerment we will be invincible, however costly the battle may be: men shall fight against us, but they shall not prevail, for the Lord is with us to deliver us (19).

10) 2:1-13

It will be helpful, as we begin to read these earlier prophecies of Jeremiah's, to look at 2 Kings 22 and 2 Chronicles 34:1-7 to see the immediate background of what is said in them. It will be seen that, from the eighth year of his reign, Josiah (now 16) began his first campaign against idolatry. Then, in the eighteenth year of his reign (when he was 26), he instituted the repair of the house of the Lord. This is when the book of the Law was discovered. This led to further extensive reforms (2 Chronicles 34/35). It is thought that Jeremiah 2-6 belong to the period of the first reform, that 7-9 were delivered in connection with the cleansing of the Temple and the recovery of the Law, and that 10-12 relate to the more extensive reforms that followed that discovery. We begin first of all with the section 2:1-4:4, which seem to belong to the early years of Josiah's reign, and before the destruction of the high places by the king, following the discovery of the Law book (c 621/20 BC). G. Adam Smith reminds us that these early oracles were not dictated to Baruch the scribe till 604/603, and that he added to them 'many like words' (36:32).

11) 2:1-13

The note struck in these verses is that of the religious apostasy of the nation and its bitter consequences already experienced (Skinner). They are addressed to the heart and conscience of the nation. In 1-3 the reference is back to the early days of Israel's walk with God. This echoes an earlier prophecy by Hosea (Hosea 2), and in underlining the 'marriage-bond' or covenant between God and His people, Jeremiah reveals that he was deeply nurtured on the teaching and message of the 8th century prophet. This reference is significant for another reason also: it pinpoints the real issue with Israel. For, in going back to these earlier days, Jeremiah is speaking of the time when Israel changed from being a nomadic to an agricultural people, and when they came in contact with the heathen religions of Canaan all around them - the nature-religions, fertility cults etc. - with all the inevitable temptations which accompanied them. Israel is represented in 4-13 as an unfaithful bride who has found another lover (another god), to whom she has transferred her homage. Religion became no longer a moral fellowship with Jehovah, but a sensuous abandonment to the wishes of nature. The contrast is made (10, 11) between the relatively faithful dealing of the heathen with their gods, and the falseness of Israel in changing from hers, and playing the harlot. Jeremiah calls the heavens to witness the terrible thing that has happened, in the twofold sin they had committed, forsaking the fountain of living water and hewing out broken cisterns that can hold no water. It is the degeneracy of Israel and their unaccountable perversity and degeneracy that are stressed, and it is a sad, sad, picture.

12) 2:14-19

The bitter consequences of such apostasy and unfaithfulness are only too clear. Such a fateful investment in evil pays heavy and bitter dividends as 17 makes clear. They had brought their parlous plight upon themselves, and there is more than a suggestion that God had withdrawn His protection from His people because they had drawn themselves from fellowship with Him. The echoes in 18 of other and earlier prophecies are significant: Isaiah had warned Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah not to turn to Assyria or to Egypt for help (Hosea strikes the same note also), but rather to the Lord. The tragedy is that under pressure from the north, Israel was not turning to the Lord but to the same broken reeds that Isaiah had so contemptuously dismissed in his day. It is not easy to read the grim words in 19 without a shudder of fear: they serve to point the lesson that the Apostle Paul teaches in Romans 1:18ff that when men do not like to retain God in their knowledge, He gives them up to a reprobate mind. Then sin takes over to become a grim and relentless teacher, well able to impart the lesson that the way of the transgressor is hard.

13) 2:20-28

The people of God are pictured as a degenerate vine. One recalls how a century previously Isaiah had used a similar metaphor (Isaiah 2), and it is interesting to see how much the later prophets owe to the earlier in their thoughts. Sensuality is a prime sin of Israel: 'Something in the nature of Israel made her throw off the control of ethical religion to find in the licentious rites of the Canaanite religion an irresistible attraction'. The 'adultery' referred to again and again in the prophets is both spiritual adultery against God and natural physical immorality, for in the nature religions, which were for the most part fertility cults with a strong emphasis upon sexuality, union with the deity was to be realised by fleshly intercourse with sacred persons dedicated to this purpose at the sanctuaries. Hence the rise of religious prostitution, a practice that still obtains today in some heathen religions. Thus the spiritual adultery and unfaithfulness to the covenant of the Lord was directly linked with physical immorality. This is why at times in the prophetic writings we cannot be sure whether it is literal or spiritual adultery that is being referred to.

14) 2:29-37

It was because of all the unfaithfulness referred to in the previous Note that misfortune and disaster were befalling the people. They had broken away from God, asserting their independence of Him (31). One thinks of the parable of the prodigal son in this connection, and his determination to assert his independence of his father and go his own way - it was this that ultimately led him to the swine-troughs. So it was with the people of God. It is impressive to see the repeated emphasis on the nuptial relationship (32) - it is as if the Lord were insisting on the seriousness of His people's sin, against an apparent inability on their part to see how terrible a thing they were doing to Him (35). This is but one more evidence of the blinding and insensitizing power of sin: it was so manifest and evident to God that there was no need for him to probe deeply in order to discover it (34), yet they were oblivious of the fact that their sin was blatant and that it cried to high heaven. When this is the situation, nothing can be done except to allow sin to do its terrible work and wreak its grim vengeance on those who commit it (36, 37). Sometimes people have to learn the hard way.

15) 3:1-5

This chapter presents problems of interpretation. The meaning in 1 seems to be: If a man divorces his wife and she goes from him and becomes another man's wife, is it likely that he will return to her? And if he did return, would not this be a terrible thing? Would not the land be greatly polluted? Well, if it is like that on the human level, says God, how is it on the spiritual? You have played the harlot with Me. Is it possible for you to come back, i.e. is it possible for any resumption of the old relationship? Has it not gone too far for the old relationship ever to be restored? If this be the meaning, the problem is that there are different views as to whether Jeremiah meant that the answer to that question was Yes or No. Some think Jeremiah is saying that there is no possibility now of a return, and that nothing is left but the judgment of the captivity. Others think differently, maintaining that Jeremiah is expressing the possibility that even yet, if only they will repent, things could still be restored. This is not really an academic question: it raises the still larger one as to whether in the earlier days of his ministry Jeremiah believed that restoration was possible, and only at a later date, when things became worse and worse, did he realise that nothing could be done. It may not be possible to decide about this; what we do know is that in the later years of his life he was clear that nothing could be done, and that even when things at one point did seem to be getting better, he prophesied boldly, saying in effect, 'No, you are past the point of no return and there is nothing for you now but the judgment of the captivity.'

16) 3:6-18

Readers of the RSV will note that this passage is written mainly in prose rather than in verse, and that it is saying something rather different, so different that it has led some commentators to think that it belongs to a different period, and disturbs the flow of the prophecy at this point. The connection is there, however, for all that, and we need not have recourse to such extremes of interpretation. It is in fact a message to Israel, the northern kingdom, who by this time were in captivity to Assyria. In 6-13 a contrast is drawn between Israel and Judah, and the Lord's respective relationship with them. Both were espoused to Him, and both have been unfaithful. The one has already been banished for their infidelity, the other, the more sinful of the two, is still in His house. The point being made is that Judah has not learned from the terrible judgment that has already befallen Israel, and there is almost a suggestion that captivity has begun to work graciously in the exiles from the northern kingdom (11-13), and an appeal is made to them to repent and turn to the Lord. In 14-18, this appeal blossoms into a full exhortation, not to Israel alone but to Judah also, with a promise of ultimate restoration as a united nation to Jerusalem. This is one of the astonishing things in the prophecy of Jeremiah - again and again we find hints that, grim though God's judgment will be, yet He will not make a full end of His people. Grace, not judgment, is to have the final word.

17) 3:19-25

These verses seem to continue the thought expressed in 1-5. Jeremiah seems to be saying in time of trouble they cry to the Lord, but what is that cry worth in face of all their terrible misdeeds? Is a pennyworth of repentance going to work miracles? (cf Hosea 6:1ff for a similar thought). It may be that this is how we are to interpret 21ff. G. Adam Smith, however, on the other hand, suggests that in 19ff we have an idealised picture of repentance and that they represent the prophet straining his ears, so to speak, to hear any possible note of repentance from the people. Perhaps also, they echo the repentance that took place when the reforms of Josiah began, after the discovery of the book of the Law. Whatever be the proper interpretation, however, we must read these verses alongside those in 4:1ff, for beyond question they give the Lord's view of what true repentance must mean for His erring people. For no mere outward reform could ever be sufficient: rather a deep heart work, represented in the words 'Break up your fallow ground and sow not among thorns' (4:4).

18) 4:1-4

These verses may well give expression to a growing awareness in Jeremiah's mind that the reforms that were being carried through by Josiah were not deep enough or radical enough to effect any lasting change in the fortunes of Judah, that they were 'too little and too late' to halt the downward movement into a disaster that now seemed to be inevitable, that they represented a sowing in ground that had not really been rid of weeds and thorns. The prophet in fact says very little about Josiah's reforms - which is all the more startling when one recalls just how much emphasis is made on them in 2 Kings 22ff and 2 Chronicles 34ff - while Jeremiah's contemporary Zephaniah completely ignores them. It has been pointed out that Jeremiah's estimate of Josiah in 22:15, 16 speaks of him not as an ecclesiastical reformer, but as a merciful man - it was what he was, not what he did, that was important and significant. Be that as it may, it is generally true that - apart from one or two notable exceptions - most significant times of reform throughout the whole prophetic era were marked more by the restoration of the ordinances of worship - the feast-days, particularly those of Tabernacles and the Passover - than by a return to the study of the Word and obedience to its moral directives. And it does almost seem as if, even in the context of the recovery of the book of the Law (2 Chronicles 34:18ff) and the renewing of the covenant which followed, the observance of the Passover (2 Chronicles 35) was in fact the climax and the heart of the renewal. To be sure, there can be no questioning the sincerity of that time, but it is possible to be deeply sincere and devoted in the desire to restore the true ordinances of worship without having an adequate awareness that this of itself may not suffice to break up the fallow ground, that, in fact, without a deep heart-work (4), it is simply to sow among thorns (3).

19) 4:5-31

There is a definite value in reading through this long passage at one time, for although it can be sub-divided into various groups of verses - 5-8, 9, 10, 11-22, 23-28, 29-31 - it holds together as a series of 'songs' or 'poems' about the impending invasion by an enemy that is unnamed. They are usually called the 'Scythian Poems', referring, it is said, to the invasion of Western Asia by the Scythians between 627 and 620 BC. Others maintain that the reference is to the Babylonians. The name of the foe is not in fact mentioned, and there is surely nothing to forbid us from accepting that both Scythians and Babylonians were in the prophet's vision as part of the outpouring of the one and the same divine judgment upon His people. Scythians or Barbarians, the north, to Judah, and to the discerning eye of the prophet, was a seething cauldron (1:13) about to erupt upon this sinning people. And erupt it did. And the sense of urgency so evident in the 'poems' is not called in question by the fact that the judgment was delayed by the goodness of King Josiah's reign. Who knows but that, but for the king's extensive reforms, the avenging rod would have fallen on Judah much earlier than it did (cf 2 Chronicles 34:26-28). The important thing for us to see is that the sands were running out for the sinning nation, and that Jeremiah was in fact interpreting his early vision (1:13) with reference to Judah's deadly danger. He was seeing, in other words, a movement among the nations of the north, in which he discerned the signs of coming judgment. In the light of this, one wonders what he would say today, about the Falkland crisis, not so much in terms of its outcome and resolution, but rather of its significance as a word of warning to our God-forgetting nation and our God-forgetting age.

20) 4:5-31

Sometimes there are circumstances in a national situation which make warnings of coming judgment more credible than at other times. This was certainly true in Jeremiah's day, for it was evident to men of any discernment that the Assyrian empire in the north was on the point of collapse and disintegration, and this alone was bound to foster a deep sense of uncertainty and foreboding. We may well imagine, therefore, with what chill of dread Jeremiah's words would come to the inhabitants of Jerusalem (5-8). Though the message in 11-22 is in itself clear and plain, we should pay particular attention to two notes struck in these verses. The first is the moral interpretation of the calamity that was to fall on the people. It was to happen because Judah had been rebellious against the Lord: their evil deeds had procured these things to them. This is an insight that is almost wholly out of favour in our day and generation, but in the minds of the Old Testament prophets there was no such thing as an arbitrary or coincidental happening: all had meaning. The second point is Jeremiah's identification with the nation in its woes and dread (19). G. Adam Smith says that this is one of the earliest instances of Jeremiah's bearing of the sins of the people and their punishment. The remarkable vision recorded in 23-26 may well have come to the prophet through the extremity of distress expressed in 19-22. It is true that when we are very over-wrought, we tend to see situations in over-lurid colours, and that things said in such a state are sometimes not the best or clearest judgments we make. But sometimes the opposite can be true: extremities of distress may clear our inward vision, and enable us to attain to a new dimension of insight, in which we see things as they really are, or are soon to be. Here Jeremiah sees the national situation with other eyes, and sees it stripped down to elemental terms, as the triumph of chaos over cosmos. We can hardly doubt that it represents the realisation of a divine judgment that had long been threatened, and that men were loath to believe would ever happen. And happen it did, in the tragedy of the captivity.

21) 4:5-31

Two further points remain to be considered. First of all, the remarkable word in 27b, 'Yet will I not make a full end'. Even in the context of his grim utterance of judgment, the prophet is able to discern better things, and see grace beyond judgment for the people of God. It is a thought echoed also in Amos 9:8; Isaiah 6:13; 10:21, and repeated in Jeremiah 5:10, 18. In the context of the dark and dread storm-clouds that are so evident in Jeremiah's prophecy, this emphasis is all the more impressive, for it indicates that even the ultimate disaster of captivity was to be discipline, not final doom, for the people of God. The other point relates to the sad and sorry picture the prophet paints in 30, 31 of the daughter of Zion. Indeed there are two pictures, the one of Zion as a harlot, dressed up in all her gaudy finery, vainly trying to fascinate her lovers once again - the various foreign alliances in which Jerusalem was trusting - and the other as a forlorn and pathetic castaway. The two really belong together, for the second shows the first for what it really is; the life of sin, however glamorous and full of adornment it may be, comes in the end to disgrace, shame and contempt. We sometimes speak of a 'moment of truth' coming to men, and this was surely Zion's moment, as she held out imploring hands, in vain, to her former associates. Sin, when it is finished, as the apostle says, always brings forth death.

22) 5:1-14

This passage depicts the prophet scouring the streets of Jerusalem in an effort to find an honest, God-fearing man. He fails in his search. It reminds us of Abraham's intercession for Sodom, and God being prepared to spare that wicked city if ten righteous men were found in it. Here, if even one righteous man were found in Jerusalem, God was prepared to pardon. It is some indication of the depth of Judah's iniquity that none was found. The message of 4 and 5 is particularly moving, and must have been very painful for the prophet: at first he thought that the apathy he saw everywhere could only be among the poor, who 'could not be expected to understand' (4). But when he sought for better things among the great, he was appalled to discover that the rot had set in there also. They had not only taken away the key of knowledge from the classes beneath them (Luke 11:54) but had made no use of it themselves (Skinner). They had thrown off all moral and religious restraints, and the realisation of this must have broken the prophet's heart. The point that is being made is that it is those who should have known better, the more enlightened, the nobles, the priests, the leaders of thought and opinion, who were in default. And, surely, this is the sinister nature of our own situation today, in that the intellectual and cultural leadership in our land is characterized by a spirit of decadence and even degeneration. The enormous influence for ill that so much questionable and unworthy material in the media has upon society in general makes it abundantly plain that the true wisdom that can guide and bless a nation is in woefully short supply among our 'great men'.

23) 5:1-14

Some commentators think that the passage refers to Jeremiah's coming to Jerusalem after long years in Anathoth, and that they record his sense of dismay at what he saw in the great city of his fathers - depravity, godlessness, and insensitiveness to sin everywhere. One thinks, as a parallel to this, of the reaction that people from overseas have when they come to Scotland, which they have been used to think of as a Christian nation - and they see the bingo halls, the betting shops, the vandalism, the drug-taking, the immorality. Is it surprising that they go back to their own land disillusioned and shocked by what they have seen? Another, even more apposite, parallel lies in the homecoming of missionaries after a few years abroad. How many have expressed their dismay at the general deterioration of standards everywhere apparent, in the comparatively short time they have been away? The indictment in 7 is very telling, and has its application to what has just been said about our own land; Israel had been so bountifully blessed by God, and yet...! Fed to the full with so many privileges, an open Bible, a full gospel, freedom to worship - all this has been true of Scotland, and yet.... And in the midst of it all - and this is as true of us as it was of Judah - the inability, and indeed refusal, to believe that the hand of God was upon them in the dangers that threatened them. How blind can men be?

24) 5:15-31

The rest of the chapter makes very grim reading. It is the terror of the coming judgment that is stressed in 15ff, and the sense of the unknown and the unpredictable in the coming of a nation of strange language. The idea appears to be the coming of something beyond their ken, and therefore demoralising in the fear and dread accompanying it. Again, in 19, there is the idea of a 'moment of truth' coming upon them as a decisive answer is given to their question 'Why has God allowed these things to happen to us?' The foolishness and the blindness of the people in face of the obvious judgments of the Lord are clearly in view, as the prophet spells out in detail the real meaning and interpretation of their plight. The judgments are in the natural realm, in agricultural blight and economic ruin. Should they not see that God, the all-powerful One (22) is able to do these things, and since he is also the all-holy One, He will and must do them? Should He not punish so, when men live so evilly (28, 29)? The note in the last two verses is sad and tragic - not only the falsity of the prophets and priests is lamented, but also the fact that the people loved to have it so. There was no desire anywhere, in prophet, priest or people, for the word of the Lord. What was there left, then, but judgment?

25) 6:1-15

The judgment referred to at the end of the previous Note is now shown in these verses to be urgent and imminent, and the country folk, who had fled to Jerusalem for shelter, are now exhorted to flee from a city whose walls and gates are about to be infested by enemy forces. The prophet's words in 4 about 'the shadows of the evening' have an ominous ring about them, indicative of his fearful conviction that time was running out for the people of God, and this is all the more striking in view of the city's insensitiveness to the coming doom and to the warning voice of God (10). Jeremiah's metaphor in 6b, 7 is very graphic, and its significance should not be missed. 'In a striking apostrophe he likens the city to one of those underground reservoirs on which the inhabitants depended for their water supply, where the water was carefully preserved from evaporation, and kept fresh and ready for use' (Skinner). The point being made is that its whole life is being polluted at source, and therefore no mere outward reform (such as Josiah had initiated) could ever hope to bring correction and healing. Most tragic of all, however, is the twofold reality of a people whose hearts are closed to the truth of God, and prophet and priest alike giving them false assurance (14), saying, 'Peace, peace; when there is no peace'. If only they had listened to the true prophetic voice!

26) 6:16-30

The grim note of judgment is even more urgent in these verses, and one has a graphic sense of the 'seething cauldron' ready to spew out its poisonous contents on the rebellious and hapless nation. Three verses in particular, 16, 19, 30, sum up their message. The real and authentic word of the Lord is given in 16, in words that are deeply moving, and timeless in their application. The 'old paths' refer to the moral absolutes of the law of God and the true religion of their forebears: these must be sought afresh, alongside a turning away from the newfangled, avant-garde attitudes that had wreaked such havoc in the life of the nation. This is surely a message we are in sore need of today. But Judah refused this counsel (16b, 19) just as she had rejected the warnings of providence ('the sound of the trumpet', 17) interpreted by prophecy (Skinner). Here their refusal is accepted as final: judgment can no longer be averted (18ff). This finality is also underlined in 30. Skinner's comment here is valuable: 'The Judah of Jeremiah's time is a crude compound of better and worse materials, whose value was to be determined by the amount of sound morals and true religion which it might contain; that it was the aim of Jeremiah's ministry to discover this value; that it had been an arduous and protracted process; and that the final result proved the nation to be utterly reprobate and rightly rejected by the Lord.' This, then, is the conclusion the prophet draws about the effect of Josiah's reforms. They were indeed 'too little and too late'.

27) 7:1-15

These verses record what has been called Jeremiah's 'Temple-sermon', in which he warns the people against a false trust in the house of God. One of the effects of Josiah's reforms was to bring about a confidence in the hearts of the people in their renewed Temple-worship, and this, to the prophet, was one of a number of signs that the reforms themselves were not radical enough, and therefore tended to mislead and delude the people into a false security. Scholars are divided as to when this particular message was delivered by Jeremiah. Most commentators think that it is a variant account of the address recorded in chapter 26, which is dated as having been given in the early days of Jehoiakim's reign, i.e. after Josiah's death at Megiddo in 608 BC. The two passages are certainly similar, but this does not necessarily mean that they refer to the same event. G. Adam Smith, probably rightly, refers it to Josiah's reign, and to Jeremiah's reaction against some sinister tendencies that he saw developing in the nation's life. Josiah's reforms were very widespread (2 Chronicles 34; 2 Kings 22), and one of the outstanding things he accomplished was the abolition of the altars and groves where idolatry had been practised. This had the effect of concentrating worship in Jerusalem itself, a notable accomplishment to be sure, but with the danger inherent in it that people should tend to think that because Temple worship had been restored all was necessarily well. But such worship in itself was an outward expression which need not necessarily have the right, or indeed any, inner meaning: it was simply ritual which could, and did, have no inner moral dynamic. This is always the danger of externalised religious forms; it is so easy to substitute outward ritual for inward reality. This is what lies behind the prophet's plaint in these verses.

28) 7:1-15

The emphasis Jeremiah lays on the ethical demands of the covenant is clear throughout, as is also the warning that if they are not met, then the trust of the people in their 'institutionalised' religion will speedily be shown to be a thing of straw. 'Shiloh' will be repeated (12), and disaster will overtake the nation at the hand of the Lord. We need only substitute 'Church' for 'Temple' to see how relevant Jeremiah's words are for today. Churchgoing is a great blessing, it is true, and the habit of it does a great deal in the life of a community wherever it obtains. And there is a sense in which it is a great accomplishment to get people to come back to church. But it is surely clear that by itself this could be not only insufficient in itself, but also a dangerous obscuring of the real issues involved in a return to God. The two things are not the same, and we confuse them at our peril. There is a real danger that people will come to trust in their return to church as if this were all that God required of them, especially if the impression is sometimes given by those in authority that it is all that is required of them. Jeremiah says that these are 'lying words'. There is indeed far too great a tendency today to think and speak of the church as if it were the great centrality, rather than Christ - we are to give of our substance to the Church, work for it, support it, love it. It is the Church, the Church, the Church all the time, never Christ. It is almost inevitable that with such an emphasis men tend to place their trust and confidence in their association with the Church, instead of in their relationship with Christ: the one becomes a substitute for the other. The words in 11 were quoted by our Lord in a situation remarkably like that of Jeremiah's day. In every age where worship becomes institutionalised and evacuated of its ethical meaning, this is always what happens to the true house of God.

29) 7:16-20

This brief section opens with a tremendously solemn word, which is repeated twice again (11:14; 14:11; cf also 15:1). There came a time, in Judah's history, when prayer for them was regarded by the Lord as useless, for they had passed the point of no return. It may be that this indicates a time following Josiah's death, but if the words were spoken during his reign, they seem to suggest that even this early Jeremiah was beginning to see that there was no hope for his people. This is a grim thought, but we must not think that it is an Old Testament conception only, for the same thought is expressed in 1 John 5:16, in relation to individuals. How solemn and solemnizing! The verses following it speak of the worship of the queen of heaven, the goddess Ishtar, and again this may refer to a time after Josiah's death, when Jehoiakim had reintroduced the idolatries that Josiah had banished from the land. Alternatively, however, it may refer to some residual heathen practices that still remained even in the context of the reforms that had taken place. The Reformers used to point to this verse as a condemnation of the Roman worship of the Virgin Mary, who is spoken of as the queen of heaven by Catholic people. Like Jeremiah, their hearts were sensitive to the affront done to the honour of Christ's name, something that is apparently set little store by in ecumenical discussions today.

30) 7:21-34

In 21-27 an important point of interpretation arises, in the contrast between 'obedience' and 'sacrifice' that forms the heart of the passage. Modern scholars insist that the obvious way to take these verses is that Jeremiah (in company with the other prophets) was in fact denying that God had ever instituted the sacrificial system for His people, that what He had always wanted of them was obedience, and that the true religion instituted by Him was the ethical, not the sacrificial. This is a very sweeping judgment, and if true, it discounts the whole sacrificial system of the Old Testament as invalid. We can hardly accept such a devastating abolition of something that speaks - and speaks so clearly - of Christ in type and illustration. There are signs of some movement away from such an extreme position nowadays and surely rightly so. For one thing, if it were a right interpretation, it would brand all later positions taken by Old Testament writers as erroneous, and indeed that of the New Testament itself, which in using the sacrificial symbolism and imagery must surely have believed in its origin in God. In this connection it is significant that when Malachi prophesied after the exile, his message was not to abolish the Temple offerings, but to renew them in the true spirit in which God had meant them to be used. Had Malachi missed the point, then, of these words in Jeremiah, and misinterpreted the message of God to his time? How could we say such a thing? No; what Jeremiah must mean here is surely that the primary reality in God's dealings with His people is the ethical obedience they are meant to offer to Him. Sinai comes before the Tabernacle! What Jeremiah is denouncing is the sacrifice that does not symbolise the repentant heart and that does not issue in righteous conduct. Apart from ethical obedience, no sacrifice is efficacious.

31) 8:1-17

The desecration of the graves (1-3) seems to have been a deliberate insult paid to a vanquished people by their victors, and gives us a graphic picture of the awful barbarity of ancient conquests. In the verses which follow (4ff), Jeremiah utters a dirge of doom, as he bewails the lack of true repentance among his people, and the judgment that must inevitably await them. In 4-7 it is perversity of the people that is in view. He has watched them carefully (cf the idea of the watching brief in 6:27ff), but for all his careful search, he has seen no sign of true repentance (6). Jeremiah observes: When men fall, it is usual for them to rise again; if a man turns away, he generally returns again; but this people are different: they are afflicted with a spirit of perpetual backsliding; the birds of the air obey the instinctive law of migration, but God's people are perversely false to the even deeper instinct wrought in them by the covenant to come back to God. He has set eternity in men's hearts, yet they do not obey its summons to come to Him for rest. In 8, 9, Jeremiah challenges what the scribes had made of the living law of the Lord, falsifying it by externalising its message, directing the people to the Temple and the sacrifices instead of to God Himself. In the light of this the force of 10-12 is clear, for it was by so doing that they had propounded much too slight and superficial an answer to the problem of the nation (the words 'peace, peace...' echo 6:12-15). In 13-17, the picture of impending doom is very stark and forbidding. The meaning of 15 appears to be that when it was too late, the people would become conscious of the false confidence they placed in the Temple and the sacrifices. It is sometimes only when it is too late that men see the emptiness of their trust and the unreliability of the foundations on which they have built. What a warning for today!

32) 8:18-9:1

Here is a wonderfully moving passage in which we see the hurt and heartbreak of the prophet as he mourns over the sins and woe of his people. It is not difficult to pass from these verses into the New Testament and to the words of Jesus as He wept over Jerusalem saying, 'If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace! But now they are hid from thine eyes' (Luke 19:41ff). How deeply Jeremiah feels for them, as they cry out in their distress, too late, for the help of their Lord and King (19); while in the background, almost faintly, there comes the rejoinder of the departing Lord, 'Why have they provoked Me to anger...?' The well-known words about the harvest being passed speak of both harvest times in the Hebrew year having failed (the grain harvest, in the field, was from April to June, while the summer harvest was of fruit and grapes). Then Jeremiah takes up the plaint in 21, and in the inexpressibly moving words of 22 exposes the tragedy of the whole situation: disaster had come upon the people in the very presence of that which could have decisively healed and restored them - there was a balm in Gilead to heal the sin sick soul and make the wounded whole. This is ever the tragedy of man: he sins away his day of grace in face of the open offer of free forgiveness and full healing. And in 9:1, the prophet's grief quite overcomes him as he weeps his heart out for the sin and shame of a Judah that has refused his tenderest pleadings and entreaties. What a revelation of the heart of God!

33) 9:2-9

Scholars think that these verses form a separate utterance, distinct from 1 and the verses immediately preceding. At all events, although the two passages follow immediately upon one another, there is in fact a difference of attitude expressed in them. In the earlier, Jeremiah is weeping over the sins and woe of his people, identifying himself with them in it all, taking them to his heart; but here, in these verses, he seems to be experiencing a revulsion of feeling against them, and wants to leave them altogether (2). This is not so inexplicable a contrast as might first seem, for the two differing emotions can often exist together. Times do come when, through very exhaustion from the burden of an unresponsive people, the only emotion left is the longing and yearning to escape from the intolerable ache. One recalls a similar emotion in David (Psalm 55), when he longed for the wings of a dove, to fly away and be at rest. Nor is it a wrong emotion, for if we say, as we surely must, that the Spirit of Christ breathes in the tender words of the weeping prophet, then we should recognise that the Holy Spirit can be, and sometimes is, grieved away by the sins of the people. It is a word of wide application, and has relevance in many differing work-situations in the service of God.

34) 9:2-9

We should notice the nature of the complaint that the prophet makes against the people. The emphasis throughout is on the sins of the tongue: cheating, slander, and lies - these are the sins he complains of. It is the complete breakdown of moral standards, not unlike the situation in the days of the Judges, when every man did that which was right in his own eyes (Judges 21:25). There may in fact be a particular significance, however, in the charge of slander, in that it was about this time that Jeremiah encountered and discovered that a campaign of slander was being mounted against him, and one which developed into a plot to destroy him for his faithfulness to the word and will of God (cf 11:9, 18, 19). We shall see the meaning and explanation of this first attempt to kill the man of God when we come to study chapter 11. All we need say at this point is that it was because Jeremiah gave such faithful support to the teachings of the word of God (11: 5), and because this led to challenging the status quo in Anathoth, that his life was endangered. This is always when and how opposition arises in the work of God - when the teaching of the Word makes it clear that things are wrong in the 'status quo', and men are not prepared to change in their attitudes and practices so as to conform to that word. This, then, was Jeremiah's lot, and we may well think that, with such a sensitive spirit as his, he would feel the pain of their reviling the Word more than the danger to his own life.

35) 9:10:26

The grim picture of judgment in 10, 11 reminds us of the desolations spoken of in 4:23ff. The prophet 'sees' as it were into the future and describes the desolation that is to take place. In 9:2-16, the moral reason for the desolations are given. The 'because' in 13 corresponds to the 'therefore' in 15. How little men reason like this today, in face of the disasters and misfortunes that come upon them whether individually or collectively! So far has our generation departed from any form of biblical thinking. In 17-22, the dirge of doom continues, and lurid descriptions of the wasting and destruction of the city are given. When death has done its work, there will be nothing left. Then, in 23, 24, we have one of the most notable and profound of all Jeremiah's sayings. Wisdom, might or riches - these are not the things for a man to glory in, although in fact men were then, and still are today, prone to do so. The sole ground of glorying ought to be that a man should understand and know the Lord. The contrast is complete: what the prophet has been saying earlier in the chapter about the doom and desolation that were sure to come upon Jerusalem is the inevitable and logical outcome and fruit of glorying in wisdom, might and riches. That way leads to death. It is knowledge of God that alone can lead to life (cf 1 Corinthians 1:31; 2 Corinthians 10:17; so also John 17:3). The final two verses of the chapter speak of the identity of treatment which the circumcised and the uncircumcised will receive. Judah was circumcised in the flesh, but not in the heart and spirit, and therefore she was as the heathen to the Lord (there are echoes of this in Romans 2:28, 29; cf also Deuteronomy 30:6).

36) 10:1-25

G. Adam Smith calls 10:1-10 a spirited, ironic poem on the follies of idolatry. It is the echo of several others in different parts of the OT Scriptures (e.g. Isaiah 44; Psalm 115). The message is a familiar one, and the contrasts between the 'scarecrow'-type idols (5) and the true and living God is complete. There is little need of comment here, but one point needs to be underlined. In the contrast that is made, the irony Jeremiah uses is biting and contemptuous, and the emptiness and futility as well as the pathos of the heathen practices are made to stand out - practices which God's own people were now only too prone to follow and emulate. But when Jeremiah speaks of God (as in 6, 7, 10, 12-14), there is a ring of authority and a deep impressiveness that are quite unmistakable. This derives not so much from Jeremiah himself as from the subject he deals with. There is a real message here. Let a man be gripped by the grandeur and glory of the gospel, and there will always be a ring of authority about what he says. It is this that explains the gripping and arresting quality of true preaching. It obliges men to listen, whether or not they agree with what is said.

The remainder of the chapter (17-25) seems to belong to a time later than Josiah's, for what is described is the siege and desolation of the city as about to take place. The warnings are couched in language that makes it seem on the very point of happening. The picture is very much like that with which western Europe became so familiar in the early years of the Second World War, when refugees in their tens of thousands sought vainly for shelter. In 19 and 20 the desolation of the people's hearts is echoed, but it is surely Jeremiah speaking, as once again he takes upon himself the burden and guilt of the nation. In this, Jeremiah demonstrates the true and proper attitude to the judgment of God - that of humble submission to it, accepting it as from Him. This is how the nation must react, if it would know the divine forgiveness and renewal. So also 23-25, which are a confession by and for Israel as a nation ('judgment' in 24 is fairness or justice). The only safe way is to commit oneself into the hands of a just God.

37) 11:1-8

'This covenant' in 2 must surely refer to the book of the Law discovered in the Temple in Josiah's time, and these verses therefore record Jeremiah's reaction to that discovery. The prophet is instructed by the Lord to preach the word of the covenant to the people, and his response in 5, 'So be it, Lord' ('amen, Lord') indicates his wholehearted assent to its teaching. This may be thought to contradict what we have already said about his misgivings concerning Josiah's reforms, but to assume this would be to miss the point. It was not the book of the Law as such, but the failure of the reforms to take its spiritual teaching seriously enough that was his concern. If this had been done, and the heart and conscience of the nation been really ploughed deep down by the Word, Jeremiah would have had no complaint. It was because things worked out so differently that his misgivings increased. Here we simply have his natural eagerness and enthusiasm for what could have been, and should have been, a deep and radical spiritual movement. It is this that highlights a solemn lesson: God's people had received a wonderful opportunity to inherit the blessing of God, but missed it. It is the story of a tragic 'might have been', and it was the realisation that that opportunity had slipped away that caused Jeremiah's agony of spirit. If Jeremiah's teaching of the inward message of the Law had been listened to, that would have saved the nation.

38) 11:9-17

These verses seem to refer to a time later than Josiah, probably that of Jehoiakim's reign, for they speak of a regression, and a return to the old idolatrous ways which Josiah had swept away. Clearly, idolatry is once again rampant in the land. 'Conspiracy' in 9 is rendered 'revolt' in RSV - Jeremiah speaks of this fresh declension of the people as if there had been a deliberate attempt to thwart the divine purposes: their resistance against the Word of the Lord was determined and set. It was no accidental slipping back into idolatry, but purposeful and malignant. This serves to explain, and is reinforced by the grim words in 14 'pray not thou for this people': they had passed the point of no return in their deliberate attitude of rebellion (cf Note on 7:16, Monday, 12 July). In 15, 16, the RSV rendering is helpful. The reference is to the false and complacent trust of the people in their institutions and observances, the externals of worship, which were merely outward, while their hearts remained untouched and unchanged. 'Do you suppose', says Jeremiah, 'that this is going to avert the doom hanging heavily upon you?' The idea in 12-14 may well be that God will turn deaf ears to their cries and prayers when that doom comes upon them in the same way that the false gods whom they had sought after are unable to help them. It is a variant of the thought expressed in 2:13, 'they have forsaken Me, the fountain of living water, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water'.

39) 11:18-12:6

This is an important section of Jeremiah's prophecy: it constitutes the first of a series of intimate and personal utterances which have come to be known as 'The Confessions of Jeremiah' (the others are: 15:10-12; 15:15-21; 17:9, 10; 17:14-18; 18:18-23; 20:7-12; 20:14-18). We have already made reference to the first plot on Jeremiah's life. There were others, when he was evilly treated and threatened with death by enraged and antagonistic nobles, and even by the king himself. It would seem that Jeremiah's early support of the reforms of Josiah, with the implications they had for the malpractices in many of the small communities throughout the land, including Anathoth, aroused the ire and opposition of many, including those of his own family (12:6). Let a man touch the status quo of any community, and he will inevitably arouse its ire; and the deeper their involvement in it, the more serious and dangerous will their reaction be. This is how it was with Jeremiah: it was asking for trouble to preach as he preached. He knew this, but he also knew there was a compulsion upon him so to preach. And he discerned, whether by a sudden spiritual illumination or gradually (18, 19) the thoughts of their hearts, and knew they were resolved on destroying him. He prays in 20 for vengeance on those who have so outraged and threatened him, and in answer he receives a revelation of the doom that awaits his persecutors (22, 23). The comforts of such assurance for those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake are obvious, and we should bear in mind that when we do suffer for Christ's sake, the living, Almighty Lord espouses our cause, and that it never goes well with those who set themselves against the servants of God.

40) 11:18-12:6

What is said at the end of the previous Note does not however answer all Jeremiah's problems. He is perplexed in spirit, hence the famous soliloquy in 12:1-4. It is the problem of evil, that vexed Job so much, that vexes the soul of Jeremiah also, the mystery of a providence that, against all the assurance in the Scriptures to the contrary, seems to favour evil men, or at least be unmindful of their evil, for they continue to walk smoothly and live at ease. Scholars have pointed out the conflict between the ideal teaching of the Law - e.g. in Deuteronomy, that obedience to the Law brings blessing, whereas disobedience brings cursing and judgment - and the real experience of Jeremiah, who was in fact suffering, not prospering, for his faithfulness to God. And these scholars tend to dismiss the Law's teaching as wrong, in face of Jeremiah's experience, and indeed that of a host of others. But this is to treat the Law in a cavalier fashion, for the law does preserve an authentic insight in this regard when it teaches that those faithful to the law will prosper, and those who are not will suffer, although it does not give the whole truth. It is just that life cannot be neatly tied up and pigeon-holed, as Job and Jeremiah both found. There are many times when the stock answers (such as those given by Job's comforters) are the right ones, but there are some occasions when these do not fit and are not appropriate; and when this happens, we must be prepared, in recognising that a deeper dimension is at work, to remain in darkness and not know the answer to the 'Whys' of life. This is how it was here.

41) 11:18-12:6

The answer God gives to the agonised questionings of the prophet is in 5, in well-known but not always well-understood words; Skinner's rendering is helpful:

With footmen thou hast run and art weary,
Then how wilt thou vie with horses?
In a land of peace thou art not at ease,
Then how wilt thou fare in Jordan's brake?

and the RSV translation is even better. The 'swelling' of Jordan (AV), also rendered 'the pride of Jordan', does not refer to the swelling of the agitated waters of the river, but to the luxurious growth of cane, willows, etc. which clothes its margin and its banks, and was a haunt of lions in ancient times. It is a striking answer that Jeremiah receives to his wistful questionings of the Lord's dealing with men - not comfort, not assurance, but 'a stern summons to a more heroic and strenuous conflict with the forces arrayed against the truth' (Skinner). Perhaps the best way of interpreting these words is to read in them a contrast between the trials of the prophet's earlier ministry in Anathoth and the much more considerable and formidable opposition he must encounter in Jerusalem. It is as if God were saying to him, 'There is worse to come yet, Jeremiah. Do not ask for an easier time; pray to be made strong enough to face all that will yet befall you.' A stark, blunt, almost harsh word - yet we cannot doubt but that it was a word full of grace for Jeremiah, and, doubtless one that would spur him to the kind of heroism that God was requiring of him. He knows what we are capable of far better than we ourselves know, and we cannot doubt but that Jeremiah rose to the challenge magnificently.

42) 12:7-17

These verses unfold an oracle, dating probably near the time of Nebuchadnezzar's assaults on Jerusalem in 598 BC. It is God who is speaking, and He pronounces a sentence of doom upon His people. But the striking thing is that that sentence is pronounced, as G. Adam Smith puts it, with pain and astonishment. And His love for His people shines through even in the necessity He finds in punishing them. They are still His 'dearly-beloved' (7). And He is strong enough to resist pity for them, strong enough to allow the judgment to come upon them. But they are still His people. This gives the lie to the terrible misinterpretation of the Old Testament Scriptures which suggests that He is represented as a harsh, unfeeling Tyrant. Not so: He judges in love, and it is His beloved that He is judging, in His perfect justice, bringing such pain and distress to His own holy heart. The idea expressed in 9 is a graphic one: an unusual bird, when exposed to other birds, is often attacked by them because it is unusual; and God's people were different from other peoples, and therefore when outwith the divine protection and care, they became the prey of all and sundry. 'Pastors' (shepherds) in 10 do not have here any spiritual connotation, but refer to the marauding bands round about, attacking Jerusalem under the control of Nebuchadnezzar. 14-17 look beyond the troubles of the time to a future restoration, not only of God's own people but also of the 'outside' nations, if they will swear by the name of the Lord and walk in obedience to Him. It is striking, is it not, even in the context of such a grim picture of judgment, the promise of grace should be so firm and clear. Judgment is ever God's 'strange work'.

43) 13:1-11

The parable of the girdle, or loin-cloth contained in these verses is an acted parable with a deep symbolism attached to it. This symbolism is often used by the prophets to convey spiritual truth. Jeremiah was commanded to buy a loin-cloth and after wearing it, but without washing it, to bury it in the cleft of a rock at the Euphrates, and then after many days to dig it out again, when he found it marred and rotted, and good for nothing. So, as Adam Smith puts it, had the Lord taken Israel to cleave to Him as such a cloth cleaves to the loins of a man; but separated from Him they had likewise rotted and were good for nothing. The message is surely clear and plain: Israel was meant to stand in a relationship of fellowship with the Lord, and in that relationship to fulfil her true destiny, just as the loin-cloth when worn would be fulfilling its true function. It is in union with Him that we find ourselves and find the true meaning of life: we come into our own. But separated from God we become good for nothing. It is not clear whether we are meant to take the reference to Euphrates literally or metaphorically. Delitzsch maintains it must be taken literally, even though the distance from Jerusalem - some 250 miles - is great, and the repeated emphasis on the name seems to indicate this. The question, however, is not of primary importance compared with the moral interpretation of the parable as a whole. We should also note the interaction, in 9 and 10, of the divine initiative and the human responsibility of Israel in the marring process: it is God who mars the pride of Judah, but it is the people themselves who walk after other gods and therefore mar themselves. The divine judgment consists in God confirming their refusal to walk in His ways. It is a frightening parable.

44) 13:12-27

Another parable, that of the wine jars follows in 12-14. Just as strong drink confuses a man's walk and thought, so will the Lord's judgment be. Judah will be so drunken and confused in the day of calamity that they will scarcely be able to distinguish between friend and foe and this will lead to their fighting against one another, brothers killing brothers, fathers killing sons in blind panic. In the next verses (15-17) Jeremiah cries out in warning love to the people. There is something terribly moving about the picture his words represent: a people wandering about, heedless and careless in their sin, stumbling helplessly as the evening comes on and the dusk begins to fall, and - sadly and tragically - unaware that their day of grace was slipping away. It is the realisation of their failure and inability to heed the warning voice that causes Jeremiah's heart such pain (17). The reference in 18, 19 is said to be to Jehoiachin (Jeconiah or Coniah) and his mother: here Jeremiah summons the royal house itself to repent. The last movement of the chapter (20-27) speaks of the judgment to come through the Babylonians, who are the foe from the north. The meaning of 21 is seen in Skinner's rendering: 'What wilt thou say when thou findest set o'er thee as heads them whom thyself mad'st familiar with thee as friends?' The reference seems to be to the attempts made from time to time by Judah to make alliances with Babylon (cf Isaiah 37). The reason for the catastrophe about to overtake them is made clear in 22 and 25, but the remarkable thing is that the people of God should be asking why these things were coming upon them, when their sins were crying out to high heaven, and obvious to all. There is, alas, a blinding power in sin which obscures even the obvious from the hearts and minds of men.

45) 14:1-12

The general tenor of this and the next chapter is very dark and gloomy, yet they are brightened for us by some remarkable insights into the prophet's inward spiritual state and his soliloquies. In 1-6 we have a description of a great drought that beset and devastated Judah, some think toward the closing years of Josiah's reign, others perhaps a little later on, into the reign of Jehoiakim. The picture is a grim one, and is often paralleled in some parts of the world today when the monsoons fail. There is no need of comment, as the verses are very clear and plain; the interest and significance lie in what follows in 7-9, which contain a very moving prayer in face of the drought and distress. A real question arises, which is significant for interpretation: whose prayer is this? The prophet's, or the people's? It has been taken in both ways, and we can look at them in turn. At all events, it is a prayer of confession, and the well-known words 'why art thou as a stranger in the land?' may well represent Jeremiah's own cry of pain and distress as he takes upon himself the burden of the people's sin. There are three images in these verses, and God is spoken of as 'a stranger', 'a wayfarer', and 'a confused or stunned man'. The 'stranger' metaphor suggests either the idea of God being 'out of it', the 'odd one out', cold-shouldered by His people, or - more probably - that He had not been known in the land for long enough. It is the thought conveyed in 1 Samuel 3, where the word of the Lord was precious in those days, i.e. a scarce commodity. We shall continue discussion of the other two 'pictures' in the next Note.

46) 14:1-12

The image of the 'wayfarer' (8) seems to suggest the mere passing presence of the Lord, rather than His constant, abiding reality. A traveller 'looks in', on his way to somewhere else; it is a brief visit that he makes, and he is off next morning. There may conceivably be a suggestion that in the time of drought a welcome shower of rain came, and men thought that God had turned away His wrath, but the blazing sun dried up the moisture once more. It was no more than a passing shower. The third picture, that of a strong man who has been stunned and confused so that he cannot exercise his strength: the idea seems to be that the continuing drought must indicate that God is not able to help them - surely the expression of dark despair. It may be in relation to this that we are meant to take what is said in 9b, with the emphasis 'yet thou, O Lord, art in the midst of us...' a desperate attempt at assurance in spite of all the evidence to the contrary. If so, and if the words are Jeremiah's, then what follows in 10-12 is the divine answer to the prophet: the people, says the Lord, are incurably sinful, and the Lord does not accept them. The prophet is told not to pray for them.

The other interpretation is that 7-9 represent not Jeremiah's, but the people's, prayer for themselves. Skinner suggests that Jeremiah may well have written down the words as he heard them sung by the Temple choir. This is perhaps stretching imagination more than a little, but one sees his point. It is the expression of popular religion which, when it is examined, is seen to be markedly defective in true ethical qualities, for there is no real sense of penitence or intention of amendment of life. In this respect, it corresponds to the famous passage in Hosea 6, where Israel's facile repentance is spoken of as being like the morning cloud and the early dew that pass away by noon.

47) 14:13-22

In 13-16 it is certainly Jeremiah that speaks, as he complains, in defence of the people, that they have been misled by the false prophets. It is interesting to see how they mistook the merely natural sense of optimism and complacency ('It can't happen to us') for a spiritual conviction from the Lord. How often we have to make do with such a spirit and attitude today, instead of having a real word from the Lord, particularly if the word from the Lord should prove unpalatable. In 17, 18, the weeping of the prophet is for the rape of the people. The reference in 17 is to the original relationship between Israel and the Lord which had become so sullied by the sin that had come between them. The picture in the latter part of 18 is very frightening, linking with the thought of 13-16: prophet and priest, the official representatives of religion, ply their trade and have no knowledge. Does it mean they have no notion of what they are doing or where they are going? The words seem to echo Hosea's, 'My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge' (Hosea 4:6). In 19-22 we have another prayer, parallel to that in 7-9, and subject to the same doubt as to interpretation. Is it Jeremiah's prayer or the people's? Perhaps more likely the latter, and it is answered in similar terms to the first, in 15:1-4. We may learn from this that even when we pray the right words, and express the right sentiments, in prayer, the prayer may be void of reality because the heart is not right in God's sight. It would be possible to regard 19 as a very soulful, spiritual cry, but it may also be a petulant and peevish plaint that God was not apparently taking much notice of them. And if 15:1 is any indication, what God is saying to the question in 19 'hast thou utterly rejected Judah?' is 'Yes, I have'. Intercession for such a people is useless, were it made even by Moses and Samuel. They are doomed to perish, by the sword, famine, and exile.

48) 15:1-9

The reference to Moses and Samuel in 1 is illuminating, for it underlines that God is a God Who can be entreated for His people. And the fact that here He was not to be so entreated is some indication of how far they had gone beyond the boundary of His patience and forbearance. One has only to recall Exodus 32, and Moses' intercession after the episode of the Golden Calf, and 1 Samuel 7:8, 9, and Samuel's pleading for Israel which led to the rout of the Philistines, to realise how serious and fateful the situation in Jeremiah's day had become. This people had already reached a point where no intercession could touch them. 'Let them go', says God. Doom is appointed for them, irrevocably and irretrievably. The reason is given in 4 - 'because of Manasseh', whose wicked reign brought the nation to a point of no return, and sealed its doom, and not even Josiah's godly reign which followed could serve to turn back the day of wrath, although of course it did postpone it. A relentless and inexorable picture is given in 5-9 of the desolation of Jerusalem. We should note the words in 6, 'you keep going backward' (RSV), and compare this with a similar word in Hosea (11:7), 'My people are bent to backsliding'. In 9, 'her sun went down while it was yet day' may contain a reference to the untimely death of Josiah at the battle of Megiddo, although others take the passage to refer to the doom of Jerusalem later under Nebuchadnezzar. Either way, the relentless sense of the inevitability of disaster stands out: it is a grim and frightening picture.

49) 15:10-21

We have in these verses another of Jeremiah's remarkable soliloquies (apart from 13, 14, which is a clear reference to the coming doom of judgment and captivity in Babylon). The RSV rendering of 10-12 reads differently from the AV, and helps towards a more adequate understanding of what the prophet is saying; Jeremiah complains that he had ever been born, because it appeared to him that he had been born a man of strife and contention to the whole land. He was against everybody; he was grating upon everybody, because of his faithfulness to the message he was given to proclaim. And withal, he had wept tears of anguish and pain over the hurt of the daughter of his people, having prayed for them in trouble and distress. G. Adam Smith renders 12, 'Is the arm on my shoulder iron, or brass my brow?', which may be taken to mean a cry something like, 'O God, I am flesh and blood; there is just so much I can stand, I am not made of iron, Have mercy on me and spare me in all this, I cannot stand it anymore'. Whatever difficulties there may be in the translation, the gist of what is said is surely clear. Jeremiah is gripped with a sense of the desolation and loneliness of his work and his attitude is, 'I did not ask for this work, I shrank from it, and still do. Yet I have done it, and look at the result.' It is never easy to be unpopular, or to say unpopular things, and to go against the stream, in a day that is impatient of harsh and gloomy prognostications. The persecution and the obloquy that came upon him were hard and bitter for him to bear. How well we can understand, in such a context, his wish that he had never been born!

50) 15:10-21

We see in 15ff how Jeremiah truly shared in the reproach of the Lord over His people, and was partaker of His sufferings. Yet the burden of continued failure, in the sense of the unresponsiveness of the people, was sometimes almost more than he could bear. He was flesh and blood, after all, not made of iron (12), and was the most sensitive of men. In such a situation of stress and agony, Jeremiah experienced two contrasting emotions: on the one hand, he knew the ineffable sweetness of fellowship with the Lord, through His word (16); and on the other, he knew a desolation of loneliness (17b) that well-nigh undermined his faith, as dark and obstinate questionings troubled him more and more (18). He seems to have come to the place where he was utterly spent in exhaustion, with deep doubts assailing his faith in the goodness of God; this is the force of the 'deceitful brook' (RSV), and the 'waters that fail' (18b). Skinner comments, 'The impulse of his youthful consecration was exhausted by the continued strain and labour of his work, and he appeared to realise that he had come near to forfeiting his office by losing its spirit, and that he needed a renewal of his vocation, a reinstatement in his mission, if he was to continue to act as a prophet of the Lord. He learns further, that the condition of victory over the world is victory over himself.' Hence the words of the Lord in 19ff, words of challenge and summons to even nobler and more heroic living, in much the same spirit as we saw in 12:5.

51) 16:1-13

The force and significance of the challenge and assurance given to the prophet in the closing verses of the previous chapter are now underlined in these verses, in which it becomes plain that the striking of a note of heroic endeavour was very necessary for him at this time in his ministry. In 1-4 Jeremiah is forbidden to marry or have children. We must understand this in its context. There was a fearful foreboding of doom upon his mind and spirit; he felt himself to be 'the prophet of a nation's dying agony' (Skinner), and he pictured any children born in that time as certain victims of the terror that was soon to fall upon the land. His celibacy and childlessness, then, were to be integral to the message he bore to the nation, just as Hosea's tragic heartbreak had been, in a previous generation. Jeremiah was to stand alone (cf 15:17), alone in the sense of having no comfort or companionship, sympathetic wife, and alone in the sense of being different from the natural state of men. It need hardly be said that the circumstances here were unusual and exceptional, and that there is no thought expressed or implied that marriage is a less spiritual or worthy state than celibacy. But we are reminded that as a gift and blessing it is God's to bestow or withhold, and that men do not have a right to it as a matter of course, nor must it be snatched at when He is not pleased to give it. Sometimes He does withhold, for His own wise purposes, and sometimes He says, 'not yet.' The 'special circumstances' reflected here are aptly paralleled in the Apostle Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 7, where he speaks in relation to the 'present distress' (1 Corinthians 7:26). In 5-13, two further prohibitions are given to the prophet, and these serve to set the first (1-4) in truer perspective. He was to exclude himself from mourning and feasting: joy and sorrow alike were to be regarded as vain, and he was to remain detached from them, and dissociated from them, just as God Himself now was. God had already said, 'You are not to pray for them anymore, Jeremiah', and now neither their sorrow nor their joy were to be suitable objects for the prophet's interest anymore.

52) 16:14-21

14, 15 are repeated in 23:7, 8, almost literally, and some scholars think the verses are out of place here, and have been transcribed from the later chapter. Others, however, maintain that in them we have an outburst from the prophet relieving the deadly pressure upon his heart since - after all - God is speaking to him about the fact that after the judgment there will come restoration. In 16-18, the emphasis is on the judgment to come under the image of fishers and hunters, and the idea expressed is the thoroughness of God in sifting them out. No one would escape: they will be fished, as fishermen fish for their fish, and drawn in a net; they will be hunted from every nook and cranny, and no one will be able to hide from the divine wrath (cf Revelation 6:15-17). In 19-21, Jeremiah takes refuge from the harshness and severity of the doom that he is pronouncing upon the nation, and in that refuge looks out with the eye of faith to see a future that is far different - the gathering in of the nations, the heathen world, to the faith of Jehovah. The real day of God's power was yet to be. It says a great deal, does it not, for the resilience of Jeremiah's faith that he should have been able to utter these words, and crouch, as it were, in the shadow of the rock, and look out into the approaching judgment and see through it and see beyond it to the final purposes of the living God. It is the basic biblical affirmation that evil does not have the last word in the affairs of men and that even in the context of judgment God's mercy and grace reach out to the future. Jeremiah, looking out into the far distances, was able to see emerging from the disaster of judgment something bigger and greater, no less than a new covenant made by God with His people in which His laws would be written on their minds and hearts.

53) 17:1-11

The passage begins with a graphic metaphor descriptive of the people's sin (1-4). What is the force of this illustration? It is that, being written, as on stone, metal or glass, by the graver's pen, it is inerasable: nothing can rub it out. And if so, then nothing can hide it from the gaze of Jehovah, which means that judgment upon it is certain. It is another way of emphasising the truth that we have already seen earlier, that God had purposed judgment upon this people because of the sins of Manasseh - it was then that the mark had become ineradicable, and too deep for anything to be done. The phrase 'upon the horns of your altars' indicates that their sin was deeply embedded even in their religious life, and this may have a reference to their trust in the Temple and the outward ceremonials of religion while their hearts were far from God. One commentator points out that the word 'discontinue' in 4 is a technical word having reference to the ancient Jewish law which required that every seventh year would be a sabbatical year for the land and the crops. What God is saying is 'Your land will lie fallow, I am going to give it a sabbatical year, and there will be nobody to plough it, for you will all be in Babylon'. In the light of this, the words that follow in 5 serve as an interpretative comment: having described the nature of the curse that was to come upon them, the prophet explains its underlying reason in the starkest of terms. We shall look at what he says in more detail in the next reading.

54) 17:1-11

It is difficult for us in our well-irrigated land to see the force of the contrast that Jeremiah makes in 6 and 8, but those who live abroad know how desperately important irrigation and water supply always are. It is the difference between barrenness and drought on the one hand, and flourishing, healthy growth on the other. Similarly, in the spiritual realm, there are only two alternatives: either trust in the Lord or trust in the arm of the flesh. And Jeremiah is not merely saying that the man who trusts in man is mistaken in his confidence: he is cursed, because that trust in man represents a revolt against the true and living God. In the last analysis, the Scriptures do not allow of a middle position, a kind of innocuous and harmless 'half-way house': we are either 'for' or 'against' God and the things of God. Hence the 'Cursed' and the 'Blessed' in 5 and 7. What follows in 9 seems directly linked to 5-8, and the meaning seems to be this: If the way of life, trusting in the Lord, is so blessed and fruitful, and the way of cursing so dire and terrible, why does man choose the latter rather than the former? The answer can lie only in the sheer perversity of the human heart, which is 'deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked'. The question 'who can know it?' at the end of 9 is answered in 10: the Lord Himself adjudges the human heart in all its perversity, and is able to assess its true condition, and apports due treatment accordingly. And His judgment is always according to righteousness.

55) 17:12-18

The prayer for healing in 14 is interesting and significant in relation to the earlier verses of the chapter. Some think it refers back to 9, 10, where Jeremiah speaks of the heart of man being so deceitful, and that in this soliloquy here he is being desperately honest before God, exposing his own heart to Him and asking 'Am I as deceitful as the rest of them? Examine my motives, O Lord.' There are a number of things to note here, as the prophet asks himself questions before God. The RSV rendering of 16a, 'I have not pressed Thee to send evil' is better than the AV and should be followed. In the RSV rendering it stands as a disavowal, almost as if he had asked himself the question, 'Have I taken a secret delight in pronouncing these harsh judgments upon the people?' Anyone who is a preacher will appreciate fully the point that Jeremiah is making, for it is one of the subtlest dangers that could ever face a minister of God. If God gives him a message that is hard and severe, he may proclaim it in love and with a breaking heart; but if he is not careful, he may find himself, perhaps almost unconsciously, taking a perverse delight in preaching it. It is one thing to speak out the judgment of God and the reality of divine wrath with vehemence, it is quite another to do so in the spirit of Christ, and with a shrinking heart. And when, in preaching it we suffer hurt, contempt and reproach, the temptation to be secretly glad when judgment does come can be very real indeed, and a justifiable desire for vindication (18) may well have less worthy motives mixed with it. We can never be too careful about this, and the prayer for healing (14) should never be very far from our lips

56) 17:19-27

It will be useful to relate these verses to what is said in 16:10, where the people ask why God has pronounced judgment upon them and the answer is given because they had forsaken His law. It is this that is now spelt out, in this remarkable passage about Sabbath-breaking. If we did not understand this aright, we might be tempted to suppose this emphasis is lopsided and distorted, for surely there were more serious things than Sabbath-breaking in Judah's long catalogue of sin? But it is not merely the violation of the Sabbath day as such, but all that that symbolises and signifies, that is so important. Sabbath desecration was the symbol of the nation's drift from the things of God; the Sabbath was a covenantal sign, and in breaking it they were violating the covenant itself. Sabbath desecration was not the disease itself, but it was the classical symptom - as it is today also, for it pinpoints not only what men think about God's laws, but also what they think about God Himself. God instituted the Sabbath to be a day when He specially meets with His people, and therefore to neglect it and violate it is to turn away from Him. It is to refuse fellowship with God. This is the point at issue: it is not a matter of whether it is right or wrong to kick a football on a Sunday, or to do some shopping, or whatever; it is what these things symbolise. If a man loves God, and loves the worship of His Name, he is going to prize God's day, and not relegate his love for Him, and his worship of Him to a convenient corner of the day and use the rest of it in secular activity. This is the point that Jeremiah makes here: it is not merely the pinpointing of a narrow, puritanical idea but a going to the very heart of the issue: neglect of God's day is neglect of God, and an attack upon it is ultimately an attack on God Himself.

57) 18:1-12

We come in these verses to one of the best known passages in Jeremiah, the story of the prophet's visit to the potter's house. An inner prompting or intimation led him to the house of the potter, and what he saw there 'spoke' to him from the Lord. This is how we should interpret the incident. Jeremiah saw the potter at work; he saw a vessel which he had made marred in his hands, and the potter, instead of throwing it away, proceeded to remould the clay into another vessel. Jeremiah 'got the message' in what he saw. It is a parable of wide and wonderful application, and the first lesson it teaches is one concerning the sovereignty of God (cf Isaiah 64:8; Romans 9:22). The divine Potter can do as He wills with the clay. But the particular emphasis on the divine sovereignty here is the sovereignty of grace. The people of God are in His hands, Jeremiah sees, and it is possible, even out of the disastrous marring of the vessel, which the prophet could see all around him in the nation in his day, for God to make another vessel, and - in spite of everything - fulfil His purposes in His people. From the long-term point of view, this in fact is done; for beyond the tragedy and fiery furnace of the Captivity, God took up His people again, and in spite of all their intractable perversity fulfilled His purposes in them, and in the fulness of the time brought forth from them His Redeemer.

But the incident is a parable of grace in an even wider sense, and in more general terms, as showing forth the marvel of divine salvation. Man was made in the image of God, but that image was defaced by sin. The vessel originally designed by the Divine Potter was marred in His hand. And yet, He did not cast away the clay, but in Christ remade and remoulded it another vessel. Broken lives can be reshaped and remade: this is the hope, the proclamation, of the gospel.

58) 18:1-12

For all that was said in the previous Note, however, there is an undertone of deep solemnity in the passage, for there does seem to be a stress on the word 'another'. What we mean is this: we may not presume on the grace and patience of God as He seeks to mould our lives in His hands. It is possible to forfeit, by our long and continued sinning, His first and best will for our lives; we may go beyond the point of no return with regard to what God originally planned and intended for us. It is possible to become 'disqualified' (this is the force of the word 'castaway' in 1 Corinthians 9:27) and to suffer God's 'second-best' for our lives. To give an example: God may lay His hand on a man or woman and say, 'I want you for the Mission-field', to be met with a continued refusal of that call. We know that people can change their minds and say 'Yes' to God where formerly they said 'No'; but it is quite conceivable that a point should be reached when that 'No' becomes permanent, for a man may come to an age when he is too old for any missionary society to accept him. God does not cast away the clay, but makes it 'another vessel' - no longer a vessel for overseas work, but something different - not the original plan but an amended one. God's best has been forfeited. This is very solemn; but there is a still darker possibility, as we shall see in chapter 19: the potter's clay, once hardened, can no longer be remade into anything, and it is dashed to pieces.

59) 18:13-23

The lament of the Lord about His people is expressed in 13-17. It is both the unthinkable of sin and its unnaturalness that are emphasised, and this is what the metaphor in 14 is meant to convey. It would have been unnatural for the snows of Lebanon to melt into nothingness or for glacial torrents to run dry, for this would have been a denial of their natural destiny. But Judah had been untrue to hers, in forgetting the Lord. Skinner hazards the following interpretation: 'To Jeremiah, the eternal snow of Lebanon (or Hermon), with the cold perennial streams which it sends down to the plains, combine to form an emblem of the unfailing source of national vitality which the true religion would have been to Israel, had it not given itself over to the unreal worship that had sapped its energies, and would reduce its land to an arid waste'.

We have another of Jeremiah's soliloquies or 'confessions' in 18-23. Obviously there is reaction against his ministry, as we see in 18. They are refusing his message, assuring themselves that there are always other preachers and priests. Jeremiah is again questioning the Lord's dealings with him, and the mystery of the nation's refusal of his word. 'Is evil a recompense for good?' he cries in his agony, and launches into a diatribe against his persecutors. It would be easy to apply the adjective 'sub-Christian' to the sentiments he expresses, but let us first of all put ourselves in his place before we do so. Furthermore, it is not necessary to interpret his words as pure vindictiveness, for the spirit of 20b reveals how he felt for his people in his deepest hour. Like God, he had no pleasure in the judgment that was to come upon them. He prophesied with tears in his heart and in his eyes. But he was also on God's side, more than he was on theirs, and to be so means ultimately that one thinks His thoughts. The spirit of retribution is not the spirit of vindictiveness. The two must be sharply distinguished.

60) 19:1-15

We have in these verses the second movement of the parable of the potter's vessel. Jeremiah is bidden by a potter's vessel (bottle) to take some of the elders of the people with him to the valley of Tophet or Hinnom, and proclaim the word of the Lord against the nation. It was a word of judgment, terrible and relentless, because of the continued impenitence and sin of the people. And having proclaimed that word, he was to break the vessel or bottle before them, signifying the final doom upon the nation - 'so that it can never be mended' (11, RSV). Having done this, Jeremiah returned from Tophet, and proclaimed the word of judgment boldly in the court of the Temple, in the hearing of all the people.

The potter's vessel here is the counterpart of that in 18:1ff, but whereas there the clay was still in the hands of the potter, and therefore still workable, even if for another vessel, here the vessel had hardened beyond all hope of reworking the clay. All that could be done to it was to break it in pieces (cf Psalm 2:9; Revelation 2:27 - words traditionally used in connection with the enemies of the Lord, but now used of God's own people). This must indeed chill the hearts of the men of Judah, to hear Jeremiah's fatal pronouncement. But it did something else also, as we shall see in the next reading.

61) 20:1-6

Chilled their hearts might have been by Jeremiah's words, but subdued they certainly were not. Rage and fury gripped them, with predictable consequences for the prophet. It was one thing to speak out his message outside the city wall, but quite another to utter it in the lion's den itself! The word 'smote' in 2 is said to refer to a blow from the priest's hand rather than to an official scourging. One can imagine the ugliness of the scene, and the sense of horror in the minds of those not so far gone in sin as the priest clearly was. What indignity for the man of God! (cf Acts 23:2, 3). It was a personal insult for the strength of his word that had challenged the Jerusalem establishment and hurt them so much. After a night in prison, in the stocks, the prophet is brought out, but far from being subdued, he utters a terrible prophecy upon Pashur, which was only too literally fulfilled (cf Ezra 2:37, 38). The name given to Pashur in 3 - Magor-missabib - which means 'terror on every side' comes from Psalm 31:13, and one commentator suggests that Jeremiah found comfort from that Psalm during his night in prison. He could hardly have found a more suitable passage for his time of need.

62) 20:7-18

Again Jeremiah soliloquises. His fearless confronting of Pashur contrasts strangely with these sobs of hurt and distress. Here is 'the other side' of a ministry that was so fearless and bold and unyielding. There is a price to pay in the secret place for power with God: here is the cost, here the tears and the agony, yea, and the doubts also: 'Can I be wrong? Have I been mistaken in my calling? Am I speaking from my own heart, not from God?' Again we see the conflict between his sense of vocation and the natural shrinking of his heart. He tries to stop speaking for God, but God's word burns in his soul and in his bones like a fire, and he cannot but speak (9). It is not without significance or by accident that the prophet's mood fluctuates so much in the brief compass of these verses, one minute assured in heart (11) and singing to the Lord (13), and the next cursing the day he was born (14). It is a superficial and basically defective assessment of this to speak of it as sub-Christian and falling far short of the true life of victory. Such a verdict betrays a basic lack of understanding of the agonies and costliness of spiritual warfare. One might as well accuse Paul of being sub-Christian in his description of his dark night of the soul in 2 Corinthians 1:8ff. The word for such glib and facile interpreters must be 'Sir, the well is deep, and thou hast nothing to draw with' (John 4:11).

63) 21:1-14

It will be remembered (see Introductory Notes) that chapter 20 brings us to the end of the first 'roll' or section of Jeremiah's prophecy, to which chapters 21-24 were added at a later time. We come now to the additional material (cf 36:27, 28, 32). We see at the beginning of this chapter that it is Zedekiah who is now king and we are therefore not dealing with chronological sequence at this point. Other kings, in fact, also figure in this section, Shallum (Jehoahaz) and Coniah (Jeconiah or Jehoiachin). The first lesson (1-5) is interesting and impressive, for here is king Zedekiah, in time of stress and peril sending to the prophet whom men had despised, rejected and held in contempt, and asking for counsel and for a reassuring word from the Lord. It is impressive, is it not, that it is to the man who has had the courage to stand alone and speak fearlessly and with authority the word of the Lord that men tend to turn in their time of need. There is a recognition, in spite of themselves, of where the truth really lies, and of who can really speak for God. It will be remembered that Isaiah had the same kind of experience at the close of his ministry, when in 101 BC, when in the hour of crisis and extremity Hezekiah turned to the one man whose voice had consistently summoned the nation to the obedience of faith and to the things of God. It was a vindication of Isaiah's whole ministry, and in this sense, Jeremiah also was vindicated in the stand he had taken for God.

64) 21:1-14

Jeremiah's reply, however, to the king was very different from that given by Isaiah to Hezekiah. For, far from assuring Zedekiah that the Lord would turn away the invader, Jeremiah not only warns the king that God would frustrate the efforts in arms that they made against the Babylonians, but also that God Himself would fight against them (5). It is a grim passage, throughout, and it contains some of the most terrible and terrifying statements about the wrath of God that we could find anywhere. Jeremiah promises the inhabitants of the city only their lives for a prey, on condition that they left the city and went into exile as captives in Babylon. Otherwise, they would be slain, for the Lord's wrath was kindled against His people. A big issue is involved here, in the advice Jeremiah gave to the king and the people, advice which is reiterated again and again in the chapters that follow and summed up in the words 'Serve the king of Babylon and live' (27:17). It was this message that, humanly speaking, spelt the prophet's doom. We will see him thrown into the dark, evil-smelling dungeon for daring to speak this word and suggesting this to be the only way of safety. We can easily see how such a message would seem to the king and to the nobles to be a betrayal of Judah and Jerusalem. How could this be the Lord's word, they would think. It may well be that in 2 they were thinking of the earlier deliverance in Isaiah's time; but what they did not recognise was that over a hundred years of evil had followed that first deliverance and that now God had appointed judgment, not deliverance, for them. God had already said that because of the sins of Manasseh no more deliverance was possible and that they had passed the point of no return. Jeremiah recognised that the only thing to do was to submit to that divine judgment, in the knowledge that they would be purged and purified by the fires of God in the crucible of suffering and captivity, and thus made available and usable for God's further purposes after the captivity.

65) 22:1-9

These verses must surely refer to a king earlier than Zedekiah, for in the previous chapter Jeremiah was speaking to the latter about the certainty of coming judgment, whereas here we have words of hope (3, 4). The tone of the passage is similar to that of 17:19-27, and a comparison between the two will show that the same promise is held out in each case (compare 17:25 with 22:4). In other words, Jeremiah is reiterating something that he had emphasised earlier, namely that the way to national prosperity was through moral and ethical obedience to the word and will of God. This must strike a very poignant note when we recall how in earlier days Jeremiah had had such high hopes of the reform movement under king Josiah, and how in the end he had come to see that they had put ceremonial and outward observance as a substitute for this moral and ethical obedience. There is a great simplicity in these words, but then, the ultimate issues of life are always clear cut and simple: the people who make a conscience of ordering their lives in accordance with God's holy laws, and who determine that the general direction of their lives is going to be God-ward, cannot but know the divine blessing and prospering upon them. As Joshua put it long before. 'As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord'. That is the way of blessing.

66) 22:10-19

The reference in 10 is to the tragic death of Josiah at the battle of Megiddo in 608 BC. Josiah's going out against Pharaoh Necho of Egypt was an act of incredible foolhardiness (2 Chronicles 35:20ff); and his death hit the nation like an earthquake devastating them. The hope of Judah went out like a light, and they never really recovered. Yet Jeremiah, deeply though he lamented Josiah's death (2 Chronicles 35:25), bids the people weep more for Josiah's son, Jehoahaz, whom Pharaoh took captive to Egypt after a brief three months' reign, where he died (Jehoahaz is Shallum, referred to in 11). In 13 onwards we have the divine pronouncement about Shallum's successor, his older brother Jehoiakim. Whether it was in an atmosphere of reaction against the disaster of Josiah's death, or resentment that the Lord should have allowed him to be cut off in the flower of his manhood, or for some other reason, the nation reverted to its idolatrous ways, and Jehoiakim seemed to exceed his forebears in the wickedness and idolatry of his life, and the luxuriousness of his court. It is to this that Jeremiah refers in these verses. The prophet remonstrates with the evil king, reminding him of the ethical principles by which his father lived and by which prosperity was wrought in the land. The words in 16, 'Was not this to know me? saith the Lord' are very striking, and they indicate that Jehoiakim's behaviour was a deliberate refusal of the knowledge of God. The 'therefore' in 18 was inevitable, and the divine pronouncement inescapable: God is not mocked. Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap (Galatians 6:7).

67) 22:20-30

The next word is to Jehoiakim's son, Coniah (24, also called Jeconiah and Jehoiachin) who reigned a brief three months, before being taken by Nebuchadnezzar in 59C BC. Skinner comments (on 20-22), 'In a single sentence Jeremiah drives home the lesson of the coming catastrophe: disobedience, indifference to Yahweh's warnings, especially in the time of respite and fancied security that followed the inauguration of the Covenant - this is the moral cause of the ruin that is impending, the shame and confusion that will fall upon the nation.' The reference in 30 to childlessness is not literal, since Coniah did have a family; what Jeremiah means is that he will have no royal children in the sense that none of them would ever sit on the throne of David in Jerusalem. The uncompromising severity of this oracle of doom pronounced by the prophet seems to have been designed to counteract any optimistic hope the people might have had that Coniah's capture by Nebuchadnezzar would be temporary and short-lived. Not so: there was a grim finality about this judgment for that whole generation. Yet, grim as it is, we can almost hear the wail of agony in the prophet's heart as he uttered it: 'O earth, earth, earth, hear the word of the Lord.' With what pain must the prophet have uttered these words!

68) 23:1-8

The material in the past two chapters is gathered together not according to chronological pattern but according to subject matter - a change from the earlier chapters, which dealt in the main with chronological events in the reign of Josiah and in the first years at least of his successor, Jehoiakim. Now, in these 8 verses we have a kind of appendix to what has been said in the last two chapters. At first sight, however, it is not easy to see the connection with what has gone before. But it is perhaps best to take them in some sense as an epilogue, as if to stress that after the disastrous run of evil rulers, the Lord would raise up new and better ones. It is an echo of renewal beyond the exile (cf the earlier emphasis in the vision of the almond rod in chapter 1, and the fuller expositions of the messianic hope later in the prophecy in chs 31-33). Some think the reference in 1, 2 is to the nobles and courtiers of Zedekiah, but it is probably an inclusive term referring to both kings and nobles and princes who have one and all failed the people. The promise of this 'messianic' passage is threefold: i) good pastors, or rulers, to replace the bad; ii) a true king, and iii) a new Exodus (7, 8). It has been pointed out that God is much harder on the shepherds than on the sheep. The pastors always ought to know and therefore they are more culpable. For the reference to the Branch in 5, see Isaiah 11, where Isaiah says that although the Assyrian will come crashing down and will fall forever, never to rise again, Judah, although involved in that catastrophe, will show signs of life again, and out of her will come the Branch. It is the same message here, with Jeremiah. It is the 'resurrection' motif once more.

69) 23:9-40

This long passage contains a number of strictures against the prophets. The phrase in 9, 'because of the prophets' (AV) is better rendered in the RSV as a kind of sub-title, 'Concerning the prophets:' and what follows gives the substance of the divine pronouncement. The oracles are grouped together thematically, rather than chronologically, and were probably uttered originally at different times. Skinner comments that the main lines of the prophet's criticism are clearly discernible. 'He declaims against the current prophecy of the day on three grounds: first, the character of its representatives; secondly, the substance of their message; and thirdly, the forms in which they gave it out as the word of Yahweh.' This is a convenient framework within which to study these verses. The picture suggested in 9-15 is that of a lone figure, Jeremiah, standing against a majority who are speaking a different language, saying different things, prophesying in a different vein; one solitary man standing for absolute moral and spiritual values against an 'avant-garde' establishment whose moral standards had become hopelessly corrupt and had spread poison throughout the whole land (15b). One has only to recall the exposures made in Arnold Lunn's book 'The New Morality' of some official attitudes adopted and propagated by some churches to realise how relevant and up-to-date Jeremiah's words are for our own day. It is little wonder that the prophet's heart was broken within him.

70) 23:9-40

From the immoral lives of the prophets Jeremiah turns to the falsity of their message, in 16ff. The character of that message corresponded to what they were, as they proclaimed peace to all and sundry without reference or regard to their moral condition. 'Laxity of moral conviction and a readiness to prophesy smooth things went naturally together' (Skinner). Indeed this is so: for where such conviction is absent there is an inevitable blunting of spiritual discernment and no perception of the absolute moral powers built into the structure of God's world. As an interesting background to Jeremiah's strictures against the false message of the prophets we should study Deuteronomy 13 which, it will be remembered, was part of the book of the law discovered in the Temple in Josiah's reign and became the basis of his reforms. The criterion of judgment, Jeremiah means, must ever be whether the prophetic message leads men towards, or further away from, the ethical demands of the divine law. These false prophets, in assuring the people of divine peace and favour under any circumstances, were simply compounding their sin and preventing a true turning to God which only a thorough-going challenge such as Jeremiah's had any chance of procuring (29, 30). In the kind of situation that obtained in Jeremiah's day, only a grim, doom-laden word of judgment was likely to be a real and authentic message from the Lord.

71) 23:9-40

Over against the falsity and dishonesty of the lying prophets' message, Jeremiah describes the qualifications of the true prophet. He is one who has 'stood in the counsel of the Lord' (18, 22); he has 'perceived and heard his word' (18, 21, 28); he is one who has been 'sent' by the Lord (21, 32). Implicit in these statements is the conviction that a real prophet must necessarily be a true man, in a close relation of personal fellowship with the Lord. Only thus could he speak for God, and from Him. This seems to be echoed also in the remarkable words of 23, 24, in the idea of the 'near' and the 'far' God. He is both immanent and transcendent, from whose all-seeing eye none can hide himself. Skinner refers to an interesting interpretation of these two verses as expressing a contrast: 'v 23 refers to the mistaken notion of God which the false prophets entertain, v 24 to the experience of a true prophet. Yahweh is not a next-door neighbour, at the beck and call of everyone who chooses to assume familiarity with Him: He is the high and lofty One who inhabiteth eternity, inaccessible to the impertinent intrusion of human audacity and presumption. But just as little as God can be found by the irreverent and irreligious mind, so little can the man truly called by Him to be a prophet find a retreat in which the imperious summons will not reach him - a truth which Jeremiah had learned for himself by his own experience.' It is perhaps not without significance that some of our contemporary evidences of superficiality find expression in a blasé and sometimes near blasphemous over-familiarity with the holy God of the Scriptures. The quotation which forms the substance of tomorrow's Note will serve to bear this out.

72) 23:9-40

Some years ago the Manchester Guardian weekly carried an article under the title 'America goes to Church' in which a leading Jewish Rabbi made some shrewd observations on what he called 'American Religiosity' - we have no reason to believe that what he said is not as applicable on this side of the Atlantic:

'Man is the beginning and end of present-day American religiosity - God is made to serve, or rather to subserve man, to subserve his every purpose and enterprise whether it be economic prosperity, free enterprise, security, or peace of mind. God thus becomes an omnipotent servant, a universal bell-hop, to cater to man's every caprice; faith becomes a sure-fire device to get what we petulantly and peevishly crave. This reduction of God from master to slave has reached its height, or rather its depth of blasphemy, in the cult of the Man Upstairs - the friendly neighbour-god who dwells in the apartment just above. Call on him any time - especially if you are feeling blue. He does not get the least bit upset with your faults and failings and, as for your sins, not only does he not remember them but the very word and concept of sin have been abolished and 'adjustment' or 'non-adjustment' have taken their places.'

It is little wonder that the Rabbi maintained that 'the religious beliefs had no real effect on their ideas or conduct in the decisive areas of everyday life', or that he should have commented on the chasm 'that separates this contemporary creed of the 'God Upstairs' and the 'Livin' Doll' from the living Lord of Amos and Jeremiah and Micah and Jesus'.

73) 24:1-10

The historical background of this chapter is that of the first deportation of the Jews to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar in 597 BC (1). The 1 record is given in 2 Kings 24, where it is clear that the elite of the Judean population, priests, nobles, soldiers and artisans, the flower of Judah's sons, were taken into captivity. A period of 11 years was to elapse before the remaining inhabitants of the land were taken into exile (586 BC) and during that time, as Skinner puts it: 'The current of Jewish life ran in two parallel channels, one in Jerusalem and the other in Babylon'. It is these two groups, the exiles in Babylon and those left behind in Judah, that form the contrast in the vision of the baskets of figs, the exiles being the good figs and those remaining in the land the bad. Jeremiah has been meditating on the disaster of this first captivity, and God comes to him in this vision and communicates to him a word of hope which became his message to the nation. He saw from the Lord that hope for the future lay with this group that had been despatched to Babylon, that God had a purpose of grace for them in thus sending them into captivity. His eyes would be upon them for good, He would discipline them, put them through the fires of chastening, and out of the crucible of suffering and shame He would bring forth in the fulness of the time a people for His Name. Here, then, is the idea of a Remnant emerging, through whom the divine purposes would yet be fulfilled. More about this in the next Note.

74) 24:1-10

Jeremiah's 'approval' of the exiles in Babylon, represented here by the good figs, sheds further light on what was said in the Note on 21:1-14 about the captives being given their lives for a prey, and about the exhortation to 'Serve the king of Babylon and live' (27:17). Subsequent events in Babylon were to show that the prophet's counsel tended to fall on deaf ears (cf 29:1-32). It was a lesson that they learned all too reluctantly and all too slowly. Nevertheless, this was the sovereign, divine purpose, and we shall see that hope expressing itself repeatedly in the chapters that follow, culminating in the wonderful vision of the new covenant in chapter 31. With this as the long-term goal, submission to the disciplines of judgment would be not only feasible but essential. Another effect of the first exile, and one fateful for the prophet, was that among the nobles of Judah there had been at least some - a small minority - who had been influenced by Jeremiah's faithful ministry, and who tended to protect him against the viler elements who opposed him and tried to destroy him. Jeremiah had friends in the court, but now they were all deported, and once more he was left in isolation, among the viler elements of the remaining populace. Presently we will find him in the dark, evil-smelling dungeon, cast in there by men who spurned him and hated him because he spoke the word of the Lord. It was as well that he had the long-term vision of God's purposes to sustain him - without it he would surely have gone down under.

75) 25:1-14

With this chapter we come to the end of the first major section of the prophecy. It would seem from 13 that 'this book' refers to the first roll of the prophecy which Jeremiah had uttered in the first half of his ministry, up to 604 BC, the fourth year of Jehoiakim's reign. The chapter, then, forms a fitting climax to the 'book' in question, and gives the Lord's word of final doom upon his sinning people. The year, then, is that of the decisive battle of Carchemish, in which Nebuchadnezzar defeated Pharaoh Necho and became the supreme ruler of the ancient world. It was this victory that confirmed Jeremiah in his conviction that doom would come to Judah from the north, and he is now able to put a name to the power that was to engulf them (9). It will be seen from 3 that this passage serves to sum up the whole of Jeremiah's ministry, from the time of his call in Josiah's reign to that point, a period of 23 years. This, we are meant to realise, is what the prophecy has all been about; and it is because over that whole period of time there had been repeated and continuing failure and refusal to hear the word of the Lord, that judgment was now to come. But it is worth noting, even in the context of the judgment that God was still in control: Nebuchadnezzar is 'My servant', and it is He, the living God, Who controls the ruling powers and moves them to act in accordance to His will. Hence, after the discipline of the captivity is over (12) Babylon itself would be punished, and recompensed according to their deeds.

76) 25:15-38

Here is a straightforward, nevertheless terrible passage dealing with the final doom that was to come upon the people. The sign of the wine-cup in 15ff may be taken as a vision, in which Jeremiah gave the cup to the nation in a symbolical act; or, alternatively - as some interpret it - more literally, with Jeremiah offering the wine-cup to the ambassadors from these various nations present at Jerusalem at the time. Either way, the meaning is surely clear: the judgment depicted is in relation to the onward march of the conquering Babylonian army, and Judah, Egypt and all the other nations mentioned fall beneath their crushing weight. Is it not impressive to realise that today also, as then, when the movement of the hand of God takes place in the Middle East, all the surrounding nations are inevitably involved. There is something tremendously grim in this picture of God giving the cup of His wrath to all these nations in Jeremiah's day, all alike involved in the almost apocalyptic doom that was to overtake them. Indeed, the prophecy does pass into apocalyptic in 33 and seems to look beyond that day to the larger judgment at the end of time. The chapter closes with a lament (34-38) reminiscent of some of the chapter endings in the book of Revelation (cf Revelation 6:12ff; 8:12, 13; 14:16ff; 16:17ff).

77) 26:1-7

We begin at this point another section of Jeremiah's prophecy (chs 26-35) with prophecies uttered in the main in the reigns of Jehoiachin and Zedekiah. These verses belong, as we see, to the beginning of Jehoiachin's reign, but they echo an earlier prophecy (cf 7:1-7), and some commentators think that this is a duplication of the earlier utterance. There is no need, however, to make this assumption, for there is nothing to have prevented Jeremiah from speaking that word both in Josiah's reign, and later in Jehoiachin's, indeed it was quite likely that he did, and for this reason: towards the end of Josiah's reign, Jeremiah was already beginning to see that the reforms were not deep enough to work deliverance in the land, hence the solemn warning to amend their ways (7:5). And now, at the beginning of the later reign God once again speaks, giving them fresh opportunity. It was as if He were saying, 'Here is a new king and a new reign; if only they would mend their ways! Let Me give them an opportunity to do so,' at the same time warning them of the dire consequences of further failure. The warning in 6 about Shiloh refers to the time of Samuel (1 Samuel 2/4), and is meant to indicate that God is not so thirled to His 'place' as to be obliged to stay in it when that place becomes an abomination to Him. He has no vested interest in the 'establishment'. He can raise up stones to be His witnesses, if His appointed ones fail. Jerusalem, he warned, would become like Shiloh in Samuel's day, and the glory would depart from it. Grim prophecy indeed, and one hardly believed in by the sinning people. But it came to pass, all the same, and Nebuchadnezzar was the instrument of its fulfilment.

78) 26:8-16

These verses are amongst the most dramatic in the whole prophecy. Given the prevailing attitude of rebelliousness against the Word of the Lord, it was hardly surprising that the people should react violently against the prophet. Jeremiah must have realised the inevitability of this also, and it says a great deal for this sensitive and agonised servant of God that he should have spoken so boldly before them all. It was an extremely ugly and ominous situation in which anything might have happened. In spite of this, Jeremiah stood his ground, even in face of the priests' fury and determination, and reiterated his solemn warning at the peril of his life (12-15), leaving himself in God's sovereign hands. We feel sure as he did so that he was remembering and leaning upon the promise given him by God at the outset of his ministry (1:18, 19). What a glorious and moving example of trusting the bare word of a promising God! Nor was that trust misplaced, for as he stood so utterly alone, God moved the princes and the people against the priests and the prophets to be sufficiently impressed with his stand to recognise in it an authentic word from the Lord. As G. Adam Smith puts it, it was 'the public instinct for justice' awakened by the Spirit of God in them and asserting itself in the behalf of the lonely prophet. How wonderfully God preserved His faithful servant in the dangers and perils of his arduous calling!

79) 26:17-24

These verses are full of interest and significance, though not without difficulty. Following the princes' support of the prophet, some of the elders (17) spoke out in his favour also, looking back into their earlier history and realising that the prophets of old had spoken in this way, and that Hezekiah, far from threatening Micah's life (18, 19) had heeded the prophetic warning and humbled himself before the Lord. The reference to Urijah in 20-23 can hardly be regarded as part of the argument of these elders, since a very different fate overtook this prophet, at the hands of the ruthless Jehoiakim. As G. Adam Smith says, 'The danger that Jeremiah faced and the source from which it sprang are revealed by the fate which befell another denouncer of the land in the name of the Lord.... The one shall be taken and the other left!' This is some evidence of how it might have gone with Jeremiah, but for the sovereign protection of the Lord (cf a similar providence at work in Acts 12 in the preservation of Peter at the time when James the brother of John was martyred). The circumstances and the instrumentality of Jeremiah's preservation are indicated in 24. The 'nevertheless' seems to suggest that a similar fate to Urijah's might well have befallen Jeremiah, in spite of the support of the princes and the common people, but for the intervention of Ahaikam, the son of Shaphan, who, according to Skinner, 'had to interpose to prevent him from being lynched'. So Jeremiah's life was spared, in one of a number of terrifying experiences that were to come upon him.

80) 27:1-22

'Jehoiakim' in 1 should read, as in RSV, 'Zedekiah', as 3b makes clear. To understand the force and thrust of this chapter's message we need to be reminded of the historical situation. When Jehoiakim died in 597 BC, Jehoiachin came to the throne and had reigned only three months when Nebuchadnezzar's armies came crashing down on Jerusalem, sacking the city and deporting the flower of Judah to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar installed Zedekiah as a puppet king of what was left of Judah, and he reigned as such for 11 years until 586 BC. During that period Nebuchadnezzar subdued all the surrounding nations, including Egypt, but all sorts of intrigues were stirred up against him, to form a collision to dispute his authority over them. This is why the messengers, mentioned in 4, had come to the court at Jerusalem, to incite Zedekiah to throw off the Babylonian yoke and regain independence. Jeremiah saw what was going on, and spoke this word to the nation: 'God's will and purpose at this time is that Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon should rule the nations of the earth. 'I have given them into his hands, so you are wasting your time trying to rebel against him. Serve the king of Babylon and live. Be wise and submit to the yoke'. This is the point about the 'bonds and yokes' (2) that Jeremiah was commanded to put on. It was, once again, an acted parable, and the message was spoken, it would seem, first to the messengers (3-11), then to the king (12ff), then to the priests and to the people (16ff). It was a message designed to strip from Judah the last remaining shreds of hope that they might have had in the prospect of a revolt against Nebuchadnezzar. It was not to be: Judgment was appointed for them, and nothing could now stay the avenging rod.

81) 28:1-17

The incident recorded in this chapter belongs to the same period as the last, the years between the first and second invasions of Nebuchadnezzar. Jeremiah has urged the people not to rebel against Babylon, but to acquiesce in the judgment of God upon them. The implication of his words has been that the captivity would be long - a thought that becomes more explicit later - but here, in this chapter, Hananiah takes it upon himself to utter in the name of the Lord (2) a prophecy flatly contradicting Jeremiah (compare his words in 3 with 27:16, 22), and brushing aside the first captivity as of little and purely temporary significance. One can sense the fine irony in Jeremiah's voice as he said 'amen' to Hananiah's words and the 'nevertheless' in 7 rings out with authentic force and power as he aligns himself with the true prophetic succession (8) whose words have really come to pass. One would have thought that Hananiah would have been cowed by the undoubted authority of Jeremiah's words, but no, with insolent arrogance he insults the man of God, snatching the symbolic yoke from off his neck (cf 27:2) and breaking it, asserting this to be a symbol of the Lord's breaking of the power of Babylon. It says a great deal for Jeremiah and his stature that he quietly submitted to this indignity (11b): he realised that with a man like Hananiah so confident and arrogant, he could not discuss or argue. But God took up his cause and discussed to some purpose: to Him Hananiah's arrogance was blasphemy, and he paid the price with his life (16, 17). Thus dramatically did God confirm the word of His servant! What must the people have thought? Did they take heed?

82) 29:1-23

These remarkable verses tell of a letter sent by Jeremiah from Jerusalem to the captives who had already been taken to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar. We have already seen in past readings that there were attempts by Zedekiah in Jerusalem to rebel against the Babylonian yoke; now we see from these verses that a similar spirit of rebellion was simmering among the captives of Babylon. News of this came to Jeremiah's ears, and he immediately wrote to warn them against any such thing. It seems that so-called prophets among the captives were inciting them to revolt (8, 9), and it is an evidence of how little they had learned from the disaster that they were so reluctant to heed the true prophet of the Lord's voice. In 10, Jeremiah explicitly reveals the length of the captivity for God's people, and it is in this context that he advocates an attitude not only of submission but of quiet cooperation with Babylon and the cultivation of a friendly spirit, hence the emphasis in 5-7. It is, as G. Adam Smith points out, an evidence of the change in Jeremiah's position in Jerusalem that his letter was carried to Babylon by two of Zedekiah's ambassadors (3), and evidently with the consent of the king. It may well be that his message was at least in some measure getting through in Jerusalem, and beginning to be appreciated as the only realistic possibility. At all events the promised restoration spoken of in 12-14 was contingent upon that lesson being learned and that submission practised. They were, alas, a long time in learning it, and they sat by the rivers of Babylon until they had wept all the idolatry and rebelliousness out of their hearts.

83) 29:24-32

Jeremiah's actual letter seems to end at 14, and what we have in 15-23 appears to be reaction to it. Whether this was enclosed in the letter referred to in 25, 29 sent back to Jerusalem, or in a separate document we are not told. What is clear is that Jeremiah was not safe from his enemies even when they were in Babylon, for Zephaniah the priest is urged by Shemaiah, who wrote the letter, to put 'that mad, fanatical Jeremiah' in prison and in the stocks for daring to write in such a way to the captives in Babylon (26). It is perhaps significant that the letter was sent not to Zedekiah the king, who by this time seems to have come round to a position of leaning, however reluctantly, on the prophet's words, but to Zephaniah the priest who, we are told in 29, read the captives' letter in the ears of the prophet. Perhaps this was done to frighten him; if so it failed signally in its purpose, for Jeremiah uttered a fearless word of doom on Shemaiah (31, 32).

Commentators have pointed out the significance of Jeremiah's advice to the captives, as indicating 'that the essential religion of Yahweh is independent of the privileges of Jewish citizenship, and is even consistent with loyalty to a foreign power' (Skinner). G. Adam Smith says it is 'a pronouncement of profound significance for the future of Israel's religion, that the sense of the presence of God, faith in His providence and grace, and prayer to Him were independent of man and temple.' One recalls in this connection our Lord's words in John 4:21ff about the worship of the Father 'neither in this mountain, nor yet in Jerusalem...but...in spirit and in truth'. There is something to think about here, is there not?

84) 29:24-32

Some further-reaching implications of what was said at the end of yesterday's Note. It is a fact of history that after the captivity, when God restored His people, not all of them, but only some, returned to the Promised Land, many choosing to remain in their foreign home. Skinner poses the interesting question as to whether those who remained in exile found in Jeremiah's letter 'the justification of their attitude, and the charter of their liberalism', and suggests that it is quite possible that 'historically the influence of Jeremiah was a factor in initiating the movement which played so large a part in the leavening the world with the principles of the religion of Israel'. Whether this be so or not it is certainly true that the Jewish Diaspora, the presence of Jewish exiles in so many lands of the ancient world, with their organised synagogue worship became the 'seed-bed' of gospel evangelism. There seems little doubt that in the providence of God synagogue worship constituted one important aspect of His preparation of the world to receive the good news of grace. It is rather wonderful, is it not, that the existence of synagogues far away from both the Land of Israel and the Temple, and their openness to hear what the first gospel preachers had to say, is directly traceable to Jeremiah's advice, 'Serve the king of Babylon and live'.

85) 30:1-24

The next four chapters (30-33) have been called 'The Book of Comfort', and contain almost the only gleams of light and hope throughout all the prophecy of Jeremiah. A glance through this chapter will reveal that it speaks of, and to, the people of God as those that have been spoiled and taken into captivity. This means it must belong to some period between 597 and 586 BC, i.e. either in the reign of the puppet king Zedekiah, or immediately following his fall in 586, when Gedaliah was made governor of the land by Nebuchadnezzar. G. Adam Smith thinks it is the latter's governorship that is in view (see 2 Kings 25:1-26 for historical background, also Jeremiah 39:11ff). The form of the prophecy in 5ff is almost apocalyptic: here is a picture of the shaking of the foundations of the world, referred to in 7 as 'the time of Jacob's trouble', but out of the convulsions Israel's deliverance was to come. The very enormity of the disaster (cf 2 Kings 25) and the agony it entailed was to be the birthpangs of the new order. What we must see in this is that this is something that is true of every age, in relation to Israel: Out of the trauma of the captivity there came the rebuilding of the Temple and of the walls of Jerusalem with Ezra and Nehemiah, just as out of the nameless horrors of the Holocaust there came the rebirth of modern Israel. This is a perennial issue, precisely because the Jews are God's people, and His signpost to world events. In this connection it can hardly be without significance that the Middle East today is such a seething cauldron of war and bloodshed, and it may well be that the message this proclaims to the dying civilisation of the 20th century is that we must trim our lamps and be ready, for the coming of the Lord draweth nigh, and that out of final travail there will come the new heaven and the new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness.

86) 30:1-24

In the second half of the chapter (12ff), in referring to the disaster of the captivity that had come upon them, it is as if God were saying, 'It is true that it is I who have brought this disaster on you, because I am punishing you for your iniquities. Yet My punishment is corrective, not final, and I will not make a full end of you. But I will punish all those who have been cruel to you'. It is impressive to see in the prophetic literature how consistently this point is made. From the beginning of Jewish history, from the time of the patriarchs onwards, this has ever been true. Every nation that has hurt God's people has suffered for it in the end, and been broken by the power of God. And this is just as true in modern times. It is our conviction that Germany was ultimately brought to her knees in the Second World War, not so much because she flaunted her might before the nations of the world in arrogance and pride, but supremely because of what she did to God's people. This is something that nations would do well to ponder and consider today. The decline of our own nation's fortunes in the post-war world may be far more directly related to our own shameful record in our dealings with Israel than we realise. This is not, and cannot be, to give carte blanche to Israel, right or wrong, but it does give a pointer to the need to secure and maintain the integrity of Israel as a nation in our modern world, and seek to protect her from the terrible hatreds with which she is surrounded on all sides.

87) 31:1-14

This chapter is one of the most wonderful in the Old Testament, and it is particularly wonderful in the grim and sombre setting of the prophecies of doom. Out of the midnight darkness there comes a wonderful gleam of light and hope for the people of God. It corresponds in its meaning and essence to the wonderful 40th chapter of Isaiah, with its 'Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people...'. We should notice particularly the idea expressed in the words 'grace in the wilderness': it was in the place of desolation that God met with them. This is always the way: it is only when we come to an end of ourselves that we begin with God, and it is when everything is stripped from us and we are left broken and in despair that God meets us. We have already suggested that Jeremiah was indebted to the prophecy of Hosea, and we see there (Hosea 2:8-20) the wilderness theme. Such is the power of God's word that this verse can apply to any wilderness - affliction, trial, sorrow, darkness - for this is where God delights to meet with His people, and to give them 'the treasures of darkness' (Isaiah 45:3). We should also note in 4 how God addresses His people, 'O virgin of Israel'. We should not miss the tremendous thing that is implied here: Israel, by her idolatry and unfaithfulness, had committed spiritual adultery with all her false lovers; but now God promises to come anew, and such is the power of His grace that He turns the clock and makes her pure again. This is how great and how glorious the new covenant is to be!

88) 31:1-14

The varied imagery in these verses reflects and is meant to convey the idea of - the breadth and extent of the divine grace which, when it begins to work, brings all manner of blessings to men - purity, gaiety, fertility and fruitfulness. This is perhaps best summed up in the phrase in 12, rendered in the AV, 'they shall flow together to the goodness of the Lord', but more illuminatingly translated in RSV, 'they shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord, over the grain, the wine, and the oil...' - a wonderful picture, and all the more wonderful when one realises it is being unfolded to the captives weeping by the rivers of Babylon, and the city of Jerusalem silent in its desolation and ruin. Perhaps as good an illustration as any of the import of these words may be found in modern times in the re-establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. It is said that when the first Jews returned to the land then, and looked northwards to see the snows on Mount Hermon, one of them said 'It is manna, it is manna!', and they wept for joy. It is not difficult to see a fulfilment of these words of Jeremiah's in the transformation that has taken place in Israel since that time. How much more, then, are they true in the spiritual sense: the rejuvenating power of divine grace is all that these illustrations indicate, and more, and the sheer joy of it is beyond telling (Psalm 126:1-3).

89) 31:15-30

The note of hope continues in these verses, even amidst the distress and pain of the people's humiliation. The reference in 15 to Ramah and Rachel is of course particularly interesting in view of the fact that Matthew quotes from this passage in his Nativity narratives (Matthew 2:17, 18). The immediate significance of Ramah being mentioned is that it was there that Jeremiah, who had originally been taken with the other captives by Nebuchadnezzar, was set free (cf 39:11ff, and 40:1) and brought back to Gedaliah in Jerusalem. The imagery of Rachel weeping for her children is a metaphor in which the prophet pictures Rachel, buried at Ramah (Genesis 35:16-20), 'turning in her grave' so to speak, as the tramp, tramp, tramp of the captives' feet echoed along the melancholy road. In the light of this, the prophet's words are particularly reassuring, in 16 and 17, as he proclaims hope for the future and the promised return of the people from captivity. It is this that Matthew takes up in his gospel narrative, in applying Jeremiah's words to the massacre of the innocents by king Herod - an immense tragedy indeed, but just as in the midst of the tragedy of the captivity God gave a word of hope, so here in this situation, Matthew means, there is a word of infinite hope. The children are slaughtered, but the Child is preserved, and in Him comfort and blessing will surely come. Death is the gateway to life. Alexander Maclaren puts it very beautifully: 'In their (the children) brief lives, they have won immortal fame. They died for the Christ Whom they never knew. These lambs were slain for the sake of the Lamb who lived while they died, that by His death they Might live forever.' The weeping for the miseries that surrounded the coming of the King are part and parcel of the divine pattern of suffering leading to blessing and glory. As the Apostle says, 'If we suffer, we shall reign'. And it was out of suffering here that hope was born.

90) 31:15-30

In 18-20 we have a moving picture that might well be entitled, 'Ephraim, the Old Testament Prodigal Son. The emphasis on the yearning after God (20) surely belies the misguided notion held by some people that the God of the Old Testament is a harsh and barbarous tyrant, bloodthirstily wreaking vengeance upon men. The point in 21 about way marks being set up is that Jeremiah is saying, from the Lord, 'Mark well the road by which you are going into captivity, because I am going to bring you back again this way.' It was a word of great hope and assurance to those hapless, weeping captives. There is a spiritual application of this, of course: the way back to God is the same way as we departed from Him. We cannot get back to God except by retracing our steps. From 26 we may gather that the things Jeremiah has been saying in this chapter came to him in a dream or vision. We can take it in two possible ways: either, having been given this wonderful vision of the future in a dream he wakes up and, seeing the smoking ruins of the Temple and the city, he wants to go back to sleep again; or, having seen this vision and awaking from it, he reckons that it has been the sweetest night's sleep he has ever had. Then, 27ff, and now fully awake from sleep, he confirms the message of the vision in words that admit of no question or uncertainty: 'So will I watch over them, to build, and to plant, saith the Lord'. Wonderful words of life, indeed!

91) 31:31-40

We need to set this glorious word about the new covenant over against what we have already seen in Jeremiah about the old covenant. The book of the law that was re-discovered in the Temple in the time of Josiah was the book that contained and unfolded the old covenant, which was the basis of the reforms that took place during his reign. Jeremiah as we have seen, realized that, extensive and radical as the reforms were they only scratched the surface of the situation: a new outward conformity to the pattern of the law and the covenant was really all that took place, and the hearts of the people were left virtually untouched (cf 4:3, 4, and also Joel's words 'Rend your hearts and not your garments', Joel 2:13). Jeremiah saw that something deeper would be needed, something so deep that only a new covenant, which would write God's laws on their hearts, would suffice. The kind of contrast that Jeremiah makes here is like that made by Paul in 2 Corinthians 3:6ff - this is perhaps as good a commentary on Jeremiah's words as we could hope to find, and the two passages should be studied together with great care. The epistle to the Hebrews makes a similar contrast, in its insistence that the new covenant is superior to, and supersedes, the old. We should not miss the central emphasis here on personal, heart-knowledge of the Lord through the experience of personal forgiveness (34). We are taken in these words right into the heart of the New Testament gospel, and it is all the more wonderful that these words should have been uttered in the first instance in a time when the people of God were reeling and staggering under the terrible judgment of God that had come upon them, and Jerusalem was smoking in ruins.

92) 32:1-15

This chapter belongs to the last year of the siege of Jerusalem, 587 BC (1), and Jeremiah is now in prison, having been shut up there by Zedekiah for daring to prophecy the fall of the city and the doom of the king (3-5). There is some dispute and difference of opinion as to whether he was imprisoned more than once (cf 37:11ff, and 38:1ff), and the accounts of his imprisonment seem to conflict. There may well, however, have been more than one arrest of the prophet. Here, at all events, he has been put in prison because he seemed to be pro-Babylonian (cf 37:13, 14, where he was accused of deserting to the Chaldeans). There were no morale-boosters from Jeremiah on this occasion, in the midst of the siege, only pronounced doom. And how solemnly 3-5 were fulfilled in the event! Doing despite to God's servant does not alter God's word. It stands: the word of God is not bound though its ministers be put in jail. There is something very grim about 4, in the reference to 'mouth to mouth' and 'eyes to eyes', because the conquering face of Nebuchadnezzar was the last thing that Zedekiah ever saw (2 Kings 25:7). There may be a symbolism in the prophet's words as if to say, 'Zedekiah, you will not see the truth when it is staring you in the face, and in the end you will no longer be able to see, for Nebuchadnezzar will take your sight from you'. Truth so long refused and resisted finally becomes truth invisible. Have we not proved in our own experience, to our hurt and to our cost, that when we have refused the plain truth that our eyes have seen in God's word, there comes a time at last when we are no longer able to see it?

93) 32:1-15

The words in 6-15 will be best understood if we realise that what we have here is an acted parable performed at the behest of God (6). The prophet is instructed to buy the field in Anathoth, his home town. He was to buy it from his cousin Hanameel who wanted to sell it, the right of redemption of the property - the first option, so to speak - being by Jewish law his, as next of kin. The point being made is this: Nebuchadnezzar was besieging Jerusalem, the country was overrun, the people taken into captivity, and land was virtually worthless. Yet the prophet bought the field as a token and evidence that a day would come when buying and selling would once again take place in the land. In other words, it was an assurance and a promise from God that His people would be brought back from captivity, and that normal life would be resumed once more. The purchase of the field by Jeremiah was an evidence of his faith in the future and of his belief in his own message, in the word of the Lord that had come to him. One thinks, by way of illustration of Paul's experience in Acts 18:9ff, and God's assurance to him, 'I have much people in this city'. Paul went on with his work in the assumption and trust that this was so. The evidence of it was laid up secretly for many days (14), but it came to pass. Faith is the evidence of things not seen. What a supreme act of faith this was on Jeremiah's part, and what joy it must have brought to the heart of God to see His servant so trusting in His word: And what a challenge this is to us about what we may call 'faith's unclaimed inheritance'- things, or people, or circumstances as yet in the hands of the enemy, but pledged and promised to us in the faithful word of God. Shall not this encourage us to lay claim to them, even if all evidence is laid up secretly for many days? Shall we not wait in unwavering faith until the promise becomes reality?

94) 32:16-25

These verses contain a great and wonderful prayer from the lips of the prophet. It is a moving experience, indeed a benediction, to read it, but we need to understand its point and significance. When we look at 25, we see that in fact Jeremiah is giving expression to a certain questioning in his heart and spirit: 'The enemy is at the very gates of the city, and about to destroy it, and You are asking me to buy the field, Lord. I do not quite understand.' There is a great deal for us to learn here. On the one hand, it is so true to spiritual experience, when we have once responded in faith and obedience to the divine word that has come to us, for doubts and questionings to arise, and for us to begin to wonder whether God has really spoken to us at all. This is so very human, but it is a terrible and agonising thing to experience; but we should realise that it is something that can happen to the best and choicest of God's saints, and we should remember for our comfort that the man who once said 'Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world' also came to the place where he found himself asking, 'Art thou he that should come, or look we for another?' Even John the Baptist was not immune from such doubts. On the other hand, we see from these verses how Jeremiah dealt with his doubts: in his prayer, he does not begin with his doubts and fears, his questionings and his darkness, but lifts his mind and heart to the reality and the greatness of the God to whom he prayed (17-22), and set the doubts over against that glorious and blessed reality. It is hardly possible to over-emphasise the importance of this: this is what it means to exercise faith, and it is this that evokes the answer of God in the verses that follow.

95) 32:26-44

A good parallel to Jeremiah's attitude spoken of in the next Note may be seen in the prayer uttered by the apostles in Acts 4:23-30: they, like Jeremiah, fixed their thoughts not on the problems that faced them, but on the glorious reality of God. And the response from God was the same in both cases. In these verses before us we see the contrast between the 'near' judgment of God (28-35) and the 'far' blessing for His people (36-44). This is how God 'justified' His ways to the questioning prophet and set his doubts at rest, as if to say, 'Yes, Jeremiah, the enemy is at the gates, and all your dread of what he is about to do is fully justified, for I have purposed this judgment upon My people. But look beyond it, Jeremiah, to what I will yet do for them. Trust Me. I will not fail of all that I have promised through you.' The parable of the field, then, was really to be fulfilled, and a day would come, beyond the devastation and tragedy of the Captivity, when restoring would take place and peace be established. God takes up Jeremiah's own words in his prayer (17), and confirms that affirmation of faith in 27. It is as if the Lord were saying, 'Jeremiah, I am going to take you at your word: you have said that nothing is too hard for Me, and I am going to show you that nothing indeed is too hard for Me.' One is reminded of the great word in Exodus 8:13, 'The Lord did according to the word of Moses'. This is how it was here, with Jeremiah, and it is this that explains the beauty and comfort of 37-44. Grace triumphs over judgment.

96) 33:1-13

The prophecy contained in these verses is, as we see in 1, the second that came to Jeremiah while he was shut up in the prison in Jerusalem (cf 32:2), and it serves to confirm further the words in 32:36ff. The words in 3, with their exhortation to call on the Lord are, it would seem, addressed both to the prophet and to the people. As to Jeremiah, he is encouraged by the Lord in the kind of prayer recorded in 32:16ff, with the assurance that still greater and deeper revelations of the divine purposes will be given him; as to the people, they are exhorted 'to betake themselves to the Lord their God in their calamity, when He will make known to them things unattainable by human discernment' (Delitzsch). It is something, is it not, that a man languishing in the mire and gloom of a prison should receive such a word from the Lord; and we doubt not that it was sweetness and comfort to the prophet, and balm to his hurt spirit. It is not without significance that this very prophecy carries the mind of the prophet, and ours also, far into the future, beyond the first and immediate fulfilment of it in the restoration from Captivity (14ff). The 'great and mighty things' mentioned in 3 have been translated 'great and hidden things', and the hidden aspect may well refer to the far future, and this at least suggests that Jeremiah saw more deeply than he might have first realised. We shall have more to say about this when we come to 14ff.

97) 33:14-26

The 'good thing' mentioned in 14 must be understood in the first instance as referring to the restoration of the people to their own land after the captivity in Babylon. But we cannot stop there, for the prophecy unfolded in the verses that follow is clearly of a much wider and far-reaching significance. This is yet another instance of the blending of the 'near' and the 'far' in the prophetic perspective. In fact, what is spoken of in 15ff was not fulfilled in the return from exile under Ezra and Nehemiah: God did not then raise up the Branch, nor was there an establishment of 'The Lord our righteousness'. All that was to come later, in the coming of Christ. But not even in that coming could it be said that in those days Judah was saved and Jerusalem made to dwell safely, for God's people refused the promised Messiah, and Jerusalem was left desolate, in AD 70 (cf Matthew 23:37-39; Luke 19:41-44). What are we to say then about all this? That its fulfilment lies still in the future? It is not quite so simple as this, because it has not yet been literally fulfilled; there was indeed a spiritual fulfilment of the promises in the Church of Christ. As one of the commentators puts it, 'In a narrow, nationalistic sense, this promise has not been fulfilled, but in a spiritual and wider sense it has. Jesus Christ is the root and offspring of David, and to Him, and Him alone, the title 'The Lord our righteousness' can be applied.' The Apostle Peter's teaching on this in his first epistle (2:9) makes it abundantly clear that the church has inherited in a spiritual sense the Old Testament promises made to the people of God. Also, the epistle to the Hebrews points out that while the Levitical priesthood passed away it was spiritually renewed and fulfilled in Christ, so that believers, in Him, are a spiritual priesthood. But this, also, cannot be the whole story, and more must be said, and will be said, in the next Note.

98) 33:14-26

While it is true and incontrovertible that the Old Testament promises made to Israel are fulfilled in Christ and His Church, which is the new Israel of God (Galatians 6:16), we cannot on this account say that Israel as a people is no longer of any significance. This would be to contradict the teaching of the New Testament itself, because Paul in Romans 9/11 clearly indicates that the Jews as a people have a strange and mysterious significance down the whole of history in relation to the divine purposes of redemption, and they cannot be separated from these purposes. Nowhere is this inseparable link seen more dramatically than in Paul's statement in Romans 11:15, where he speaks of the casting away of the Jews being the reconciling of the world, while in 2 Corinthians 5:19, in ever memorable words, he shows that it was the 'casting away' of Christ, in the death of the cross, that was the reconciling of the world. The Jews, as it has been said, are the shadow of the Church, as it were, and together they walk through the course of history side by side, the Church bearing a positive witness to God's redeeming purposes and the Jews a negative witness, unknown to them and in spite of them. Even in their rejection of Christ, God insists on using the Jews. This is deeply mysterious, but history, as well as Scripture, bears witness to it. The Levitical ordinance of the scapegoat (Leviticus 16) has sometimes been used as an illustration: in the ordinance there were two goats: one was slain and its blood poured out on the altar, the other was taken and led out to the wilderness to wander in a land not inhabited. Together they signify and illustrate God's purpose of atonement. In like manner, in history, the Lamb of God was slain and His blood spilt for our salvation; while the scapegoat - dare we say it, the Jews? - has wandered down the course of history. Is this why Paul can say, in Romans 11, that in association with the end-time, when God's purposes will have come to fruition, there will no longer be need for this scapegoat to wander any longer, and so all Israel will be saved?

99) 34:1-7

This word concerning Zedekiah must be dated 587/ 586 BC or thereabouts, after the king had rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar at the instigation of the king of Egypt, and when the Babylonians had responded to that revolt by devastating the city of Jerusalem (1). It repeats the now monotonous message that the city would fall (2) and that there was no hope of raising the siege. It almost seems (3-7) as if Jeremiah felt sympathy with the hapless king; perhaps he felt he was weak and wayward, and at the mercy of the whims of his nobles and princes, rather than abandoned in evil as his predecessors had undoubtedly been, and felt pity for him. In the historical appendix at the end of the book (52:1ff) we see what actually did happen in the end to Zedekiah, and we need to square Jeremiah's prophecy about his dying in peace (5) with what is said there. It is true that Zedekiah did not die by the sword, but in prison; but he died an ignominious death. And it may be that we are meant to understand, either that Jeremiah's prophecy here was conditional upon Zedekiah's paying heed to his warnings, which he did not do; or, that God brought the king right down into the depths (as described in ch 52) before He could give him peace. And it may be that in his blindness and desolation, in the Babylonian prison, Zedekiah came to himself, reconciled to God after all the evil of his reign and after the tragedy that had come upon him. We cannot know; but it is impressive, is it not, that such a word (5) should have been spoken to the king in such an hour of judgment.

100)34:8-22

We are still, in these verses in the time of the siege of Jerusalem. The king, we are told in 8ff, made a covenant with the people to proclaim liberty to them. We need to understand aright what this means and how it came about. The historical background will help. During the final siege of Jerusalem the Babylonian armies were distracted and withdrew briefly from the city. Zedekiah with his priests and nobles thought that this was the end of the siege and that they would have no more trouble from Nebuchadnezzar. Jeremiah speedily disabused them of this false and facile optimism, insisting that doom had been pronounced on the city - hence the grim warning in 22 that the Babylonian armies would return. At all events this proclamation of liberty, which represented a return to the laws of God enshrined in Leviticus was at least an attempt to put things right in the nation, a gesture on Zedekiah's part. Put at its best, it was a kind of peace offering; at its worst, an expedient, a sop to the living God, as if to say, 'O God, look what we are doing. We are putting things right: will You not now save us from our enemies?' Whatever the motive, it is sadly clear that when the pressure was lifted, the princes and nobles changed their minds about giving the slaves their freedom (11), and brought them into subjection again. Hence the word of the Lord in 12ff, reproaching them for going back on the covenant. The Lord was prepared to accept their action at its face value (15), and this is some evidence of how eagerly He looks for any sign of repentance in His people. But alas, their goodness was as a morning cloud, and as the early dew it passed away (Hosea 6:4), and any hopes the Lord had were quickly dashed, hence the pronouncement of judgment in 17ff. How easy it is, in time of crisis, to become serious in spiritual things, and - when the crisis is over - to subside into the old complacency and lukewarmness of spirit. Is this what happens to our consecration, after a crisis blows over?

101)35:1-19

This chapter, as was pointed out in our original analysis of the book, forms an appendix to the second section of the prophecy (chs 25-34). The Rechabites mentioned here are used as an illustration by the prophet, to make a point which will become clear when we understand the history and significance of this group of people. They were a wandering, tent-dwelling tribe that lived within the borders of Israel and worshipped Israel's God. The only reference to them elsewhere in the Old Testament, in 2 Kings 10:15ff, traces their lineage and their distinctive practices to Jehonadab, son of Rechab, in the time of Ahab's reign, and shows Jehonadab to have been associated with Jehu in the reforms the latter effected during that time. He was clearly a man of puritanical zeal for the things of God, and was involved in the protest against the Baal-worship and the corruption that had polluted the land. One expression of their puritanical zeal was a total abstinence from wine-drinking, as we see here, in 6, 8; another was the maintenance of a simple lifestyle and a pilgrim spirit (9, 10). As such they are the hereditary forebears of many another protest movement within the life of the church, as for example, the Pharisees, who originated in Maccabaeen and post-Maccabaeen times as a spiritual protest against the over-politicisation of the church of their day and were in their inception a deeply spiritual and dedicated movement - as, centuries later, were the Puritans in 17th century England. It is this background that Jeremiah uses here as a parable bearing the message of the Lord to the nation, and we shall look at the point being made in the next Note.

102)35:1-19

The parabolic use made of the Rechabites' tradition is as follows: Jeremiah is commanded by the Lord to bring them into the Temple and offer them wine. This was not a temptation but a test, for God knew very well they would not touch it, since as a family they had committed themselves to total abstinence, and would hold rigidly to it. When, as expected, they refused to drink it, God said - and this was His message to the nation - 'Look at the Rechabites: their father said 'Drink no wine, neither you nor your sons forever' - they have kept their father's word. In contrast, however, look what I have said to you, and you have not kept My word'. The obedience and loyalty given by the Rechabites to their earthly father is therefore contrasted with Israel's disobedience to their heavenly Father. It is important for us to see that it is not their abstinence from strong drink as such, but their constancy and loyalty that are commended. As G. Adam Smith comments, 'How it put to shame Judah's delinquency from the commands of her Divine Father:' That is the one lesson: the other is that this is set in contrast to what we saw in the previous chapter, where the temporary 'consecration' of the people in time of crisis was seen to evaporate very quickly as soon as the pressure was lifted from them (see Note on 34:8-22). The Rechabites have something to teach us also today, alike in the constancy of their loyalty, and in the simplicity of their lifestyle, and we should not be slow to listen to what their worthy example has to say to us.

103)36:1-19

This chapter begins the third section of Jeremiah's prophecy, which extends to ch 44 and is mainly narrative. These verses tell of the gathering together and inscribing in a book of all Jeremiah's prophecies from the beginning in Josiah's reign up to this point (1, 2), and of Jeremiah's instruction to Baruch to read them to the people on the fast day (6). It is impressive to see how even at this late date the prophet - and the Lord - still looked for and longed for a turning in repentance by the people (3, 7). It is impressive also to see how this was to be achieved, if ever it was to come about: by a repetition of the words of the prophet's ministry - no new thing, it will be seen, only a reiteration of what had already been said. That is a lesson worth learning, in a day when we are so concerned to be saying something new in our efforts to reach men. The proclamation of a fast in 9 is some indication of the consciousness in the nation of impending crisis, but nothing could be clearer than the emptiness and meaninglessness of such a fast when there was such a total unwillingness and refusal to hear and heed God's word through the prophet, as the rest of the chapter makes plain. Even although it seems that the princes were at this time at least sympathetic towards Jeremiah's ministry (14, 19), the inner clique of counsellors surrounding the king, and the king himself, were clearly not; and in view of this the fast was simply a piece of hypocrisy, and a form of magic and superstition, to ward off the danger they saw threatening them. What point would there be in a multitude of such fasts, when their hearts were so far away from God?

104)36:20-32

The measure of just how far their hearts were from God is indicated by the terrible acts of the king recorded in 21-23. We cannot but feel that his action in deliberately and contemptuously mutilating the roll of the book containing Jeremiah's words and casting it in the fire represented a climacteric of evil so terrible that it filled the prophet's heart with astonishment (24) and evoked alarmed protests even from some of the king's counsellors (25). One thinks of Paul's solemn word in Romans 3:18 as he charges home the guilt of sin upon men: there was certainly no fear of God in the king or his company in this awful act (24). The remaining verses of the chapter (27ff) pronounce the inevitable doom upon him: disinherited and disowned (30, 31) his punishment would be condign and final. In contrast, however, we should note what happened to the word of the Lord which he so contemptuously spurned: not only was it to be written out again (28), and thus reconstituted, but also substantially added to (32), with 'many like words'. Which thing is a parable: the word refused comes back bigger than ever, because the word of God is not bound, men cannot destroy or abolish the testimony of the Lord. His servants may be put in prison, even killed, but His word endures forever: it is an anvil that has broken many hammers.

105)37:1-10

The events of this chapter belong, as we see from 1, to the ten-year period of Zedekiah's reign, between the first assault on Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar and the final one in 587/586 BC. It was in the midst of this period, as we have seen, that Zedekiah rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar, aided and abetted by Pharaoh of Egypt and other subject-states, who intrigued against Babylon and inveigled Zedekiah into doing so, in spite of all Jeremiah's warnings to 'Serve the king of Babylon and live' (2). In 5ff we see that Jerusalem was given temporary respite, when the approach of the Egyptian army led to Nebuchadnezzar's withdrawal from the city (this is the situation referred to in the Note on 34:8-22). Jeremiah then warns against the folly of thinking that the danger is over. Even if at this late date God was testing His people to see if any lasting repentance might take place in them, to make deliverance possible from His hand, Jeremiah could see only too clearly that there was no real intention on their part to change their ways, hence his uncompromising and unequivocal pronouncement in these verses. From which we may gather that Zedekiah's request for the prophet's prayers in 3 was no real evidence of a change of heart, but only a reaction of fear under pressure. Indeed, it may well be that we are meant to interpret Jeremiah's words in 6ff as the Lord's intimation to him when he prayed at the king's request. In other words, the Lord's answer was No.

106)37:11-21

It is clear from 11, 12 that the temporary respite in the siege referred to in yesterday's Note was very real, giving the city a breathing space that enabled a reasonable freedom of movement for its inhabitants. Thus Jeremiah was able to travel to Anothoth, his home town, in Benjamin, 'to receive his portion there among the people', as the RSV translates it. This may well refer to the incident recorded in ch 32 about the buying of the field in Anothoth. It will be remembered that the prophet was in prison when this purchase was made; and now, when the siege was temporarily lifted he took the opportunity to go and see the field that was now his in title. But this had fateful consequences for the prophet, for an army officer seeing him there concluded that he was defecting to the Babylonians, had him arrested and committed him to prison (13ff), where he languished 'many days' (16). It was while he was in prison in the house of Jonathan the scribe that the king sent for him yet again (17), seeking from him a word from the Lord. Zedekiah's weak and irresolute conduct is evident - he was a distracted monarch indeed. It is one thing, however, to ask or want a word from the Lord, and quite another to be prepared to obey it or welcome it. He clearly wanted a comforting and reassuring message, but the only word given him was in terms of the earlier 'Serve the king of Babylon and live' (17b). The 'Moreover' in 18 is some evidence of Jeremiah's unbroken spirit, although in 20 we may have some indication of the sufferings he had endured (and the flogging he had received) in the house of Jonathan the scribe. Zedekiah makes a partial response to the prophet's plea, making more congenial arrangements for him in the court of the prison. Why could he not have released him altogether? He was a puppet in the hands of his princes too, as well as in Nebuchadnezzar's.

107)38:1-13

Some scholars think that this chapter is a duplicate and variant account of the same imprisonment as that recorded in ch 37, and that the 'many days' of 37:16 refer to the period of almost two years during which the siege went on, and that Jeremiah was in prison all that time (cf 38:28). Others, however, (including G. Adam Smith) see no reason why the two chapters should not refer to two entirely different occasions, and that they follow one another consecutively. We shall see as we read on how the imprisonment developed, from the house of Jonathan the scribe (37:15) to the court of the prison (37:21); from there to the dungeon of Malchiah (38:6), then the court of the prison again (38:28). It would seem that after Zedekiah's partial intervention (37:21) the prophet was kept in open, rather than close, arrest and that during this period, which may have gone on for some considerable time, Jeremiah had some measure of freedom, and a certain amount of access to the people, enabling him to preach to them (in much the same way as the apostle Paul did in Acts 28). If this be a correct interpretation of the situation, the people, who knew the prophet was under arrest, may well have come to hear him - perhaps out of curiosity or even out of contempt. The words 'had spoken' in 1 are translated 'was saying' in the RSV, and this does seem to suggest a continuing ministry from prison which compelled their attention. Speaking with the authority he undoubtedly had (2, 3) this ministry was spreading dismay among the people and they were being made to tremble. And the princes said, 'This cannot go on: he must be put to death' (4). Zedekiah was too hopelessly weak to protect the prophet, and he was flung into an unspeakable dungeon, and left in the filth and mire to die.

108)38:1-13

Jeremiah may have languished in the mire of that dark and foul dungeon for many days - may have been months, for the siege lasted nearly two years - and it does not need much imagination to realise in what a weak and emaciated condition he was when Ebed-melech, one of the king's eunuchs, went to Zedekiah to plead for his life. Clearly, God moved the heart of this man to feel compassion for His servant. Our omnipotent Lord has His ministering angels in queer places! This is one of the most tender and beautiful touches in all the Old Testament record: not only did this black slave from Ethiopia, with great daring and at considerable peril to his own life, go to the king to plead Jeremiah's cause, awakening compassion in the irresolute monarch, but he also told a wonderful sensitivity to the pitiable condition of the prophet's frail body after so long an incarceration, realising that lifting him out of the dungeon with bare ropes would have caused him excruciating agony - hence the old cloths and rags to put under his armpits as he was lifted out (11, 12). Some of the gruesome pictures of the survivors of Belsen, Buchenwald and Thereisenstadt during the Second World War would give an idea of Jeremiah's condition in this terrible experience. We can almost hear the squelch of the mud and mire as his body was lifted out, a pitiful object. The Rev T. Swanston comments that this was Jeremiah's Calvary - an apt and grim description of what he had suffered in his faithfulness to the message God had given him to proclaim.

109)38:14-28

These verses record yet another secret meeting between the king and the prophet. Jeremiah has clearly been shattered by his terrible experience, and is unwilling to answer the king's request (14) without some assurance from him about his safety (15). This being given (16) the prophet utters the same grim message as before. What an incredible courage this sensitive, timid man must have had, with the mire of his imprisonment scarcely dry upon him. The urgency of his appeal to the king, in face of Zedekiah's fear and dread in 19, is very moving, and must have constrained the king to heed his advice (20ff). The last verses of the chapter, however, show his irresolution once again, and - in view of what we have said about Jeremiah's heroic spirit - a somewhat unexpected agreement on his part, at the suggestion of the king, to prevaricate with the princes (25-27). Calvin's comment here is useful: 'It was indeed not a falsehood, but this evasion cannot wholly be excused. The prophet had an honest fear; he was perplexed and anxious - it would be better to die at once than be thus buried alive in the earth.... Yet it was a kind of falsehood. He confesses that he did as the king charged him and there is no doubt that he had before him the king's timidity. He cannot be wholly exempted from blame. In short, we see how even the servants of God have spoken evasively when under extreme fear.' C. Adam Smith adds the comment, 'The prophets were men of like passions with ourselves. By now Jeremiah had aged, and was strained by the flogging, the darkness, the filth and the hunger he had suffered. Can we wonder at or blame him? But with what authenticity does its frankness stamp the whole story!'

110)39:1-18

This chapter records the final denouement, when the city of Jerusalem was 'broken up', makes grim and terrible reading indeed. The near two-year duration of the siege is indicated in 1, 2 - this is the time of Jeremiah's imprisonment - and the doom long predicted by the prophet became a reality. Zedekiah's refusal to heed his advice to yield quietly and submissively to the king of Babylon (38:17) had entirely predictable consequences, as we see in 4ff: the king's pathetic and vain attempt to flee by night was speedily brought to nought, and he suffered the terrible experience of seeing his sons slain before his eyes, along with his nobles, and then his own eyes were put out in an ultimate act of barbarity. Yet things might have been so different for him, as Jeremiah had predicted, if only he had taken the prophet's advice; and we must assume that what befell him was the inevitable punishment of his continued rebellion against Nebuchadnezzar, rather than an evidence of indiscriminate and mindless barbarity on the latter's part. Indeed, this seems to be borne out by the fact that the victor showed considerable wisdom and clemency in dealing with 'the poor of the land' (10). His action in this, along with his appointment of Gedaliah as governor (14, cf also 40:5) seems to indicate an intention at least to restore some kind of organised life in the beleaguered land. After all, God's quarrel was not with the poor of the people but with the royal family, the nobles and the princes who had dragged them all down into this doom. Another, and still more striking, evidence of Nebuchadnezzar's clemency is evident in 11ff, and this we shall consider in the next Note.

III)39:1-18

The more one thinks of what is recorded in 11-14 the more remarkable and astonishing it seems. The scene in Jerusalem at this time must have been one of indescribable chaos, with the victorious army of Babylon setting fire to everything, and pillaging and plundering the Temple and all the nobles' houses - and in the midst of all this ruthlessness, one Jew is singled out for special treatment. Jeremiah was to be taken and looked well after and preserved inviolate. 'Them that, honour Me, I will honour' says the Lord. Jeremiah had been faithful even - in principle - unto death and he was wonderfully vindicated and rewarded in being kept safe in such a holocaust. We do not know how Nebuchadnezzar knew about him - by supernatural means or through his own intelligence system and the interrogation of captives who had told him about the prophet who had urged 'Serve the king of Babylon and live'. At all events God had fulfilled His earlier promise to Jeremiah to make him 'a defenced city' (1:18), not only against his fellow countrymen but against Babylon too. A similar preservation was made of Ebed-melech the Ethiopian. (cf 38:7ff) for the kindness and care he showed for the prophet while in prison. These two 'preservations' in the midst of the maelstrom of the final siege and its aftermath serve to assure us of the absolute sovereignty of God in such a situation: the storms never roar so loudly that individuals are no longer able to be the objects of His tender care and protection. What He promises, He will invariably perform and fulfil, and He will never leave nor forsake a single soul to whom He has pledged His guardian, covenant love.

112)40:1-16

The siege of Jerusalem and its capture are now behind us, and it remains for us to see what happened to those who were left and to the prophet himself. This is the subject matter of the next few chapters (40-44). Following this, in 45-51, we have various prophecies against the nations, and finally, in 52, a historical appendix giving in retrospect the account of the fall of Jerusalem once again. The chapters now before us are deeply suggestive in the analogy they present with the present day, for they deal so to speak with a post-war period, the 'years of the aftermath', as it were, and they have to do with the business of 'winning the peace', and as such have relevance for our own situation in Britain today. When war came in 1939, we were accustomed to speak of the disaster as a judgment on the West and on our land for sin. Then, we won the war; and we did not speak so much about a judgment, for how could it be a judgment, if in fact we won? But what, if winning was itself part of the judgment of God? For look at the rapid deterioration of Britain's greatness as a power: we have been cut down to size, and this has taken place since the end of hostilities in 1946. We have not really won the peace: we could have, but we have not, and now it may be too late to do so. The same possibilities as these faced the people who were left in Judah; and they made the same mistakes. They did not change from resisting and refusing the will of the Lord; and they persisted in false ideas of their identity as a nation, and in an aggressive attitude against Babylon. This was their unrealism, the inability to accept their now lowly position as a nation that had sinned away its greatness. Over against this, Jeremiah's realism was vindicated. His exhortation 'Serve the king of Babylon and live' may have sounded defeatist and even treasonable, but it proved to be the only safe and sensible course. It was also the right thing to have done after the fall of the city, as we shall see, and would have succeeded, but for a tragic and disastrous misfortune that befell Gedeliah, the governor appointed by Nebuchadnezzar after the capture of Zedekiah. This is the kind of context and application that we need to give to these chapters now before us.

113)40:1-16

First of all, we have in 1-6 the release of Jeremiah. There is some difficulty in reconciling 39:11-14 with these verses, but the two seemingly different accounts may be supplementary, the one explaining the other, and elaborating it. Jeremiah could have been released as described in 39:11ff, and the manner of his release may have been according to 1-6; perhaps, even, he was released from prison at first, then rounded up with the others for deportation, and subsequently released when it was known who he was. At all events, he was associated with Gedeliah, the new governor (cf 2 Kings 25:22ff). Gedeliah's governorship, closely bound up as it was with the personal fortunes of Jeremiah, was, as Skinner points out 'An experiment in local autonomy which exhibits in a very favourable light the pacific tendency of the Babylonian imperialism. It vindicated, when too late, the soundness of Jeremiah's repeated counsels to surrender the capital to the Chaldean army. Even now, in spite of the severity with which he had crushed and punished the rebellion, Nebuchadnezzar had no thought of exterminating the Jewish people.... In Gedeliah, the son of Ahikam, the Babylonians appear to have found a man of outstanding character and ability, thoroughly sympathetic with their policy, and capable, if he had lived longer, of working it out successfully.... He was convinced like the prophet that the one hope of national regeneration lay in submission to the irresistible yet lenient sway of the king of Babylon, in whose clemency he had unbounded confidence. And he showed the courage of his convictions by his willingness to undertake the arduous and dangerous duties of building up a new commonwealth out of the wreck which war had made of the kingdom of Judah.' That is a highly significant comment, and it is a pointer to what we also in our day need to be looking for in government.

114)40:1-16

The potential for good in the administration set up by Gedeliah was considerable, as may be seen in 7ff. The fact that he set up government at Mizpeh (6) seems to have had a symbolic significance, for this was the centre from which the prophet Samuel had 'judged' Israel and rebuilt the nation. It seems clear that Gedeliah had hopes of consolidating a viable government over the various unsettled districts of the land where there were pockets of resistance still against the rule of Babylon. One by one, the leaders of their bands came to him to give him their allegiance, and he urged them to settle down to a peaceful existence, harvesting the produce of the vineyards and the orchards (10). That is to say they were to settle down, accept the situation as it was and not battle against it. The prospects for the future seemed bright, and for a time, as Skinner suggests, that period in the aftermath of the city's fall may well have been the happiest of Jeremiah's long life. But alas, it was destined to be short, as 13ff indicate: word was brought to Gedeliah of a sinister plot to assassinate him. It may be that Gedeliah was so moved and encouraged by the thought that the hand of God was now upon them for good that he just could not believe in the existence of such a conspiracy. At all events, he failed to take the warning seriously, refusing to believe ill of Ishmael, the son of Nethaniah (16), with predictable consequences, as we shall see in our next reading.

115)41:1-18

The conspiracy to destroy Gedeliah was only too real, and its course and results are chronicled for us in this chapter and the next. The naive trustfulness of Gedeliah stands out clearly in 1, 2: at first, in the 'dinner-party' at which Ishmael and his companions were entertained, any suspicions Gedeliah might have had seemed allayed and set at rest. But, in a foul act of betrayal reminiscent of the circumstances surrounding the massacre of Glencoe, the assassins suddenly attacked, and the terrible deed was done. Ishmael, as G. Adam Smith says, 'was one of those fanatics with whom the Jewish nation have been cursed at all crises in their history'. He represented the fiercely patriotic, anti-Babylonian faction who refused to recognise with any realism the facts of Babylon's sovereignty and the divine hand upon it, and insisted on carrying on the rebellion which had cost Zedekiah so dearly. It was the Ammonites who put Ishmael up to it, just as earlier it had been Egypt who put Zedekiah up to it - shades of the dark intrigue that bedevil Middle East politics today! The ugliness of this dark deed is seen further in what followed. In 5 we are told of further groups coming in from outlying districts to give their allegiance, as they thought to Gedeliah (word of his assassination had not yet become known). Ishmael basely tricked them, and put them to the sword. It was a grim testimony to the fact that sin breeds sin, and that once restraints are removed anarchy is likely to prevail.

116)41:1-18

By the time Ishmael's terrible deeds were disclosed, all the important people in Mizpah who had been committed to Gedeliah's care by the Babylonians had been carried away captive by him into Ammon. However, he was overtaken by a force under Johanan, Gedeliah's lieutenant (who had originally warned about the conspiracy), and the captives were recovered. But Ishmael escaped into Ammon. Faithful and loyal as Johanan clearly seems to have been, he was lacking in the kind of strength that was needed in such a time of crisis, for although he succeeded in rallying the people (16), he clearly felt that their standing with Babylon had been hopelessly and irretrievably compromised, and that they must inevitably be dealt with summarily in vengeance by Nebuchadnezzar for such a crime against his appointed governor; hence the panic decision to flee to Egypt (17, 18). Perhaps if he had kept his nerve and stayed on in the land to face the music, an impartial investigation by Nebuchadnezzar might well have cleared him and his loyal followers of implication in the assassination, and all might yet have been well. But he did not have the courage or the statesmanship, even in face of Jeremiah's encouragement (42:7ff), to stand firm, and he succumbed to the temptation to turn to Egypt, believing that all was lost. And because he thus believed, all was indeed lost, and the one hope of better things finally disappeared. All of which shows yet again the critical importance of stature in national leadership, in time of crisis.

117)42:1-22

Jeremiah, as G. Adam Smith points out, was the one hope left to them, and like Zedekiah (37:17) they turned to him in their perplexity for a word of guidance from the Lord (2, 3). The prophet undertook to pray to the Lord on their behalf and to relate to them all that was revealed to him by the Spirit. The form of Jeremiah's words in 4 may have a significance: 'the Lord your God' not the 'Lord our God'. It is almost as if he were putting a barrier between himself and them, dissociating himself from them, or at least recognising that they were not in touch with Him as he was. Their protestations in 5, 6 about obeying what the Lord said are very earnest, but as we shall see in the event were empty and false. Jeremiah took ten days to lay the matter before the Lord in prayer, 'studying, we may be sure, the actual facts of the situation (including what he already knew to be the people's hope of finding security in Egypt) and carefully sifting out his own thoughts and impulses from the convictions which his prayers brought him from God' (G. Adam Smith). The answer that came was clear and unequivocal: once again Jeremiah assured them from the Lord that safety for them lay in remaining in the land and that they must not fear the king of Babylon (10, 11). If, however, they refused to do so - and this would mean to disobey the voice of the Lord their God - and determined to go to Egypt, the doom that they feared from Nebuchadnezzar would befall them there: they would die by the sword, by famine and by pestilence, and none of them would escape.

118)42:1-22

The coming of this grim and unwelcome word from the Lord had predictable consequences. They were to refuse it, of course, as will become plain in the next chapter. But it was to do something else also: it served to expose the dissembling of their hearts (20), and reveal quite unmistakably that they had never had any real intention to obey the divine voice. All they had wanted was a confirmation of their own instinctive desires to flee to Egypt. This teaches us a lesson of considerable importance, and prompts us to ask ourselves if in our prayers we are really seeking the Lord's will and prepared to obey Him, whatever He says, or simply wanting confirmation of our own desires and inclinations. One wonders, in this connection, whether this explains why some Christians go the rounds of their friends asking their advice in a particular issue, in order eventually to find one whose counsel will coincide with what they themselves really want to do. There can be a great deal of wishful thinking in soulful and prayerful consultation! But there is an even more solemn lesson in these verses, and it is this: by their long disobedience, the people had finally rendered themselves incapable of hearing and obeying the word of the Lord. It was this that brought such a stern pronouncement from the prophet. As G. Adam Smith says, 'Jeremiah had well discerned (24:1ff) that those of his countrymen, who had been deported in 597, were the good figs of his vision and those who remained the bad. The latter were of the breed that had turned Temple and Sacrifice into fetishes, for as such they now treated the prophet, the greatest whom God ever sent to Israel.

119)43:1-13

We see in 1-7 the all too predictable reaction of the people's leaders. It is particularly sad that Johanan was also involved in this revolt against the word of the Lord, for one could have had real hopes of him (2). Their response was also characteristic: they accused the prophet of speaking falsely (2) since they were not prepared to accept that what he said could possibly be of the Lord. This is an instinctive human reaction: it would hardly have done, would it, for them to have admitted that God had spoken and then deliberately repudiated His word. It is always much more comfortable to convince oneself that the Lord has not really said such a thing: It is interesting also to see that Baruch, Jeremiah's servant, is held responsible for unduly influencing the prophet in his pronouncement - an improbable, even far-fetched notion! - and this is evidence, surely, that Baruch shared Jeremiah's own insights and interpretation of the situation. It is some evidence of how involved Baruch had become in public affairs, in the service of Jeremiah, that he should have been singled out in this way as a possible influence on the prophet. At all events, as Skinner says, 'it now suited the purpose of the self-willed captains to put on him the responsibility for an oracle which they were determined to disobey. Their minds were already made up; and without further parley they gathered their company together, and set out for Egypt, taking Jeremiah and Baruch with them.'

120)43:1-13

If they thought that they would escape the uncomfortable pressure of the word of the Lord by being in Egypt, these hapless leaders were soon to be disillusioned, for once again the word of the Lord came to them through Jeremiah. He may have been a prisoner, but the word of God is not bound. Whether or not, however, they thought to escape the word of the Lord by being in Egypt, it is certainly clear that they thought they would be beyond the reach of Nebuchadnezzar's vengeance there, and that they would enjoy the protection of a friendly power. Of this false notion they were speedily disabused, through the symbolic message that the prophet delivered to them, when he laid great stones in the entry of Pharaoh's house, and declared that Nebuchadnezzar would set his throne and spread his royal pavilion over them (10). The prophet could see very clearly that the invasion of Egypt by the king of Babylon was inevitable, and that it would happen soon. Nor, surely, did it need any special prophetic insight to see this: it was only the obtuseness of the leaders of the people that made them incapable of seeing what must surely have been obvious to anyone with any political awareness. Babylon was on the ascendant at this time, and no power on earth was in a position to resist her (Skinner adds: 'Obscure references in both Babylonian and Egyptian inscriptions combine to make it probable that a Babylonian invasion of Egypt took place in the year 568, in which the land was ravaged as far as the southern frontier at Svene (Ezekiel 29:10)').

121)44:1-14

This passage seems to belong to the time later than that of the previous chapter, perhaps considerably later, for the prophet has been able to acquaint himself with how his countrymen have settled down in the pagan environment of Egypt, and it is this that prompts his word to them recorded in these verses. It is addressed not only to those whom he accompanied down to Egypt but to all the Jews who were then in Egypt. There were already, evidently, Jewish settlements from earlier periods in different parts of Egypt. It is the consciousness that they are continuing in their evil ways and worshipping other gods that prompts this word to them. He points out that Jerusalem and Judah are now desolate because of the wickedness and idolatry of their people, and their stubborn disobedience of the word of God (2-6). And he warns them that to continue in such attitudes of disobedience and idolatry now in Egypt would inevitably bring a similar judgment upon them there (11ff). It says much for the resilience of the prophet and his courage, that in such disadvantageous circumstances he should be prepared to utter such a fearless denunciation upon them, especially in their intransigent and stubborn defiance of the word of the Lord. He must have realised that it would provoke a violent reaction against him and further endanger his life (as we shall see in the passage that follows). But he is true to the last to his commission: he will speak whether they hear, or whether they will forbear (Ezekiel 2:5).

122)44:15-30

While 1-14 seemed to constitute a word to all the Jews residing in Egypt, suggestive of a letter being circulated among them, the verses which now follow here seem to indicate that Jeremiah had addressed a great gathering (15). Skinner thinks it possible to harmonise the seemingly discordant ideas in the two parts of the chapter by imagining 'a great representative gathering of Jews from all parts of Egypt, met to celebrate the resurrection of the cult of the Queen of Heaven, on which the female element among them had set its mind'. The words of the women in 16ff must have been especially distressing to the prophet, as they attributed their present misfortunes to their failure to worship the Queen of Heaven (18), and made this the reason for the resumption of their idolatry. One recalls Isaiah's earlier prophecy, 'Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil...Isaiah 5:20: this, then, was what they had come to in their ongoing disobedience and rebellion, and it is a very frightening evidence of the deadly effect of continuing sinning. All that Jeremiah can say to it is to reiterate his solemn words of doom (20ff), and to leave the proof of his words to the events that would ultimately overtake them. As Skinner says, 'He makes no further attempt to expostulate with them, but with scathing irony he hands them over to their reprobate and superstitious mind (25-28)'.

123)44:15-30

One or two further things require to be said before we leave this chapter. Skinner suggests that it is perhaps 'taking a too serious view of this feminine theology to suppose that it involves a belief in the Queen of Heaven as a more potent deity than Yahweh, or a deliberate repudiation of the national God. What the women objected to was not the acknowledgement of Yahweh as the supreme God, but only that exclusive worship of Him which the prophets and Deuteronomy demanded and which had made illegal an innocent and picturesque piece of ritual which experience had now shown to be necessary for the welfare of the State'. Skinner goes on to point out that the point in Jeremiah's words here was to dispel the illusion the people had that they could still hold fast to the religious inheritance of their race even though living in a strange land (this is surely why they compelled Jeremiah to come with them to Egypt). But it is not possible, in any age or for any people, to serve God and the devil, and this they were to learn the hard way, and at great cost to themselves.

These are the last words we have from Jeremiah - what remains of the prophecy is a series of pronouncements against the Gentile nations uttered at various times and gathered together as a kind of appendix to the book - and he lays down his work as prophet in pronouncing this sentence of final rejection upon his people, a broken-hearted man and disappointed in the ultimate remnant of Israel, but still himself, as G. Adam Smith says, 'in his honesty, his steadfastness to the truth and his courage; still himself in his irony, his deliberateness and his confident appeal to the future for the vindication of his word.'

124)45:1-5

We come with this chapter to the final section of the prophecy of Jeremiah, comprising a series of utterances pronouncing the doom and judgment of God upon various Gentile nations which surrounded Judah in the prophet's time. These are gathered together for their subject matter rather than for any chronological sequence. The section is prefaced by this brief word from God to Baruch, Jeremiah's servant, a thought-provoking and moving utterance which needs to be pondered carefully before its significance comes through. The RSV rendering is rather more graphic than the AV and will help in our understanding of its message. The Lord's word to Baruch, in 4, 5, is in response to what Baruch himself has said in 3. Reading between the lines, as it were, it would seem that the prophet's servant (and secretary), who had been Jeremiah's companion in the fellowship of all his sufferings throughout his long ministry, and who had shared his deepest insights, had found this to be a burden that was crushing and well-nigh unbearable - this is the meaning of the 'Woe is me' in 3. The constant and unremitting 'doom-ladenness' of the message Jeremiah had proclaimed in faithfulness to God, involving so much opposition, rejection, and hurt, made Baruch long for some more bearable alternative. He wanted to see his master vindicated, as a power and influence in the nation, not an object of contempt and persecution. Was there no way for him to be faithful and acceptable at the same time? If there were, he, Baruch, would also share in such acceptance. This is the point that is made in the words in 5, 'Seekest thou great things for thyself'. It was as if he were being asked 'Do you want to be feted by the leaders of the nation and welcomed and accepted by them? Is that your ambition?' More on this in the next Note.

125)45:1-5

In the Lord's reply to Baruch's plaint in 4, 5 there is a particular emphasis in the personal pronouns which is not immediately evident in the AV. The force of the RSV rendering seems to be as follows: 'Behold, what I have built I am breaking down, and what I have planted I am plucking up - that is, the whole land. And do you seek great things for yourself? Seek them not.' G. Adam Smith comments that Jeremiah might well have appealed from his own example to Baruch, pointing out that he had been stripped of family, friends, affections, or hopes of positive results from his ministry...but instead of quoting his own case Jeremiah brought to his despairing servant and friend a still higher example. The Lord Himself had been forced to relinquish His designs and to destroy what He had built and to uproot what He had planted. In face of such divine surrender, both of purpose and achievement, what was the resignation by a mere man, or even by a whole nation, of their hopes or ambitions? Let Baruch be content to expect nothing beyond bare life: thy life shall I give thee for a prey.' It is as if God were saying that this is all a man can expect on this side of eternity. The rewards are yonder. The fulfilment of ambitions is not now, but then, Baruch. Be patient, play the man, take up the cross. 'It is the way the Master went, should not the servant tread it still?' This is something that all who seek to be faithful to the Lord are liable to be confronted with. When we suffer the contempt, sneers of our fellows, we are tempted to ask ourselves 'Is there not an easier way to be faithful to God? Surely I can be acceptable and still be faithful?' This chapter gives the answer to such questions.

126)46:1-12

Before we look in detail at this next prophecy, it will be useful to see the pattern unfolded in these final chapters: in 46, it is doom against Egypt; in 47, against Philistia and Tyre; in 48, against Moab; in 49, against Edom, Damascus, Kedar and Ellam; in 50 and 51, the longest part of the section, against Babylon itself, and the climax of Jeremiah's utterance. Then, 52 gives a historical appendix outlining the history of the last days of Judah under Zedekiah. The significance of this historical appendix coming at the end seems to be something like this: Just as when Jeremiah prophesied doom upon Judah and it finally came to pass, so also the prophecies that he utters upon the Gentile nations, as yet unfulfilled, will also come to pass. And, paradoxically, this was a word of hope for the captive people: God was saying to them, 'Jeremiah prophesied your doom and it finally came to pass; he also has prophesied the doom of the surrounding nations and of Babylon. And just as his word was fulfilled in relation to you so his word will also be fulfilled in relation to your captors.' There is a very useful and practical principle involved here, since it makes it plain that fulfilled prophecy is the best argument for the truth of prophecy that is as yet unfulfilled. God is faithful to His own word.

127)46:1-12

Two prophecies concerning Egypt are given in this chapter, the first of which, in these verses, refers to the battle of Carchemish in 605 BC (2) when Pharaoh Necho was decisively defeated by Nebuchadnezzar. This was a very significant battle in the ancient world, signaling as it did the passing of world power from Egypt to Babylon. Herodotus, the historian, observes that Pharaoh Necho was a very astute and able man. One of his enterprises was a vast engineering project by which he tried very hard to connect the mouth of the Nile with the sea, thus anticipating the Suez Canal by 2½ thousand years. He failed in his endeavour, in which 120,000 slaves perished. This gives some idea of the extent of the Egyptian empire that was broken at this time. Two brief points may be made: one is to remark on the extraordinary way that history seems to repeat itself, with the Suez Canal area again figuring so prominently in the world scene. The other point is to note how sovereignly the Lord, as Disposer Supreme, raises up and casts down earthly powers in the furtherance and fulfilment of His will in the world and in relation to His own chosen people. This is something that we should remember today also, in the tragic and horrific events in the Lebanon. It must never be a matter of taking the stance 'Israel, right or wrong' - as if barbarism were somehow less barbaric when committed by Israel than by other nations - but rather we should endeavour to discern the divine purposes being worked out in the midst of such turmoil and upheaval.

128)46:13-28

These verses refer to a period after 586 BC when most of Judah were in captivity in Babylon, and the remnant had gone down to Egypt to escape, as they thought, from the wrath of Nebuchadnezzar. And here Jeremiah warns them that the day would soon come when Nebuchadnezzar would descend upon Egypt and devastate it. Little comment is needed by way of exposition, the picture is a bleak and devastating one. Towering over all is the reality of the King whose name is the Lord of Hosts (18), and in spite of the severity and awfulness of the doom pictured in these verses it is impressive to realise the thoroughness and finality of His judgment upon Egypt. In contrast to this, 27, 28 underlines the essential difference in His treatment of His chosen people: they and the Gentiles are alike brought under divine judgment for their sin, but whereas His punishment of the Gentiles is final and retributive, it is corrective and remedial so far as His own people are concerned. He will not make a full end of them. This is the explanation of the extraordinary change of emphasis in 27, 28, with their twofold 'fear thou not'. When we remember that Judah was in captivity in Babylon when this word was spoken it is all the more wonderful: 'I am with thee' - in the prison-house, in their affliction, in His chastisement of them, loving them utterly even in His righteous anger against them and His determination to punish them for their sin. Such is His grace. He remembers His covenant!

129)47:1-7

The next prophecy relates to Philistia. The time referred to in 1 goes back before Carchemish, indeed, before the battle of Megiddo in 608 BC, where king Josiah was slain, since it was on that expedition that Pharaoh passed up the coastal route on his way to help the Assyrians in their last stand against Babylon, and devastated Philistia on the way. Jeremiah presents the situation as a 'discussion' with the sword of the Lord (6, 7). It is the Lord Who has appointed this doom on Philistia, who are represented in 3, 5 as in total disarray, fleeing in terror and utterly demoralised. What lesson are we to take from this picture? Well, we may recall the earlier days of Israel's history, when the Philistines were notable for their mighty men of war and tyrannised the people of God. But now they are utterly reduced and ignominiously dismissed. When God takes a hand in the situation, no giants can withstand His power. And God can reduce modern giants too, with equal ease. What are the giants that beset us today? Apathy, despair, materialism, indifference, opposition? These are the powers that make the Church tremble and sometimes cringe in fear. But God can reduce such giants to nought when He comes in Power - as the history of spiritual awakening amply records - and turn their hands to feebleness and their knees to water. It may be that He is asking us to go forward with resolution against them, drawing our swords and tackling them in His name. What is the giant that oppresses and tyrannises your life at this time, making you cower and shrink in fear? Is there not a word here for such a situation as yours?

130)48:1-25

To read this chapter is to have the feeling that one is experiencing a whirlwind! But the Lord is in this whirlwind. Moab had been a hereditary enemy of Israel from earliest times (cf Numbers 22-25), but although they had been kept at bay for long enough in the earlier years of the kingdom, they had shown repeated tendency to revolt after Ahab's time. Their destruction had already been prophesied by Amos (2:1-3) and Isaiah (15, 16), and Jeremiah's word here, associated with the coming of the Babylonian power upon Palestine, indicates that that destruction was now imminent. Delitzsch sums up as follows: 'The chief cities of Moab are perished, and with them their fame. Plans are being concocted for their destruction. On all sides there is a crying over the devastation, and wailing, and flight; Chemosh, with his priests and princes, wanders into exile, and country and city are laid waste (v 1-8). Let Moab escape with wings in order to avoid the destruction; for although they have, in all time past, lived securely in their own land, they shall now be driven out of their dwellings, and come to dishonour with their god Chemosh, in spite of the bravery of their heroes (v 9-15). The destruction of Moab draws near, their glory perishes, the whole country and all its towns are laid waste, and the power of Moab is broken (v 16-25).'

131)48:1-25

One of the reasons for Moab's destruction is given in 11: 'Moab had been at ease from his youth...'. Briefly, we may say that it was because Moab had not had correction that judgment was now to come upon them. The process of sifting and discipline which they had never known had certainly been part of Israel's ongoing experience, for God's people had frequently been 'emptied from vessel to vessel'. The phrase at the end of 11 is significant; the AV has 'his taste remained in him, and his scent is not changed', which simply means that over the years they have remained the same old Moab, with the same 'smell' or flavour. This is an important metaphor or parable of spiritual things. A believer who has been at ease from his youth, has not known the disciplines of grace 'tastes' the same at the end as he did at the beginning. And the taste is sour. The fruit tastes green, and inedible. This can be put another way. When we begin with the Lord, our 'scent' is rank and pungent: it is only when we go on with Him that the sweet fragrance of the Holy Spirit begins to be distilled in our lives. It is therefore a serious matter when it can be said of a believer that 'his scent is not changed'. In this sense, we may well ask, 'Do we 'smell' better this year than we did last? Has there been any change in us? Our temperament, for example. Do people still see those marks of asperity, or brittleness, that were there last year? Are the failures that characterised us last autumn still failures today?' This is how it was with Moab and this is one of the reasons why God visited them. Their experience had left them untaught, and unteachable.

132)48:26-47

These verses give a further reason for Moab's judgment. Again, Delitzsch's comment is helpful: 'All this befalls them for their pride and loftiness of spirit; because of this they are punished, with the destruction of their glorious vines and their harvest; and the whole land becomes filled with sorrow and lamentation over the desolation, and the extermination of all those who make offerings to idols (v 26-35). Meanwhile the prophet mourns with the hapless people, who are broken like a despised vessel (v 36-38). Moab becomes the laughing-stock and the horror of all around: the enemy captures all their fortresses, and none shall escape the ruin (v 39-44). Fire goes out from Heshbon and destroys the whole land, and the people must go into captivity; but at the end of the days, the Lord will turn the captivity of Moab (v 45-47).' We may note one or two points of significance in the reading. The reason why Moab's 'scent' was not changed is made very clear in 28, 29 - they were too proud to be changed, their pride would not allow them to submit to any of the living God's intentions toward them. But there is something else we may discern in 27: Israel was a derision to them, and this is invariably a fateful attitude to adopt towards God's people, whether in 606 BC or in the latter half of the 20th century. The rulers of modern nations should be very careful about their attitude to Israel, and should see to it that that attitude be dictated by the principles of the Word of God, not by political expediency. The living God is still the God of Israel.

133)48:26-47

There is one further point we must note before leaving this chapter. When we read all these prophecies, we feel that there is a sameness about them, and, in one sense, this is perfectly true. But a careful reading of these chapters makes it clear that they are not quite the same. When God judges, He is dispensing justice, that is to say, He deals righteously with nations. Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right? But there is discrimination in His judgment, and one of the remarkable things in this final section of Jeremiah's prophecy is that some of the nations spoken of as coming under God's judgment are promised restoration at a later stage, while others are not. Egypt, for example, is promised restoration in 46:26; and here, in 47, the same is said of Moab - and of Ammon in 49:6 and of the Elamites in 49:39. But, in the case of Philistia, Edom, Damascus and Babylon there is no promise of restoration, but on the contrary, final, irretrievable ruin. We should bear this in mind when the judgment of God is abroad upon the earth. All that He does, even in judgment, is right, and none can say, It is not fair of God to do this or that, because, as we see from these chapters, He judges precisely: some nations are given respite and restoration, and others are not, because the cup of indignation for them is filled to overflowing: they have passed, as it were, the point of no return. We may therefore be sure when God moves in judgment, His judgments are true and righteous altogether.

134)49:1-6

The judgment upon Ammon occupies the first part of this chapter, and the key to its understanding is found in 1, for it indicates that the Ammonites had unlawfully annexed territory belonging to the tribe of Gad, who had received it in the apportioning of the land by Moses (Numbers 32:33ff). In fact, a long history of encroachment by Ammon upon the land of Gad is recorded in Scripture: in the time of the Judges (10:7 ff; 11:12-32); later, in Samuel's (1 Samuel 2) and in David's days (2 Samuel 10; 10:26ff); in Jehoshaphat's time (2 Chronicles 20), and later still, after the Assyrians had taken Israel captive, Ammon must have taken the opportunity once more to appropriate the territory of Gad, now depopulated by the captivity, for themselves. It is this unjust appropriation that is referred to in the opening of the prophecy here (the emphasis is similar to that in Amos 1:13-15, which see). It is interesting to see that Ammon is referred to in 4 as 'O backsliding daughter', a term normally used of Israel, a fact which has led some commentators to suggest that during the time when Ammon was under the control of the tribes of Gad and Reuben, they may well have become adherents of Israel's religion. If this be so - and at any rate they must have had light and revelation through the law in their association with Gad - their sin must be regarded as sin against that light. This also was involved in the divine judgment now pronounced upon them.

135)49:7-22

Next, it is the judgment upon Edom. Jeremiah seems to have relied much on Obadiah 1-9 in this prophecy, as a reading of these verses will show. It will be useful as well as necessary to look at the history of this people that led to such an unsparing denunciation of them by the prophet. The Edomites were descendants of Esau, the twin brother of Jacob, and the circumstances surrounding the birth of Isaac's sons were surely symbolic of the antagonism that was to mark all their subsequent association. The dissension and mutual antipathy between the brothers were transmitted to their posterity. It is a fact that, as G.A. Smith says, 'of all antipathies which the nation experienced, none was more bitter and constant than that towards Edom. The rest of Israel's enemies rose and fell like waves...but Edom was always there, and fretted his anger forever.' As early as the wilderness days Edom opposed Israel (see Numbers 20:14-21; Judges 11:17, 18). In Saul's time Israel fought against Edom (1 Samuel 14:47). David warred against Edom and conquered it (2 Samuel 8:14). In Jehoshaphat's reign (2 Chronicles 20) and in Jehoram's (2 Chronicles 21), as also in Amaziah's (2 Chronicles 25) assaults were made on the Edomites, while in Ahaz's time, Edom invaded Judah and carried off captives (2 Chronicles 28:17). At the fall of Jerusalem Edom rejoiced, as we see in 12 (see also Psalm 137:7; Ezekiel 25:12-14; 35:3-15) and judgment was foretold for her bitter hatred of God's people. The subsequent history of Edom shows that it fell into Arab hands in the 5th century BC, and in the 3rd was overrun by the Nabateans. Judas Maccabaeus subdued the Edomites in 164 BC and in 109 BC, John Hyrcanus conquered them, compelling them to be circumcised and incorporated into the Jewish people. In the Idumean dynasty of the Herods, Edom continued to distress the people of God in our Lord's own day. This historical review is sufficient to indicate the relentless and unremitting enmity between the two nations and to explain the vehemence expressed in these verses.

136)49:7-22

The root of Edom's sin, as we see from 16, was pride. It is a historical fact that Edom was a naturally fortified country, well-watered and abundant in rocky, mountain fastnesses that tempted the inhabitants to think that they were virtually impregnable. The whole lie of the land was conducive to a spirit of isolation and haughty independence of other peoples, not to say contempt of them. From the heights of their rocky caves and fortresses they looked down on others below them, and it was perhaps natural that this geographical phenomenon should develop into a moral and spiritual attitude. As one commentator puts it, 'our natural habits, and even the places we dwell in, often betray the real concerns of our hearts'. It was certainly so with Edom. It is not without significance that the New Testament speaks of Esau (the progenitor of Edom) as 'a profane person' (Hebrews 12:16). The root meaning of 'profane' has the force of describing a life divorced and dissociated from anything religious. Paul, describing the nature of sin in Romans 1, says that men 'did not like to retain God in their knowledge'. G. Adam Smith points out that we never hear in the Old Testament of the Edomite gods or that Edom ever had a religion. Their long history of proud, disdainful treatment of Israel, particularly the enormity of their actions following the sack of Jerusalem in 586, must be seen as the fruit - and the inevitable fruit - of their thoroughly irreligious attitude to life. It was this that brought the judgment of God upon them.

137)49:23-39

Damascus (23-27), Kedar (28-33), and Elam (34-39) are next to have judgment pronounced against them. Damascus, the capital of Syria, was the troublemaker in the earlier history of God's people, before the northern kingdom was taken into captivity. One recalls the conspiracy between Pekah of Israel and Rezin of Syria, mentioned in Isaiah 7, and the divine pronouncement through that prophet. God has a long memory (cf Amos 1:3-5) and now the time for the fulfilment of that promise of judgment had come. Kedar, a Bedouin or Arabic nation descended from Ishmael, were lovers of war and dwelt in apparently careless security, having 'neither gates nor bars' (31). They too were to bear the brunt of the Babylonian advance from the north spoiling and crushing them. The prophecy against Elam (34) is given a date: Zedekiah began to reign in 597 BC. Little is known about them, but here we are told that its martial power was to be destroyed and its population scattered. One might almost think that Jeremiah was hurrying through these prophecies against the nations, in order to get to the climax of his book, which is his pronouncement, in 50, 51, against Babylon. And climax it surely is as we shall see in the readings that follow. Before we leave Elam, however, we should note the promise of restoration in 39 and recall that on the day of Pentecost, Elamites were among those present in Jerusalem for the feast day, and heard in their own language the apostles rehearsing the wonderful works of God.

138)50:1-20

This chapter and the next form the climax of these prophecies of doom upon the nations, and Babylon itself, which was the instrument of the divine judgment upon so many of the other nations mentioned in the earlier chapters now has its own destruction foretold. The prophecy is extraordinarily vivid and graphic, although in point of fact many years were to pass before it was fulfilled, as we may gather from 51:59-64. Just as, in the case of the other nations, Babylon was to sweep down upon them as the foe from the north, so now another foe from the north would do likewise with Babylon, that foe being Cyrus of Persia. As Babylon had done to others, so now it would be done to Babylon (15). It is impressive to see the interaction and association in these verses between the fall of Babylon and the release of captive Israel, with 4-8 and 17-20 imbedded in the doom-laden record. There is a necessary connection between the two ideas, for it was the judgment that God brought upon Babylon that set His people free. There is a great spiritual lesson for us here: in the gospel, it is God's judgment upon sin in the Cross and His devastation of the dark powers that hold men in thrall that sets men free and stirs them to come and seek the way to Zion with tears and repentance and make them enter into a perpetual covenant with the Lord (4, 5). It is the mighty act of deliverance in Christ that creates the disposition of repentance in the soul. He is exalted as a Prince and a Saviour to give repentance to His people. And in this marvellous pictorial illustration we have it shown to us that the very stroke that devastated Babylon opened all the prison doors. That is the essence of the gospel.

139)50:1-20

There are other lessons also for us in these verses. Sometimes it takes a terrible action from God to move men's hearts to come with weeping. It may be that it is this kind of visitation that will be needed in our land before we see men beginning to ask the way to Zion. It was said of the times of spiritual awakening in the north-east of Scotland in the 1920s that revival came after one or two disastrous seasons in the fishing industry when whole communities were facing economic duress and stringency. It was in such a time of blight - judgment, it might be said - that the Spirit of God came down. And strong men were made to cry with fear as they sensed the holiness and majesty of the living God. And they wept their way to Zion and made a covenant with the Lord. It may be that the pattern of recurrent crisis and economic ruin that we have known for long enough in our own society today is a precursor of something our hearts have longed to see. And if God thinks to turn our nation to Himself by bringing to the verge of economic collapse and breaking it as a great nation forever, He will surely not hesitate.

Another lesson we must not miss in these verses is one of the reasons given for the destruction of Babylon. In 7, we see that they presumed upon the fact that Israel had sinned against the Lord, and thought that they could therefore spoil her with impunity, while in 11 we see that they gloried and exulted in what they did to God's people. It was this that brought the judgment of God down upon Babylon: they lived dangerously by so doing, and paid the price of their folly.

140)50-21-46

The fierceness of the divine wrath unfolded in these verses burns like a great fire, and they are awe-inspiring to read, reminding us of the tremendous utterances about Babylon in Revelation 17/18. The 'hammer' metaphor in 23 is very evocative - for so long Babylon had been the hammer of the whole earth, God's hammer, indeed, but now the hammer itself is shattered in pieces, being no match for the weapons in the divine armoury (25). The phrase in 28, 'the vengeance of his temple' is significant, and must surely have reference to the sacrilege committed by Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar (Daniel 5) against the vessels of the Lord pillaged from the temple at Jerusalem. There are other statements that also find echo in Daniel - Babylon's pride (29c) brings to mind Nebuchadnezzar's boastful and arrogant words in Daniel 4:30, and there may be a reference in the words in 36, 'they shall dote', to his humiliating downfall in Daniel 4:32, 33, where he is reduced to the level of a beast grazing in the field. The grim picture portrayed in 39ff is one that has been literally fulfilled, and the absolute desolation even to the present day of the area that once was Babylon, with the owl and the bittern, and the wild beasts haunting the ruins, but no human life, is an eloquent testimony to the reality of the judgment that fell upon the once proud empire. Those who have seen the Fact and Faith film 'The Stones Cry Out' will know just how literally Jeremiah's words are to be taken. What is said of Nebuchadnezzar in 43 makes us think of the words David spoke of Saul, 'how are the mighty fallen!' (2 Samuel 1:25, 27): this is how so many of Babylon's victims felt, and now Nebuchadnezzar gets a taste of his own medicine: as he had done, so now was done to him (29b). Finally, as we have seen before, the judgment on Babylon was to spell deliverance for Israel (33, 34). How wonderful that in the midst of such a dark picture there should be such a testimony: 'their redeemer is strong; the Lord of Hosts is His Name'.

141)51:1-26

The grim and lurid descriptions of judgment continue throughout this chapter. The fanners (2) and the archers (3) refer to the Medo-Persian power sweeping down upon Babylon showing no mercy, just as Babylon had shown no mercy to others. In 5, the reason for the doom about to overtake Babylon is stated to be the fact that God had not forgotten or forsaken His people. Doubtless Israel, languishing in Babylon, would be tempted to think that God had forsaken them forever and cast them away without hope of restoration. But this prophecy, as we see from 59-64, was sent to the captive people, and little as it might have seemed to them at that point, it was surely a source of great encouragement and hope, indicating that judgment was not His final word, and indeed, that we have not said the deepest thing about Jeremiah if we call him merely a prophet of doom. The suddenness of Babylon's fall is stressed in 8, and one can only marvel at the swiftness with which the hand of the Lord changes world situations - we have seen, have we not in the 20th century the sudden and total eclipse of world leaders who have strutted arrogantly and with seeming impunity on the stage of history and are now no more: Hitler, Stalin, Khrushchev, to name but a few. The glorious and impressive description of the sovereignty of God in 15ff should be a sufficient indication to us of the ease with which He can put down and bring to nothing the pride of evil men. Well would it be for such world leaders if they were to pay heed to what is said in 25: God has only to stretch out His hand upon them, that is all that is needed!

142)51:1-26

We should take particular note of the remarkable statement in 9: 'we would have healed Babylon...'. There are two points to be made: first of all the possibility that was present for Babylon. It was God Who had appointed her to become ruler of all the earth and this was in God's sovereign purposes. He was to use this world power to chastise His sinning people. But, as we saw in ch 49, Babylon exceeded that divine remit, and had gone beyond the bounds of the divine permission. It was for this she was punished; and what Jeremiah means here seems to be that if she had contained herself within the bounds of that remit, the judgment would not have come upon her. That is the first thing, and the second is this: who are the 'we' in the phrase 'we would have healed Babylon'? It may be that it is the captive Israelites themselves that are referred to, and if so, this raises the intriguing question of the witness of God's people in captivity. One thinks of the reference in Psalm 137 to singing the Lord's song in a strange land, and we have evidence in the book of Daniel of one group of captives whose faithful witness was sufficient to have healed Babylon, and did in fact exercise enormous influence there. This is the impressive thing: there was ample testimony to the living God at the heart of the Babylonian empire, and one can only assume that the words in 9, 'she is not healed' must be taken to mean 'she would not be healed'. There was a refusal of grace, and it was this that finally sealed Babylon's doom.

143)51:27-58

The picture of final defeat and ruin in 27ff is very dramatic, as the once seemingly invincible Babylon wilts and breaks up, with messengers running hither and thither (31) with news of attack after attack upon the city. The note struck in 33, in the words 'yet a little while' reminds one of the question and answer in Revelation 6:10, 11, 'How long, O Lord...?' and 'For a little season' - one of a number of echoes of Jeremiah that appear in John's final vision. In 44, another familiar metaphor is used: the dragon that was Babylon was to be forced to disgorge the people it had swallowed up, and deliverance would thus come to them. Hence the reference in 45, in words which echo a frequent emphasis in the latter chapters of Isaiah (cf Isaiah 48: 20; 52:11, etc). The assurance in 46ff is remarkable. It was very natural that God's people should fear they might be completely swallowed up in the convulsions of the time, but they are urged here not to let their hearts faint. Which is a reminder to us that there are two ways of looking at times of crisis: with the human eye - which fills us with foreboding - or with the eye of faith - which recognises that God is at work in them and brings out of them that which is good for His sovereign purposes. There is probably an echo in 48 of the apocalyptic idea of the redemption of nature that is associated with the redemption of mankind (cf Romans 8:19-22). In 50 we see that God's people are not only to be set free by the stroke that brings about the doom of Babylon, they are to be set free unto God. Jerusalem, as the city of God, was their ultimate goal, and it was there that they were to let their minds be. There seems to be a reference in 53 to the ancient Tower of Babel story (Genesis 11:1-9), and this story serves to underline the meaning of the phrase in 56 'the Lord God recompenses' - a new and grimly apposite name, in this context, for the living God.

144)51:59-64

The chapter ends with a historical note giving an account of how the word of the Lord was brought to the exiles in Babylon from Jeremiah, in the 4th year of Zedekiah's reign, by Seraiah, the brother of Baruch (cf 32:12). The prophecy was to be read by him to the exiles, then bound to a stone and cast into the river Euphrates, as a symbol of Babylon's ultimate destruction. The words in 64, 'and they shall be weary' are a repeat of the last words in 58, which marks the end of Jeremiah's prophecy. Seraiah was probably to repeat the last words of the prediction (58), and as they passed his lips throw the roll into the river - as if to say, 'everything that Jeremiah has spoken will be fulfilled - down to the very last word'.

And so, the word of God followed the captive people into their captivity. Psalm 139:8 says 'If I make my bed in hell, behold Thou art there', and in this hell of Israel's own making they found that God was still with them. They could not escape from His word, and as we have already indicated, it was a word of both judgment and mercy.

145)52:1-34

This chapter forms a historical appendix to the whole prophecy. It is almost identical with 2 Kings 24:18-25:30 (which see). We have referred to it repeatedly throughout our studies. This is the captivity referred to in 39:1ff, which was followed by the 'governorship' of Gedeliah: 1-11, the siege and capture of Jerusalem and Zedekiah; 12-16, the burning of the Temple; 17-30, the rape of the Temple; 31-34, the last days of Jehoiachin. If there is any hidden significance in this historical record other than summarising the events that took place it must be this. Just as Jeremiah had consistently prophesied the doom of Jerusalem, and here we see that it happened as predicted by the prophet, so the final doom of Babylon, as predicted by him, and not yet fulfilled, would likewise take place. One further point may be mentioned: the last verses of the chapter (31ff) record Babylon's kindly treatment of Jehoiachin, which without doubt indicates the providence of God at work. But why Jehoiachin, when Zedekiah, for example, received very different treatment? Ultimately, there is no answer to this save in the sovereignty of God. But we may find some indication of why he was preserved in a study of the genealogy at the beginning of Matthew's gospel, where the Jechonias in 1:12 is certainly the Jehoiachin of this history. From which we may gather that Jehoiachin was a 'marked man' in God's genealogy of the line of promise, for he was the grandfather of Zerubbabel, one of the leaders of the returning exiles and ancestor of the promised Messiah. The king of Babylon was not aware of God's purposes, but He was in control of the whole situation. And so, Jeremiah's prophecy, dark as it has been, ends with this hidden note of hope, as if to say 'When I spoke in 31:1ff of the new covenant, I meant it to be taken seriously. Jehoiachin was preserved because he had a part to play in that covenant being brought about. Our God will never let His purposes, or His promise, go by default.' How wonderful to end with such a hope!