

### The Prophet as God's "Hatchet Man".

The prophet is the mouthpiece of God. He is expected to hear and to speak what God wants to say, when God wants him to say it. Unfortunately much of what God has to say is in the form of warning and correction. The tenor of Scripture is that the prophet is likely to function most at times when warnings are required. It has to be that way simply because of the waywardness of humanity. Warning and correction are, of course, to be seen as an expression of the love of God, but the need to convey them, nonetheless, make the ministry of the prophet at times very unpleasant, for whilst no one minds giving words of affirmation (which, of course, the prophets frequently do) giving words of warning and correction can be a very different matter. Those are much less likely to be received with grace, if indeed they are received at all. But the true prophet is hardly likely to avoid commissions of reproof. He will not relish them, and if he has any human sensitivity, he will not go looking for them.

Thus the prophet becomes God's "hatchet man", trying to cut through a pattern of behaviour which is contrary to God's way and dangerous for those following it. It can be at a personal level or at a national level. So Samuel had to call Saul to order in his disobedience, and Nathan had to face up to David at David's moment of adultery. These were unpleasant and dangerous moments for those prophets, even if in those two instances the prophetic correction was received. Not all prophetic corrections are received with such grace; indeed the vast majority are not and they are likely to arouse an unpleasant and even violent response.

This latter sort of negative experience was precisely that which the prophets experienced in the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah. For 200 yrs in the case of Israel and over 300 yrs in the case of Judah their calling was almost entirely a calling to warn those nations severely about their rejection of God and their evil behaviour. As the years passed by the message of correction and condemnation became stronger and stronger until, as the imminent destruction of each kingdom approached, they reached a climax in the pronouncements of the Major Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel) and most of the so-called Minor Prophets. Page after page of these prophecies speak against what the people are doing, and even if the prophecies convey the love of God for his people and speak occasionally of the hope of restoration or a coming Messiah, the overall thrust of the message was an unpleasant exposure of the sins of the people. Such ministry required men of extraordinary conviction, courage and persistency.

### Jeremiah Demonstrates What Such Ministry Demanded.

Jeremiah's prophetic work began in Jerusalem in 627 BC, and he was still pursuing it forty years later in 587 AD when Jerusalem was captured by the Babylonians. From the very start his message had to be one of strong warning for he was called to prophesy after 50 years of blatant paganism in the nation under King Manasseh and his son, Amon. God had already pronounced dire judgement on Judah on account of the Manasseh years, but he wanted remind Judah of exactly where she stood so that she might have an opportunity for repentance. This was Jeremiah's essential task as God's spokesman.

It was obvious that speaking correction to a nation which had been following the ways of paganism for two generations would be extremely difficult. Priests and people alike were set in their ways, and they were bound to react against any strong moral interpretation of religion which forbade them the pleasures of paganism. Their personal interests, especially the financial interests of the rich and the political interests of the national leadership, were intertwined with the status quo. Moreover their paganism had now become so intermingled with the religion of Yahweh that they were spiritually confused. They would doubtless see Jeremiah as one who was just causing trouble and an outlandish radical. Small wonder, therefore, that at the very outset of his ministry Jeremiah should have received a stern reminder from the God for whom he spoke that *"they shall fight against you"* (Jer 1:19).

### The Call for Plain Speaking.

There could be no half measures or innuendoes. A bold statement of undiluted truth was what was called for: Jeremiah had to tell the nation simply and directly that it was bound for a catastrophe in which Jerusalem and its Temple would be destroyed and the nation dispossessed of its promised land – unless there was repentance and a turning back to Yahweh. Thus the imagery of his prophetic words and his prophetic actions were inevitably vivid and unmistakable. He was told, for example, to bury a belt in Babylon and then to retrieve it after many days, ruined and useless. With the belt in his hand, he was to proclaim that *"these wicked people ... who worship other gods will be like this belt – completely useless"* (13:1ff). It is true that his imagery could be very beautiful and persuasive at times: *"I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me ... What fault did your fathers find in me that they strayed so far from me?"* (Jer. 2:1, 5) but more often it was very earthy and blunt: *"under every tree you lay down as a prostitute .... You are a swift she-camel running here and there ... sniffing the wind in her craving – in her heat who can restrain her?"* (Jer. 2:20, 23). The image of spiritual prostitution used here was very frequent, and in the light of the fact that so

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much actual prostitution was taking place in Judah it was a most appropriate image. The very offensiveness of the language was designed to shock those who heard, for polite language was not always heard. Not that it was Jeremiah who chose to use such jagged and brutal words. Left to his own devices he would no doubt have watered down the directness and the abruptness of the message. But both the imagery of Jeremiah's prophecies and the force of the language was a direct function of the Spirit who was propelling his mind and his tongue. As Jeremiah confessed the word was *"like a fire"* inside him", and it simply had to come out.

Nor was Jeremiah allowed to give such plain speaking in a corner to a group of sympathisers. Judah's "prostitution" was proclaimed *"in the hearing of Jerusalem"* (2:1). He was told to *"stand at the gate of the Lord's House and there proclaim this message"*. He was told to collect and send his messages to the king himself. God had a message and he wanted it heard, especially by the nation's leaders.

**Thus Jeremiah embarked on a ministry of incredible difficulty**, the sort of ministry that any prophet would seek to avoid. But the call of the prophet is not to glamour and popularity. There will always be something in his calling that will take him to stand against the tide, to speak out against the familiar and comfortable. The people of God are always wont to stray, always likely to become complacent. The prophet is the instrument to disturb such slumbers. He could not have imagined, however, despite the warning God gave him, just how virulent the opposition would be to what he had to say. He was devastated to find that the people of his own home town of Anathoth were actually planning to kill him even though he was one of their own priests, so incensed were they at his preaching (Jer. 11:18ff). The result of his preaching in the Temple court was that the son of the chief officer of the Temple, Pashhur, had him beaten and put in the stocks. A further proclamation from Jeremiah in the courtyard of the Temple court of the destruction of the Temple finished with the priests, the prophets and the people all seizing him and saying “you must die” (26:8). Fortunately some officials took his side and he was spared, but the threat had been real and thereafter he was more of a marked man than ever. He battled bitterly against the arrogant court “prophets” (Jer. 28 & 29). King Jehoiakim systematically burned his collected prophecies and sought his death (36:20ff). His enemies among the officials eventually threw him into a cistern to die (38:6), though thankfully he was rescued by a friendly official. In all this he learned at depth what God had meant by “*they will fight against you*”!

A very distressing feature was that these moments of great danger, which increased as his work went on, were merely the peaks of a **never ending background of constant and bitter rejection**. This was much more wearing in its way than the high profile danger moments and took greater toll on Jeremiah’s heart and emotions. It went on for forty years. Even after working with the reforming King Josiah for two decades, he cried out “*For twenty three years the word of the LORD has come to me and I have spoken to you again and again, but you have not listened.*” (25:3). Over the next two decades it got worse. The temptation to bitterness of heart is very evident at times. He cried out on one occasion, “*Alas my mother that you gave me birth, a man with whom the whole land strives and contends! I have neither lent nor borrowed, yet everyone curses me*” (15:10); “*You understand, O LORD; remember me ... .. avenge me on my persecutors ... .. think of how I suffer reproach for your sake ... .. Why is my pain unending and my wound grievous and incurable?*” (15:15-18). God met him with a rebuke and a call to re-iterate his message. Self pity was never allowed to get the better of him. When he complained bitterly about the way the wicked prospered God again rebuked him saying that worse was to come and he must face that and keep preaching (Ch.12). This seemed a hard response, but it was the firmness of love. It was the prophet’s call.

Jeremiah was never, however, entirely alone, even if must have felt like that at times. Part of the strengthening that God promised him came by way of human support. Though he doesn’t mention him by name, King Josiah in his work of legislating against paganism must have been a great support to Jeremiah. Jeremiah was not alone in his prophetic activity either: we hear of Uriah (who eventually paid for his prophetic words with his life 26:20ff) and the faithful Baruch, his scribe. There were always individual officials and elders who supported him against the implacable priests and prophets. Such people were few, but they were there, and they proved to be sufficient for his preservation.

#### **What are the requirements for such a daunting ministry?**

What were Jeremiah’s resources? How did he keep going? These are questions worth asking, and not just for prophets. Without question, the most important factor in this was Jeremiah’s deep sense of call. Unfortunately we do not have the details of his call in the same way that we have for Isaiah. What we do know, however, is that he was given a profound sense of being set apart as a prophet and “*a prophet to the nations*” before he was even conceived (1:5). There is a suggestion that he may in fact have had some visual experience like Isaiah for he recalls that “*the LORD reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, ‘Now I have put my words into your mouth’*” (1:9). This was evidently the moment of his anointing and his commissioning, as was the coal on Isaiah’s lips. Whatever took place, his sense of commission by Yahweh himself, Israel’s God, was unshakeable – like Isaiah it was burned into him – and this in his ‘teens. The depth of this

meeting with God meant that he never doubted that he was acting for God or that he really heard from God. Not in his worse moments of despair and pain do we hear him voice in his prophetic writings any doubt about God – complain he might, and bitterly, about his lot, but he could not doubt the genuine hand of God in it. Nothing but this sort of conviction could hold him firm in the face of violent opposition from the acknowledged “prophets” of his day.. This was the essential root of a powerful and prolonged ministry against bitter opposition. It was precisely the same with Paul the Apostle, whose whole life was informed and built on his Damascus road experience and call.

One aspect of the prophetic calling and commission is to be found in what might be described as “prophetic compulsion”. This is an inner urge to speak out, and to speak out with the heart of God. Such compulsion is part of the anointing on the prophet. Jeremiah clearly refers to this on more than one occasion: “*But if I say, ‘I will not mention him or speak any more in his name, his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot’*” (20:9); “*The word of the LORD is offensive to them ... but I am full of the wrath of the LORD and I cannot hold it in*” (6:11); *I never sat in the company of revellers, never made merry with them; I sat alone because your hand was on me and you had filled me with indignation.* (15:17). This compulsion was also part of the reality of the continual dialogue that he maintained with God (or that God maintained with him!). It was a persistent reminder that he had not had a one-off visionary experience

A further aspect of the prophetic call was that the word of judgement that God had entrusted to him was constantly refreshed in Jeremiah’s heart by a variety of prophetic inspiration: it was never allowed to get dull or become tired. These fresh injections were crucial in keeping alive his ministry. His favourite expression is the “The Lord said to me”, but the word would come to him visually (as in the almond tree 1:13) as well as audibly. God spoke to him through the things he saw around him (like an earthen pot); he saw prophetic parables (like the ruined belt and the purchase of a plot of land in a Jerusalem about to be destroyed), and he heard the inner voice. In all ways the word of the Lord came to him.

Prophets pay a high price for a singularly important ministry but their reward is a vivid awareness of God and his ways. Rejection is part of heir life - it is the same today when an unpleasant word has to be spoken.

**Bob Dunnett**

**“The most important factor was his sense of call”**