

Exegetical Notes on Jeremiah 33:14-16

The reading from the Old Testament which is assigned to the First Sunday in Advent in Series C of *Lutheran Worship* consists in three verses of chapter 33 of the Book of Jeremiah, namely, verses 14-16.

THE HISTORICAL AND LITERARY SETTING

Jeremiah ben-Hilkiah was a priest who was a native of the small town of Anathoth, some six miles northeast of the capital city of Jerusalem. We know more of his life and personality than of any writing prophet of the Old Testament other than Moses (as is noted in the author's *The Prophetic Books of the Babylonian Exile and the Persian Empire*). The prophetic ministry of Jeremiah spanned some seven decades which were closely intertwined with the resurgence and then the ascendancy of the city of Babylon, now in the control of the Chaldeans. For Jeremiah received his call to the prophetic office, already in adolescence, in 627 B.C. as the Assyrian Empire was just beginning to crumble. The final edition of the Book of Jeremiah appeared around 560 B.C. as the culmination of several previous editions which Jeremiah had published in Judah and Egypt and as the distillation of a prophetic ministry which had spanned at least sixty-seven years (ibid.)

The thirty-second and thirty-third chapters of Jeremiah, as we have come to enumerate them since medieval times, comprise a distinct section of the Book of Jeremiah. Contrary, certainly, to the conception of some (including even Theodore Laetsch), they lie quite beyond the bounds of the Book of Consolation, which consists only in chapters 30 and 31. Chapters 32 and 33, distinctively, consist in a record of things said and done during the prophet's imprisonment in the Court of the Guard of the royal palace. The background and vicissitudes of this imprisonment are recounted more fully in chapters 37 and 38 of the Book of Jeremiah.

The things recorded in chapters 32 and 33 of Jeremiah were said and done during the latter half of the year 587 and the first half of the year 586 B.C. For the introduction to chapter 32 dates the words and actions recorded there to "the tenth year of Zedekiah king of Judah, which was the eighteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar" as king of Babylon (verse 1) during the latter's siege of Jerusalem (verse 2). The eighteenth regnal year of Nebuchadnezzar ran from April of 587 to 586 B.C., concurrently with the tenth year of Zedekiah. The Babylonian army had, in fact, already laid siege to the capital of Judah on 15 January of the year 587. For Jeremiah himself dates this beginning of the end to the tenth month of the ninth year of Zedekiah (chapter 39:1) and, more specifically, to the tenth day of the month (chapter 52:4, as also 2 Kings 25:1 and Ezekiel 24:2).

Thereafter, in the course of the year 587, Jeremiah had passed a considerable time walking about the besieged city advising surrender to the Babylonians. He identified Nebuchadnezzar as the scourge of God Himself justly punishing the king and the people of Judah as traitors to the True King of the nation (chapters 37:2 and 34: 1-7). The prophet censured the more powerful denizens of Jerusalem in particular for freeing the Hebrews whom they were wrongly keeping in slavery, in hopes of winning divine assistance, and then re-enslaving them when the Babylonians temporarily departed from the city (chapter 34: 6-22). In these ways Jeremiah antagonized, even

more than the King Zedekiah, the powerful princes who were more and more deciding the affairs of the nation by bending the weakling king to the policies of the oligarchy.

The siege had been temporarily lifted by reason of the approach of an Egyptian army led by the Pharaoh Hophra in alliance with Judah (chapters 34:21 and 37:5). The Babylonians, however, quickly repelled the threatening Egyptians and so resumed the siege of Jerusalem with renewed dedication (chapters 34:22 and 37: 6-10). It was, quite preposterously, during the brief period of the Babylonian absence that Jeremiah was unjustly arrested and imprisoned by his enemies in the army and oligarchy (chapter 37: 11-14). He was confined at first in the squalid dungeon of the royal scribe Jonathan, where he languished "many days" (chapter 37: 15-16).

It was only after the lapse of these "many days" that Zedekiah brought Jeremiah to his own palace in order to seek, in secret, his prediction of the immediate future (chapter 37:17). Although uncompromising in pronouncing the divine doom on Zedekiah, the prophet nevertheless besought the king, in turn, not to send him back to the dungeon of Jonathan, where he would slowly perish. In typical fashion Zedekiah tried to find a middle way between the justice which he owed to Jeremiah and the desires of the princes who so intimidated him. The unkingly king confined Jeremiah, in much more livable circumstances, to the portion of his own palace known as the Court of the Guard and provided him with daily sustenance.

Jeremiah remained in this prison until Zedekiah, admitting his own impotence before his courtiers, permitted the prophet's relegation to an even worse place than the dungeon of Jonathan, a fetid cistern in which, sunk in mire, he was to starve (chapter 38: 1-6). At the instance, however, of a godly alien, Zedekiah allowed a return to the previous arrangements (chapter 38: 7-13). In his final secretive meeting with Jeremiah the king manifested more pathetically than ever his effete incapacity to rule his vassals or even himself (chapter 38: 14-26). The Prophet Jeremiah then remained in the Court of the Guard until the fall of the city of Jerusalem on 19 July of the year 586 B.C. (chapter 38:28).

The two main parts of the section of Jeremiah before us are clearly divided by the word *shenith* at the beginning of chapter 33: "Moreover the word of the LORD came unto Jeremiah the second time, while he was yet shut up in the court of the prison" (verse 1, AV). The same expression compels us to understand the two subsequent assertions in chapter 33 of "the word of the LORD" coming "to Jeremiah" (in verses 19 and 23) as introducing revelations which are subsidiary to the primary oracle comprised by verses 1-18. They are, in fact, elaborations, in particular, of the conclusion to the aforesaid oracle which is found in verses 17 and 18.

The major revelation itself is clearly divided into five divine assurances to the penitents in Judah by the recurring introductory formula *koh 'amar YHWH*: "thus has the LORD said" (in verses 4, 10, 12, and 17) or its equivalent in verses 13-14 (as described below). Only in verses 4 and 17 is this formula preceded by a *ki* ("for"), which marks those assurances which respectively initiate and summarize the series of predictions of "great and mighty things" intimated in verse 3: "Call upon Me, and I will shew thee great and mighty things which thou knowest not" (AV).

The following outline thus emerges of chapters 32-33 of Jeremiah with special emphasis on the section and subsection currently under consideration:

"The Imprisonment of Jeremiah"

I. Initial Words and Actions (32)

1. The Words and Actions of Various Parties (verses 1-25)
2. The Basic Revelation (verses 26-44)

II. Ensuing Words of the Lord (33)

1. The Basic Revelation (verses 1-18)
 1. The Introduction (verses 1-3)
 2. The Five Assurances (verses 4-18)
 1. The Initial Assurance (verses 4-9)
 2. The Second Assurance (verses 10-11)
 3. The Third Assurance (verses 12-13)
 4. The Central Assurance (verses 14-16)
 1. The Introduction (verse 14)
 2. The Substance: The Gospel of the Messiah (verses 15-16)
 1. The Messiah Himself (verse 15)
 2. His Person (verse 15a)
 3. His Work (verse 15b)
 4. The Church of the Messiah (verse 16)
 1. Its Salvation (verse 16a)
 2. Its Alien Righteousness (verse 16b)
 5. The Concluding Assurance (verses 17-18)
 1. The Kingly Office of the Messiah (verse 17)
 2. The Priestly Office of the Messiah (verse 18)
 2. The Supplementary Revelations (verses 19-26)
 1. The First Appendix (verses 19-22)
 2. The Introduction (verse 19)
 3. The Substance: An Elaboration of the Concluding Assurance (verses 20-22)
 4. The Second Appendix (verses 23-26)
 5. The Introduction (verses 23-24)
 6. The Substance: An Elaboration of the Concluding Assurance (verses 25-26)

The three verses, then, which are the focus this exegetical study form the fourth and climactic assurance of the five which comprise the major revelation of the thirty-third chapter of Jeremiah.

The description of verses 14-16 as "climactic" is justified by at least two considerations. The sphere of reference, in the first place, is purely messianic with no admixture of preparatory developments. Formally, moreover, there is the unique transition from the preceding assurance to this one. *In every other case, as indicated above, a new assurance begins with koh 'amar YHWH.* In this case, on the other hand, the third assurance ends with *'amar YHWH* ("the LORD has

said") and the fourth assurance has as its fourth and fifth words the construct chain *n'um-YHWH*: "the oracle of the LORD" (verse 14).

A LITERAL TRANSLATION AND COMMENTS

14. Behold, days are coming -- is the oracle of the LORD -- When I will establish the good word which I have spoken unto the house of Israel and concerning the house of Judah:

The first two lines in the translation above ("behold, days are coming -- the oracle of the LORD") correspond to five words in the Hebrew Text which Jeremiah uses also in the closely connected Book of Consolation (chapters 30-31) as a special formula to introduce a messianic prophecy: *hinneh yamim ba'im n'um-YHWH*. The theme itself, indeed, of the Book of Consolation is stated in this way: "For, behold, days are coming -- is the oracle of the LORD -- when I will reverse the captivity of My people Israel and Judah ..." (chapter 30:3). In Jeremiah 31, again, these words introduce two or three more messianic predictions (depending on the textual choice in verse 37), including the best-known prophecy of the new testament within the Hebrew Bible (in verses 26 MT [27 EV], 30 MT [31 EV], and 37 MT [38 EV], where this exegete, although siding with the kethibh, in accord with his *modus operandi* in general, would still take the *hinneh yamim n'um-YHWH* there as an exclamatory abbreviation of the ordinary formula which would by then have been very familiar to all the hearers and readers of the *Prophet Jeremiah*). The apostle, therefore, in quoting the whole of verses 30-33 (MT, verses 31-34 EV) of Jeremiah 31 in Hebrews 8 (verses 8-13), clearly treats the phrase as predicting the era of the new testament which Jesus Christ had then already initiated by means of His bloody death: *idou, hemerai erchontai, legei Kurios* (verse 8).

In regard, however, to the verses now before us, the most pivotal prior use of the introductory formula occurs in verse 5 of chapter 23, where it then recurs in verse 7. For in spite of the differences of weighty significance between the two passages, the prophecy of verses 14-16 (and so, in turn, all the ensuing verses of chapter 33) clearly build upon the foundation of verses 5 and 6 of chapter 23:

[5.] Behold, days are coming -- is the oracle of the LORD -- When I will establish for David a Righteous Sprout; Yea, a King shall rule and He shall act wisely, And He shall work judgment and righteousness in the earth. [6.] In His days Judah will be saved, Yea, Israel will dwell in security; For this is His name which they will call: The LORD Our Righteousness.

This prophecy had already been uttered, apparently, early in 597 B.C. during the prior siege of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar (or immediately following its fall) which ended in March of 597, when the young King Jehoiachin and ten thousand of his leading subjects were carried into exile in Babylonia. For chapter 22, on the one hand, ends with a prediction of the exile of Jehoiachin, who reigned, only within the encircled walls of his capital, little more than three months between December of 598 and March of 597 B.C. (2 Chronicles 36:9). Chapter 24, on the other hand, takes its rise explicitly from the deportation of "Jeconiah, the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, and the princes of Judah" to Babylonia (24:1).

Verses 5 and 6, then, of Jeremiah 23 comprise, above all, "the good word" which the Lord has "spoken" previously "unto the house of Israel and concerning the house of Judah" and to which He pledges Himself anew here in Jeremiah 33. To call a prophecy "the good word" is to call it the gospel of the Messiah, and to "establish" a prophecy is to fulfill it.

The foregoing paragraphs are by no means intended to deny that Jeremiah applies the phrase *yamim ba'im* also to developments preceding the arrival of the Messiah. Various applications of the phrase can be observed in the following locations in the Book of Jeremiah (although Brown-Driver-Briggs speaks of 7:32 plus, not fourteen, but thirteen additional occurrences in Jeremiah [BDB, 400a], evidently siding with the kethibh of 31:37 against the qere):

7:32 (with *hinneh* and *n'um-YHWH*)

9:25 (with *hinneh* and *n'um-YHWH*)

16:14 (with *hinneh* and *n'um-YHWH*)

19:6 (with *hinneh* and *n'um-YHWH*)

23:5 (with *hinneh* and *n'um-YHWH*)

23:7 (with *hinneh* and *n'um-YHWH*)

30:3 (with *hinneh* and *n'um-YHWH*)

31:26 MT (27 EV) (with *hinneh* and *n'um-YHWH*)

31:30 MT (31 EV) (with *hinneh* and *n'um-YHWH*)

31:37 MT (38 EV) (with *hinneh* and *n'um-YHWH*, but where the participle *ba'im* is lacking in the kethibh although assumed as the qere)

33:14 (with *hinneh* and *n'um-YHWH*)

48:12 (with *hinneh* and *n'um-YHWH*)

49:2 (with *hinneh* and *n'um-YHWH*)

51:47 (with *hinneh* but without *n'um-YHWH*, which comes only at the end of the following verse)

51:52 (with *hinneh* and *n'um-YHWH*)

Although, moreover, the majority of the occurrences of *yamim ba'im* fall within the Book of Jeremiah, several appearances in the Book of Amos and elsewhere in the Old Testament may likewise be noted:

1 Samuel 2:31 (with *hinneh* but without *n'um-YHWH*, except in the preceding verse)

2 Kings 20:17 (with *hinneh* but without *n'um-YHWH*, although introduced as the *dbhar-YHWH* at the end of the preceding verse)

Isaiah 39:6 (with *hinneh* but without *n'um-YHWH*, although introduced as the *dbhar-YHWH-tzbha'oth* at the end of the preceding verse)

Amos 4:2 (with *hinneh* but without *n'um-YHWH*, which comes only at the end of the following verse)

Amos 8:11 (with *hinneh* and *n'um-'adhonai-YHWH*)

Amos 9:13 (with *hinneh* and *n'um-YHWH*)

The phrase is used, then, but five or six times outside the Book of Jeremiah, depending on whether one counts Isaiah 39:6 and 2 Kings 20:17 as separate uses or as merely two instances of the same use.

In and of itself, to be sure, the phrase *yamim ba'im* would be capable of many possible applications. For it conjoins, quite simply, the indefinite plural of *yom* with the participle of the common verb *bw'* employed as the verbal predicate of the noun. In the usage of Jeremiah, however, the reference is always messianic if the prophecy is positive (a "good word").

15. In those days, yea, at that time, I shall cause to sprout forth for David a Sprout of Righteousness; And He shall work judgment and righteousness in the earth.

The idea of sprouting is stressed here by employing both the verb denoting the action and the noun derived therefrom. The qal of the verb *tzmch* means "sprout, spring up" and is used literally in this way of plants and trees [BDB, 855a-b]. The hiphil, with its causative significance, is likewise employed in a literal sense of plants and especially of grass [BDB, 855b]. The noun *tzemach*, correspondingly, means "sprout" (or in some places the "growth" of a vine, which grows by sprouting) [855b]. A *tzemach*, then, is never a mere branch, much less a twig, of a tree, but is rather a fresh sprout springing newly from ground or root, so as to form a new plant of some kind. In this case the idea is that the Messiah, sprouting forth from the roots of the family of David, would become a tree with branches as numberless as those who would believe in Him. The conception of the sprouting of the Messiah here and in many passages can only be understood as signifying His birth in the family of David in a time when that family would be regarded as virtually dead by reason of its separation from all political and social importance.

The Messiah is called a "Sprout of Righteousness" for two reasons. According, on the one hand, to His divine nature, He has always possessed from eternity the full righteousness of God Himself. According, on the other hand, to the human nature which He assumed, with no human paternity, in the womb of a virgin descended from David, He possessed from the moment of His conception the full righteousness which Adam had before the fall of man into sin.

The Messiah then lived a life of righteousness by keeping the law of God perfectly without sin in the place of all His sinful fellow-men and suffered unto death all the penalties which had been earned by all His unrighteous fellows. By virtue, then, of its superfluous infinitude, God could thereupon impute the righteousness of God the Son to those of us who had no righteousness in ourselves. In this way, through the aforesaid imputation in the eyes of God, was the Messiah able to "work" a "righteousness in the earth" which individual earthlings could now appropriate through faith in Him.

Clearly, then, the *mishpat* which is coupled here with the imputed righteousness of the Messiah is no judgment of condemnation. Nor is even "judgment" or "justice" in some neutral sense at all a satisfactory understanding, in which case *mishpat* would still be no such word of gospel as was promised in verse 14. The *mishpat* ("judgment"), rather, which the Messiah was to "work ... in the earth" was, specifically, a judgment of righteousness. The reference is, in other words, to the verdict of innocence which we call the justification of the world, on the basis of the vicarious life and death of Jesus Christ in uncompromising righteousness.

The verb '*sh* occurs some 2622 times in the Old Testament [BDB, 793b, in 793b-795a], all of these representing forms of the *qal* aside from ninety-seven instances of the *niphal* and but one of the *pual* [BDB, 795a]. According to the lexicographers, '*sh* means something within the general category of "do" more than 1560 times [BDB, 793b, in 793b-794a] and something within the semantic field of "make" more than 670 times [BDB, 794b, in 794b-795a]. In actuality, however, these divisions are more reflective of choices which must be made in translating a given occurrence into English than of any real distinction in the intention of the Hebrew speakers and writers. In a case like the one before us, in which the predicates are a forensic action and the resulting forensic state ("judgment and righteousness"), something like "work" or "effectuate" is the appropriate translation in English. The use here is related, on the one hand, to the use of '*sh* with *mishpat* and *chesed* and the concepts of "executing judgment" (and likewise "executing vengeance" and "doing the justice ... of any one, i.e. maintaining his cause") which fall within the general region of "do" in Brown-Driver-Briggs [BDB, 794a: I.1.a.(6.), I.3., and I.1.a.(5.), (3.), and (6.) respectively]. Equally strong, on the other hand, is the relation to such meanings listed under the general rubric of "make" as "produce" or "yield" [BDB, 794: II.2.], "prepare" [ibid.: II.3], "provide" [ibid.: II.4, in reference to the original significance], "ordain" or "institute" [BDB, 795a: II.8], and "bring about," which is predicated of the Lord "effecting a deliverance" of some kind [ibid.: II.9].

Examples cited of this final usage are Exodus 14:13, 1 Samuel 11:13, 2 Samuel 23:10 and 12 [ibid.]. In the latter three cases the Authorized Version uses the present perfect or simple past of "work" to translate the corresponding form of '*sh*. Thus, "the LORD wrought a great victory" (2 Samuel 23:12).

16. In those days Judah will be saved, Yea, Jerusalem will dwell in security; For this is that which one will call to her: The LORD is our righteousness.

The terms "Judah" and "Jerusalem" here take the place of the "Judah" and "Israel" found in verse 6 of chapter 23 and, indeed, of "the house of Israel" and "the house of Judah" cited here in verse 14. All these terms can be used interchangeably only because they are all metaphors of the same

entity which is indicated by the feminine suffix on the prepositional lamedh at the end of the third clause of verse 16 (the *he* dotted with mappiq). The reference, in other words, is to the church of the new testament, which in various passages of both testaments receives all these names on several interrelated grounds. There is, firstly, her corresponding role to Israel and, more specifically, Judah as the peculiar people of God and to Jerusalem, in the church of the Old Testament, as the prime locus of the sacraments of God. Even more essential, however, to the scriptural rationale of these metaphors is the spiritual descent of the church from Israel and, more specifically, Judah and her historical origin within the people of Judah and, more specifically, within the city of Jerusalem.

That the Lord in the verses before us is building upon the foundation of verses 5 and 6 of Jeremiah 23 is undeniable, as has already been observed. This relationship, nevertheless, can by no means excuse the way in which so many of the English versions translate the third clause of verse 16 here in virtually the words as the third clause of chapter 23:6. Thus, the Authorized Version runs as follows: "and this is the name wherewith she shall be called" (although printing "is the name" in italics). The New King James Version and the New American Standard Bible follow the same path, with minor variations in the interests of making the language more modern.

In actuality, however, the word rendered "name" does not appear here in 33:16 as it does in the very distinctive formula of 23:6. For in chapter 23 the members of the church call upon the Messiah by a name which reveals the very essence of His person and work:

For this is His name which they will call: The-LORD-Our-Righteousness.

Here, on the other hand, the situation is some one member of the church calling something to the church in general. There is no need to regard the words called forth as a name. Since there is no inclusion of the word *shem* as in 23:6, treating the final two words of the verse, *YHWH tzidhqenu*, as a separate clause is much more reasonable syntactically and contextually:

For this is that which one will call to her: The LORD is our righteousness.

A present form, of course, of the verb "be" must, as is usual, be supplied in English in order to join the subject of the non-verbal clause with its predicate nominative.

We find, then, in verse 16b the reverse of the same coin of which 23:6b represents the obverse. For in the prior verse the church confesses the essence of the person and work of the Messiah by addressing Him as the LORD who is our righteousness. In 33:16, building upon this foundation, one member of the church proclaims the essence of the gospel of Messiah to his fellows by reminding us once again that this LORD is our righteousness.

Stated, then, from differing angles in both Jeremiah 23 and 33 is the central theme of the Old Testament: justification by grace through faith in the Messiah. He is both fully man as a sprout from the family of David and fully divine as the LORD Himself, using the Sacred Tetragrammeton which can only be used of the One True God in Holy Scripture. As man the Messiah could serve as a substitute for others of His race, and as God His substitution could

embrace all men in the history of the world. By this means would His church "be saved" and "dwell in security" with Him to all eternity.