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THESIS.
JEREMIAH'S CONCEPTION OF GOD
AND HIS RELATION TO MEN.

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Introduction.

The prophets of Israel did not stop to inquire whether God is, they assumed his existence and attempted to order their lives according to the requirements which they believed he exacts of men. To them God was the ruling factor in the processes of nature and life. Earthquake, drought and flood equally betokened his hand in nature; war, famine and pestilence, his dominion over the affairs of men.

To those who were so vividly conscious of the divine, who so continually felt its overruling in their lives, who so distinctly heard God's revealing voice, who communed with him in heavenly visions and summoned his chariots from the skies the attributes of God were no abstract dogmas. They were rather intuitive conceptions born of a living experience. Ever present in their lives God was omnipresent; creating and

controlling all things, he was omnipotent; ordering all things in wisdom he was omniscient. He, who giveth his favors without respect of person, who blesses the unworthy and forgives the rebellious, must be righteous, gracious and full of loving-kindness.

Neither did they stop to inquire whether God could reveal himself to men nor to consider the psychological how of revelation. It was sufficient for them, to know that he did reveal himself, to feel their spirits inspired by his Spirit and to obey his commands and proclaim his, "Thus saith the Lord."

We should not expect to find in any concise, logical, or dogmatic form, the theology of such men. To learn their theology in its essence and completeness we should need to live over with them again their strenuous lives and feel their thoughts by experiencing what they experienced. Since this is not possible, we can hardly, for our purpose, do better than to review with Jeremiah in his own words some of his experiences and glean from them what they may reveal of his theology.

Section I. Metaphysical Attributes.

1. Unity and Personality of God.

Jeremiah's prophecies contain no direct statement as to the unity of God but such a conception is implied and inherent in their thought and forms of expression. Unlike the Babylonians, who assigned the different functions of nature and the various ministrations to the needs of men to as many different deities, Jeremiah attributes all the direction of natural forces and all the administration of human affairs to the one Lord, Jehovah.

Personality implies unity and the God of Jeremiah is intensely personal. This sense of God's personality is well illustrated by the form of address ascribed to him. He represents God as repeatedly inviting his chosen people to address him as Father. When he sets them apart and assigns them a goodly heritage among the hosts of the nations, then he commands them, "Ye shall call me My Father and shall not turn from after me. (3:19). One cannot read the oft repeated words of the covenant, "I will be your God and ye shall be my people;"(30:20), without concluding that their author /

thought of God as personal and unitary.

2. Spirituality of God.

The spirituality of God is likewise taught by implication rather than by direct assertion, yet he does not leave us without evidence that he thus conceived of him. This is implied in his scathing rebuke spoken to his people because they indulged in the worship of material objects and addressed stocks and stones as "my father."

This conception is also presupposed in all those passages which teach the infinite power, wisdom, and ubiquity of God. These ideas are not consistent with the conception of a material being but belong to spirit alone.

Likewise the demand for a spiritual worship presupposes a spiritual object of worship. Who but the prophet of a spiritual God would represent him as saying to his people, "Circumcise yourselves to the Lord and take away the fore-skins of your hearts, ye men of Judah,"(4:4), or "I spoke not unto your fathers nor commanded them in the day that I brought them out of Egypt, concerning burnt offerings or sacrifices but this thing I commanded them, saying, hearken

unto my voice and I will be your God and ye shall be my people."(7:22). These strong expressions with many others of like nature clearly show that there was, at least, latent, if not expressed, in the mind of the writer a clear conception of God's spirituality.

3. Omnipresence.

As in the case of unity and spirituality, omnipresence is assumed. At the same time it is clearly taught in the following passages: "Am I a God at hand, saith the Lord, and not a God afar off? Can any hide himself in secret places that I shall not see him; do not I fill heaven and earth? saith the Lord." (23:23f). This attribute is also implied in that of omnipotence, which as we shall see is most emphatically affirmed.

4. Omnipotence of God.

The one thought of Jeremiah which seems to fill him with amazement at the blindness of his fellows and to give him courage to thunder his message in their ears, is his exalted conception of God's power.

"Through his power he created the heavens and the elements,"(14:22), "The earth, the man and the beast that are

upon the face of the earth,"(27:5), "and placed the sand for the bound of the sea by a perpetual decree."

He who creates has supreme power over all that he has created. So he says, "Are there any among the vanities of the heathen that can cause rain, or can the heavens give showers?"(14:22). "I have made them by my outstretched arm, and I give them unto whom it seemeth right unto me."(27:5,6.)

Jehovah alone has full dominion over the nations of the earth. The heathen nations might be content with local deities with limited dominion, but not so Jeremiah. Jehovah has authority over all the earth and its peoples. At one time he punishes the surrounding nations most severely; at another he employs them as instruments for the punishment of his disobedient children. His own people Israel are in his hands as the clay in the hands of the potter. If at one time he promises to make all nations servants of Nebuchadrezzar, the same proud ruler is promised the most severe humiliation. Such exalted power over nature and authority over men can hardly be assigned to other than the omnipotent.

5. Omniscience of God.

Omniscience is a necessary basis of omnipotence and the former is implied in the expression of the latter. It is equally a coattribute with omnipresence, When the prophet represents God as asserting that no one can hide himself from his all-seeing eye, he pays a strong tribute to his omniscience. (23:23).

Besides Jeremiah represents Jehovah as the perfect searcher of hearts from whom no secret thought can be hid. He knoweth and witnesseth. (12:3).

When Jehovah promises the exiled captives a restoration to their chosen land he seals that promise with an everlasting covenant. Clearly only an omniscience which can see the eternal possibility of fulfilment, can enter into such a covenant in good faith. (32:40)

6. Eternity of God.

The last remark applies also to the conception of eternity. The prophet equally implies this attribute when he inquires, "Will he retain his anger forever?"(3:5), and affirms it most fully when he declares that God has placed

the sands for the bound of the sea by a perpetual decree. (5:22). He reinforces the same idea when he threatens the disobedient people with an "everlasting reproach and perpetual shame." (23:39f.).

Only the eternal can be assigned eternal thoughts and feelings or enter into everlasting covenants, proclaim perpetual decrees and threaten with eternal punishments.

Section II. Moral Attributes.

Having reviewed what Jeremiah has to say directly or indirectly concerning the metaphysical attributes of God, we now inquire what he teaches concerning his moral attributes.

1. Holiness.

Jeremiah gives us just one passage in which he applies the epithet holiness to God. He has just been speaking of the redemption of the remnant through the righteous branch of David. As he thinks of the wonderful mercy of God as promised in this vision and sees the perverseness and faithlessness of the prophets about him, he

cries out, "My heart is broken within me and I am like a drunken man because of the Lord and the words of his holiness." (23:9). By holiness then he means the purity of God's purpose and the perfect righteousness of his gracious dealings with his people.

2. God's Love.

God's love is shown in his loving care for his people. In comforting the suffering captives he represents the Redeemer as saying, "The Lord appeared of old unto me saying, Yea I have loved thee with an everlasting love; therefore with loving-kindness I have drawn thee . Again I will build thee and thou shalt be built O virgin of Israel." (31:3).

On the other hand he punishes the disobedient by the withdrawal of his love. "I have taken away my peace from this people, saith the Lord, even lovingkindness and mercies." (16:5). Again man's boast should be in the knowledge of Jehovah's goodness, "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches; but let him that

glorieth glory in this that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the Lord which exercise lovingkindness, judgment and righteousness in the earth." (9:24).

3. The Graciousness of God.

Because of God's love and solicitation for his people they find favor in his sight. Thus he represents the Lord as saying, "The people which were left of the sword found grace in the wilderness, even Israel, when I went to cause him to rest." (31:2). This passage alone would be a sufficient and emphatic tribute to God's gracious purpose toward Israel.

4. God's Mercy.

While Jeremiah ascribes to Jehovah the greatest depths of mercy at the same time he recognizes that untempered indulgence is not mercy. Therefore his representations express both a positive and negative phase. On the positive side God's mercy is manifested in his disposition to forgive their trespasses.

Thus he sends his prophet with these gracious invitations, "Return thou backsliding Israel, saith the Lord; I

will not look in anger upon you; for I am merciful saith the Lord, I will not keep anger forever"(3:12), "Therefore now amend your ways and your doings and obey the voice of the Lord your God; and the Lord will repent him of the evil that he hath pronounced against you." (26:13). Likewise he reassures the prophet with this promise, "I will cleanse them from all their iniquity, whereby they have sinned against me, and I will pardon all their iniquity whereby they have sinned against me and whereby they have transgressed against me." (33:8).

Not only will God grant pardon to his people but he will give them aid in their affliction. He promises to cause the king of Babylon to favor them and return them to their own land. "If ye will still abide in this land, I will build you and not pull you down -----for I repent me of the evil that I have done unto you. Be not afraid of the king of Babylon of whom you are afraid;-----for I am with you to save you and deliver you from his hand, and I will grant you mercy, that he may have mercy upon you, and cause you to return to your own land." (42:10-12).

But all this is conditional upon the repentance and obedience of Israel. If they become incorrigible, persisting in their wickedness, then the same love which dictates mercy will dictate its withdrawal; hence there is a negative side to Jeremiah's representation. "Behold I will fill all the inhabitants of this land, even the kings that sit on the throne of David, and the priests and the prophets and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem with drunkenness and I will dash them one against another even the fathers and the sons together, saith the Lord, I will not pity, nor spare, nor have compassion, that I should not destroy them."(13:13-14).

As he contemplates their seemingly incorrigible wickedness the prophet is convinced that there is no longer any hope. This conviction is well expressed in the following: "And the Lord said unto me pray not for this people for their good."(14:11). "Then said the Lord unto me, 'Though Moses and Samuel stood before me, yet my mind could not be toward this people; cast them out of my sight and let them go forth.'" (15:1). He proceeds to show that this harsh judgment is made necessary by their incorrigibility. "Thou

hast neglected me saith the Lord; thou art gone backward; I am weary of repenting; I have fanned them with a fan in the gates of the city; I have bereaved them of children; I have destroyed my people; they have not returned from their ways; I have brought up-----the spoiler at noonday;----- she that hath borne seven languisheth;---her sun is gone down while it was yet day; she hath been ashamed and confounded; the residue of them will I deliver to the sword, saith the Lord." (15:7-9).

5. Longsuffering.

Inseparable from the representation just given is the idea of longsuffering or forbearance. It seems scarcely necessary to refer to the repeated mention of his forbearance and forgiveness which were treated with such constant disregard as to call forth the severest wrath of a God of love.

6. Justice.

The justice of God is shown by his judgments which are executed upon men according to their deserts. "I the Lord search the heart; I try the reins; even to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings."(17:10). This passage is an index of the ground for

all the judgments repeatedly pronounced upon the people. Their punishments are according to their deserts, though tempered with mercy.

7. Righteousness.

The question that comes nearest Jeremiah's own experience and most tries his faith is that of God's righteousness.

In the first place this attribute is most emphatically asserted in passages like the following: "Let him glory in this, that he knoweth that I am the Lord that exerciseth lovingkindness, judgment and righteousness in the earth." (9:24). He is called the Lord of hosts that judgest righteously. (11:20). The prophet also represents the Lord as challenging any one to accuse him of unrighteousness. Thus he says, "What iniquity have your fathers found in me, that they are gone from me? (2:5).

A God who is perfect in righteousness demands righteous conduct of men, his own children. So through his prophet he enjoins this in most urgent commands: "Execute ye judgment and righteousness, and deliver the spoiled out of the hand of

the oppressor;" (22:3). "And thou shalt swear, The Lord liveth, in sincerity, justice and righteousness; and the nations shall bless themselves in him." (4:2). His righteousness again is implied in the name given to the promised ideal ruler, "In his days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely; and this is his name whereby he shall be called, The Lord is our righteousness." (23:6).

But the prophet is not always so clear upon this point. The Lord had called him to the prophetic office against his own wish and protest. It is not easy for him to see why the Lord should allow him to receive bodily harm while he is engaged in this mission. The men of Anathoth, his native town, have forbidden him to prophesy in the name of the Lord, and accompany the injunction with a threat against his life; he pours forth his feelings upon this occasion in Chapter 12:1-6. "Righteous art thou, O Lord, when I plead with thee; yet would I reason the cause with thee: Wherefore doth the way of the wicked prosper? wherefore are all they at ease that deal very treacherously? Thou hast planted them, yea, they have taken root; they grow, yea, they bring forth

fruit:"----- Then his enemies cruelly mock him, saying, "Though in a land of peace, thou art insecure; then how wilt thou do in the pride of Jordan? For even thy brethren, and the house of thy father, even they have dealt treacherously with thee." It is not strange that he would reason his cause with God. It is the same question as that of the old Indian who asked Elliott, "Why does not God kill the devil." The answer is no open sesame. The prophet as he suffers unjustly in the Lord's service falters in doubt, but whenever he stops to reason the matter, the vision of God's goodness and mercy rises before him and all his doubts and complaints seem but childish folly. This passage is an indication of a tested and vital faith, not of doubt.

Again in the days of Pashur he meets with a similar experience. The high priest casts him in the stocks because of his prophecy against the city and forbids him to prophesy again in the name of the Lord. Once more he cries, "O Lord thou hast deceived me, and I was deceived; thou art stronger than I, and hast prevailed: I am become a laughing stock all the day, every one mocketh me. For as often as I speak I cry

out, I cry, Violence and spoil; because the word of the Lord is made a reproach unto me, and a derision all the day, and if I say I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in his name, then there is in mine heart, as it were, a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with forbearing and I cannot contain." (20:7-9). Here we behold the prophet in the crucible. The prosperity of his enemies enkindles in his heart doubts of God's goodness. He is tempted to give way before his persecutors and withhold his message; but when he would restrain the message, it becomes in his heart a burning fire consuming his bones and he cannot contain.

Thus he is tried in the fire. We know the outcome. From the ordeal the prophet comes forth refined and steeled for more trying service yet to follow. He becomes as it were "perfect steel hammered out on the anvil of persecution." His faith in God is triumphant; his love becomes universal. He can now say without faltering, "Thou art the Lord that exerciseth lovingkindness, judgment and righteousness in all the earth."

Section III. God's Relation to Men.

It may be said with a degree of assurance, that it was in his conception of God's relation to men, that Jeremiah made the greatest advance upon the teachings of his time. That which makes Christ's character unique among men more than any other feature was his transcendent sense of fellowship with the Father. Perhaps no other teacher before his time approached so near to this experience of Jesus as the prophet Jeremiah. His most tender representation of the relation of God to men is that of Father and children.

This is beautifully expressed in the often repeated exhortation, Thou shalt call me, My Father, the guide of my youth or more simply, My Father.

The same relation is affirmed in the repeated covenant, "I will be your God and ye shall be my people."

In one passage especially is the relation of Israel to Jehovah most tenderly expressed, "Thus saith the Lord, I remember for thee, the kindness of thy youth, the love of thine espousals." Israel was holiness to the Lord, the first fruits of his increase. This is the prophet's ideal desire

for his people--a nation wholly set apart unto the Lord.

The one condition prescribed by the Lord as the basis for this coveted relation is obedience. All their sufferings from famine, pestilence and war are viewed as the direct result of disobedience. Obedience is the offered condition of entrance into and continuance in the sacred covenant relation. "Thus saith the Lord God of Israel; cursed be the man that heareth not the words of this covenant, which I commanded your fathers in the day that I brought them forth out of Egypt, out of the iron furnace, saying, Obey my voice and do them; according to all which I command you; so shall ye be my people and I will be your God." (11:3-4).

Jehovah is in Jeremiah's conception more than a local and national God. He is not only able to defend Israel against all other gods but he is the sovereign ruler over all nations. Kings and peoples are in his hand; he planteth and plucketh up; he buildeth and teareth down; he uses the nations as instruments to punish his rebellious people: likewise, their kings are instruments in his hand to restore his penitent children to their lost heritage. (25:9). He promises

to bring the nations of the North and Nebuchadrezzar against his people and their neighbors, to bring them into servitude to the King of Babylon. "Behold I will give this city into the hand of the Chaldeans and into the hand of Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylon and he shall take it." (32:29). "I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all countries whither I have driven them, and I will bring them again to their folds, and they shall be fruitful and multiply." (23:3).

He will not only use the nations as instruments for the refining of Israel but he will also refine the nations in the fire of affliction. So he says, "Behold the day cometh that I will punish all them which are circumcised in their uncircumcision; Egypt, and Judah, and Edom, and the children of Ammon, and Moab:----for all these nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel are uncircumcised in heart." (9:26). "Behold evil shall go forth from nation to nation; and a great tempest shall be raised up from the uttermost parts of the earth; and the slain of the Lord shall be from one end of the earth even unto the other end of the earth." (25:32).

But this punishment of the nations shall not be utterly in vain. It shall be unto their salvation. When they at last see that the Lord is Lord indeed of all the earth, and witness his blessings upon Israel they shall turn at last to him and be blest. "I will cause the captivity of Judah and of Israel to return, and will build them as at the first; and I will pardon all their iniquities,---and this city shall be to me for a name of joy, for a praise, and for a glory, before all the nations of the earth, who shall hear all the good that I do unto them, and shall fear and tremble for all the good and for all the peace that I procure unto it. (33:9). And the nations shall bless themselves in it, and in it shall they glory."

Thus at last Jeremiah comes to a faith as broad in its application as the commission by which the child of Anathoth became the prophet, not only of Israel, but of all nations and all times.

It may be well to recall at this point the terms of that commission. The word of the Lord came to him, saying, I have sanctified thee and ordained thee a prophet unto the nations.

Say not, I am a child for thou shalt go to all that I send thee and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak. Behold I have put my words in thy mouth and I have this day set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant.

To this exalted position the prophet came at last; the child became the seer; the seer who came into intimate fellowship with the God of Israel became the prophet of the God of nations.

When men rise to the lofty ideal which the prophet sets for the nations of the earth under the one sovereign and gracious Lord of Lords; when they realize in their lives that which he sets forth as the ideal relation which should exist between God and men-- the infinite Father ruling over the universal family with a providence unlimited in its resources, blessing his children with a love limited only by their receptivity; children yielding to that Father a perfect obedience growing out of an implicit trust and repose in his goodness-- then will they know the truth of his richest

beatitude, "Blessed is the man that trusteth in the Lord and whose hope the Lord is, for he shall be as a tree planted by the waters and that spreadeth out his roots by the river and shall not fear when heat cometh but his leaf shall be green; and shall not be careful in the year of drought, neither shall cease from yielding fruit," (17:7-9) and of the Source of all blessings, they will ever say, "Thou art my Father" and my God.