THE PRAYER OF JEREMIAS

By JULIEN HARVEY

For over two thousand years the interior life of the prophet Jeremias has fascinated and attracted all those who have come into contact with him. St. Jerome thought he was the most saintly figure in the Old Testament;[1] yet only a small part of his book is devoted to prayer.[2] Interest in him must therefore derive from a value-judgement on his quality and importance. People have felt that the prayer of Jeremias has an authenticity that every sensitive soul must recognise as exceptional. This spontaneous judgement that each one of us shares with a long christian tradition deserves careful analysis. But reflective search into the secrets of the prophet's prayer would seem to demand a wide-ranging exploration of biblical prayer in general.

The Covenant and Prayer

Yahweh showed his face only extremely rarely; and even then he did not want the memory of this revelation to be preserved in a petrified image. The gods born of a natural religious sentiment, such as Apollo or Baal, gradually took shape with the aid of the sculptors' chisel; it was as images that they became the source of revelation for their devotees. But the God of Abraham and Moses, in contrast with the idols, presents himself first of all as a voice which calls upon man and awaits a response. In the most ancient traditions of the Pentateuch, prayer is considered as a dialogue.[3] Even though to see Yahweh means death, they are aware that he can speak and that they can reply.[4] Yahweh is a God of dialogue, and the term implies not only continuity but also the unexpected. Israel very soon understood that it had entered into a relationship with a person whose activity was not limited by any cyclic movement such as the inevitable recurrence of the seasons or of the stars. Yahweh wants Israel to be a partner in a covenant with him. This invitation is

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1 *Comment. in Jeremiam*, 23, 9 (PL 24, col. 822). An ancient *haggadah* attributes the safety of Jerusalem during Jeremias' lifetime to his prayer (*Pesiqta Rabba* 131a).

2 About 80 verses of the 1365 that make up the book.

3 Gen 3, 8-19; 4, 9-15; 15, 1-16; 28, 12-16.

4 Exod 5, 22-23; 32, 11-13; Gen 18, 22-33; 28, 20-22.

founded on historical fact, on his personal intervention in historical events; it is founded above all on the Exodus, when his vassals were transformed into free men. Thenceforward, Yahweh is involved in history and his voice interprets it,[1] interprets it to free partners.[2] Many prayers, especially after the Exile, are addressed to Yahweh the Creator. But creation is still envisaged in the context of the covenant: there is a sense of wonder that their God, the God of this small chosen people, should be he who created heaven and earth and therefore the ruler of the other peoples who have not been chosen.[3]

Prayer as Answer

It is in this precise context, within the covenant, that the prayer of the Old Testament is born. Some of its special features are immediately discernible. It is an answer, a response, since Yahweh always takes the initiative in the dialogue. Many of the liturgical prayers simply take up the words of Yahweh or rehearse his saving acts.[4] The essence of Old Testament prayer is to be found in this idea of an answer to a divine call – the call which is both a promise of and a plea for fidelity – and the sense of presence which accompanies this dialogue.[5] This is why Israel always had the courage to praise Yahweh not only in his 'wonderful works of salvation' but also in his punishments:[6] his avenging presence is infinitely better than his absence. The prayer of the Old Testament keeps alive a nostalgic longing for a return to the intimate dialogue, the familiarity which the patriarchs had with Yahweh.

It is this same idea of dialogue between Yahweh and Israel which inspires the constant reference to historical events:[7] every prayer is a *canticum novum* that can be addressed to Yahweh as though for the first time, because the historical intervention it celebrates is a new departure, an absolutely new beginning.[8]

Prayer to the Known God

From the covenant conceived as a dialogue deeply rooted in history, we can pass to another aspect of biblical prayer: one harder to

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[1] Amos 3, 7. [2] Jos 24, 15. [3] Deut 32, 8-9; Ps 23; 32; 88, 12sqq.; 94, 5sqq.
[4] Most of all the 'historical credo' in Deut 26, 5-10; another important example is the *shemah* (cf. infra, p. 174, note 1). [5] Cf. Gen 12, 1-3; Isai 50, 2; Jer 35, 17.
[6] Cf. Ps 37; 43; 50.
[7] Gen 32, 9-12; Exod 32, 13; Ps 73; 77; 104; 105; Jer 32, 17-25.
[8] Isai 42, 10; Ps 32, 3; 39, 4; 95, 1; 97, 1; 143, 9; 148, 1; Jer 31, 22.

formulate but which marks it off from the finest expressions of prayer in natural religion. Over and above the strongest affirmation of the divine transcendence and holiness, there is the fact that biblical prayer is addressed to a God who is known.[1] This is clear enough even on the level of style and literary *genre*. From the period of Deuteronomy a practical theology of prayer is formed in which experience of personal relations with Yahweh shows how he should be addressed and how silence should be kept while awaiting his reply. All the stages of a reverent friendship appear: the preliminaries which must precede a prayer of petition, the need to recall past favours and the attributes of his divine personality when he is being asked to intervene again, the exact degree of humility suitable to prayer. All these features are not to be explained away simply as a taking-over of the courtly style of the ancient East, though this may have provided hints. Nor is Yahweh to be sought and found as the unique conclusion to a speculative analysis;[2] it is rather a question of reaching out to a *person* who is known by name. And if the Hebrews wished to designate him metaphorically, they preferred familiar, known objects like rock, fire, wind and sandstorm, rather than the remote stars.

The Voice and the Hearer

Addressed to a known if mysterious God by a partner in the covenant, the prayer of the Old Testament desires intensely to be heard. It does not rely on magical spells. It is addressed to the living God whose character is known, though in some respects unpredictable in his activity; it knows that God wishes to realise in history a plan which cannot as yet be fully grasped. This anxiety to be heard gives to the prayer of the Old Testament its poignancy, its realism and affectivity and the liveliness which leads it to try varied lines of approach to God.[3] The same anxiety is at the root of Israel's desire, from her earliest days, to discover and eliminate all the obstacles to prayer. In the earlier period these obstacles were seen largely in

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[1] Texts like Exod 34, 6-7; Deut 4, 32-5 are particularly important in this connection. The fact that the Bible, unlike the mesopotamian world generally, thinks of transcendence in temporal ('I am the first and the last . . .') rather than in spatial terms, is partly to be explained by this age-old dialogue with Yahweh.

[2] Cf. Rom 1, 19-21; Wis 13, 1-9.

[3] This realism can be disconcerting for a modern reader (e.g. Jer 15, 18; 20, 7; Job 7, 11-21; 13, 22-27). The men of the Old Testament were not afraid of showing a lack of respect for Yahweh, provided that his justice and strength were not questioned.

terms of ritual proscriptions;[1] but soon – and this was one of the main positive tasks of the pre-exilic prophets – a link is established between Yahweh hearing the prayer and the purity of heart of the worshipper: it is sin which blocks the way of prayer.[2] Indeed this view of prayer led to a crisis in the time of Jeremias and the Exile: Yahweh's delay in answering their prayer seemed scandalous. It was then that Israel gradually understood that Yahweh's fidelity to his promises did not exclude fearful judgements in history, and that in such cases the divine plan took precedence over the supplications of the faithful.

The Meaning of Prayer

Although it is the answer to the call of Yahweh, the prayer of the Old Testament is heavy with the burden of human desires. In the beginning it is very largely a prayer of petition, and it is material goods above all that are asked for. Yet we must beware of dismissing too hastily these continual requests made to God; semitic anthropology does not think in terms of a body-soul duality, but rather of the contrast between flesh and spirit which, combined with the ignorance of a future life, meant that stress was laid on immediate dependence on Yahweh's goodness at each moment. Such an attitude makes impossible any sharp distinction between purely material and purely spiritual goods.

Besides, it would be a mistake to think of the development towards 'spiritualisation' in terms of simple evolution. From a very early period, there are prayers which transcend the utilitarian attitude and which ask for purely spiritual goods.[3] The same tendency is found in Deuteronomy and in the so-called 'anti-cult polemic' of the pre-exilic prophets:[4] what they are chiefly concerned with is a protest against a ritualism devoid of spiritual content, against a situation that could only arise where utilitarian desires predominate and prayer has lost its value. After the exile, another attempt was made to connect the true conditions of prayer with the most meticulous ordering of the sacrificial cult. This led to a genuine liturgical revival which was however soon undermined: interior purity was

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[1] E.g. 1 Sam 14, 36-42.

[2] Isai 1, 15; Jer 2, 27; 7, 16; 14, 8-9; 16, 5; Ezek 8, 18; 14, 14-20; 20, 3.

[3] Ps 31; 50; 102; 129.

[4] Amos 4, 4; 5, 21sqq.; Os 6, 6; Isai 1,10 sqq.; 29, 13; Mic 6, 6-8; Jer 6, 20; 7, 22-23; Ps 49, 8-12; 1 Sam 15, 22-23.

transformed into the perfect external fulfilment of the rubrics, and the way was opened to scrupulosity.

More important is the gradual interiorisation of the dialogue with Yahweh just before the Exile. The historical tribulations were bound to lead to crisis for a theology of prayer so thoroughly based on history. The loss of the divine presence in the Temple and the enforced cessation of the sacrificial cult could not halt the ceaseless movement of prayer towards God. Indeed, these events enabled prayerful souls to discern the more intimate presence of Yahweh in the hearts of his servants.[1] Once this process had begun, it could overcome all obstacles, even death. Hope, born of prayer, of the inseparable closeness of Yahweh, is one of the deepest roots of faith in life eternal.[2]

Intercession

Without some understanding of this aspect of Old Testament prayer, it would be difficult to understand one of the major themes of the prayer of Jeremias. From the earliest covenant period, Israel had thought that the principal, and practically the exclusive, function of leaders endowed with charismatic powers was intercession: they were to be intermediaries between Israel and Yahweh.[3] This idea has a deep theological foundation: no matter how much the Lord wishes to enter into dialogue with his people, the subject feels that he is impure in the sight of the Lord's holiness. The intermediary was first of all considered as one who was separated, purified by Yahweh and thus able to speak to him in the first person singular; he would refer to the people he represented in the third person. This way of speaking is found in all the mediators of the covenant of the first period, and in the first prophets up to Jeremias:[4] they can be called 'exclusive' mediators.

But by the time of Jeremias a new attitude appears. The mediators become aware that they are sinners among sinners, and yet

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[1] Ps 3, 8; 16, 15; 22; 26, 4; 35, 10; 62, 2-7; 130.

[2] Especially Ps 15, 9-11; 48, 16; 72, 23-26.

[3] Intercession appears in the accounts of the patriarchs (Gen 18, 22-32; 20, 3-7). It is attributed to various charismatic leaders, and above all to Moses, mediator of the covenant (Exod 17, 4-9; 33, 11-17; 34, 9; Num 11, 2; Deut 9, 18-29; cf. also Exod 8, 4-9, 24; 9, 27-33; 10, 16-19; Num 12, 11-14; similarly Samuel (1 Sam 7, 6-9; 12, 19), Elias (1 Kg 17, 20; 18, 42), and David (2 Sam 24, 17). On this question cf. J. Scharbert, *Die Fürbitte in der Theologie des AT*, in *Theol. u. Glaube* 50 (1960), pp. 321-338.

[4] Amos 7, 2, 5; Isai 6, 1-13; 2 Kg 19, 4; there are hints of a new attitude in Mic 7, 18-19; cf. Scharbert, *art. cit.*, 330ff.

their duty to intercede remains; they will speak from now on in the first person plural. The sense of being privileged mediators whose requests will infallibly be granted, disappears; Jeremias looks back wistfully to Moses and Samuel,[1] the great mediators of the past. He himself is a mediator who does not escape the judgement passed on his brethren, and this gives his prayer its special character: he is an 'inclusive' mediator.[2]

The Prayer of Jeremias

We can now better understand the prayer of Jeremias as it is outlined against the long history of Israel's dialogue with its God. It has two aspects. There are prayers in which Jeremias, involved in the fate of his people, speaks as mediator to Yahweh;[3] and there are prayers in which he turns to Yahweh on his own account to speak of his soul, his mission, his solitude: these prayers have been appropriately styled the Confessions of Jeremias.[4]

The first prayer in the book of Jeremias is the objection he raises to his vocation: 'I am but a child that has never learned to speak'.[5] These words throw light on the way he thinks of his call: he will not be the detached deliverer of an impersonal message. The judgement he transmits is passed on himself first of all, and his exclamations of distress interrupt the logical order of his oracles; they express the suffering of man under the burden of sin and judgement.[6] Again, he speaks in the first person singular when clearly all Israel is involved, as though all Israel were concentrated in his heart.[7] As his consciousness of his vocation deepens, he gradually becomes aware that not only has he received a message, but that his life itself is a message. His vocation reaches down to the depths of his personality, making celibacy necessary for him,[8] forbidding him to take part in

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[1] Jer 15, 1. More and more expectation begins to centre on the coming of the ideal mediator (Isai 53, 4-12; Zech 12, 10-14).

[2] Christ takes up the tradition of the 'exclusive' mediators of the covenant (e.g. Jn 17, 20), and Paul emphasises that Christ is the *only* mediator in the strict sense (1 Tim 2, 15). In the Epistle to the Hebrews the exclusive character of Christ's mediation is an important theological theme.

[3] Jer 4, 10, 19; 6, 11; 8, 18-23; 10, 23-25; 14, 7-9, 17-22; 32, 17-25.

[4] Jer 11, 18-23; 12, 1-6; 15, 10-21; 17, 12-15; 18, 18-23; 20, 7-18. Cf. G. M. Behler, *Les Confessions de Jérémie* (Tournai), 1959 and S. H. Blank, *The Confessions of Jeremiah and the Meaning of Prayer*, in *Hebrew Union College Annual* 21 (1948), 331-354.

[5] Jer 1, 6. It is worth noticing that Jeremias in describing his vocation follows the literary pattern of Moses (Exod 3, 1-4, 10; 6, 2-12) and Gideon (Jg 6, 11-24).

[6] Cf. Jer 4, 10, 19; 6, 11; 16, 19. [7] E.g. Jer 10, 23-25. [8] Jer 16, 1-2.

the mourning and the rejoicing of the people.[1] One of the key words in Jeremias is 'heart'. It occurs sixty-five times in the book. Yahweh knows that this heart can be moved by the disasters of the enemy he should rather be denouncing: 'For Moab my heart wails like the wailing of flutes'.[2] Jeremias' message becomes paradoxical: it is an outspoken proclamation of an implacable judgement; yet it is accompanied by the constant prayer that Yahweh might withold judgement. Jeremias is begged to intercede;[3] but he meets with so little gratitude that he cannot avoid feelings of resentment.[4] Yet the avenging oracle ends with tears which Yahweh hears more readily than words.[5] Then a day comes when Yahweh forbids him to intercede for the people;[6] but the repetition of the command suggests that Jeremias did not find it easy to resist what was for him the natural impulse of his prayer.

The Confessions of Jeremias

It is not so much in the oracles, but in the Confessions, rare jewels of biblical spirituality, that the interior life of the prophet is made manifest.[7] Although it cannot be affirmed with certainty, these moving self-revelations probably belong to one period of his life, towards the end of the reign of Josias. They express a spiritual crisis of great violence. Jeremias suddenly learned that the preaching of his message was endangering his life; first the simple people in his own region, Anatoth, and then the leaders in Jerusalem, thought that he should be done away with. From that moment the prayer of Jeremias has a double aspect: a burning desire that Yahweh may punish his enemies before they can destroy him,[8] and bitter complaint to Yahweh who has misled and deceived him.[9]

The first of these themes, with its apparent impulsiveness and

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[1] Jer 16, 5-8. [2] Jer 48, 36; cf. vv. 31-32. [3] Jer 21, 2; 37, 3; 42, 1-4.
[4] Jer 15, 11; 17, 16; 18, 20. Later Jewish tradition was grateful to him: cf. 2 Macc 15, 12-14. [5] Jer 8, 18-23; cf. 4, 19 and Gen 21, 16-17.
[6] Jer 7, 16; 11, 14; 14, 11; 16, 5.
[7] It has often been asked how this document managed to survive. Wellhausen ascribes its survival to a mysterious inspiration on the part of Jeremias himself; other commentators put it down to his humility. I prefer a more fundamental explanation: Jeremias has written a kind of *documentary memorandum* as a guarantee against his own doubts and against the attacks of his enemies on the genuineness of his message. His own resistance to the divine word is the best guarantee of all. Isaias (Isai 6) and Michaeas son of Jemla (1 Kg 22, 19-23) guarantee their mission by appealing to the theophany in which the word was communicated to them; Jeremias recounts as his guarantee his inner torment.
[8] Jer 11, 18-23; 12, 1-6; 18, 18-23; cf. 17, 12-13.
[9] Jer 15, 10-12, 15-21; 17, 16-18; 20, 7-18.

crudity, comes as a disappointment to the christian reader. Jeremias remains a man of the Old Testament, and we must recognise here the limitations of his spirituality. At the same time we must bear in mind that for Jeremias the loss of earthly life meant the loss of everything, even of spiritual goods. The response of Yahweh provides a better revelation of the world of prayer: the same Lord who previously guaranteed Jeremias protection against danger[1] will protect him now, though he does this in a disconcerting way, simply by warning him of his peril. Jeremias wanted rather more than that. Yet Yahweh's only reply is that he must prepare himself for graver risks, renounce all security and be content to escape with his life.[2]

This answer is not enough to satisfy the heart of Jeremias. His enemies do not desire his death on account of the message of disaster he brings but rather because his prophecies remain as yet unfulfilled; then at least let the disasters come, let the prophecies be fulfilled! Like Jonas, he begins to urge God to bring about the calamities he has announced.[3] Yet this prayer, wrung from him in a moment of weakness, will have no power over the heart of God.

The Old Testament never thought of prayer as a flux of ideas and feelings without any precise structure. Prayer is always an act, a step taken, an event. This is probably why the Bible does not usually lay down the length and the number of prayers to be said.[4] The idea the men of the Old Testament had of prayer is better conveyed in Jacob's struggle with the angel by night than by any kind of neo-platonic contemplation: prayer is an adventure from which one does not emerge unscathed.[5] The third part of the Confessions makes this clear:[6] Jeremias curses the day he was born, the day on which he was chosen out to be the messenger of wrath.[7] Yahweh is the one who has broken his promises! Jeremias has courageously done what he could. The most violent accusation he brings against Yahweh is that he is a well in which there is no water: in a subtropical country this is the equivalent of an accusation of murder! Yet the full extent of the crisis only appears in Yahweh's reply. He speaks of *conversion* and of a return to the mission:[8] phrases which suggest that Jeremias had, in his despair, abandoned his

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[1] Jer 1, 18. [2] Jer 12, 5. [3] Jer 17, 16-18; cf. Jon 3-4.
[4] The rare examples are late: Ps 118, 163, and perhaps Ps 54, 18.
[5] Gen 32, 24-29, 31. [6] Jer 15, 10-12, 15-21. [7] Jer 1, 4.
[8] Jer 15, 19. The vigorous terms used by Yahweh seem to indicate that we are not dealing with a metaphor and that Jeremias really had given up his vocation and ceased to hand on the message.

vocation. Yahweh promises an increase of strength, but there is no promise of a restoration of human happiness: the life of Jeremias will be saved, but his loneliness will remain.[1]

Jeremias again expresses his disappointment and calls for vengeance.[2] And the last fragment reaches a crescendo of disgust, indignation and despair: 'Lord, thou hast sent me on a fool's errand, and I played a fool's part'.[3] Jeremias, who has a strong sense of the ridiculous, describes his absurd situation: he is one who has tried to keep silent, but the message of Yahweh, like a burning fire within him, has forced him to speak out.[4]

The Confessions conclude, strangely enough, with this outburst. The only proof we have that Jeremias rediscovered peace is his serenity in the years which followed, in spite of the destruction of Jerusalem and the deportation.

Through this struggle, through the extraordinary frankness of his prayer, Jeremias reaches the decisions which make him authentically a man in whom there is nothing dessicated or hardened, a man who is completely committed to Yahweh. His prayer has made him Jeremias, unique, unrepeatable, the man for whom the loyalty of the 'remnant of Israel' came to mean the glowing spark of love in the depths of his heart, the love alone capable of comprehending the new covenant: 'Behold, the days are coming when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel . . . I will put my law within them and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people'.[5] Thanks to his struggle, fiercer than that of Jacob at Jaboc, we can hear and understand, dominating the clamour of war, the tormented yet human heart-beats of Jeremias, violent but still faithful: 'My heart is close to You'.[6]

(Translated by Peter Hebblethwaite, s.j.)

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[1] Jer 15, 20-21. [2] Jer 17, 12-18; 18, 18-23. [3] Jer 20, 7-18.
[4] W. Rudolph (*Jeremia*, Handbuch zum AT, Tübingen, 1947, p. 113) points out that with Amos 3, 8 and 1 Cor 9, 16, this is one of the strongest affirmations of the genuineness of prophetic inspiration. Cf. also Isai 8, 11; Ezek 3, 14.
[5] Jer 31, 31-3. [6] Jer 12, 3.