SHORT NOTES

"THE PRIESTS SCRAPE OUT ON THEIR HANDS,"

JEREMIAH V 31

The second hemistich of Jer. v 31, has never been given a satisfactory interpretation. The remainder of the verse is clear:

"The prophets have prophesied falsely (בָּשָׂךְ), and the priests—on [or the like] their hands; my people love to have it so, but what will you do when the end comes?"

But it has not been clear what action it is in which the priests engage to parallel the false preaching of the prophets. The verb לָשָׂךְ is difficult, the preposition לע is difficult, and there is uncertainty as to whether Jeremiah was referring to the hands of the priests or of the prophets.

The Versions are not helpful. The LXX reads ἐπεκρότησαν ταῖς χερσίν αὐτῶν: the priests “clapped their hands”; and the Vulgate follows this lead with applaudebant manibus suis. The Pešitta reads מַמְשֵׁה "are assisting on their hands (= on their authority)".

Thus vocalized, the verb לָשָׂךְ can be referred to either of two Biblical roots. The first of these means “to rule”, and is relatively common in the OT. If the priests “rule”, then “on their hands” must be understood as “on their authority”, and the reference must be to the prophets’ authority, rather than in some way to the hands of the priests, though such reference is certainly awkward. This is the traditional Jewish exegesis of the passage: the priests rule the people indirectly through the authority of the prophets (so RASHI, J. H. ALTSCHLER 1). This interpretation, which is already indicated by the Targumic rendering, has been followed by many modern commentators and translations (GIESEBRECHT, WEISER; the American Revised Standard Version reads “rule at their direction”).

Emendations have been proposed. CORNILL emends the verb לָשָׂךְ to

1) Jehiel Hillel ben David ALTSCHEL or ALTSCHLER, מץאתו רד, and מץאתו וסנו, in the rabbinic Bible of Warsaw, תבצא תועלת, publ. by LEVENSOHN, 1860-68. For ALTSCHLER’s work, see the Jewish Encyclopedia, I, 479.
“they teach”, and this suggestion has been followed by Condamin and Rudolph, and is recommended in the textual notes of Kittel’s Biblia Hebraica; the Bible de Jérusalem reads “enseignent de leur propre chef”. Volz radically emends the phrase to פניהם, “have knowledge for slackness”, as a suitable parallel for the first hemistich.

I submit that the text does not require emendation, but that the solution lies in the second root נַדֵּר, “to scrape out”. This verb appears only twice in the OT, in both cases in Jdg. xiv 9, when Samson “scraped out” honey from the carcass of a lion. The verb appears in the Talmud for “scraping” honey out of a beehive, and loaves of bread out of an oven. It may be a reminiscence of this verb of action which underlies the LXX rendering “clap their hands”, but the rendering as it stands is misleading. David Qimhi, though citing the standard interpretation “rule”, suggests “scrape out” instead: “It is a phrase of taking, from נַדֵּר to scrape out honey; that is, they take bribes to corrupt justice: they take them on their hands like someone scraping honey in his hand, which is good and sweet”. And Duhm follows this interpretation (though suggesting for insufficient reasons a revocalization of the qal verb to the synonymous piel): “schieben in ihre Taschen, eigentlich: auf ihre Hände”.

Recourse to this root solves the problem of the pronoun reference of “their hands”: no longer need we assume a reference to the hands of the prophets of the previous phrase. But though I submit that this is the verb which Jeremiah had in mind, he evidently was not thinking of bribery. Coming from a priestly family, he is evidently recalling here the technical term used for the installation or consecration of a priest: מַלְבִּים נַדֵּר “to fill the hand of someone”. This phrase appears seventeen times in the OT; the oldest passage is perhaps Jdg. xvii 5-12, where it appears twice. The original implications of this idiom are now impossible to discover—we can no longer determine what it was with which the new priest’s hand was filled (a portion of the sacrifice? his first salary?). The idiom was a liturgical formula whose origins no doubt lie in pre-Israelite times (there are Mesopotamian texts from the second millennium which offer parallels) 1). Indeed, by the time of the writing of Ezek. xliii, the phrase carried no literal connotation at all, for it is used in v. 26 of the consecration of an altar.

Jeremiah is making reference here to this formula of consecration. He is saying, in effect, “Our priests are scraping out whatever it is