THE SPOILING OF JEREMIAH'S GIRDLE
(Jer. xiii 1-11)

There are a number of puzzling features in the narrative of Jerem-iah's journey to "Perath" to hide his linen girdle, subsequently spoilt there (Jer. xiii 1-11), that have not been satisfactorily explained. Bright, followed by Nicholson, interprets the action as meaning the spoiling of Judah in exile. Both are puzzled by the inconsistency of Jeremiah's views, for in Jer. xxiv the exiles are accounted by Yahweh as "the good figs" (xxiv 5), whom he will one day return to their land. How, then, can Jeremiah proclaim that they will be spoiled in exile?

Bright's solution to this difficulty is to say that the story of the girdle has nothing to say about a return from exile, but only about the humbling of the nation's pride there. This alone is indicated by the spoiling of the girdle in the cleft of the rock by the Euphrates/Perath. For "one cannot, after all, expect that any prophet should express his entire theology in each of his utterances" (p. 96). Nicholson adds: "we must clearly make allowances for the intensity of the
prophet's message to have varied from one situation to another” (p. 122).

The interpretation of the symbolic act as a reference to the exile is a well-established one (Volz, Keil, Giesebrecht, Weiser and others), but it is one which lays undue stress perhaps on a single element of the narrative—that Jeremiah makes a journey to bury the girdle—at the expense of other elements. Perhaps the historical questions raised—was it a real journey (Bright) or a vision (Rudolph, Weiser); was it to the Euphrates (Rudolph, Weiser) or to ‘Ain Farah (Bright)?—are at least partly responsible for this concentration on a point which may be irrelevant.

W. Rudolph’s view, in contradistinction to that of many other critics, is that this is not a prophecy about the exile at all. It is a visionary experience which means simply this: so long as Judah clung to Yahweh, he was proud of his people, but ever since it came under the political and religious influence of the lands of the Euphrates, it had become corrupt and useless. A. Weiser rejects this explanation, while agreeing that the narrative does not describe a real event. The linen girdle may suggest the sacred character of the people (linen being used for priestly vestments in Israel), and its purchase by Jeremiah points to their belonging to Yahweh through the covenant. The hiding of the girdle does indicate exile, and Jeremiah’s second journey to recover it, God’s intention to restore the people to their land. But then there is a new point of departure in Yahweh’s dealings with his people in the discovery that in exile old habits have been reinforced, and now the people, like the rotted girdle, has become entirely corrupt and useless. Neither of these views is entirely satisfactory. Rudolph’s, because he is forced to an arbitrary emenda-
tion of v. 9 to avoid the statement that it is Yahweh who has destroyed the pride of Judah; and Weiser’s, because the contradiction with the Jeremiah tradition is heightened by this theory rather than resolved.

Let us start, then, by taking a look at the narrative as a whole. It consists of three separate instructions from Yahweh to the prophet, each of which Jeremiah fulfills; and a final word of interpretation by Yahweh (v. 9) which declares the meaning of what has occurred. The account of the fulfillment of the instructions is told with great economy, and only the third (v. 7) adds anything significant which was not already contained in the corresponding instruction—namely, that the girdle has been spoilt. It is this additional element which