THE FATE OF ZEDEKIAH: REDACTIONAL DEBATE
IN THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH

PART I

by

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The fate of Zedekiah as recorded in 2 Kings xxv 4-7 is one of the more brutal scenes described in the Old Testament. As he flees from Jerusalem he is intercepted by Babylonian troops and arraigned at Riblah before Nebuchadrezzar who passes sentence: his sons are slaughtered in front of him; his eyes are gouged out; he is bound in chains and deported to Babylon, presumably to die as a captive. Zedekiah’s actual death is not recorded here, or in 2 Chronicles or Jer., although it is alluded to in Jer. lli; Ezek. xii 10-14 (cf. also Ezek. xvii 19-21), which may also refer to his blindness (but cf. Ezek. xii 6). The historicity of the account in 2 Kings has never been seriously doubted, and Ezekiel’s oracle is thought to reflect accurately the king’s fate, which accords with the treatment threatened against a rebellious vassal of another age in I Sefire A 35-40 (cf. Deist).

In Jer., however, a problem is encountered. Chs xxxix and lli record, with some modifications (cf. especially Ackroyd [1968]), the fall of Jerusalem and the fate of her king much as recorded in 2 Kings. But a number of other texts in Jer. portray Jeremiah as predicting a variety of fates for Zedekiah. The relevant passages are Jer. xxi 1-7, xxiv 1-10, xxvii 12-15, xxxii 3-5, xxxiv 4-5, 21-2, xxxvii 17, xxxviii 14-23, and they preserve almost the whole range of possibilities for Zedekiah’s fate: he will die “by the sword” (xxi 1-7); he will certainly be captured (xxxiv 21-2, xxxvii 17); he will be exiled (xxiv 1-10, xxxii 3-5); he can

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1 Throughout this article “Jer.” stands for the book of Jeremiah and “Jeremiah” refers to the prophet.

2 So Eichrodt, p. 148 n. i (German, p. 78 n. 1); Zimmerli, pp. 267-8, 273-4 (German, pp. 256-8, 266-7).

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avoid capture and exile (xxxvii 14-23); he will not die “by the sword” but b’šālōm “in peace” (xxxiv 4-5). A ninth passage xli v 30 which looks back on Zedekiah’s fate, may also be of relevance.

What are we to make of this apparent confusion in Jer.? The schemes of literary dependence constructed by scholars are unconvincing and source-critical results are contradictory. In my view it is insufficient simply to trace the historical origins of the passages (cf. e.g. Malamat, pp. 152-3) as such an approach does not tell us about the present ordering and meaning of the Massoretic Text. In fact, these texts offer an opportunity to approach one of the major problems of Jer.’s interpretation: the relationship between judgement and hope in the book. The variety of doom-laden and hopeful predictions associated with just one character offers controls for approaching this aspect of Jer. and may shed some light on the problem.

In Part I of this article I shall review some suggestions for understanding the relationship between judgement and hope in Jer. and also Jer.’s attitude to the Judahite monarchy. Some aspects of the stereotyped language of the eight texts will be noted, and each passage will then be considered in its redactional setting. I will suggest that the redactors of Jer. have deliberately drawn attention to differences in the texts or traditions concerning Zedekiah available to them, effectively preserving a “debate” over the status and fate of the king. Building upon this they have fashioned a wider “debate” for their own theological purposes. In Part II, I shall examine more closely some of the implications of this “debate” for our understanding of the relationship between judgement and hope in Jer. and for other aspects of Jer.’s theology. I shall also attempt to date the redactors’ activity, suggesting that one of the key texts represents a development of the Deuteronomistic History in the direction of the Chronicler’s account of the destruction of Jerusalem.

Judgement and Salvation in the Book of Jeremiah: Dialectic and “Debate”

Carroll ([1981] p. 5) follows Duhm when he comments that a man as passionately committed to proclaiming God’s judgement as Jeremiah simply could not perform the necessary volte face to become a prophet

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3 Cf. e.g. Steuernagel, pp. 557ff.; Carroll (1981), pp. 149-57; Skinner, pp. 256-60; Bright, pp. 232-4; Misch, passim; Seitz (1985) pp. 86-7 and refs.; also the introductions, especially Driver, pp. 270-7.