

I

THE FALSE CONCEPTION OF SECURITY

THE study which follows may be described as an essay on the theology of the Jeremiah tradition, centring on the use in that tradition of the term *šeqer*, commonly translated 'lie, falsehood, deception'. While this noun is fairly frequent within the Old Testament as a whole (111 occurrences), there is such a sudden burst of occurrences in the book of Jeremiah that one immediately suspects that the concept of falsehood had a special significance in the message of that prophet. This is in fact the case, and our study undertakes to show the way in which the prophet took up this concept, extended its connotations, and adopted it as one of the more important terms of his theological vocabulary.

In the book of Jeremiah we encounter the notion of 'falsehood in connection with three main objects of the prophet's concern: the false sense of security which was preventing the people from responding to Yahweh's call to repentance, the prophetic opponents of Jeremiah ('false prophets'), and the falsehood of idolatry. The first two stand in an especially close relationship to each other, and will be the primary objects of our concern. It is clear that many Judeans of Jeremiah's day were confident that Yahweh would assure the continued existence of their nation in the face of all approaching danger. The presence of the temple in their midst seems to have symbolized for them a guaranteed national security. We may therefore begin our study with an examination of the basis of this confidence and the prophet's reaction to it.

In order to discover Jeremiah's convictions about the people's false sense of security it will be useful *to direct our* attention to his 'Temple Sermon', for in it the prophet gives a vivid indication of the underlying causes of and factors involved in this attitude. Besides providing us with general information about the conditions under which the message was delivered, Jeremiah 7.1-15

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ŠEQER IN THE THEOLOGY OF JEREMIAH

THE main emphasis of this study has been on Jeremiah's use of the notion 'falsehood' to describe the sense of security which he felt was preventing the people of Judah from responding to Yahweh's call to repentance and the prophetic opponents, who were active purveyors of this message of 'peace'. For the sake of completeness, brief reference must be made to another area in which the prophet's notion of falsehood found expression, namely his polemic against idolatry.

I have elsewhere discussed this topic in detail, concentrating my attention on an analysis of the structure and content of Jeremiah 10.1-16 viewed in the context of the shape of the polemic against idolatry found in the remainder of the book.¹ It is unnecessary to repeat the details of that study here, although some of its general conclusions should be cited as relevant to the present investigation. It was argued that Jer. 10.1-16 displayed a definite structural pattern, in which hymn-like praises addressed to or spoken about Yahweh alternate with statements critical of idols. The function of this pattern is to press home the contrast between Yahweh and the gods whose symbols the idols are. This scheme was seen to recur in the utterances of Jeremiah in passages like 2.8-13, 26-28; 3.1-5, 23; 5.20-25; 14.22; and 16.19-20. The question of why the prophet felt moved to brand these gods and their cultic practices 'false' (3.23; 10.14; 16.19) seems best answered in terms of his perception of their basic ineffectiveness.

It is interesting that the prophet compares Yahweh with the gods in terms of their own special functions, and not by playing off his capability of historical action against their bondage to

¹ 'The Falsehood of Idolatry: An Interpretation of Jer. x. 1-16', *JTS*, NS 16 (1965), pp. 1-12. In my view the methodological implications of this study are inseparable from and at least as important as the conclusions it reached about the specific interpretation of Jer. 10.1-16.

nature, as if the latter in itself made them inferior. In the broader sense it is true that Jeremiah conceived of Yahweh as pre-eminently a God of history, yet in terms of this one concrete aspect of his polemic the prophet is conceiving of him as the creator and ruler of nature. By comparison with him the gods of the nations are 'vain' (*hebbel*), powerless even to accomplish those functions for which they are specialists. Consequently, the cultus connected with such gods is also ineffective. Only in Yahweh is the 'salvation' of Israel to be found (3.23).²

Our task is now to attempt to understand the meaning and function of the term *šeḡer* in the theological vocabulary of the prophet Jeremiah. But in order to put his use of the term in a proper perspective, some remarks are in order about its use outside the book of Jeremiah.³ While the noun *šeḡer* is found 36 times in Jeremiah, it also occurs frequently in the Pentateuch, Psalms, and Proverbs, and it will be convenient to limit the following brief remarks to those three blocks of material.⁴

Seven of the eight occurrences of *šeḡer* in the Pentateuch are in what we might call a 'legal' context. That is to say, the topic under discussion in each of them is false witness, swearing falsely, or

² Because of his conviction that the term *šeḡer* refers basically to a breach of relationship, often of the covenant relationship which exists between the people and Yahweh, Martin A. Klopfenstein argues that the intention of Jer. 3.23 is not to say that idol worship is *šeḡer*, but that it leads to *šeḡer* (i.e., breach of the covenant). Only in passages like Jer. 16.19; 10.14, and Isa. 44.20 does *šeḡer* cease to describe personal behaviour and come to refer to the 'ineffectiveness' of the idols themselves. The latter constitutes a decided 'fading' of the original connotation. See *Die Lüge nach dem Alten Testament*, pp. 83ff. At least in the case of Jeremiah, one wonders if such a distinction is necessary. In his polemic the ineffectiveness of the people's false sense of security for coping with the contemporary political situation seems functionally equivalent to that ascribed to the gods: neither were capable of altering the course of events which Yahweh has willed.

³ While *šeḡer* is but one of the Hebrew roots which convey the basic notion of 'falsehood', it is the only one that has been systematically used by Jeremiah in his prophetic utterances. Klopfenstein has done an exhaustive study of all the roots, and his conclusions about the sphere in which each was originally at home are of interest: *šqr* is basically a term from the sphere of treaty law, *keḥš* from that of criminal law, *šaw'* from that of primitive magic, and *kezb* from daily life. *Op. cit.*, pp. 321f.

⁴ The verb is infrequent in the Old Testament. Klopfenstein maintains that its basic meaning relates to the breaking of an agreement rather than to some kind of 'lying' speech (Gen. 21.23; Pss. 89.34; 44.18), and cites eighth-century Aramaic treaties of state in which the root *šqr* functions as a technical term for the breaking of a treaty (*op. cit.*, pp. 8ff.).

speaking falsely, and all of these are viewed as a perversion of justice. Probably the most familiar example of this usage comes from the Decalogue itself: 'You shall not bear false witness ('ed *šāqer*) against your neighbour' (Ex. 20.16; cf. 23.7; Lev. 5.22, 24; 19.12; Deut. 19.18, where the term occurs twice). The basic meaning here is non-correspondence to 'fact'. What the 'false witness' does is accuse someone of doing a thing which he in fact did not do (cf. Deut. 19.1 j-19). He tells a 'lie' in our everyday sense of that term. An actual example of this kind of lying is found in II Kings 9.12. After being privately anointed by Elisha, Jehu emerges into the presence of his servants but seeks to deceive them by implying that nothing took place between the prophet and himself. In the face of this rather suspicious assertion the men reply, 'It is a lie! Tell us now (what really happened) !'

The one exception to this 'legal' usage of the term is Ex. 5.9, which is part of the narrative describing Pharaoh's reaction to Moses' initial demand that the people of Israel be allowed to make a pilgrimage into the wilderness to worship Yahweh. Angered by this request, he ordered the foremen to withhold straw from the captive labourers but not to reduce the number of bricks required of them, so that they would have no time or inclination to 'regard lying words'. That is, Pharaoh was in effect saying the same thing about Yahweh's promise of deliverance (Ex. 3.7-10; 5.1-3) that we found Jeremiah saying about the gods, viz. he is ineffective, unable to carry out the promise made.

The term *kqer* occurs 22 times in the Psalter in a total of 14 Psalms: 7, 27, 31, 33, 35, 38, 52, 63, 69, 101, 109, 119 (eight times), 120, 144 (twice). According to Gunke's classification, most of these are to be viewed as individual laments (the exceptions are : 27.1-6, a song of trust; 33, a choir-hymn; 101, an enthronement proclamation; 144, a royal lament; and 119, an alphabetical psalm of mixed form).⁵

Beginning with those *šeger*-psalms which may be classified as laments (of whatever sort), we may note that almost without exception the term *kqer* is used as descriptive of the actions of the enemies. As one would expect, it occurs for the most part in two

⁵ H. Gunkel and J. Begrich, *Einleitung in die Psalmen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1929 and 1933). H.-J. Kraus, *Psalmen*, arrives at substantially the same classification.

elements of these psalms: the laments and the prayer.⁷ 27.12 is especially instructive, for the enemies are here described as 'false witnesses' ('*ēdbē Seqer*'), and this appears to be the burden of their offence against the suppliant. Throughout these psalms, in fact, the plotting of the enemies is predominantly oral in nature (cf. 31.19; 35.1, 11, 20f., 25; 52.4–6; 120.2; etc.). Thus two-thirds of the occurrences of *Seqer* in the Psalter come in laments, in which the term performs the function of referring to the enemies' actions. This action may be generally characterized as the bearing of false witness and involvement in plots against the suppliant. The major emphasis, then, is on the use of the term 'lie' in the sense of untruth or non-correspondence to fact. The connotation of the term in these psalms is heavily legal, as it is also in several psalms outside the lament group.⁸ In only two passages (3 3.17; 119. 118, where the connotation 'ineffectiveness' seems to be called for) do we find clear indications that something other than a legal context is *to* be thought of where the term occurs.

Our understanding of these occurrences of *seqer* will depend somewhat on how we conceive of the individual psalms of lamentation. For Gunkel this group formed the backbone of the Psalter, and represented the prayers of real, private individuals.⁹ S. Mowinckel, on the other hand, suggests that these are in fact royal psalms, or national laments in the 'I-form'.¹⁰ H. Birkeland concurs in this judgment, arguing that the enemies of the individuals here represented are identical with those of the nation.¹¹ He cites, for example, the fact that numerous psalms contain war imagery and speak of 'falsity' or 'false witness' (27, 3 1, 3 5, 69, etc.), and refers to the Amarna letters as providing us with the most

⁶ 27.12; 52.5; 63.12; 69.5; 109.2. In 7.13 the term appears in a narrative section, which is perhaps most akin to the lament.

⁷ 31.19; 35.19; 120.2; 144.8, 11.

⁸ Ps. 101 is in effect the king's promise (doubtless uttered in connection with his enthronement) to maintain justice in the land, so the reference to 'those who utter lies' (*dōbbre šeqārīm*, v. 7) probably refers to persons who in more strictly legal terminology would be designated '*ēdbē Seqer*'. In several passages in Ps. 119 walking in *Seqer* (etc.) is specifically rejected in favour of Yahweh's *tōrāh* (vv. 29, 163) or *piqqūdhīm* (vv. 104, 128). The other occurrences of *Seqer* in this psalm are within lament contexts (vv. 69, 78, 86).

⁹ *Op. cit.*, paragraphs 3, 4, 5, 30.

¹⁰ *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*.

¹¹ *The Evildoers in the Book of Psalms* (Oslo: Dybwad, 1955), p. 9. This book is a restatement of the argument of his earlier work. *Die Feinde des Individuums in der Israelitische Psalmenliterature* (Oslo: Grondahl, 1933).

plausible background for understanding this phenomenon : Israel is under foreign domination, and 'false witnesses' appear accusing the vassal king before his overlord. Falsity thus has a legal connotation (untrue accusation) and belongs 'to the patterned qualities of the enemies'.¹²

It would thus seem that the term *šeqer* in the psalms retains the same basic connotation which we found it representing in the legal material of the Pentateuch, centring on the notion of 'lie' as 'non-correspondence to fact'.¹³

Finally, some comments are in order regarding the 20 occurrences of the noun in Proverbs. It is widely recognized that this book is not a literary unity, but is rather 'the outcome of a process of thought and work that continued for centuries, and in which writing was a by-product of oral teaching'.¹⁴ Several collections (often displaying independent headings ; cf. 10. 1; 25. 1) are evident within the book, the oldest of which is probably the 'Proverbs of Solomon' (10. 1-22. 16),¹⁵ although the process of development of even this section may have extended into the exilic period or beyond.¹⁶ The bulk of the occurrences of *šeqer* (13) are within this section of the book.

Again, it is the 'legal' sense of the term which predominates. In several instances the condemnation of 'false witness' is explicit, as, for example, the couplet:

He who speaks the truth gives honest evidence,
but a false witness utters deceit (12. 17).¹⁷

Other couplets characterize the lips or tongue which conceal the true feelings, intent, or actions of their owners as *šeqer*,¹⁸ and the

¹² *Evildoers . . .*, p. 32.

¹³ Klopfenstein agrees that the use of *šeqer* in the Psalms corresponds to that of the passages which speak of false testimony and oaths. He takes pains to point out that whoever is guilty of such perjury is in breach of the covenant with Yahweh (*op. cit.*, pp. 40f., 78f.).

¹⁴ J. Coert Rylaarsdam, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon* (Richmond: John Knox Press; London: SCM Press, 1964), p. y.

¹⁵ Cf. J. Coert Rylaarsdam, 'The Proverbs'. *Peak's Commentary*, ed. M. Black and H. H. Rowley (2nd ed. rev.; London: Thomas Nelson, 1962).

¹⁶ Cf. O. Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction*, trans. P. R. Ackroyd (Oxford: Blackwell, 'and New York: Harper and Row, 1965), pp. 473f.; R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes* (The Anchor Bible, Garden City: Doubleday, 1965), pp. 17f.

¹⁷ Cf. also 6.19; 14.5; 19.5, y; 25.18.

¹⁸ 6.17; 10.18; 12.19; 26.28.

general notion is that only the unrighteous or wicked man engages in such activity (described in 12.22 as ‘an abomination to Yahweh’).¹⁹ Several times the term is used in general axioms.²⁰ This concrete and practical use of the term is what one would expect in the earliest Israelite collection of wisdom material, for the purpose of this movement itself ‘was initially a very practical one: to educate the nobility for cultural and political leadership’.²¹

One additional comment can be made. G. von Rad has argued that from the beginning Israel’s empirical wisdom was involved in an attempt to perceive the truth about human existence, to discern the ‘kindly’ order which lay ‘at the bottom of things’. It was, therefore, ‘an attempt to safeguard life and to master it on the broad basis of experience’.²² If such a description is accurate, then one might say that the type of activity referred to by the term *šeḡer* represents not so much a simply neutral entity in the scheme of things as an actual threat to the continued harmonious existence of this ‘kindly’ order of life.

To sum up, in the blocks of Old Testament material just discussed the legal usage of the term *šeḡer* predominates, although some extension of that meaning is already present in such passages as Ex. 5.9 and Pss. 33.17; 119.118.

We might expect that in the process of employing the noun *šeḡer* as one of the important concepts in his theological vocabulary, Jeremiah would not lose sight of the predominant legal sense in which the term was usually employed, but would rather build upon and enlarge it. This is in fact the case, and there are several occasions in the later narrative chapters of the book in which the term *šeḡer* is employed in the common, everyday sense of our word ‘lie’. Once, during a temporary lifting of the siege of Jerusalem, the prophet attempted to leave the city on family business. When stopped at the gate by a sentry, who accused him of wanting to desert to the Chaldeans, he replied, ‘It is a lie! I am not deserting to the Chaldeans’ (*wayyō’mer jirmeyāhū šeḡer’ēnenni nōphēl’al-hakkasdīm*, 37.14; cf. 40.16 and 43.2).

¹⁹ 11.18; 13.5; 17.4; 20.17; 21.6.

²⁰ 29.12 (‘If a ruler listens to *šeḡer* / all his officials will be wicked’), 3 1.30 (‘Charm is *šeḡer* and beauty *bebhel* / but a woman who fears Yahweh is to be praised’); also 17.7 and 25.14.

²¹ Rylaarsdam, *Proverbs* . . . , p. 9.

²² *Theology* I, pp. 418-21, 428, 432.

Yet we have seen that for the most part Jeremiah's own view of those things which could be characterized as *šēger* (the misconception of the nature of the security afforded by Yahweh's election of the nation, the words of his prophetic opponents, confidence in other gods) was that they were ineffective, powerless to change the real situation confronting the people. They served only to gloss over the trouble spots and prevent any amelioration of the situation, for they counselled a course of action diametrically opposed to that which would have been necessary to avoid the coming destruction of the city, temple, and land. To use a concrete example, they encouraged the people to think that Nebuchadnezzar's rule of Palestine would be of short duration, and the outcome of this encouragement was revolt and destruction rather than the continued existence of the nation in its land which might have followed acknowledging the Babylonian king's presence as an act of punishment ordained by Yahweh (ch. 27).

Simply to cite such an example is to emphasize the fact that any discussion of the activity of either Jeremiah or his opponents has to make sense within the context of the concrete historical situation of the last days of the Judean kingdom. We have even to see these prophets as belonging to opposing political parties or persuasions: Jeremiah and some of the princes (notably the family of Shaphan) were pro-Babylonian in their sentiments, while king Jehoiakim, a large number of princes, and (presumably) prophets like Hananiah maintained a pro-Egyptian stance.

Now it was the job of a prophet to interpret current events on the basis of a certain set of theological insights or assumptions, and we need to remember that Jeremiah and the other classical prophets were not the only ones engaged in this interpretative activity. His opponents also had their views concerning the meaning and outcome of the events of their day, and these were often quite different from the notions espoused by Jeremiah (e.g., the conflict over the length of the exile). Both were performing the same function, and the crucial questions are why they differed and the basis upon which one is able to decide between the two.

Put in this way, the problem is seen as one which directly affects only Jeremiah's contemporaries. From the standpoint of a later day it is a simple matter to vindicate Jeremiah, for the judgment of which he spoke came to pass with striking finality in the second conquest of Jerusalem. But for individuals who found themselves

standing in the actual complicated historical situation of, say, Judah between the two deportations, the matter would not have been so simple. Confronted by men of such diverse opinions as Hananiah and Jeremiah, they would have found themselves faced with the necessity of making an important religious and political choice. This was not merely a choice between men, but a choice between alternative courses of action in pursuit of the goal of national security and survival. Nor could the decision be put off. Events were rolling towards a climax, and if the decision was to have any effect upon their outcome, it would have to be reached before the climax arrived. In a deeper sense, the fall of Jerusalem in 586 was less a vindication of Jeremiah than a clear indication of his failure to get his message across persuasively enough for the people to take the proper steps to avert the disaster.

The Hananiah episode makes it abundantly clear that the actual auditors of the prophet's message did not have available to them any 'objective' criterion like that of the 'fulfilment of prophecy' in terms of which they could judge between rival claims. Whatever validity is to be attributed to the words which Jeremiah delivered to his people during the course of four decades resides less in any fulfilment which they might subsequently have attained than in the assumption on which they were based, namely, that Yahweh was in control of the events of history and in the exercise of this control was free to confront his people in new and sometimes destructive ways in any period of their existence.

Of course, to put the matter this way is simply to restate, and not solve, the problem. Jeremiah's opponents also knew that Yahweh was in control of history. This is clearly the case with Hananiah, who expects that 'within two years' Yahweh will bring the captives and temple vessels back from Babylon to Jerusalem (28.2-4). In Hananiah and Jeremiah, then, we are confronted by two differing interpretations of the way in which Yahweh was acting in current history.

It ought to be fairly clear that in matters of this sort definite proof is seldom if ever available. Even if the opponents had pointed explicitly to the optimistic traditions of the great covenants, this 'evidence' would have been unconvincing to Jeremiah. Likewise, Jeremiah's designation of their activity as *šeqer* was merely his own assessment of the situation. Both interpretations are ultimately based upon an evaluation of current events in the

light of certain theological traditions. And how can we distinguish between the two modes of appropriating the traditions of the past? In attempting to answer this question it seems useful to me to suggest that Jeremiah's interpretations rest upon an affirmation of Yahweh's radical freedom to deal with his people in ways appropriate to their present situation, while those of his opponents are characterized by a tendency to accept the traditional patterns of the faith as normative for all of Yahweh's action, past and future. Both are attempts to remain faithful to the valued traditions of the past, yet in the conflict between them we have a striking example of the age-old tension between more or less rigid institutional expressions of the 'faith' and continuing attempts dynamically to appropriate this faith in terms relevant to the complexities of a contemporary historical situation.

It is important that we do not make the mistake of viewing these two tendencies as mutually exclusive. It would be more accurate to see them as opposing points on a continuum. Both Jeremiah and his opponents are to be placed at appropriate spots on a relative scale between them. Neither, for example, thought of Yahweh as absolutely free with regard to his dealings with Judah. It was inconceivable to Hananiah that Yahweh would ever completely abandon the nation, and so for him the capitulation of 597 must have seemed like punishment enough against the people. Surely Yahweh would now restore their fortunes. One could thus with good conscience even counsel revolt against Nebuchadnezzar, feeling no incongruity between this action and Yahweh's will. Jeremiah, as we know, felt differently. Yet although it was within his capabilities to see and understand a complete destruction of the nation at Yahweh's hands, he could not conceive of this as being the last word in the matter. And it is precisely in his envisioning of a 'new covenant' between Yahweh and his people (3.1.3 1-34) that his own deep-rooted sympathies with his opponents come clearly to light (cf. 28.6). The difference between him and his opponents is one of degree, not kind.

The political and social situation of the mid-twentieth century has a way of presenting itself to us as a highly (often a bewilderingly) complex set of phenomena. I would suspect that the people of ancient Israel, especially those living in times of major crisis, had a similar feeling about the political and religious forces at work in their day. Not all situations were the same, nor would

there necessarily be agreement among interpreters of a single situation. As a case in point, the contrast between the views of two great prophets, Isaiah and Jeremiah, with regard to the fate of Zion shows clearly that a prophet could view a coming period of disaster in any one of several ways. Isaiah said that Zion would be saved,²³ while Jeremiah insisted that it would perish. What does this difference of opinion reflect?

It is improbable that the difference resides simply in the fact that, after a close political analysis, Isaiah found the position of the nation in his day to be less vulnerable than Jeremiah did in his. It is questionable to assume that, from a realistic point of view, military defeat looked any less imminent to Isaiah than it did *to* Jeremiah. For Isaiah's contemporary, Micah, it seemed clear that the city would fall (3. 12), and the seriousness of the situation is further demonstrated by Sennacherib's own account of the Palestinian campaign in which he tells how he captured forty-six Judean cities and made Heekiah himself 'a prisoner in Jerusalem, his royal residence, like a bird in a cage'.²⁴

However, the religious situation in Judah does seem to have looked better to Isaiah than to Jeremiah. For the former, although the people had been sinful and must be punished, a remnant would return and be established in the land (cf. 7.3; 4.2ff.; 10.20-22; 11.10-16; 28.5f.; 37.32). Jeremiah, however, had arrived at a new estimate of the situation of the people, one which saw them incapable of any change which would be sufficient to preserve the old means of relationship to Yahweh (2.20-22; 13.22f.).²⁵

It is interesting to note that from the earliest days of his ministry Jeremiah announced the coming of destruction from the North. We have seen that this theme is strong in chs. 4-6 and 8-9. Only at a later date (after the battle of Carchemish) is this foe explicitly identified with the Babylonians (25.9). It would therefore appear that the prophet was announcing punishment against a sinful people even before the concrete political threat of such punishment was imminent. As a matter of fact, the historical

²³ See the passages cited above, p. 40. n.30.

²⁴ ANET, p. 288.

²⁵ While this description of Isaiah's attitude toward Zion seems essentially correct, passages like 29.2, 4 reveal a certain 'theological ambivalence' in his view concerning Yahweh's judgment against the people. Cf. von Rad, *Theology II*, pp. 164ff., 174f., and B. S. Childs, *Isaiah and the Assyrian Crisis* (SBT, Second Series, 3, 1967), pp. 20-68.

situation at the time of these oracles must have made the prophet's message seem quite strange. It seems probable that Palestine was not threatened by an invasion of Scythians during this period. Furthermore, Judah under Josiah was again beginning to assert herself politically by taking advantage of the increasing weakness of the Assyrian empire to recoup for herself portions of the Davidic kingdom which she had not controlled for centuries. Thus Jeremiah was predicting doom for the people when little was yet in sight, another indication that his message must be seen as a complicated mixture of theological assumptions and political astuteness.²⁶

²⁶ These statements presuppose a date of 627/26 for the prophet's call, based on the evidence of 1.1f. and 25.3. This traditional date has, however, been challenged, in recent times most persistently by H. P. Hyatt, who originally argued that the prophet's call should be dated in the period 614-612 but later came to view 609 as a preferable date. Cf. 'The Peril from the North in Jeremiah', *JBL* 59 (1940), pp. 499-513; 'Jeremiah and Deuteronomy', *JNES* 1 (1942), DD. 156-72; 'Jeremiah: Introduction and Exegesis', *IB* V (1956); and 'The Beginning of Jeremiah's Prophecy', *ZAW* 78 (1966), pp. 204-14. In the latter article he is debating C. F. Whitley's view that the call occurred in 605; cf. Whitley's 'The Date of Jeremiah's Call', *VT* 14 (1964), pp. 467-83, and his rejoinder to Hyatt, 'Carchemish and Jeremiah', *ZAW* 80 (1968), pp. 3-8-49. Although this is not the place for a detailed critique of such arguments, some brief objections to Hyatt's reconstruction seem warranted. First of all, it is worth noting that this reconstruction flies in the face of the only explicit evidence we have regarding the date of the prophet's call (1.2; 25.3). Secondly, although he is historically correct in pointing to the improbability of a Scythian invasion of Palestine, Hyatt is guilty of making certain rather problematic assumptions about the whole notion of an enemy from the North. He assumes, for instance, that this foe must be actually named and concretely real, but in his treatment of the early oracles Rudolph has convincingly pointed out that no concrete designation of an enemy completely corresponds to the prophet's description and that, furthermore, the focus of attention is rather upon Yahweh's punishment of a sinful people and not on the identification and description of the foe. That the early oracles eventually find their fulfilment (at least as far as the prophet himself is concerned) in the rise to power of the Neo-Babylonian state, cannot be denied (Cf. 25.9, and see *op. cit.*, pp. 47-49. Cf. also A. S. Kapelrud's treatment of 'the northerner' in *Joel Studies*, Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksells, 1948, pp. 93-108.) Thirdly, both Hyatt and Whitley seem to be motivated by the assumption that it is necessary to 'save' a great prophet like Jeremiah from the embarrassment and discredit involved in being wrong about the imminence of the coming destruction. Thus Hyatt: 'This date removes the difficulty of supposing that Jeremiah once supported the Deuteronomic reforms and later turned against them; and also of supposing that the prophet was discredited by prediction of a peril from the north which did not materialize and then went into retirement in disgrace, only to emerge after Josiah's death' (1940, p. 513). And Whitley: 'To suppose that Jeremiah was mistaken in his first utterances and was compelled to modify them in accordance with later

Here it may be relevant to recall that form criticism of the prophetic oracle has taught us that the normal utterance of a prophet consisted of two parts: an exhortation or diatribe, followed by a word from Yahweh. The latter element is normally distinguished from the former by the intervening 'messenger formula', 'Thus says Yahweh. ...' It is commonly thought that the diatribe (*'Begründung'*) is the prophet's own analysis of the situation into which he speaks his message, while the word itself (*'Gerichts-ankündigung'*) constitutes the message received from Yahweh.²⁷ This means that the individual prophet possessed a large degree of freedom in developing an analysis of the situation which he could preface to Yahweh's word, as well as in choosing an appropriate form in which to express this analysis and even an appropriate audience to hear it.²⁸ Perhaps this is why Jeremiah was briefly stumped by Hananiah's announcement of imminent restoration. It may be that he had to retire precisely to rethink this analysis of the political situation and the condition of the people. But his assumptions about Yahweh's freedom and the people's condition remained constant, and thus the result of his re-evaluation was the same as his original message.

It is evident that there was more than one view of Yahweh's activity current in Jeremiah's day. The prophet himself pictured him as acting through Nebuchadnezzar in judgment upon a sinful people. Hananiah, on the other hand, saw him as about to initiate

developments likewise overlooks the efficacy of the divine word' (1968, p. 48). Both seem to overlook the fact that the prophet himself felt discredited during much of the early part of his career (cf. 20.7f.). Unlike them, I do not find the possibility that Jeremiah gradually sharpened his perception of the 'foe from the North' to be beyond comprehension: cf. my 'King Nebuchadnezzar in the Jeremiah Tradition', *CBQ* 30 (1968), pp. 37-48. I do not want to assert that the problem of the date of Teremiah's call and related matters (such as the supposed absence of oracles datable in Josiah's reign and his connection, or lack of it, with the Deuteronomic reform) are simply solved, but only that to this point I remain unconvinced by evidence cited against the traditional date. On the other hand, two articles may be mentioned as having implications which seem to strengthen the position of supporters of the traditional date: R. Davidson, 'Orthodoxy and the Prophetic Word', *VT* 14 (1964), pp. 407-16, and W. Johnstone, 'The Setting of Jeremiah's Prophetic Activity', *Transactions of the Glasgow University Oriental Society* 21 (1965-66), pp. 47-55.

²⁷ G. von Rad, *Theology II*, pp. 36-39; C. Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech*, trans. H. C. White (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), pp. 169ff.

²⁸ G. von Rad, *Theology II*, pp. 70ff.

on behalf of his people a great act of restoration. But there were others whose views were different again:

He will do nothing;
 no evil will come upon us,
 nor will we see sword and famine.
 The prophets will become wind,
 the word is not in them. (Jer. 5.12f.)
 Yahweh will not do good,
 nor will he do evil. (Zeph. 1.12)

Von Rad has commented that these statements are not those of 'atheists', but rather of men who 'no longer reckoned with divine action in the present day'. The present political crisis left the 'question of Yahweh's relationship to his people completely uncertain'. His 'purpose' could no longer be discerned behind the events of history.²⁹

Why was this so? Presumably, part of the reason would be that the Yahweh faith was simply not shared by all the people of Judah in Jeremiah's day or in any other. We too often forget that the Old Testament is the product of a religious movement, whose assumptions it reflects and defends. It is difficult to envision the time when the entire Israelite community actively embraced its brand of religious 'orthodoxy' (exclusive worship of Yahweh, etc.).³⁰ Yet it is evident that even many 'religious' people of Jeremiah's day had adopted a rather static view of Yahweh and his ability and inclination to act in their history. That is to say, their theological outlook was characterized by a tendency which threatens all institutions, a tendency to absolutize certain portions of their heritage. They formed guidelines within which Yahweh was thought to act. In this they were probably no different from their fathers before them, though such a recognition could not have justified in Jeremiah's eyes a course of action which he viewed as particularly disastrous.³¹

²⁹ *Ibid.*, II, p. 263.

³⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, II, 341, and especially Th. G. Vriezen, *An Outline of Old Testament Theology*, ch. 2, where a distinction is made between three separate but interrelated phenomena; 'the ancient oriental religious world, the religion of Israel, and the Old Testament' (p. 14).

³¹ Klopfenstein makes a similar point, noting that when *šeqer* is used to describe the utterances of the prophetic opponents it points to the fact that they do not give sufficient room to the 'freedom of divine action,' (*op. cit.*, p. 119).

This study began with an examination of Jeremiah's Temple Sermon, which revealed the promise of the covenant (or election) traditions as the source of the people's false feeling of security. More sharply than many of his contemporaries, the prophet saw that the maintenance of the relationship to Yahweh celebrated in those traditions depended upon the people's fulfilling of two broad conditions: the preserving of a just social order and of a cult dedicated to Yahweh alone. Although they were aware of these conditions, their inclination to centre their thought on the positive side of the traditions dulled their sensitivity to their misdeeds in the social and religious spheres and the threat of the political situation.

The discussion of Jeremiah's encounters with the prophetic opponents has indicated how these men took up this misconception and fostered it. For it has been seen again and again that what made these prophets 'false' was the content of the message which they proclaimed: 'peace'. As Jeremiah interpreted the situation, they were making this proclamation without sufficient regard for either the condition of the people or the current political threat.

One of the organizing insights in von Rad's treatment of Old Testament theology is that with the advent of prophecy something radically new was being said to the Israelite people about their relationship with Yahweh:

However overpoweringly diverse (the prophetic movement) may be, it nevertheless has its starting point in the conviction **that Israel's previous history with Yahweh has come to an end, and that he will start something new with her. The prophets seek to convince their contemporaries that for them the hitherto existing saving ordinances have lost their worth, and that, if Israel is to be saved, she must move in faith into a new saving activity of Yahweh, one which is only to come in the future. But this conviction of theirs, that what has existed till now is broken off, places them basically outside the saving history as it had been understood up to then by Israel. The prophets' message had its centre and its bewildering dynamic effect in the fact that it smashed in pieces Israel's existence with God up to the present, and rang up the curtain of history for a new action on his part with her.**³²

The prophetic message was based upon a continuing dynamic perception of the ways in which Yahweh was presently acting with his people. Because he viewed reality in this way, Jeremiah

³² *Theology I*, p. 128.

could announce the destruction of the nation and affirm the continuing lordship of Nebuchadnezzar over the nations. He could, in other words, see the sure result of the habitual course of religious, social, and political action of the people and their leaders. But because of his stronger orientation to the essentially positive aspects of the tradition, a prophet such as Hananiah was not so radically free in his conception of Yahweh's activity. The break between him and Judah was seen to be less complete, and its grounds less serious. Punishment had already come. Could restoration be far behind? To put it another way, the flexibility of his theological outlook allowed Jeremiah to be much more open to the fact of Babylon's overwhelming political power and appreciative of the inevitable consequences of that fact for Judah's national existence. By contrast the relative rigidity of Hananiah's theology enabled him more easily to ignore (or at least take a less realistic attitude towards) the press of historical events.³³

There is, we discover, no easy answer to the listener's dilemma. There is no simple formula by which a contemporary could determine whether Jeremiah or his opponents were 'false'. We do not know how many threw in their lot with Jeremiah, although the fact that Judah rose in a final, disastrous revolt against Nebuchadnezzar at least implies that many of the influential persons of the government did not. Some of the princes did support him, however (cf. 26.24; 36.9-26), notably the members of the house of Shaphan, and the fact that he received such strong support from the latter family may yield an important clue with regard to the 'listener's dilemma'. Shaphan ben Azaliah was a high official under Josiah (*sōphēr*, II Kings 22.3) and was from the beginning in on the discovery of the law-book and the reform of the cultus. He and the members of his family would thus be especially sensitive to both aspects of the election traditions: promise and obligation. In this respect it is interesting to contrast the reaction of Josiah (and presumably Shaphan) to the finding of the law-book (II Kings 22.1 1, 19) and that of Micaiah and Gemariah (along with some other princes) to the reading of Baruch's roll (Jer. 36.16, 25) with the reaction of Jehoiakim and his supporters to that roll (Jer. 36.22-24). Jeremiah's message would for the most part have been

³³ For a discussion of Jeremiah's response to the collapse of Judah cf. P. R. Ackroyd, *Exile and Restoration* (London: SCM Press, and Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968), pp. 50-61.

understood and accepted only by those who had (or in whom could be aroused) some sensitivity to the full range and complexity of the nation's theological heritage. Both understanding and acceptance would certainly be hindered if the listener were a staunch member of the pro-Egyptian camp.

The message of Jeremiah is dominated by the notion of 'falsehood'. It could have been otherwise. The prophet might conceivably have emphasized a number of other concepts and still got his message across. Is it possible to decide why the term *šeḡer* fits his needs so well? The key to this question would seem to reside in an observation that we have made several times in passing: the term *šeḡer* implies the operation of a destructive power, and is thus peculiarly applicable to the social, political, and religious situation in which the prophet worked.³⁴ J. Pedersen's views on the Israelite conception of society are very suggestive in this regard.

For a man to be isolated from his fellows was, in the Old Testament view of things, an unnatural condition. Man exists in a community, which is (or ought to be) characterized by a common will and a common sense of responsibility. At its base, this community rests upon a covenant which manifests itself in the 'peace' or 'wholeness' (*šalôm*) of mutual confidence between human beings.³⁵ The reality 'covenant' is thus conceived in a very broad sense :

All life is common life, and so peace and covenant are really denominations of life itself. One is born of a covenant and into a covenant, and wherever one moves in life, one makes a covenant or acts on the basis of the already existing covenant. If everything that comes under the term of covenant were dissolved, existence would fall to pieces, because no soul can live an isolated life. . . it is in direct conflict with its essence to be something apart.³⁶

Such important qualities of existence as justice and truth (*'emeth*) presuppose a covenant relationship. The individual can live and act only in unity with others. He is but a link in a larger totality which 'creates a centre of will. To be just and true means to subject the whole contents of one's soul to this centre of will,

³⁴ On numerous occasions Klopfenstein makes reference to the destructive power of *šeḡer* within the community. See, for example, pp. 23, 32, 94, 98f., 106, 109f., 129, 131, 161ff.

³⁵ J. Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture I-II*, pp. 263ff.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 308.

to identify one's will with that of the totality'. Man is thus an organic part of a whole system of expectations. And because this is so, justice is for him both 'a privilege and a claim'. He is bound to respond to both its benefits and its requirements.³⁷

Šeḡer enters this discussion as the correlative of '**emetb**'. As Pedersen describes it, a sinful act is one which is split off from the 'firm centre of action' provided by a covenant. 'Falsehood' is characteristic of the split soul of the man who acts in this way. By virtue of its grounding in the common will and responsibility of the community, truth has the strength to maintain itself. But falsehood is without basis in this totality. It is 'hollow and rootless'. Since 'it is not filled with the substance of a soul', it is 'inefficient (and) powerless' (cf. Ps. 3 3.17). Sin and falsehood act outside the laws of the covenant which upholds life.³⁸

In applying these insights to the material of the present study, we must begin with the recognition that both Jeremiah and his opponents were members of the same broad social, religious, and political community, and both were ultimately interested in the welfare of that group. Certainly Jeremiah was concerned in the years after 597 to prevent actions on the part of the people which would lead to further destruction (cf. 28.6). In this sense he too was a prophet of peace. And yet the perceptions which each had of the prevailing situation of the nation were quite different. For the opponents it seemed beyond question that at its core the covenant basis of the community remained healthy. Because of this they could cry out to the people in Yahweh's name, 'You will not see the sword, and you will not have famine, for you will have *šalôm* '**emetb** in this place' (14. 13).

Jeremiah could label this affirmation *šeḡer* (14.14) because of his different reading of the total situation. Over and over again in his utterances we are aware that he looks upon the community not as a healthy whole, but as tragically broken. The '**emetb**, *mišpāt*, and *šedaqâ* characteristic of a healthy community were gone, and must be asserted again by a repentant people who actively return to Yahweh (4.1f.). The situation which he saw was characterized by a breakdown in the harmony between man and man (9.1-7; *šeḡer* is

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 340-42.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 41 1-15. Klopfenstein concludes his study with the remark that we can summarize the Old Testament's basic evaluation of falsehood in the simple assertion: 'Falsehood is hostile to the community' (*op. cit.*, p. 353).

displacing 'emetb, v. 4) and man and Yahweh, and an actual heightening of the causes of this breakdown by the national leaders. Wholeness was gone, and could be restored only by a future turning of God towards his people (32.36-41; 33.1-9).

Because of its brokenness, the national life can be characterized by the term *seger*. In this kind of context that term transcends the everyday notion of prevarication and becomes descriptive of an insidious destructive force at work among the people. This is true first of all because *seger* points us to the empty centre of the communal life. The inner harmony was gone, and in its place was a hollowness which prepared the way for collapse. Harmony could only be brought back by a radical change on the part of the people: 'Amend your ways and your doings, and I will let you dwell in this place. . .' (7.3). Had the people responded to this call to repentance they might have regained a common centre of will and been again on the road to communal health and wholeness. But anything less than this radical response would be like attempting to cure a cancer with cold cream.

But beyond this pointing to the void at the centre of life, the people's *seger* emerged as a force actively working against any amelioration of the present situation. It was able to do this by obscuring the real nature and seriousness of the illness that plagued the communal life. The lopsided confidence in Yahweh's relationship to the nation and the spurious utterances which strengthened these convictions formed a pervasive web of falsehood which encouraged muddled thinking and superficial observation. It led to actions which were not based on a perception of religious and historical reality, and could therefore do nothing to heal the sickness at the core of the community.

Again, all of this is strikingly appropriate within the historical context to which Jeremiah addressed himself. The prophet stood on the brink of a vast crisis in the history of his nation, and we ought not be surprised if the internal disintegration which contributed so much to this crisis was viewed by him as equally broad in scope. Everything seemed to be working against the welfare of the nation, and he did all that was in his power to shatter the illusions of the people and arrest the destructive tendencies which he saw at work among them. That the great catastrophe came, that Jeremiah fades out of sight without having accomplished his purpose of averting it, is a tragedy for the people, the prophet,

and for Yahweh as well (cf. Jer. 45). But it is a tragedy which reflects much more on the pervasive and destructive force of *šeqer* in the communal life than upon the quality of the prophet's insights or the diligence of his efforts.

The study which we have undertaken is now complete. It is hoped that in the process of examining in detail the central place which the concept *šeqer* plays in the message of Jeremiah some light has been shed on the concerns which motivated his activity and the way he gave them expression, as well as upon the underlying assumptions and convictions on which his utterances were based. It is hoped as well that in the course of the discussion some contribution may have been made to the understanding of certain perennial problems of Old Testament study, for example, the matter of 'false prophecy'.

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