

**‘LETTER OF JEREMIAH’**  
**BARUCH 6 in Vulgate**

## Introduction

This is a harangue (not a ‘letter’) directed at people faced with idolatry. The unknown author attributes it to Jeremiah, encouraged by the fact that Jeremiah did write a letter to the exiles in Babylon (see Jeremiah 29), and also on Jeremiah’s words against idolatry (see Jeremiah 10:2-15).

No Hebrew version has been discovered, and the earliest Greek version is the one discovered in Cave VII at Qumran. Most scholars agree that the Greek version was a translation (in rather poor Greek) of a Hebrew original.

The Greek translator produced his work probably during the Seleucid period, when there was a lot of pressure for Judah to embrace the dominant Greek culture, including its ‘idolatry’. In keeping with the title, the text is about Babylonian idolatry. The readers would have had no trouble in applying the lesson to their own situation. The author of 2Maccabees, writing in the first century BC, appears to allude to it (see 2Maccabees 2:1-4).

The ‘Letter’ has no connection with the Book of Baruch. We are treating it here only because Jerome included it as Chapter 6 of the Baruch scroll. Jerome did not accept it as sacred scripture because it was not part of the canon of the Hebrew Bible. However, since it was part of the Septuagint, Origen, Athanasius, Cyril of Jerusalem, and others, accepted it as canonical.

Besides drawing on Jeremiah 10:2-15, it draws on other texts of the Older Testament that speak against idolatry: Isaiah 44:9-20, 46:5-7; Psalm 115:3-8 [Psalm 113:11-16 in the Hebrew Bible]; Psalm 135 [134 in the Hebrew Bible] verses 6-7, 15-17; and Deuteronomy 4:27-28.

The 'letter' purports to have been sent to those about to be exiled to Babylon in 597 (verse 1). This is the only time Jeremiah is mentioned.

'Seven generations' is a symbolic number for the fullness of time determined by God. God speaks directly only in verses 3 and 7.

Verse 4 is a reference to the religious cult in which the Babylonians carried their gods in procession. See the sarcastic remarks in Isaiah 46:1-7.

Verses 4-6 state the key theme of the 'Letter', a theme that is repeated in all the following stanzas.

On 'angel' see Genesis 48:16; Exodus 23:23; 32:34; Daniel 12:1

**<sup>1</sup>A copy of a letter that Jeremiah sent to those who were to be taken to Babylon as exiles by the king of the Babylonians, to give them the message that God had commanded him.**

**<sup>2</sup>Because of the sins that you have committed before God, you will be taken to Babylon as exiles by Nebuchadnezzar, king of the Babylonians.**

**<sup>3</sup>Therefore when you have come to Babylon you will remain there for many years, for a long time, up to seven generations; after that I will bring you away from there in peace.**

**<sup>4</sup>Now in Babylon you will see gods made of silver and gold and wood, which people carry on their shoulders, and which cause the heathen to fear. <sup>5</sup>So beware of becoming at all like the foreigners or of letting fear for these gods possess you <sup>6</sup>when you see the multitude before and behind them worshipping them. But say in your heart, "It is you, O Lord, whom we must worship."**

**<sup>7</sup>For my angel is with you, and he is watching over your lives.**

Stanza 2 verses 8-16

**<sup>8</sup>Their tongues are smoothed by the carpenter, and they themselves are overlaid with gold and silver; but they are false and cannot speak.**

**<sup>9</sup>People take gold and make crowns for the heads of their gods, as they might for a girl who loves ornaments.**

**<sup>10</sup>Sometimes the priests secretly take gold and silver from their gods and spend it on themselves, <sup>11</sup>or even give some of it to the prostitutes on the terrace. They deck their gods out with garments like human beings – these gods of silver and gold and wood! <sup>12</sup>Although draped in purple clothes, these gods cannot save themselves from rust and moths.**

**<sup>13</sup>Their faces are wiped because of the dust from the temple, which is thick upon them.**

**<sup>14</sup>One of them holds a scepter, like a district judge, but is unable to destroy anyone who offends it.**

**<sup>15</sup>Another has a dagger in its right hand, and an ax, but cannot defend itself from war and robbers.**

**<sup>16</sup>From this it is evident that they are not gods; so do not fear them.**

Verse 8 echoes Psalm 135:15-16 and 115:4-5.

See the stories of Bel and the Snake in the Greek Additions to Daniel (verses 1-32).

Verse 16 is repeated with slight variations in verses 23, 29, 65 and 69.

The idols are helpless and senseless. Why would you worship them?

<sup>17</sup>For just as someone's pot is useless when it is broken, <sup>18</sup>so are their gods when they have been set up in the temples. Their eyes are full of the dust raised by the feet of those who enter. And just as the gates are shut on every side against anyone who has offended a king, as though under sentence of death, so the priests make their temples secure with doors and locks and bars, in order that they may not be plundered by robbers.

<sup>19</sup>They light more lamps for them than they light for themselves, though their gods can see none of them.

<sup>20</sup>They are just like a beam of the temple, but their hearts, it is said, are eaten away when crawling creatures from the earth devour them and their robes. They do not notice <sup>21</sup>when their faces have been blackened by the smoke of the temple.

<sup>22</sup>Bats, swallows, and birds alight on their bodies and heads; and so do cats.

<sup>23</sup>From this you will know that they are not gods; so do not fear them.

Stanza 4 verses 24-29

**<sup>24</sup>As for the gold that they wear for beauty—it will not shine unless someone wipes off the tarnish; for even when they were being cast, they did not feel it.**

**<sup>25</sup>They are bought without regard to cost, but there is no breath in them.**

**<sup>26</sup>Having no feet, they are carried on the shoulders of others, revealing to humankind their worthlessness. And those who serve them are put to shame <sup>27</sup>because, if any of these gods falls to the ground, they themselves must pick it up. If anyone sets it upright, it cannot move itself; and if it is tipped over, it cannot straighten itself.**

**Gifts are placed before them just as before the dead.**

**<sup>28</sup>The priests sell the sacrifices that are offered to these gods and use the money themselves. Likewise their wives preserve some of the meat with salt, but give none to the poor or helpless.**

**<sup>29</sup>Sacrifices to them may even be touched by women in their periods or at childbirth.**

**Since you know by these things that they are not gods, do not fear them.**

The idols are clearly unable to look after themselves.

Verses 26-27 draw on Isaiah 46:7 and Jeremiah 10:5.

Furthermore, the priests take advantage of the gullibility of the worshipping crowd, and make a living out of the cult.

There were no women priests in Judaism. They would have been scandalised at the Babylonian practice.

These outward signs of mourning for the dead were prohibited for Jewish priests (see Leviticus 21).

Unlike YHWH, these pagan idols cannot determine history. They cannot reward or punish.

<sup>30</sup>**For how can they be called gods? Women serve meals for gods of silver and gold and wood;**

<sup>31</sup>**and in their temples the priests sit with their clothes torn, their heads and beards shaved, and their heads uncovered.**

<sup>32</sup>**They howl and shout before their gods as some do at a funeral banquet.**

<sup>33</sup>**The priests take some of the clothing of their gods to clothe their wives and children.**

<sup>34</sup>**Whether one does evil to them or good, they will not be able to repay it. They cannot set up a king or depose one.**

<sup>35</sup>**Likewise they are not able to give either wealth or money; if one makes a vow to them and does not keep it, they will not require it.**

<sup>36</sup>**They cannot save anyone from death or rescue the weak from the strong.**

<sup>37</sup>**They cannot restore sight to the blind; they cannot rescue one who is in distress.**

<sup>38</sup>**They cannot take pity on a widow or do good to an orphan.**

<sup>39</sup>**These things that are made of wood and overlaid with gold and silver are like stones from the mountain, and those who serve them will be put to shame.**

<sup>40</sup>**Why then must anyone think that they are gods, or call them gods?**

**<sup>40</sup>Besides, even the Chaldeans themselves dishonour them; for when they see someone who cannot speak, they bring Bel and pray that the mute may speak, as though Bel were able to understand!**

**<sup>41</sup>Yet they themselves cannot perceive this and abandon them, for they have no sense.**

**<sup>42</sup>And the women, with cords around them, sit along the passageways, burning bran for incense. <sup>43</sup>When one of them is led off by one of the passers-by and is taken to bed by him, she derides the woman next to her, because she was not as attractive as herself and her cord was not broken.**

**<sup>44</sup>Whatever is done for these idols is false.**

**Why then must anyone think that they are gods, or call them gods?**

‘Chaldean’ here stands for magician, astrologer, diviner.

‘Bel’ (compare the Canaanite ‘Baal’) is an honorific title given to Marduk, the god of Babylon.



Idols are created by human beings (compare Jeremiah 10:9). What kind of gods are they?

Verse 47 repeats what we have heard in verses 35-38

Verse 48 repeats verse 15.

**<sup>45</sup>They are made by carpenters and goldsmiths; they can be nothing but what the artisans wish them to be.**

**<sup>46</sup>Those who make them will certainly not live very long themselves;**

**<sup>47</sup>how then can the things that are made by them be gods? They have left only lies and reproach for those who come after.**

**<sup>48</sup>For when war or calamity comes upon them, the priests consult together as to where they can hide themselves and their gods.**

**<sup>49</sup>How then can one fail to see that these are not gods, for they cannot save themselves from war or calamity?**

**<sup>50</sup>Since they are made of wood and overlaid with gold and silver, it will afterward be known that they are false.**

**<sup>51</sup>It will be manifest to all the nations and kings that they are not gods but the work of human hands, and that there is no work of God in them.**

**<sup>52</sup>Who then can fail to know that they are not gods?**

Stanza 8 verses 53-56

**<sup>53</sup>For they cannot set up a king over a country or give rain to people.**

Verse 53, see verse 34.

**<sup>54</sup>They cannot judge their own cause or deliver one who is wronged, for they are as helpless as the clouds between heaven and earth.**

**<sup>55</sup>When fire breaks out in a temple of wooden gods overlaid with gold or silver, their priests will flee and escape, but the gods will be burned up like timbers.**

Verse 55, see verses 20 and 48.

**<sup>56</sup>Besides, they can offer no resistance to king or enemy.**

Verse 56, see verses 15, 34 and 49.

**Why then must anyone admit or think that they are gods?**

<sup>57</sup>Gods made of wood and overlaid with silver and gold are unable to save themselves from thieves or robbers. <sup>58</sup>Anyone who can will strip them of their gold and silver and of the robes they wear, and go off with this booty, and they will not be able to help themselves.

<sup>59</sup>So it is better to be a king who shows his courage, or a household utensil that serves its owner's need, than to be these false gods; better even the door of a house that protects its contents, than these false gods; better also a wooden pillar in a palace, than these false gods.

Nature is more powerful than these false gods, and it can bestow blessings upon mankind - which is more than you can say about idols!

<sup>60</sup>For sun and moon and stars are bright, and when sent to do a service, they are obedient. <sup>61</sup>So also the lightning, when it flashes, is widely seen; and the wind likewise blows in every land. <sup>62</sup>When God commands the clouds to go over the whole world, they carry out his command. <sup>63</sup>And the fire sent from above to consume mountains and woods does what it is ordered. But these idols are not to be compared with them in appearance or power.

<sup>64</sup>Therefore one must not think that they are gods, nor call them gods, for they are not able either to decide a case or to do good to anyone.

<sup>65</sup>Since you know then that they are not gods, do not fear them.

Stanza 10 verses 66-73

<sup>66</sup>**They can neither curse nor bless kings;**

<sup>67</sup>**they cannot show signs in the heavens for the nations, or shine like the sun or give light like the moon.**

<sup>68</sup>**The wild animals are better than they are, for they can flee to shelter and hide.**

<sup>69</sup>**So we have no evidence whatever that they are gods; therefore do not fear them.**

<sup>70</sup>**Like a scarecrow in a cucumber bed, which guards nothing, so are their gods of wood, overlaid with gold and silver.**

<sup>71</sup>**In the same way, their gods of wood, overlaid with gold and silver, are like a thornbush in a garden on which every bird perches; or like a corpse thrown out in the darkness.**

<sup>72</sup>**From the purple and linen that rot upon them you will know that they are not gods; and they will finally be consumed themselves, and be a reproach in the land.**

<sup>73</sup>**Better, therefore, is someone upright who has no idols; such a person will be far above reproach.**

Verse 66 echoes Jeremiah 10:5.

On verses 67-69 see Jeremiah 10:2-5.