

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Judah in the seventh century BC

The Kings of Judah

Manasseh	(698-643)	2Kings 22:1-18
Amon	(642-641)	2Kings 21:18-25
Josiah	(640-609)	2Kings 21:26 - 23:30
Jehoahaz	(609)	2Kings 23:30-34
Jehoiakim	(609-598)	2Kings 23:34 - 24:6
Jehoiachin	(597)	2Kings 24:6 - 25:29

The seventh century in Judah began with the devastation of Judah by the Assyrian army under Sennacherib (701), and ended with the siege and capture of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army under Nebuchadnezzar (598).

As already noted on page 132, though Judah was devastated in 701, Jerusalem itself survived intact. The tribute demanded by Assyria was to weigh heavily on Judah for the first seventy years of the seventh century.

Hezekiah's son, Manasseh, came to the throne as a boy of 12 in 698 and reigned till 643. He had no choice but to submit to being a vassal of the Assyrian king. There would have been those in Judah, probably including priests from the smaller sanctuaries, who blamed Hezekiah for the way things turned out, and many welcomed Manasseh's long reign. Things fell apart religiously, but because he was a loyal vassal of the powerful Assyrian king there was peace in Judah and growing economic prosperity.

During Manasseh's reign Egypt was conquered by Assyria. A puppet regime was created (the 25th Saite Dynasty). However, by the middle of the seventh century, Assyria's dominance in the region was beginning to wane. When Babylon revolted in 652, it took the Assyrian king, Ashurbanipal, four years to assert his authority.

Manasseh's reign took up nearly half the seventh century. The following is the damning appraisal composed by the Deuteronomists:

Manasseh did what was evil in the sight of YHWH, following the abominable practices of the nations that YHWH drove out before the people of Israel. For he rebuilt the high places that his father Hezekiah had destroyed; he erected altars for Baal, made a sacred pole, as King Ahab of Israel had done, worshipped all the host of heaven, and served them. He built altars in the house of YHWH, of which YHWH had said, "In Jerusalem I will put my name." He built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of YHWH. He made his son pass through fire; he practised soothsaying and augury, and dealt with mediums and with wizards. He did much evil in the sight of YHWH, provoking him to anger.

The carved image of Asherah that he had made he set in the house of which YHWH said to David and to his son Solomon, "In this house, and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will put my name forever; I will not cause the feet of Israel to wander any more out of the land that I gave to their ancestors, if only they will be careful to do according to all that I have commanded them, and according to all the law that my servant Moses commanded them." But they did not listen; Manasseh misled them to do more evil than the nations had done that YHWH destroyed before the people of Israel.

YHWH said by his servants the prophets, "Because King Manasseh of Judah has committed these abominations, has done things more wicked than all that the Amorites did, who were before him, and has caused Judah also to sin with his idols; therefore thus says YHWH, the God of Israel, I am bringing upon Jerusalem and Judah such evil that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle. I will stretch over Jerusalem the measuring line for Samaria, and the plummet for the house of Ahab; I will wipe Jerusalem as one wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down. I will cast off the remnant of my heritage, and give them into the hand of their enemies; they shall become a prey and a spoil to all their enemies, because they have done what is evil in my sight and have provoked me to anger, since the day their ancestors came out of Egypt, even to this day." Moreover Manasseh shed very much innocent blood, until he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another, besides the sin that he caused Judah to sin so that they did what was evil in the sight of YHWH.

– 2Kings 21:5-16

In 640 Manasseh's son, Amon, was assassinated. Amon's eight-year old son, Josiah, inherited the throne. We read in the Second Book of Chronicles:

In the eighth year of Josiah's reign [632], while he was still a boy, he began to seek the God of his ancestor David, and in the twelfth year [628] he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of the high places, the sacred poles, and the carved and the cast images.

– 2Chronicles 34:3

Josiah's twelfth year as king was the year of the death of Ashurbanipal, king of Assyria (628BC). Josiah seized the opportunity to throw off the vassalage that had kept Judah subject to Assyria for a century. He was determined to win back for Judah the northern kingdom of Israel, and he brooked no opposition in his determination to reform the religious life of his people. This was the opportunity that the Deuteronomic School had been waiting for. At last they had a champion ready to carry out with rigorous efficiency the reform for which they had been preparing.

In 622 on Josiah's orders, the temple was being cleared of Assyrian altars with a view to being re-consecrated, when a document, called 'the book of the law', was 'discovered' (1Kings 22:3; 2Chronicles 34:8). We are told that when Josiah heard 'the words of the book of the law' he

made a covenant before YHWH, to follow YHWH, keeping his commandments, his decrees, and his statutes, with all his heart and all his soul, to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book. All the people joined in the covenant.

– 2Kings 23:3

According to the account in the Book of Kings, the document expressed YHWH's anger against his people and threatened punishment for just the kind of behaviour that had brought about the collapse of Israel and that had flourished in Judah under Josiah's grandfather, Manasseh. This discovery reinforced Josiah's determination to purify Judah and the re-conquered territories of all signs of cult to any other deity but YHWH. Josiah insisted that all cult had to take place in the Jerusalem Temple, and nowhere else. This centralising of the cult was the single most influential change brought about by Josiah's reform. It is backed up again and again in Deuteronomy, and accounts for many changes that dramatically affected the way worship was carried out in Judah. Things would never be the same again. Was the document really 'discovered', or did it contain the blueprint of the reform that the Deuteronomists had been sedulously preparing? There is not enough evidence to draw a certain conclusion, but what is certain is the close parallel between the reforms that Josiah put in place and the material that we read in Deuteronomy.

Josiah cleared Judah of cult sites, and expanded the borders in every direction. This was possible because Egypt was still not strong, and Assyria was fighting a losing battle with Babylon and with the Medes. In 614 Ashur was sacked by the Medes. Two years later it was Nineveh's turn.

In 609 the Assyrian army suffered a crushing defeat at Haran. Neco, Pharaoh of Egypt, was heading north to assist Assyria, and it appears that he summoned Josiah to receive from him an oath of loyalty, and had him executed (he was only thirty-nine). Summarising Josiah's reign, the historians of the Deuteronomic School wrote:

Before him there was no king like him, who turned to YHWH with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; nor did any like him arise after him.

– 2Kings 23:25

The prophet Zephaniah

The scribes who introduce the Zephaniah scroll claim that his ministry took place 'in the days of King Josiah' (Zephaniah 1:1). His ministry took place somewhere between 628 and 620, including the early days of Josiah's reform, a reform that he was inspired to encourage (see the commentary on Zephaniah by Marvin A. Sweeney, Augsburg Fortress Press 2003, page 17).

Zephaniah was influenced by Amos, a prophet whose ministry took place in the northern kingdom some 130 years earlier. Amos spoke of the 'Day of YHWH' as being a day when YHWH would act, not to save his people, as they assumed, but to punish them for their infidelity (see Amos 5:18-20).

Zephaniah urges his contemporaries to turn to YHWH before they are forced to face God's punishment. He declares that the Day of YHWH is imminent. Like Amos, he knows that YHWH is just. Judah would not be the only nation to face judgment. Amos speaks of the crimes of Israel's neighbours, Syria, Philistia, Tyre, Edom, Ammon and Moab, and of the punishment they are to endure (see Amos 1:3 - 2:3). Similarly, we hear Zephaniah speaking out against Philistia, Moab, and Ammon (2:5-11). Though he speaks out against the people's sin, and is firm in insisting on the need for repentance, that is not his main focus. True prophet that he is, his primary focus is on YHWH, whose fidelity transcends human sin. Amos's scroll ends on this note (see Amos 9:11-15), so does Zephaniah's (see 3:14-20).

After a century of subjection to Assyria, at last there was some hope of liberation. Assyria's power was declining, no other power was yet threatening to take its place, and Judah had a king who listened to those who were pushing for religious reform. Most of Zephaniah's oracles speak of God's judgment on the sins that he witnessed. The whole of the first chapter is devoted to God's threat of punishment of Judah. Judah's enemies, too, will be punished by God (see 2:4-6, 8-15). If the people were ever to enjoy the presence of YHWH in their midst and the blessing consequent upon such a communion, they would have to change their ways, and drastically (see 2:3). Like other prophets he explained God's punishment as an instrument in bringing about the purifying of the nation, and he bemoans the people's failure to repent (3:2, 7). As a true prophet his focus is on YHWH, and therefore he speaks of a remnant (3:12-13) and of restoration (2:7; 3:9). He concludes with a remarkable statement of the passionate exuberance of God's longing for intimate communion with his people, and the sheer delight God will have when this intimacy is restored (3:14-24).

The prophet Nahum

It was during Josiah's reign that Ashur, the religious capital of the Assyrian Empire, was sacked by the Medes, with the backing of Babylon (614BC). Nahum looks forward with delight to the imminent fall of Nineveh (it happened in 612BC). His oracles fit best some time in the period between 620 and 612, a decade or so after Zephaniah. He sees the collapse of Assyria as a sign of YHWH's blessing on Judah. His exultation at Assyria's imminent collapse is also delight at YHWH's faithfulness to his chosen people. Josiah's reforms were already bearing fruit, or so it must have seemed.

Zephaniah had urged his countrymen to change their ways. He had also promised the blessing of YHWH on the remnant who heeded YHWH's call. Nahum takes all this for granted. His focus concentrates on the fulfilment of Zephaniah's promise. Assyria is on its knees, and Nineveh, the capital of the mightiest empire, could not hold out much longer. Nahum gives expression to the pent up feelings of subject Judah against its powerful oppressor. His is powerful poetry. The sudden shift from image to image sustains the excitement of the reader still today. Imagine its effect on Nahum's contemporaries.

Any people who have experienced the collapse of an oppressive enemy will understand Nahum's joy. Though our understanding of the place of God in warfare differs from Nahum's, he can still encourage us to believe in the ultimate triumph of good over evil. Though oppressive abuse of power can appear to dominate our world, evil cannot avoid the consequences that come in its train.

We cannot, however, follow Nahum in seeing mass destruction as an appropriate response to evil. We would do well to 'balance' a reading of Nahum by contemplating the final words of the book of Jonah:

Should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?

– Jonah 4:11

The final years of the Kingdom of Judah

When King Josiah died in 609BC, the king-makers of Judah bypassed Josiah's eldest son, Eliakim, and chose as king his younger brother, Shallum, who took the throne name Jehoahaz (see Jeremiah 22:11; 1Chronicles 3:15). They hoped he would continue the policies of his father, Josiah. However, Neco deposed him in favour of Eliakim, who was given the throne name, Jehoiakim. This began the unravelling of the independence that Josiah had achieved.

In 605 the Babylonian army led by Nebuchadnezzar defeated the combined forces of Assyria and Egypt in the battle of Carchemish. In 598 Nebuchadnezzar attacked Judah and besieged Jerusalem. Jehoiakim died during the siege. He was succeeded briefly by his eighteen year old son, Jeconiah (Coniah), who took the throne name Jehoiachin. He reigned for the first three months of 597BC. He decided to surrender, and the siege was lifted. He was taken into exile in Babylon, along with all the leading citizens. Nebuchadnezzar replaced him with another of Josiah's sons, Mattaniah, Jehoiachin's uncle, who was given the throne name Zedekiah. Jeremiah, whom we will look at shortly, lived through these tumultuous years. He witnessed the siege and capture of Jerusalem and the exile of Jehoiachin.

Jeremiah stayed on in Jerusalem and continued to be critical of the policies (and lack of religious fidelity) of Zedekiah. Again and again Zedekiah was tempted to seek alliance with Egypt and revolt against Babylon. Jeremiah spoke out in YHWH's name against such a misguided policy. When Zedekiah finally allied himself with Egypt, Nebuchadnezzar decided to lay siege to Jerusalem. This time he was determined to raze the city to the ground. He succeeded in 586BC. Another group of leading citizens was taken into exile.

The prophet Habakkuk

The only hint that points to the period in which Habakkuk exercised his ministry is found in chapter 1 verse 6 which refers to the 'Chaldeans', a term used to designate the people of the Neo-Babylonian Empire founded by Nabopolassar in 626BC.

The oracle recorded in Habakkuk 1:1-11 appears to have been delivered after the Battle of Carchemish in 605. He speaks out against the lack of justice in the institutions of Judah during Jehoiakim's reign. This injustice is accompanied by violence as the rich plunder the community. His criticism is confirmed by his contemporary, Jeremiah (see Jeremiah 5:26-29; 22:13, 17). Habakkuk sees the attacks on Judah precipitated by 'the Chaldeans' (Habakkuk 1:6), as being YHWH's response to Judah's failure to live the Torah. The material from Habakkuk 1:12 to 2:20 appears to come from the time of Zedekiah between the capture of Jerusalem in 598 and its sacking in 587, as it is written against the background of actual experience of Babylonian oppression. As to the psalm in chapter 3, scholars offer different suggestions. Some claim it as a separate piece composed by Habakkuk himself (as indicated in 3:1). Others suggest that it is an archaic poem added by later editors to proclaim the faith of Israel in the final victory of divine justice. There is no convincing reason against Habakkuk himself having included it, as it forms an excellent conclusion to his oracles. Habakkuk's ministry was probably exercised in the period 605-590.

Many of the prophets speak out against injustice. Habakkuk struggles with the violence of the aggressive policies of the new super-power, Babylon (Habakkuk chapter 1). He struggles to believe that justice will prevail (Habakkuk chapter 2); that 'the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of YHWH, as the waters cover the sea' (Habakkuk 2:14). He gives voice to the oppressed as their cry pierces the heavens. God does not seem to be listening, or doing anything.

Habakkuk forces us to look at the systems under which we live in whatever nation we belong to (Habakkuk 1:2-4). He then expands our reflection to the international stage to look at the way stronger states dominate weaker ones and are able to manipulate systems to their own benefit while oppressing others (Habakkuk 1:12 - 2:1).

His ridicule of the pretensions of imperial power in 2:5-20 is also a warning to us personally not to put our trust in wealth, in security that is not based on faith, in power, or in honour and reputation. We must be careful not to worship what we can control. This goes even for the danger of limiting God to our inherited or contrived ways of understanding the deity.

His key contribution is his insistence that the righteous will live, because of the faithfulness of YHWH, a theme taken up in the Newer Testament where Habakkuk 2:4 is quoted (see Galatians 3:10-13; Romans 1:17; Hebrews 10:37). To find real life, we must put our trust in the faithfulness of God, and persevere in fidelity to the covenant God has made with us.

In his concluding prayer (Habakkuk chapter 3) he affirms his belief in God's power, and, in spite of the calamity that appears inevitable (see Habakkuk 3:16), he concludes with one of the finest expressions of faith to be found in the Older Testament (see Habakkuk 3:17-19)

The prophet Jeremiah

The editors of the scroll have Jeremiah's ministry spanning the 40 years from 627 to 587 (see 1:1-3). Though 3:6 and 25:3 speak of Josiah, the bulk of Jeremiah's oracles are located in the reigns of Jehoiakim (609-598) and Zedekiah (597-587). The reign of Jehoiakim saw the rise of Babylon as the dominant power in the region. Jehoiakim favoured alliance with Egypt, which was happy to support Judah as a buffer against the encroaching Babylonians. Jeremiah condemned the failure of the people to be faithful to the covenant with YHWH. They were rejecting God's blessing, and by their refusal to obey their God they were inviting down on themselves the curses spelled out in the Torah. Jeremiah saw Babylon as the instrument chosen by YHWH to punish Judah for its infidelity. The court did not want to listen, basing its confidence on the promises made by their God YHWH to David, and they remembered how Jerusalem was 'miraculously' saved by YHWH a hundred years earlier (701) when Judah was devastated, but Jerusalem was spared. The priests rejected the very idea that a foreign god could conquer YHWH's city and temple. Jeremiah's was a lone voice, and his contemporaries dismissed him and his 'oracles' as the ravings of a religious crank. Moreover, there was no lack of self-acclaimed 'prophets' who kept reassuring the people that it was impossible for Jerusalem to fall, since its security was guaranteed by YHWH. Jeremiah kept insisting that their security depended on their fidelity. No one wanted to listen to him.

Zedekiah kept vacillating between submission to Babylon and courting favour with Egypt. In 588 the Babylonian army again laid siege to the city. This time they showed no mercy. The city was burnt and the temple razed to the ground. More people were taken into exile. It was the end of an era. Judah, the last of the tribes of Israel, was utterly devastated. It was Jeremiah's lot to minister as a prophet during the terrible final years of Judah's decline. This accounts for the unrelenting criticism of the policies that led to the disasters of 597 and 586, and the dire warnings of divine punishment that all but fill his scroll.

As one would expect, the exiles struggled to make sense of their experience. The fact that Jeremiah was right caused them to want to preserve his words and to ponder their meaning. If there was to be any hope, they must, at all costs, not repeat the behaviour of those who had brought down upon them the righteous anger of YHWH. While the members of the Deuteronomistic School, along with the Priestly School, the Isaiah School, and no doubt others with their special points of view, were working on the Torah and the Isaiah scroll, they were also working on the Jeremiah scroll, preserving Jeremiah's oracles, but also drawing out the implications of his words for them and for their future.

There is a close connection between Jeremiah's oracles and the position of the Deuteronomistic School who were responsible for completing the Book of Deuteronomy and for the interpretive commentary on the history of Israel and Judah (the Books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings). Both Jeremiah and the Deuteronomistic School see the basic issue as Judah's failure to be faithful to the Torah and the Covenant.

There is still no consensus in deciding how much of the scroll can be attributed to Jeremiah, and how drawn out was the process of composing the scroll as we have it.

R. P. Carroll in his *The Book of Jeremiah* (SCM Press 1986, page 49) states:

Few exegetes agree on the weight to be given to the role of the editors in the production of the book, and there is no consensus of scholarly opinion on such matters as the extent to which the Deuteronomists worked on the different levels of tradition, the relation between the poetry and the prose, the connections between a 'historical' Jeremiah, and the tradition, the figure of Baruch as amanuensis, biographer, creator of this tradition or creation of one level of the tradition, and the dating of the book and its parts.

Some try to assign as much as possible of the scroll, whether poetry or prose, to the prophet (for example, Bright and Holladay). Others argue that the process of editing and re-editing went on for so long, and represents so many attempts to make sense of so many different situations, that it is not possible to discern with confidence the texts that come from Jeremiah himself (for example, Carroll).

To read the Jeremiah scroll we need to put ourselves among the exiles in Babylon as they tried to grasp what they understood as YHWH's will in using the Babylonians to humble Judah. We need to picture the elders, the priests, and scholars of various 'Schools', struggling to understand what had gone wrong. Jeremiah's oracles would have been an important source for their reflections, and their insights are incorporated into the scroll. Some of these insights are expressed in homiletic form, aimed at inspiring the other exiles to learn from Jeremiah. As one would expect, the homilies expressed what YHWH had revealed to Jeremiah by drawing out the implications of Jeremiah's words in ways that connected with the exiles' experience.

The process did not stop there. Jeremiah spoke clearly about the catastrophe that Jerusalem was calling down upon itself by its failure to live in a way that was faithful to the covenant. The extraordinary fact of the return from exile re-awakened hope that there would be a new spring if only they learned from Jeremiah and stayed faithful to YHWH who had proved his fidelity and demonstrated that his choice of them was not over. Back in Judah after the return from exile, members of the Deuteronomic School as well as members of the various Priestly Schools, and others, continued to present Jeremiah to their contemporaries. Based on his oracles they present a 'portrait' of Jeremiah, and they present their reflections as oracles revealed to Jeremiah by YHWH. They are not claiming as a historical fact that all the words attributed to Jeremiah were in fact spoken by him. Rather, enlightened by Jeremiah's words, they express their attempts to make sense of their experience by drawing out the implications of Jeremiah's words for their contemporaries.

Their exegesis, their explanations, their desire to make Jeremiah's warning relevant to their contemporaries, meant a continual expansion of the scroll. This process went on for centuries. Because of this, it is notoriously difficult to achieve any certitude in establishing the exact context in which individual parts of the scroll were composed. Ancient editors with different points of view made their own arrangements of the material and gave their own comments so that the final text lacks any overall shape.

The second century BC Septuagint Greek Version of Jeremiah is shorter than the official Massoretic Hebrew text by as much as a seventh, and points to a shorter Hebrew original. Some of the longer Hebrew text may have already existed in other manuscripts, but it is likely that parts of the Hebrew text post-date the Septuagint, and that the formation of the Hebrew text as we have it was still going on into the second century BC. Generation after generation of scribes continued to be fascinated by the clarity of Jeremiah's warnings, but even more so by his conviction of the passionate love of YHWH for his people.

Another significant difference between the Masoretic Hebrew text and the Septuagint Greek text is the position and sequence of the oracles against the nations. These are at the end of the Hebrew scroll (Jeremiah 46-51), whereas the Septuagint has them from 25:14 to 32:24.

Perhaps the best way to visualise the growth of the scroll is to think of Jeremiah's usually short statements, typically in poetic rhythm, as triggering comment, typically, but not necessarily, in prose, and that this added material in turn triggered further comment, all with the aim of seeing and conveying the significance of Jeremiah's words in the changed circumstances of later generations.

If a reader is looking for a thorough analysis of the text as well as a critique of other commentaries it is hard to go past the commentary by William McKane. McKane's two volume work is part of the International Critical Commentary Series published by T&T Clark Edinburgh (Volume 1, 1986 - reprinted with corrections 1999; volume 2, 1996). It has 174 pages of Introduction, and 1,396 pages of commentary. McKane thoroughly examines the Hebrew Masoretic Text, and constantly compares it with the Greek Septuagint Version, the ancient Greek Versions of Aquila, Symmachus and Theodotion, the Latin Vulgate, the Syriac Peshitta and the Aramaic Targum. He pays close attention to the work of two medieval Jewish Rabbis: Rabbi Solomon Izhaqi (Rashi) born at Troyes in the Champagne region of northeastern France in 1040, and Rabbi David Kimchi, who was born in the city of Narbonne in the Provence area of southern France in the year 1160.

McKane looks at every significant modern commentary. He is not convinced that the prose is by Jeremiah or is contemporary with him. Without denying a contribution to the Jeremiah scroll by members of the Deuteronomic School, he claims that the link between the prose of the Jeremiah scroll and the writings of the Deuteronomic School is a tenuous one. McKane speaks of

a complicated, untidy accumulation of material, extending over a very long period, and to which many people have contributed.

– Volume 1, Introduction page xlvi

Accepting that there is as yet no consensus among Jeremiah scholars, I suggest dividing the text into three parts. In Part One (chapters 1-25) we start with an expectation that the poetic sections represent Jeremiah's oracles as edited by later scribes. Following the Septuagint positioning, Part Two consists in the Oracles against the nations (Hebrew text 25:15-38 and 46-51). Here we start with an expectation that the prose material and the poetic oracles against the nations represent later material that represent the attempts by later scribes to apply Jeremiah's insights to their changed circumstances.

Part Three (26-45) covers the life and times of Jeremiah. We assume they are a later creation.

Two-thirds of Part One (chapters 2-25) consist in declarations of the divine punishment that was coming upon Judah because of the people's infidelity, and the whole of Part Two (chapters 25:15-38 and 46-51) consists in declarations of the divine punishment that would be inflicted on the surrounding pagan nations. Together these sections on punishment make up just under half the entire scroll. This is explained by the times in which Jeremiah ministered. The sin of Judah that brought down God's punishment is expressed succinctly by Jeremiah:

My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.

– Jeremiah 2:13

I YHWH test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their deeds.

– Jeremiah 17:10

It is essential that as we read this material on divine punishment we remember the key assumption that Jeremiah shared with his contemporaries that whatever happens in history is an expression of God's will. We examined this assumption in Chapter Five. While we cannot follow Jeremiah in this assumption, one lesson we can learn from him is that what we do matters. We cannot simply wish away the consequences of the decisions we make.

Some of these declarations of punishment call for repentance (a change of mind and heart and behaviour) with a view to avoiding the punishment (for example 3:11-25; 4:1-2, 14; 6:8; 7:3; 18:11).

Return, faithless Israel. I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful. I will not be angry forever. Only acknowledge your guilt, that you have rebelled against YHWH your God.

– Jeremiah 3:12-13

Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place.

– Jeremiah 7:3

In fact repentance was not forthcoming, but we can learn the importance of changing our way of thinking and deciding when it becomes evident that we are wrong. Only the truth can set us free.

Jeremiah's words were unwelcome. He was sidelined as a doomsday quack. His life was in danger. We cannot but be impressed by the constancy he showed in continuing to proclaim his unpopular message, and the trust that he had in YHWH. For his prophetic call and experience see, for example, Jeremiah 1:4-13, 17-19; 15:20-21; 17:14-18; 23:18. He has quite a lot to say about so-called prophets who do not listen to God and so do not proclaim God's word (see, for example, Jeremiah 2:8; 5:13, 31; 6:13; 14:13-16; 23:14-40; 27:16; 29:8-9). Anyone claiming to speak in God's name has a lot to reflect on here.

Along with this radical trust went an honesty in expressing his personal suffering and the doubts he experienced as well as the confusion he felt at God's giving him his ministry and then appearing to leave him high and dry, especially when the situation made it appear that his words were not being fulfilled. He felt used and even deceived. In no other prophetic scroll do we find such feelings expressed as powerfully and convincingly (see especially the section from 11:18 to 20:18).

This helps account for the importance of Jeremiah's words for the exiles in Babylon, who for many years saw no hope of relief. It was the same for the exiles who returned to Judah, only to find that their high hopes were not realised as they continued to languish, politically (there was no hope of recovering their independence), and economically (Judah was a small, land-locked, fraction of pre-exilic Judah). Jeremiah's complaining was in the context of his continued belief in God's goodness and fidelity. This honest combination continues to encourage and inspire us today.

It would be tragic if the extensive focus on divine punishment were to obscure Jeremiah's conviction concerning the special love YHWH has for his people.

I have forsaken my house, I have abandoned my heritage; I have given the beloved of my heart into the hands of her enemies.

– Jeremiah 12:7

As the loincloth clings to one's loins, so I made the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah cling to me in order that they might be for me a people, a name, a praise, and a glory. But they would not listen.

– Jeremiah 13:11

I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.

– Jeremiah 31:3

You show steadfast love to the thousandth generation, but repay the guilt of parents into the laps of their children after them, O great and mighty God whose name is YHWH of hosts.

– Jeremiah 32:8

In a daring way, Jeremiah speaks of God's feelings of regret at having to punish:

I thought how I would set you among my children, and give you a pleasant land, the most beautiful heritage of all the nations. And I thought you would call me, My Father, and would not turn from following me.

– Jeremiah 3:19

My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain! Oh, the walls of my heart! My heart is beating wildly; I cannot keep silent; for I hear the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war.

– Jeremiah 4:19

For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me.

– Jeremiah 8:21

O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people!

– Jeremiah 9:1

Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he the child I delight in? As often as I speak against him, I still remember him. Therefore I am deeply moved for him; I will surely have mercy on him.

– Jeremiah 31:20

The people are obstinate in their infidelity. YHWH, however, is always faithful to the covenant he has with his people (see Jeremiah 3:12; 11:3-4; 31:3-34; 32:40).

Let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am YHWH; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight.

– Jeremiah 4:27

Surely I know the plans I have for you, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

– Jeremiah 29:11-14

Because it is YHWH who is punishing, Jeremiah knows that the deserved punishment cannot be the final word. YHWH will bring the exiles home and restore 'his land' (Jeremiah 7:3), 'his heritage' (Jeremiah 12:8), 'his vineyard' (Jeremiah 12:10). See especially chapters 30-33.

I will set my eyes upon them for good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up, and not tear them down; I will plant them, and not pluck them up. I will give them a heart to know that I am YHWH; and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart.

– Jeremiah 24:6-7

As for you, have no fear, my servant Jacob, and do not be dismayed, O Israel; for I am going to save you from far away, and your offspring from the land of their captivity. Jacob shall return and have quiet and ease, and no one shall make him afraid. For I am with you, to save you ... you will be my people, and I will be your God.

– Jeremiah 30:10-11,22

Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel! Again you shall take your tambourines, and go forth in the dance of the merrymakers. Again you shall plant vineyards on the mountains of Samaria; the planters shall plant, and shall enjoy the fruit.

– Jeremiah 31:4-5

With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back, I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn

– Jeremiah 31:9

Jeremiah goes to the heart of Yahwism when, in the tradition of the prophets who went before him, he challenges his contemporaries to live justly. In one of his more powerful statements he challenges King Jehoiakim to follow the example of his father, Josiah:

Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice; who makes his neighbours work for nothing, and does not give them their wages; who says, "I will build myself a spacious house with large upper rooms," and who cuts out windows for it, panelling it with cedar, and painting it with vermilion. Are you a king because you compete in cedar? Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? says YHWH. But your eyes and heart are only on your dishonest gain, for shedding innocent blood, and for practicing oppression and violence.

– Jeremiah 22:13-17 (see 5:1; 5:25-28; 7:5-6)

Without justice, religious cult is valueless.

The priests did not say, "Where is YHWH?" Those who handle the law did not know me.

– Jeremiah 2:8

Of what use to me is frankincense that comes from Sheba, or sweet cane from a distant land? Your burnt offerings are not acceptable, nor are your sacrifices pleasing to me.

– Jeremiah 6:20 (see 7:21-22; 14:12)

YHWH asks for sincerity of heart.

If you swear, "As YHWH lives!" in truth, in justice, and in uprightness, then nations shall be blessed by him, and by him they shall boast.

– Jeremiah 4:2

The house of Israel is uncircumcised in heart.

– Jeremiah 9:26

YHWH wants his people to obey his voice:

But this command I gave them, "Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people; and walk only in the way that I command you, so that it may be well with you."

– Jeremiah 7:23

They have forsaken my law that I set before them, and have not obeyed my voice, or walked in accordance with it, but have stubbornly followed their own hearts and have gone after the Baals, as their ancestors taught them.

– Jeremiah 9:13-14

They do not know the way of YHWH, the law of their God ... They all alike had broken the yoke, they had burst the bonds.

– Jeremiah 5:4-5

Thus says YHWH: Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls. But they said, "We will not walk in it."

– Jeremiah 6:16

YHWH wants his people to speak and to do the truth.

You shall say to them: This is the nation that did not obey the voice of YHWH their God, and did not accept discipline; truth has perished; it is cut off from their lips.

– Jeremiah 7:28

They bend their tongues like bows; they have grown strong in the land for falsehood, and not for truth; for they proceed from evil to evil, and they do not know me.

– Jeremiah 9:3

YHWH wants his people to be faithful to the covenant he has made with them.

I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness.

– Jeremiah 2:2

He wants them to ‘fear him’, that is to say, to not lose a profound sense of awe in his regard.

Do you not fear me? says YHWH; Do you not tremble before me? I placed the sand as a boundary for the sea, a perpetual barrier that it cannot pass; though the waves toss, they cannot prevail, though they roar, they cannot pass over it. But this people has a stubborn and rebellious heart; they have turned aside and gone away. They do not say in their hearts, “Let us fear YHWH our God, who gives the rain in its season, the autumn rain and the spring rain.

– Jeremiah 5:22-24

YHWH wants his people to ‘know’ him; that is to say, to live in communion with him, and enjoy the intimacy of love with which he, ‘the fountain of living water’(Jeremiah 17:13), longs to bless them.

Let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am YHWH; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says YHWH.

– Jeremiah 9:24

Again and again, Jeremiah criticised the foolish policy of looking towards Egypt. He sees Babylon as YHWH’s instrument for the punishment of Judah (see Jeremiah 20:4-6; 21:3-10; 22:25; 25:8-11; 27), a punishment that aims to bring about a change of mind and heart (see Jeremiah 3:1 - 4:4).

He speaks out against cult practised without obedience (Jeremiah 7:1 - 8:3), and criticises his contemporaries for having broken the covenant (see Jeremiah 11:1-17). In Jeremiah 26:20-23 Jehoiakim is portrayed as a prophet-killer (see 2Kings 24:2).

It is interesting to read Jeremiah’s letter addressed to the exiles (see Jeremiah 29). He tells them that it is God’s will that they cooperate with Babylon by settling in and making good citizens (verses 4-7). He warns them not to listen to false prophets (verses 8-9; he had so much trouble with them himself), and he holds out a wonderful promise of hope (verses 10-14).