

# **PART ONE**

## **JEREMIAH'S ORACLES**

### **JEREMIAH 2:1 – 25:14**

#### **1. INFIDELITY & ITS CONSEQUENCES**

##### **JEREMIAH 2**

<sup>1</sup>The word of YHWH came to me, saying: <sup>2</sup>Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem, Thus says YHWH:

I remember the devotion  
of your youth,  
your love as a bride,  
how you followed me  
in the wilderness,  
in a land not sown.

<sup>3</sup>Israel was holy to YHWH,  
the first fruits of his harvest.  
All who ate of it  
were held guilty;  
disaster came upon them,  
says YHWH.

<sup>4</sup>Hear the word of YHWH, O  
house of Jacob, and all the families  
of the house of Israel. <sup>5</sup>Thus  
says YHWH:

What wrong did your ancestors  
find in me  
that they went far from me,  
and went after worthless things,  
and became worthless  
themselves?

<sup>6</sup>They did not say, "Where is  
YHWH  
who brought us up from  
the land of Egypt,  
who led us in the wilderness,  
in a land of deserts and pits,  
in a land of drought and  
deep darkness,  
in a land that no one passes  
through,  
where no one lives?"

In verse 2 Judah's relationship with YHWH is likened to a marriage. Jeremiah romanticises the wilderness period as a simple idyllic time, a kind of honeymoon period, in which Israel showed 'devotion' (*hesed*), and 'love' ('*ahab*) and 'followed' (*halak*) YHWH like a new and faithful bride (compare Hosea 2:14-15; Deuteronomy 8:2-4).

In verse 3 he changes the metaphor. Judah belongs exclusively to YHWH. She has been offered to him as first fruits of the harvest in acknowledgment of the fact that the land belongs to YHWH (see Leviticus 25:13; Deuteronomy 26:2-10; 32:8-9). This exclusive belonging is central to the covenant (see Exodus 19:6; Deuteronomy 7:6).

Verse 3 goes on to speak of the guilt of those who have used what is exclusively YHWH's ('holy to YHWH'), and have devoured the harvest, reaping it for their own benefit and failing to offer it to YHWH. It is this infidelity that is the cause of the disaster that has come upon Judah.

In verse 4ff Jeremiah presents the case against Judah, called the 'house of Jacob/Israel' because it represents the whole of God's chosen people. The rupture of the love-relationship is not because of anything YHWH has done (see verse 5). It is because Judah has given her love to idols – a pursuit (again the verb *halak*) that has corrupted the lives of the whole people (compare Hosea 9:10; Psalm 115:8).

The indictment begins in verse 6. Jeremiah reminds the people that they neglected to call upon YHWH who liberated them from Egypt and led them through 'a land of drought and deep darkness'. Notice the repetition of the word 'land.'

Verses 7-8 continue the indictment. YHWH brought his people into the Promised Land, but they defiled the land with their idolatry, all of them: the priests, the judges, the rulers and the prophets.

They ‘did not know’ YHWH. Knowing YHWH means being faithful to an exclusive love with him. It also means being obedient to the Torah. Later this will be identified as acting with justice (see 22:16). They are being accused of ‘going after’ (*halak*) ‘things that do not profit.’

YHWH presses his charge against his people. Whether they look to the West (Cyprus stands for all the nations of the Mediterranean), or to the East (Kedar represents the desert tribes of Arabia), they will see that every nation is faithful to its gods. Every nation except Israel (compare Deuteronomy 32:17). YHWH himself is the ‘glory’ of Israel, but they chose to abandon YHWH ‘the fountain of living water’, and take to themselves false gods that cannot satisfy their thirst. Everyone (‘heavens’) watching this extraordinary infidelity of Judah is stunned (verse 12).

The authors responsible for the Jeremiah scroll saw infidelity to an exclusive covenant with YHWH and failure to follow YHWH’s revealed will as the main reason for YHWH’s abandoning Jerusalem to destruction, and exile. They found in Jeremiah a prophet who confronted the leaders and the people in the years leading up to these terrible events, and they are preserving Jeremiah’s words in the hope that the people will learn their lesson so that Judah will not be destroyed again.

**<sup>7</sup>I brought you into a plentiful land  
to eat its fruits and its good things.  
But when you entered you defiled  
my land,  
and made my heritage an abomination.**

**<sup>8</sup>The priests did not say,  
“Where is YHWH?”  
Those who handle the law  
did not know me;  
the rulers transgressed against me;  
the prophets prophesied by Baal,  
and went after things  
that do not profit.**

**<sup>9</sup>Therefore once more I accuse you,  
says YHWH,  
and I accuse your children’s children.**

**<sup>10</sup>Cross to the coasts of Cyprus and look,  
send to Kedar and examine with care;  
see if there has ever been such a thing.**

**<sup>11</sup>Has a nation changed its gods,  
even though they are no gods?  
But my people have changed  
their glory  
for something that does not profit.**

**<sup>12</sup>Be appalled, O heavens, at this,  
be shocked, be utterly desolate,  
says YHWH,**

**<sup>13</sup>for 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.**

**<sup>14</sup>Is Israel a slave?**

**Was he born into slavery?**

**Why then has he become plunder?**

**<sup>15</sup>The lions roar and growl over him.**

**They have made his land a waste;**

**his cities are in ruins,**

**without inhabitant.**

**<sup>16</sup>Even the people of Memphis**

**and Tahpanhes have broken**

**the crown of your head.**

**<sup>17</sup>Have you not brought this**

**upon yourself**

**by forsaking YHWH your God,**

**<sup>18</sup>What then do you gain by going**

**to Egypt,**

**to drink the waters of the Nile?**

**Or what do you gain by going**

**to Assyria,**

**to drink the waters of the Euphrates?**

**<sup>19</sup>Your wickedness will punish you,**

**and your apostasies will convict you.**

**Know and see that it is evil**

**and bitter for you**

**to forsake YHWH your God;**

**the fear of me is not in you,**

**says the Lord YHWH of hosts.**

Israel was a free nation, liberated by YHWH himself. The enslavement they experience need not have happened. It is the consequence of the choices they have made.

In verse 16 Jeremiah reminds them that seeking an alliance with Egypt was not the answer (Memphis was the capital of lower Egypt, and Tahpanhes was a border fortress east of the Nile delta). Babylon has ravaged Judah. Egypt, too, has done its share, as is demonstrated by the death of king Josiah at the hands of Pharaoh Necho (609).

Look what happened when Israel turned to Assyria (compare Hosea 7:11). The same thing is happening now by Judah's turning to Egypt. They are the cause of their own destruction. They have forsaken YHWH (see also verse 13). It is to YHWH they must turn.

The destruction that Jeremiah could see coming, and the destruction upon which the authors of the scroll were reflecting, was the result of the people's apostasy. Judah lost its sense of awe, and so forfeited the joy of enjoying the fruits of a love-communion with their God.

Jeremiah likens Judah firstly to an ox that refuses to submit to the yoke (compare Hosea 10:11). He goes on to speak of her prostituting herself by turning to pagan gods (compare Hosea 4:13-14; Deuteronomy 12:2).

God chose her to be a perfect vine, but she went wild (compare Isaiah 5:1-4). There is nothing that can wash away the stain of her guilt (compare Isaiah 1:15-20).

He speaks again of her idolatry. She can't help herself, chasing after whatever takes her fancy - like a young camel or a wild ass on heat (compare Hosea 8:9). Reference will be made later to the desperate sacrifices the people of Jerusalem offered in the valley of ben Hinnom (see 7:31; 19:5).

Warnings have failed to get through to her, so determined is she to pursue one distraction after another.

Those who should know better are themselves caught up in chasing after any so-called 'god' that they think might help them. Of course these gods are useless. Then, when they are in trouble they think they can call out to YHWH and he will hear their cry. The trouble is they are not listening; 'they have turned their backs on' YHWH, who alone can save them - YHWH, the source of their life (compare Deuteronomy 32:18).

**<sup>20</sup>Long ago you broke your yoke  
and burst your bonds,  
and you said, "I will not serve!"  
On every high hill  
and under every green tree  
you sprawled and played the whore.**

**<sup>21</sup>Yet I planted you as a choice vine,  
from the purest stock.  
How then did you turn degenerate  
and become a wild vine?**

**<sup>22</sup>Though you wash yourself with lye  
and use much soap,  
the stain of your guilt is still  
before me, says the Lord YHWH.**

**<sup>23</sup>How can you say, "I am not defiled,  
I have not gone after the Baals"?  
Look at your way in the valley;  
know what you have done -**

**a restive young camel dashing about,  
<sup>24</sup>a wild ass at home in the wilderness,  
in her heat sniffing the wind!  
Who can restrain her lust?**

**Don't tire yourself chasing her  
in her month you will find her.  
<sup>25</sup>Stop before your sandals are worn out,  
and your throat parched with thirst.  
But you said, "It is hopeless. I love  
strangers, and will chase after them."**

**<sup>26</sup>As a thief is disgraced when caught,  
so the house of Israel is in disgrace -  
they, their kings, their officials,  
their priests, and their prophets,**

**<sup>27</sup>who say to a tree, "You are my father,"  
and to a stone, "You gave me birth."  
They have turned their backs on me;  
they will not look towards me.**

**But in the time of their trouble  
they say, "Come and save us!"**

**<sup>28</sup>Where are your gods  
that you made for yourself?  
Let them come, if they can save you,  
in your time of trouble;  
for you have as many gods  
as you have towns, O Judah.**

Judah will not avoid exile

<sup>29</sup>**Why do you complain against me?  
You have all rebelled against me,  
says YHWH.**

<sup>30</sup>**In vain I chastised your children;  
they accepted no correction.  
Your own sword devoured your  
prophets, like a ravenous lion.**

<sup>31</sup>**And you, O generation,  
behold the word of YHWH!  
Have I become  
a wilderness to Israel,  
or a land of thick darkness?  
Why then do my people say,  
“We are free of you,  
we will come to you no more”?**

<sup>32</sup>**Can a girl forget her ornaments,  
or a bride her attire?  
Yet my people have forgotten me,  
days without number.**

<sup>33</sup>**How well you direct your course  
to seek lovers!  
So that you have perfected the art  
of evil behaviour.**

<sup>34</sup>**On your skirts is found  
the lifeblood of the innocent poor,  
though you did not catch them  
breaking in.  
Yet in spite of all these things**

<sup>35</sup>**you say, “I am innocent;  
surely his anger has passed me by.”  
Now I am bringing you to judgment  
for saying, “I have not sinned.”**

<sup>36</sup>**How lightly you gad about,  
changing your ways!  
You shall be put to shame by Egypt  
as you were put to shame  
by Assyria.**

<sup>37</sup>**From here you will go out  
with your hands on your head;  
YHWH has rejected the pacts made  
with those in whom you trust,  
you will not prosper through them.**

Judah is blaming YHWH for the situation in which the people find themselves, but it is Judah that is bringing the suffering upon itself. There has been a long history of infidelity, but they seem never to learn the lesson, even turning against the prophets sent by God to warn them.

Jeremiah is amazed at the obtuseness of the people. YHWH has been a source of peace and light for them. Their forgetting of YHWH makes no sense, but they still persist in it.

Jeremiah condemns their idolatry: they are infatuated with the pagan Canaanite fertility rites.

Their infidelity to YHWH shows itself in their failure to live the essence of Yahwism: treating the poor justly (verse 34). The reference to ‘breaking in’ is perhaps intended to highlight the innocence of the poor that are victims of injustice.

The people are blind to their guilt, and think that their God will support them however they might behave.

Related to their idolatry is their ‘gadding about’ (verse 36), looking to foreign nations for security. This didn’t work with Assyria in the past and it won’t work with Egypt now.

Verse 37 is a warning of defeat and exile. Jeremiah proved right on both scores. Hence the belated recognition of him as a true prophet sent to them by YHWH. His words are being preserved lest the people forget and see history repeat itself.