

3. 'TERROR ON EVERY SIDE' (6:26)

JEREMIAH 4:5 – 6:30

Does YHWH deceive?

- ⁵Make this announcement in
Judah, proclaim it in Jerusalem;
blow the trumpet
through the land;
shout aloud and say,
“Gather together, and go to the
fortified towns!”**
- ⁶Send out the call: “To Zion!”,
flee for safety, do not delay,
for I am bringing evil
from the north,
and a great destruction.**
- ⁷A lion has gone up
from its thicket,
a destroyer of nations has set out;
he has gone out from his place
to make your land a waste;
your cities will be ruins
without inhabitant.**
- ⁸Because of this put on sackcloth,
lament and wail:
“The fierce anger of YHWH
has not turned away from us.”**
- ⁹On that day, says YHWH,
courage shall fail the king and
the officials;
the priests shall be appalled
and the prophets astounded.**
- ¹⁰Then I said, “Ah, Lord YHWH,
how utterly you have deceived this
people and Jerusalem, saying, ‘It
shall be well with you,’ even while
the sword is at the throat!”**

No longer do we hear the yearning of YHWH for the return of his faithless spouse. Judah is being invaded by a foreign army ‘from the north’ (see 1:13-15). Jeremiah is challenging the received ‘wisdom’ of the court and temple. The fact that Jerusalem is YHWH’s city does not mean it is impregnable. The people are to leave the countryside and seek safety immediately in the fortified towns, though ultimately this will be to no avail.

In a world in which it is assumed that whatever happens is willed by God, it must be God who is behind the invasion. Since it is also assumed that God is just, this must mean that the evil behaviour of the people is such that YHWH has decided they must be punished.

So certain is Jeremiah that Judah will be devastated that he tells the people to begin their mourning now (verse 8). YHWH does not want to see his people destroyed – hence the warning to flee and seek the protection of the fortified towns. But their behaviour leaves God no choice but to punish them.

Those who were so certain that they were safe will lose courage, and be appalled and astounded (verse 9).

Verse 10, in prose, appears to be a comment made by the authors/editors of the scroll who are looking back at the disaster of the destruction of Jerusalem, and who are looking to Jeremiah’s words to help them make sense of it. If YHWH (as they assumed) was ultimately responsible for the destruction, YHWH must also be ultimately responsible for the prophets who assured Jerusalem (wrongly) that all would be well. The people’s constant infidelity is seen as the cause of YHWH’s action in punishing them, but why would YHWH allow prophets (obviously false prophets) to deceive them (compare 1Kings 22:19-23; Ezekiel 14:6-11; Deuteronomy 13:1-3)?

The approaching enemy is likened to a violent and destruction wind from the desert, far too strong to do anything but flatten everything in its path.

Jeremiah does have things to say about the foolish political policies that set Jerusalem up for destruction. His key concern, however, is in the foolish decisions they are making in regard to YHWH. It is YHWH's opposition that they should fear. The invading army is YHWH's instrument in punishing them for their failure to keep the covenant. It is swooping down upon Judah, more swiftly than an eagle (compare Habakkuk 1:8).

Jeremiah knows it is too late to fend off the destruction, but he still feels moved to summon the people to repent (verse 14). There is never a situation in which turning to YHWH is not a good thing to do.

Verse 15 carries on from verse 13. The dread news reaches Judah from Dan in the extreme north; then from Ephraim, just north of Jerusalem. The whole world is looking on. Everyone can see the disaster that is about to fall.

The towns of Judah (especially Jerusalem) are under siege. No one can escape. And why? Because the people have rebelled against YHWH. The destruction that threatens is the consequence of their evil way of life. Judah is rotten to the core.

- ¹¹At that time it will be said to this people and to Jerusalem:
A hot wind comes from me out of the bare heights in the desert toward my people,
not to winnow or cleanse –
¹²a wind too strong for that.
Now it is I who speak in judgment against them.**
- ¹³Look! He comes up like clouds,
his chariots like the whirlwind;
his horses swifter than eagles –
woe to us, for we are ruined!**
- ¹⁴O Jerusalem, wash your heart clean of wickedness
so that you may be saved.
How long shall your harbour
evil schemes within you?**
- ¹⁵For a voice declares from Dan
and proclaims disaster from
Mount Ephraim.**
- ¹⁶Tell the nations, "Here they are!"
Proclaim against Jerusalem,
"Besiegers come from a distant
land;
they threaten the cities of Judah.
¹⁷They have closed in around her
like watchers of a field,
because she has rebelled against
me, says YHWH.**
- ¹⁸Your way of life and your deeds
have brought this upon you.
Your evil will have bitter
consequences!
It has infected your heart."**

- 19**My anguish, my anguish!
I writhe in pain!
Oh, the pounding of my heart!
Feelings overwhelm me;
I cannot keep silent;
I hear the sound of the trumpet,
the noise of war.
- 20**One disaster after another,
the whole land is laid waste.
Suddenly my tents are destroyed,
their coverings are in tatters.
- 21**How long must I see the standard,
and hear the sound of the trumpet?
- 22**My people are foolish,
they do not know me;
they are stupid children,
they have no understanding.
They are skilled in doing evil,
but do not know how to do good.
- 23**I looked on the earth, and lo,
it was waste and void;
and to the heavens,
and they had no light.
- 24**I looked on the mountains, and lo,
they were quaking,
all the hills were shuddering.
- 25**I looked, and lo,
nobody was there;
and all the birds of the air had fled.
- 26**I looked, and lo,
the fruitful land was a desert,
and all its cities were in ruins
before YHWH,
before his fierce anger.

Jeremiah's experience is a sharing in the profound disturbance that overwhelms YHWH at the sufferings of his people.

He is emotionally drained, not only by the violence, but also by the uselessness of the attempts at defence that are pointless and totally ineffectual.

Even more crushing is the refusal of the people to learn. When Jeremiah says that the people do not know YHWH (verse 22), he is speaking of the kind of knowing that comes from intimate communion and that bears fruit in the people's way of life, 'knowing how to do good'. This is picked up later when he contrasts the behaviour of the king with the behaviour of the king's father, Josiah:

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.

– Jeremiah 22:15-16

There are interesting links between 4:23-26 and the account of creation in Genesis. The author of Genesis 1:2 looks at how things were before YHWH brought order into chaos. He, too, speaks of the earth as being 'waste and void' (תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ). Jeremiah is speaking of the reverse process: the ordered world is being thrust back into chaos. Light is giving way to darkness, the hills, symbols of stability, are shaken (compare Nahum 1:5), cultivated land is reverting to wilderness. The reversal into chaos is the result of human failure to carry on God's creative action.

According to the theology of the time, this is happening because God is angry and is punishing Judah for its unfaithfulness.

Heaven and earth are in mourning. Judah is utterly destroyed. This is YHWH's purpose and there is no turning back. The words 'yet I will not make a full end' are unexpected. It may be a later emendation, influenced by 5:19, in the light of the fact that Judah was restored. Or it may indicate YHWH's ambivalence. Punishment is necessary but he is reluctant to inflict it. Nevertheless he will not stop (verse 28).

Verse 29 describes the population abandoning the towns and living like animals in the countryside. Their only hope is to escape. Their only aim is survival.

The people are ignoring the prophet's warning. They are carrying on, getting ready for the next round of prostitution, seemingly unaware that the false gods that they are worshipping are the gods of the armies that are swooping down on them to destroy (verse 30)

Jerusalem is a shameful prostitute. She is as helpless as a woman giving birth to her first child (verse 31). The death throes of the inhabitants of Zion (the king's city) are compared to the pangs of a woman giving birth, except that what is coming into being is not life, but death.

The city is at the complete mercy of her killers.

27For thus says YHWH:
**The whole land shall be desolate;
 yet I will not make a full end.**
28Because of this the earth
 shall mourn,
 and the heavens above wear black;
**I have spoken, I have purposed;
 I have not relented
 nor will I turn back.**

29At the noise of horseman
 and archer
 every town takes to flight;
 they enter thickets; they climb
 among rocks;
 all the towns are forsaken,
 and no one lives in them.

30What do you mean that you
 dress in crimson,
 that you deck yourself with
 ornaments of gold,
 that you enlarge your eyes
 with paint?
 In vain you beautify yourself.
 Your lovers despise you;
 they seek your life.

31I hear cries of anguish as of a
 woman in labour,
 anguish as of one bringing forth
 her first child.
 It is the cry of daughter Zion
 gasping for breath,
 stretching out her hands,
 "Woe is me! I am fainting
 before killers!"

All have forsaken the way

**¹Run to and fro through the
streets of Jerusalem,
look around and take note!
Search its squares and see
if you can find one person
who acts justly and seeks truth—
so that I may pardon Jerusalem.**

**²Although they say,
“As YHWH lives,”
yet they swear falsely.**

**³YHWH, do your eyes not look
for truth?**

**You have struck them,
but they felt no anguish;
you have disciplined them,
but they refused to take
correction.**

**They have made their faces
harder than rock;
they have refused to repent.**

**⁴Then I said, “These are only
the poor, they have no sense;
for they do not know the way
of YHWH,
the law of their God.**

**⁵Let me go to the powerful
and speak to them;
surely they know the way
of YHWH,
the judgment of their God.”
But they all have broken
the yoke,
they have burst the bonds.**

**⁶Therefore a lion from the forest
shall kill them,
a wolf from the desert
shall destroy them.
A leopard will prowl around
their cities;
everyone who goes out shall be
torn in pieces—
because their transgressions
are many,
their apostasies are great.**

We seem to be dealing here with an attempt to justify YHWH's destroying Jerusalem. Since YHWH is just he cannot destroy the innocent (compare Genesis 18:22-23). So, they population must have all been guilty! The argument is clearly unsatisfactory. It is based on a false assumption that YHWH was responsible for the destruction (see Introduction pages 16-18). Searching for one just person calls to mind the story of Sodom (see Genesis 18:22-32).

Jeremiah searches among the ordinary people (verses 2-4), but can find no one 'who acts justly and seeks the truth'. Pardon is impossible because no one is open to receive it. Yes, there are people who call on YHWH but it is a charade.

In verse 3 Jeremiah has to agree with God's assessment. The people obstinately 'refuse to repent'.

He thought that this may perhaps have been due to ignorance (verse 4), but when he looked at those who should have known better he saw the same failure to 'know the way of YHWH', the same ignoring of God's judgments (verse 5).

There is no avoiding the cataclysm that will engulf the whole people. The enemy are likened to a lion, a wolf, a leopard. Everyone 'will be torn to pieces'.

The reason – 'their transgressions are many, their apostasies are great' (verse 6).

YHWH longs to pardon (verse 7), but the people's apostasy makes pardon impossible. They have 'forsaken' ('*azab*) their faithful husband (compare 2:13,17,19; 3:1). We are accustomed to the language of adultery being used of infidelity to the covenant. It may be, however, that verse 7 includes the idea that aberrant sexual behaviour was part of the pagan cult in which the people were engaging.

Their behaviour makes pardon impossible. This in turn points up the inevitability of punishment, though verse 10 'do not make a full end', echoing 4:27, seems to indicate YHWH's reluctance.

YHWH is inviting the invading forces to destroy YHWH's vineyard, Judah (compare Isaiah 18:5). Israel is mentioned because Judah is heading in the same direction as Israel. They seem incapable of learning the lessons of history.

There were other people, acclaimed (falsely) as prophets (verses 12-13), who were opposed to Jeremiah. They seem to be claiming that YHWH would never sanction the destruction of his city and temple. Jeremiah asserts that YHWH's word 'is not in them'.

YHWH is the 'God of hosts', the God of the heavenly hosts and the God who controls the armies of the world. People will see that it is Jeremiah who is speaking YHWH's words when they are 'devoured' in the coming conflagration. The words uttered by the so-called prophets that the people like to listen to are just hot air. Jeremiah's are a devouring fire ignited by YHWH. (see 1:9; 23:29).

**7How can I pardon you?
Your children have forsaken me,
and have sworn allegiance to
those who are no gods.
I made them swear allegiance to me,
but they committed adultery
and trooped to the houses of
prostitutes.**

**8They were well-fed lusty stallions,
each neighing for his neighbour's
wife.**

**9Shall I not punish them for this?
says YHWH;
and shall I not bring retribution
on a nation such as this?**

**10Go up through her vine-rows
and destroy them,
but do not make a full end;
strip away her branches,
for they are not YHWH's.**

**11For the house of Israel and
the house of Judah
have been utterly faithless to me,
says YHWH.**

**12They have spoken falsely of YHWH,
and have said, "He will do nothing.
No evil will come upon us,
we shall not see sword or famine."**

**13The prophets are nothing but wind,
for the word is not in them.
Thus shall it be done to them!**

**14Therefore thus says YHWH,
the God of hosts:
Because they have spoken this word,
I am now making my words like fire
in your mouth;
this people will be the fuel,
and the fire will devour them.**

Disaster, but not annihilation

**¹⁵I am going to bring upon you
a nation from far away,
O house of Israel, says YHWH.
It is an enduring nation,
it is an ancient nation,
a nation whose language you
do not know,
nor can you understand
what they say.**

**¹⁶Their quiver is like an open tomb;
all of them are mighty warriors.**

**¹⁷They shall eat up your harvest
and your food;
they shall eat up your sons
and your daughters;
they shall eat up your flocks
and your herds;
they shall eat up your vines
and your fig trees;
they shall destroy with the sword
your fortified cities in which
you trust.**

**¹⁸But even in those days, says the
YHWH, I will not make a full end of
you. ¹⁹And when your people say,
“Why has YHWH our God done all
these things to us?” you shall say
to them, “As you have forsaken me
and served foreign gods in your
land, so you shall serve strangers in
a land that is not yours.”**

Jeremiah is conveying YHWH's words to the people of Judah ('Israel'). Punishment for their apostasy will take the form of a disaster inflicted by an attacking army.

The arrows deal out death. They are sent forth as an expression of the voracious appetite of the conquering army. In the words of Psalm 5:9, 'their throats are open graves.'

Earlier (4:6), the people were encouraged to retreat to the protection of the fortified towns. Here it is clear that these will prove useless against the invading force. There are similarities between this passage and Deuteronomy 28:49-52.

YHWH will bring a nation from far away, from the end of the earth, to swoop down on you like an eagle, a nation whose language you do not understand ... It shall consume the fruit of your livestock and the fruit of your ground until you are destroyed, leaving you neither grain, wine, and oil, nor the increase of your cattle and the issue of your flock, until it has made you perish. It shall besiege you in all your towns until your high and fortified walls, in which you trusted, come down throughout your land.

Verses 18-19 appears to be a later (prose) insertion, composed in the light of the fact that the terrible disaster was not a complete annihilation (see 4:27; 5:10). A remnant did survive. For the reference to the exile compare 16:10-13.

The hopes of the ‘House of Jacob’ (verse 20) rest in Judah. The key word is ‘hear’ (verse 21), the opening word of the covenant (šema, Deuteronomy 6:4). The people and their leaders, however, are so unaware (‘senseless’ is, literally, ‘without heart’) that they have lost any sense of wonder at the presence in their lives of their awesome God. It is YHWH who is preserving the created order. This is demonstrated significantly by the limits YHWH imposes on the sea (on chaos). There are connections here with Genesis 1:9.

God said, “Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.”
And it was so.

Verse 23 introduces a separate oracle, linked to the previous one by the accusation that the people do not ‘fear YHWH’.

Yet another example is given of YHWH’s action that establishes the order of the seasons and the harvests.

This order, however, is one that sin can disturb (see 3:3). It is the people’s ‘stubborn and rebellious’ sin that has brought about the terrible military destruction, which in turn has wrecked the seasonal harvests.

20 Declare this in the house of Jacob, proclaim it in Judah:

21 Hear this, O foolish and senseless people, who have eyes, but do not see, who have ears, but do not hear.

22 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.

23 But this people has a stubborn and rebellious heart; they have turned aside and gone their own way.

24 They do not say in their hearts, “Let us fear YHWH our God, who gives the rain in season, the autumn rain and the spring rain, and keeps for us the weeks appointed for the harvest.”

25 Your iniquities have interfered, your sins have cut you off from these good things.

**²⁶For scoundrels are found among
my people;
they take over the goods of others.
Like fowlers they set a trap;
they hunt human beings.**

**²⁷Like a cage full of birds,
their houses are full of loot;
they have become great and rich,**

**²⁸they have grown fat and sleek.
They know no limits in deeds
of wickedness;
they do not judge with justice
the cause of the orphan,
to make it prosper,
they do not defend the rights
of the needy.**

**²⁹Shall I not punish them for these
things? says YHWH,
and shall I not bring retribution
on a nation such as this?**

**³⁰An appalling and horrible thing
has happened in the land:**

**³¹the prophets prophesy falsely,
and the priests rule as the
prophets direct;
my people love to have it so,
but what will you do when
the end comes?**

A further criticism focuses attention on the rampant injustice that characterises life in Judah. Typical of prophetic critique is that breaking with God leads to a breakdown in people's relationship with each other.

Greed has meant that some have grown powerful, while others are trapped (compare Isaiah 3:14; Deuteronomy 32:15). The orphans and the needy are the chief victims.

Verse 29 repeats the question raised in verse 9. Injustice, like apostasy, demands punishment. YHWH cannot allow such injustice to continue.

False prophets are assuring the community that all will be well, and they are doing so in YHWH's name. Priests who should be seeing to the obedience of the community to the Torah are conspiring with the false prophets in ignoring the rampant apostasy and injustice. Jeremiah is not laying the whole blame on the false prophets and the unfaithful priests. 'The people love to have it so'. The people have the 'prophets' and 'priests' they deserve! The results of this collapse of order will soon be manifest for all to see. What are the people going to do then?

For 6:1-8 compare Amos 3:6-11 (Tekoa is Amos's home town).

The enemy is from the north (see 1:14). The direction of the warning signals, however, indicates that the actual attack on Jerusalem is coming from the south. This fits with what we are told about the invasion of 588, when the Babylonian army isolated Jerusalem by first wiping out the fortified towns to the south (see Jeremiah 34:6-7). On the siege see 2Kings 25:1; Jeremiah 34:6-7; 52:4. Does he speak first to 'the children of Bethlehem' (verse 1) because he is thinking of his own people (see 1:1) who may have been thinking to seek refuge in Jerusalem?

The pampered urban elite are replaced by the lowly shepherds (verse 2).

In verse 3 the various divisions of the attacking army, each with its own general, are likened to flocks with their shepherds. They are stripping the countryside bare.

In verse 4 we are inside the council of war of the invading forces. They are determined to waste no time in organising the attack,

YHWH, who is understood to be ultimately responsible for the campaign, is urging the invaders on, expressing his disgust at the corruption within the city. So determined is YHWH that he instructs them to go against the legislation of the Torah in regard to the cutting down of trees (see Deuteronomy 20:19-20).

Verse 8 is a final call to repentance, lest the disaster involve a complete annihilation – the consequence of YHWH breaking all ties with his people.

**¹Flee for safety, O children
of Benjamin,
leave Jerusalem!
Blow the trumpet in Tekoa,
raise a signal on Beth-haccherem;
for disaster looms out of the north,
and great destruction.**

**²Daughter Zion, beautiful and
pampered,
is near her end;**

**³Shepherds with their flocks
are approaching her.
They pitch their tents around her;
each grazing his allotted pasture.**

**⁴"Prepare war against her;
up, and let us attack at noon!
Woe to us, for the day declines,
the shadows of evening lengthen!"**

**⁵Up, and let us attack by night,
and destroy her fortifications!"**

**⁶For thus says YHWH of hosts:
Cut down her trees;
cast up a siege ramp
against Jerusalem.**

**This is the city on which
judgment is about to fall;
there is nothing but oppression
within her.**

**⁷As a well keeps its water fresh,
she keeps fresh her wickedness;
violence and destruction are
heard within her;
sickness and wounds are ever
before me.**

**⁸Take correction, O Jerusalem,
or I shall turn from you in disgust,
and make you a desolation,
an uninhabited land.**

All will perish

**⁹Thus says YHWH of hosts:
Glean as you would a vine
save whatever you can of the
remnant of Israel;
go over the branches again
like one picking grapes.**

**¹⁰To whom shall I speak?
Who will listen if I testify?
Their ears are uncircumcised,
they cannot listen.
The word of YHWH is to them
an object of scorn;
they take no pleasure in it.**

**¹¹I am full of the YHWH's wrath;
I am weary of holding it in.
I shall pour it out on the children
in the street,
and on the gatherings of the
young as well;
husband and wife shall be taken,
the old folk and the very aged.**

**¹²Their houses shall be turned over
to others,
along with their fields and wives;
for I will stretch out my hand
against the inhabitants of the
land, says YHWH.**

**¹³For from the least to the greatest
of them,
everyone is greedy for unjust gain;
and from prophet to priest,
everyone deals falsely.**

**¹⁴They have been negligent in
treating my people's wound,
saying, "Peace, peace,"
when there is no peace.**

**¹⁵They acted shamefully,
they committed abomination;
yet they were not ashamed,
they did not know how to blush.
Therefore they shall be among
the victims;
at the time that I punish them,
they shall be overthrown,
says YHWH.**

If any are left after the destruction, YHWH wants them thoroughly harvested (verse 9), even though the Torah is against gleaning (see Deuteronomy 24:21). The idea seems to be that YHWH doesn't want anyone to escape judgment.

In verses 10-11 Jeremiah wants to obey YHWH, but he is frustrated by the determination of the people not to listen and heed YHWH's warnings. He speaks here of their 'uncircumcised ears' (compare the uncircumcised heart of 4:4).

Jeremiah can't hold back but must tell everyone of the catastrophe that is about to fall upon them, whether they are willing to listen or not.

In verses 12-15 Jeremiah proclaims YHWH's judgment,

In verse 13, Jeremiah returns to the theme of rampant greed and injustice, and to the fact that those in a position of religious leadership have no interest in the truth or in justice.

They are content to lull the people into a false sense of security by assuring them that all will be well 'when there is no peace' (compare 4:10).

They do this with no sense of shame, and they will be among the victims when YHWH's judgment comes to pass.

The nation is at a crossroads. Jeremiah tells the people that it is YHWH's will that they choose the path revealed by the wisdom that has been handed down by their ancestors. This is the way to find the rest for which their souls (*nepeš* – their most profound being) longs. The people reject this. They are obstinate in taking the path that suits them, with no regard for YHWH or for fidelity to the past.

They take no heed of the genuine prophets (and this includes, significantly, Jeremiah) whom YHWH has sent to warn them.

The whole world is summoned to witness YHWH's judgment: 'I am going to bring disaster on this people'. Jeremiah is not slow to point out that it is they who are responsible for this: they have paid no heed to YHWH's words (verse 19), and have rejected his teaching (*tôrâ*, compare Isaiah 5:24).

There is no point to their carrying on the rituals of public religion (compare Hosea 9:4). For these to be acceptable to YHWH more than ritual purity is required. They must listen to YHWH and faithfully obey YHWH's revealed will.

Along the path they have chosen, YHWH will put obstacles. They will certainly stumble and perish – all of them.

**¹⁶Thus says YHWH:
Stand at the crossroads, and look,
ask for the ancient paths,
where lies the way to good;
and take it,
and find rest for your souls.
But they said, We will not take it.**

**¹⁷I raised up sentinels for you:
"Give heed to the sound of the
trumpet!"
But they said, "We will not give
heed."**

**¹⁸Therefore listen, O nations,
and know, O congregation,
what will happen to them.**

**¹⁹Hear, O earth; I am going to bring
disaster on this people,
the fruit of their schemes,
because they have not given heed
to my words;
and as for my teaching,
they have rejected it.**

**²⁰Of what use to me is frankincense
from Sheba,
or sweet cane from a distant land?
Your burnt offerings are not
acceptable,
your sacrifices do not please me.**

**²¹Therefore thus says YHWH:
I am laying before this people
stumbling blocks against which
they shall stumble;
parents and children together,
neighbour and friend shall perish.**

YHWH has rejected his people

²²Thus says YHWH:

**A people is coming from the land
of the north,
a great nation is stirring from the
farthest parts of the earth.**

²³They grasp the bow and
the spear,

**they are cruel and have no mercy,
their sound is like the roaring sea;
they ride on horses,
equipped like warriors for battle,
against you, O daughter Zion!**

²⁴We have heard news of them,
our hands fall helpless;
anguish has taken hold of us,
pain as of a woman in labour.

²⁵Do not go out into the field,
or walk on the road;
for the enemy's sword is
unsheathed,
terror is on every side."

²⁶O my poor people,
put on sackcloth,
and roll in ashes;
mourn as for an only child,
make bitter lamentation:
for suddenly the destroyer
will come upon us.

²⁷I have made you an assessor
of my people
so that you may know and test
their way of life.

²⁸They are all stubbornly rebellious,
going about with slanderers;
all of them act corruptly.

²⁹The bellows blow fiercely,
the lead is consumed by the fire;
in vain the refining goes on,
for the wicked are not removed.

³⁰They are called rejected silver,
for YHWH has rejected them.

One more oracle warning the people of Jerusalem of the mighty nation that is descending upon the city. The fact that we find the same text used again in 50:41-43 (against Babylon, not Zion) should alert us to the stereotyped nature of the text.

The people know there is nothing they can do.

For the expression 'terror is on every side'(verse 25), compare Psalm 31:13.

All that is left for them is to mourn and lament.

Jeremiah has been given by God the task of seeing if it is possible to separate the innocent from the guilty, much as someone tries to separate silver from dross. It was customary to pour lead in as part of the smelting procedure. The trouble is that the conflagration is so extreme that the bellows are damaged and the lead is consumed. The process fails. The people are so stubborn that it is impossible to syphon off the innocent. Everyone will undergo the catastrophe.