

5. THERE IS NO HEALING

JEREMIAH 8:4 – 10:25

- ⁴You shall say to them,
Thus says YHWH:
When people fall, do they not
get up again?
If they go astray, do they not
turn back?**
- ⁵Why then has this people
turned away
in perpetual backsliding?
They have held fast to deceit,
they have refused to return.**
- ⁶I have given heed and listened,
but they do not speak honestly;
no one repents of wickedness,
saying, "What have I done!"
All of them turn to their
own course,
like a horse plunging headlong
into battle.**
- ⁷Even the stork in the heavens
knows its times;
and the turtledove, swallow,
and crane
observe the time of their coming;
but my people do not know
the order established by YHWH.**
- ⁸How can you say, "We are wise,
and the law of YHWH is with us,"
when, in fact, the false pen of the
scribes has made it into a lie?**
- ⁹The wise shall be put to shame,
they shall be dismayed and taken;
since they have rejected the word
of YHWH,
what wisdom is in them?**
- ¹⁰Therefore I will give their wives
to others
and their fields to conquerors,
because from the least
to the greatest
everyone is greedy for unjust gain;
from prophet to priest
everyone deals falsely.**

There is no hope of healing, not because YHWH is unfaithful, but because Judah is obstinate in her rejection of YHWH. In verses 4-5 we are told, once again (see 5:1-3), of the amazing stubbornness of the people who 'refuse to return' to YHWH.

YHWH has bent over backwards to listen, but hears no sign of honesty or repentance.

In 5:22 we were reminded that even the sea (chaos) respects the order established by YHWH. Jeremiah is stunned. Every other creature lives within the order of nature. Not so Judah, whose nature is to live in a covenant-communion with YHWH. Yet 'my people do not know the order established by YHWH'. Against the law of nature, they are determined to 'hold fast to deceit'.

In verses 8-9 we have evidence of conflict between the prophet Jeremiah and the official interpreters of the Torah (the 'wise'). Jeremiah would have no argument with the statement found in Deuteronomy 4:6 that keeping the law makes a person wise. But not as it is being interpreted by the false prophets! Events will soon prove them wrong. How can they lay claim to be 'wise' when they reject YHWH's word.

In verse 10, the consequences of their refusal to live lives of justice in accordance with the Torah are spelt out in highly charged language. The fact that 8:10-12 is a variant of 6:12-15 is a reminder of the stereotypical nature of the material.

The indictment continues (compare 6:12-15). The official ideology that cannot imagine an end to the Davidic dynasty or the temple cult continues to proclaim peace. But its proponents are wrong. Furthermore they are oblivious to shame, so assured are they that they are answerable only to themselves.

There is no good in the people, nothing worth harvesting. They have forfeited all the blessings that YHWH has given them.

Verse 14 repeats the call of 4:5, but adds that, sensible as it is to try to organise some defence, there is no point (compare 5:17). There is no escape from the punishment meted out by YHWH 'because we have sinned'. The water they drink will bring death.

Verse 16 speaks again of horses (see 4:13; 6:23). The north (Dan, see 4:15) is already overrun. There is no hope for Jerusalem.

The image for the victorious enemy shifts from horses to poisonous snakes, This time there will be no bronze snake to bring healing (see Numbers 21:6).

¹¹They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, "Peace, peace," when there is no peace.

¹²They acted shamefully, they committed abomination; yet they were not at all ashamed, they did not know how to blush. Therefore they shall be among the victims; at the time when I punish them, they shall be overthrown, says YHWH.

¹³When I wanted to gather them, says YHWH, there are no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree; even the leaves are withered, and what I gave them has passed away from them.

¹⁴Why do we sit still? Gather together, let us go into the fortified cities and perish there; for YHWH our God has doomed us to perish, and has given us poison to drink, because we have sinned against YHWH.

¹⁵We look for peace, but find no good, for a time of healing, but there is terror instead.

¹⁶The snorting of their horses is heard from Dan; at the sound of the neighing of their stallions the whole land quakes. They come and devour the land and all it contains, the city and those who live in it.

¹⁷I am letting snakes loose among you, adders that cannot be charmed, and they shall bite you, says YHWH.

Anguish of heart

**¹⁸My joy is gone, grief is upon me,
my heart is sick.**

**¹⁹Hark, the cry of my people
from a distant land:
“Is YHWH not in Zion?
Is her King not in her?”**

**(“Why have they provoked me to anger
with their images,
with their foreign idols?”)**

**²⁰“The harvest is past, autumn is ended,
and we are not saved.”**

**²¹For the hurt of my people I am hurt,
I mourn, and dismay has taken hold
of me.**

**²²Is there no balm in Gilead?
Is there no physician there?
Why has the health of my people
not been restored?**

**^{9:1}O that my head were a spring
of water,
and my eyes a fountain of tears,
that I might weep day and night
for the slain of my people!**

**²O that I had in the desert
a traveller’s lodging place,
that I might leave my people
and go away from them!
For they are all adulterers,
a band of traitors.**

**³They draw their tongue,
their bow is falsehood;
they have grown strong in the land
but not for truth;
for they proceed from evil to evil,
and they do not know me,
says YHWH.**

In verses 19 and 20 we hear the anguished cry of the people, interrupted by a divine response (in brackets; compare Deuteronomy 32:21) which explains the reasons for the disaster that has come upon them.

In verses 18 and 21 is Jeremiah giving expression to his own profound grief, which is YHWH’s grief? Or are we listening to the city lamenting what is happening to its inhabitants?

Autumn has passed without the New Year Festival, celebrated to exult in YHWH their King. The New Year has brought nothing but a continuation of despair.

The lament continues (verse 22). If there is no healing in Jerusalem, perhaps they can look across the Jordan and to the north, to Gilead?

Chapter 9 verse 1 (following the Latin) is 8:23 in the Hebrew and Greek. All Jeremiah (or is it YHWH, or Jerusalem?) wants to do is to weep for the people.

Chapter 9 verse 2 is 9:1 in the Hebrew. YHWH is so grief-stricken at their obstinacy that he wants to leave them (compare 14:8).

They refuse to break from worshipping pagan gods (‘adulterers’, see 2:20f; 3:1-5), and continue to betray that which identifies them as a people. Truth has no place in their speech. Jeremiah quotes YHWH’s complaint: ‘They do not know me’ (verse 3; see 2:8; 5:4; 8:7,12).

The social fabric is in tatters. There is no trust in the community or in the family. “Deceivers” translates the Hebrew *ya‘qob* (יַעֲקֹב). Is there an allusion here to Jacob deceiving Esau (Genesis 27)? The reason for the collapse of social order is that ‘they refuse to know me’ (verse 6; see verse 3).

YHWH will attempt to separate the innocent from the guilty, as one attempts to separate silver from dross, but with the same result as when Jeremiah tried (see 6:27). It is all dross. Like a deadly arrow their tongue speaks only to deceive (compare verse 3).

The behaviour of the people must be punished.

Jeremiah is instructed to give expression to God’s distress at what is happening to his people.

Shepherds and their flocks, herdsmen and their cattle have had to abandon the pastures on the edge of the wilderness. There is a strange and foreboding silence. This is how the towns and their surrounding fields will soon be.

**⁴Beware of your neighbours,
and put no trust in any of your kin;
for all your kin are deceivers,
and every neighbour is a slanderer.**

**⁵They all deceive their neighbours,
and no one speaks the truth;
they have trained their tongues
to speak lies;
they commit iniquity and are too
weary to repent.**

**⁶Oppression upon oppression,
deceit upon deceit!
They refuse to know me,
says YHWH.**

**⁷Therefore thus says YHWH of hosts:
I will now refine and test them,
what else can I do with my people?**

**⁸Their tongue is a deadly arrow;
it speaks deceit through the mouth.
They all speak friendly words
to their neighbours,
but inwardly are planning to lay
an ambush.**

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

**¹⁰Take up weeping and wailing
for the mountains,
and a lamentation for the pastures
of the wilderness,
because they are laid waste so that
no one passes through,
and the lowing of cattle is not
heard;
birds and animals are gone.**

**¹¹I will make Jerusalem a heap of
ruins,
a lair of jackals;
and I will make the towns of
Judah
a desolation, without inhabitant.**

Why Judah was destroyed

¹²Who is wise enough to understand this? To whom has the mouth of YHWH spoken, so that they may declare it? Why is the land ruined and laid waste like a wilderness, so that no one passes through?

¹³YHWH said: Because they have forsaken my law that I set before them, and have not obeyed my voice, or walked in accordance with it, ¹⁴but have stubbornly followed their own hearts and have gone after the Baals, as their ancestors taught them.

¹⁵Therefore thus says YHWH of hosts, the God of Israel: I am feeding this people with wormwood, and giving them poisonous water to drink. ¹⁶I will scatter them among nations that neither they nor their ancestors have known; and I will send the sword after them, until I have consumed them.

**¹⁷Thus says YHWH of hosts:
Summon the mourning women
to come;
send for the skilled women to come;
¹⁸let them quickly raise a dirge over us,
so that our eyes may run down
with tears,
and our eyelids flow with water.
¹⁹Sound of wailing is heard from Zion:
"How we are ruined!
We are utterly shamed,
we have left the land,
they have cast down our dwellings."**

Verses 12-16 [Hebrew 11-15] appears to be a later reflection. The authors begin with a question that expresses astonishment at the power of the preceding oracles, and the extent of the catastrophe.

They go on to explain the reason for the terrible disaster and subsequent exile. It is not hard to find: the people forsook the covenant, failed to listen and refused to live by the Torah. This critique is central to that of the Deuteronomic School.

God's judgment is expressed in verses 15-16.

Jeremiah is conveying a call from YHWH for the women skilled in keening to begin their task, so as to set up the atmosphere for a communal mourning and lamentation (see verse 10). Calling on the authority of YHWH is a way of asserting that there is no avoiding the calamity described in these verses.

The dreadful situation will go on and on, and so the women must hand their skill onto their daughters.

There is no security against the plague. No matter how strong the walls and doors, death will find its way in through the windows.

Nothing is more symbolic of the complete breakdown of social order than unburied corpses (compare 7:32 - 8:3). The image of the grim reaper is invoked.

Verses 23-24 contrast two ways of living. The first, associated with human wisdom, power and riches, is of no avail. All that matters is to 'know YHWH' (see already 5:4-5; 8:7; and especially 9:3,6; see later 22:15-16).

YHWH acts with 'steadfast love, justice and righteousness' and calls on us to act with these same virtues. It is because the people have failed to honour the covenant, it is because they have not acted justly and righteously that they have brought divine judgment upon themselves.

Circumcision became an important distinguishing mark of the exiles from Judah when they lived in Babylon where it was not practised. This passage lists nations other than Judah that practise circumcision. Judah is no better than them. What ought to set Judah apart is not physical circumcision, but circumcision of the heart (see Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6) – that is to say a truly repentant heart that is obedient to YHWH.

**²⁰Hear, O women, the word of YHWH,
and let your ears receive the word
of his mouth;
teach your daughters a dirge,
each teach her neighbour a lament.**

**²¹Death has come through our
windows,
it has entered our palaces,
to cut off the children from
the streets
and young men from the squares.**

**²²Speak! Thus says YHWH:
Human corpses shall fall
like dung upon the open field,
like sheaves behind the reaper,
and no one shall gather them.**

**²³Thus says YHWH:
Let not the wise boast in their wisdom,
let not the strong boast in their might,
let not the rich boast in their wealth;
²⁴but 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.**

**²⁵The days are surely coming, says
YHWH, when I will attend to all those
who are circumcised only in the fore-
skin: ²⁶Egypt, Judah, Edom, the Ammo-
nites, Moab, and all those with shaven
temples who live in the desert. For all
these nations are uncircumcised, and all
the house of Israel is uncircumcised in
heart.**

**¹Hear the word that YHWH speaks to you,
O house of Israel. ²Thus says YHWH:**

**Do not learn the way of the nations,
or be terrified by signs in the heavens;
such as terrify the nations.**

**³For the customs of the peoples are false:
a tree from the forest is cut down,
and worked with an ax by the hands
of an artisan;**

**⁴people deck it with silver and gold;
they fasten it with hammer and nails
so that it cannot move.**

**⁵Their idols like scarecrows in a
cucumber field, cannot speak;
they have to be carried,
for they cannot walk.**

**Do not be afraid of them,
for they cannot do evil,
nor is it in them to do good.**

**⁶There is none like you, YHWH;
you are great, and your name is great
in might.**

**⁷Who would not fear you, O King
of the nations?**

**For that is your due;
among all the wise ones of the nations
and in all their kingdoms
there is no one like you.**

**⁸They are both stupid and foolish;
the instruction given by idols
is no better than that given by wood!**

We have already noted that the Septuagint Version of the Jeremiah scroll is considerably shorter than the Masoretic Hebrew Version. Chapter ten is especially interesting because of a fragment in Hebrew found in Cave 4 at Qumran. It has a Hebrew text that agrees with the Septuagint. Both lack 10:6-8,10 which appear to be examples of later commentary.

In verse 2 Jeremiah is reminding his contemporaries that true religion frees us from fear of the gods or from looking to the heavens to discover what the future holds.

Verses 3-5 are a satire ridiculing idols. We find parallel statements in Isaiah 40:18-20; 41:6-7; 44:9-20 from the period of the Exile.

Verses 6-8 appear to be a post-exilic reflection on verses 3-5, and include a liturgical hymn of praise of YHWH.

The translation offered in the second part of verse 8 is hardly more than guesswork.

What this and the following passage set up is a sharp contrast between the 'gods' that we humans make, and YHWH. The gods we humans make cannot see, speak, move, act (for evil or for good). They cannot make anything. People who trust in them are foolish. YHWH, by contrast, creates, speaks, forms, organises. And YHWH is in a covenant relationship with Israel—a relationship and a commitment to which he is faithful.

The text speaks of material coming in from largely unknown lands in the west, brought in by the huge seafaring ships (Tarshish), and that coming from the extremities of the east, brought in by the Arab caravans (Ophir). The gods we make are products of the economic and commercial system we create and in which we trust. (This does not apply only to the ancient world!).

In contrast to idols ‘YHWH is the true (real) God’. ‘He is the living God’ (not formed from wood or metal!). He reigns as King.

Verse 11 summarises the following verses (12-16). The focus is on YHWH as the Creator.

Those who make or are devoted to idols are ‘stupid and without knowledge’. The gods they create will certainly let them down for they are ‘false’ (not true) and useless.

By contrast Israel’s God is YHWH ‘who formed all things’. YHWH belongs to Israel, and Israel belongs to YHWH (compare Deuteronomy 32:9). The underlying challenge is for us to choose YHWH (compare Deuteronomy 30:15-20).

⁹Beaten silver is brought from Tarshish, and gold from Ophir.

Idols are the work of the artisan and of the hands of the goldsmith; their clothing is blue and purple; all the products of skilled workers.

¹⁰But YHWH is the true God; he is the living God an everlasting King.

At his wrath the earth quakes, the nations cannot endure his indignation.

¹¹Thus shall you say to them: The gods who did not make the heavens and the earth will perish from the earth and from under the heavens.

¹²It is he who made the earth by his power, who established the world by his wisdom, and by his understanding stretched out the heavens.

¹³When he utters his voice, there is a tumult of waters in the heavens, and he makes the clouds rise from the ends of the earth. He makes lightnings for the rain, and he brings out the wind from his storehouses.

¹⁴Everyone is stupid and without knowledge; goldsmiths are all put to shame by their idols; for their images are false, and there is no breath in them.

¹⁵They are worthless, a work of delusion; on the day of reckoning they will perish.

¹⁶Not like these is YHWH, the portion of Jacob, for he is the one who formed all things, and Israel is the tribe of his inheritance; YHWH of hosts is his name.

Exile is inevitable

**17 Gather up your bundle from the ground,
O you who live under siege!**

**18 For thus says YHWH:
I am going to sling out the inhabitants
of the land at this time,
and I will bring distress on them,
and they will know about it.**

**19 Woe is me because of my hurt!
My wound is severe.
Truly this is my punishment,
and I must bear it.**

**20 My tent is destroyed,
and all my cords are broken;
my children have gone from me,
and they are no more;
there is no one to spread my tent again,
and to set up my curtains.**

**21 For the shepherds are stupid,
and do not inquire of YHWH;
therefore they have not prospered,
and all their flock is scattered.**

**22 Hear, a noise! Listen, it is coming—
a great commotion from the land of
the north
to make the cities of Judah a desolation,
a lair of jackals.**

**23 I know, YHWH, that the way of human
beings is not in their control,
they cannot direct their own steps.**

**24 Correct me, YHWH, but in just measure;
not in your anger, or you will bring me
to nothing.**

**25 Pour out your wrath on the nations
that do not know you,
and on the peoples that do not call on
your name;
for they have devoured Jacob;
they have consumed him,
and have laid waste his habitation.**

Jeremiah is conveying to the people YHWH's determination to have them taken into exile. There is no escaping this.

In verses 19-20 we hear the people lamenting.

The leaders bear the primary responsibility. Their decisions – decisions that have led to this disaster – were made with no reference to YHWH.

In verses 23-25 Jeremiah appears to be quoting (in the context, without approval) the kind of prayer that he hears rising from the temple. Without making any attempt at repentance, the people are pleading the limits of their humanity (verse 23). They want YHWH to limit the correction (verse 24). Were they praying Psalm 6:1? – 'YHWH rebuke me but not in your anger, discipline me but not in your wrath'.

They also pray Psalm 79:6-7. They want YHWH to turn his attention to the pagan nations – their behaviour is not without fault! Verse 25 is developed later in the oracles against the nations (see chapters 46-51).