

7. OBSTINATE JERUSALEM

JEREMIAH 11:18 – 20:18

Introduction to Jeremiah 11:18 – 20:18

In this section of the scroll two themes dominate. The first is Jeremiah's clear and concise message: Jerusalem will be destroyed. The second is Jeremiah's grief and anger that it has fallen to him to announce this painful and unwelcome truth.

Again and again Jeremiah complains to God about his relationship with the people, about his call, about what being a prophet involves, and, perhaps especially, about YHWH's apparent failure to carry out the threats that he got Jeremiah to proclaim. What about the guarantee that YHWH gave Jeremiah that he would protect him (1:8, 17-19)?

Holladay suggests two situations that could well provide the context for a number of these complaints. They help explain why opposing 'prophets' were able to get away with mocking Jeremiah, even, in accordance with Deuteronomy 18:20, to demand his death as a false prophet. The first occasion was at the end of 601, after the defeat of Babylon by the Egyptians. This defeat was seen as supporting the pro-Egyptian party which Jeremiah had so often denounced, and appeared to undermine Jeremiah's call to submit to Babylon. This is possibly the occasion, too, for King Jehoiakim to mockingly tear up Jeremiah's scroll (see 36:23, according to the date given in the Septuagint). The second occasion was in 594, when Zedekiah, having survived an assassination attempt, was emboldened to set about forming an anti-Babylonian alliance (see Jeremiah 27 and 29:1-23).

Jeremiah also had to contend with the fact that the exiles in Babylon were unhappy with his declaration that they had to put up with their exile. They wanted it over quickly.

When we examine YHWH's response to Jeremiah's complaints it becomes obvious that they don't satisfy the distraught prophet. Furthermore, on many occasions there is no response: YHWH is silent.

This material is unique among the prophets. It is not difficult to imagine why it was preserved. When Jeremiah was finally vindicated by the capture of Jerusalem in 597, and its destruction in 587, people came to see that he was the true prophet, not his opponents. Jeremiah's protracted experience of suffering and endurance would have become, for those living in exile, a symbol for their own experience, as it would have become for the inhabitants of post-exilic Yehud, who treasured YHWH's promises, but could see no hope of their being fulfilled.

There is some comfort for us, too, who often cannot find meaning in what happens to us and around us. There is no sin in complaining, in joining Jeremiah in expressing to God our pain, our doubts and our fears, so long as we also share with Jeremiah his faith.

The above comments are based on the understanding that the text is offering us insights into experiences of the historical Jeremiah. It is necessary to note that one cannot be completely confident that this is the limit of what is intended by the texts. A parallel may be made with many of the psalms, which are attributed to King David and carry a title which relates the psalm to particular incidents in David's life. The title suggests a context for praying the psalm, but does not guarantee that David is its author. We should say the same about the oracles here that are attributed to Jeremiah.

Aware of this caution, we will follow the editors and reflect on the portrait they are offering of the prophet Jeremiah.

Initially we are given no context for Jeremiah's words in verses 18-20. In answer to his prayer (verse 18), God revealed to him that there was a plot to have him killed. On page 132 we suggested a couple of likely situations for this, but it could have been any time in his ministry. He was a lone figure, proclaiming that God willed them to accept Babylon, and to submit to the punishment called for by their infidelity. His message did not win him friends.

Jeremiah's call for God to bring retribution down upon his opponents is also a call for God to carry out the threats he had inspired Jeremiah to make in God's name. The validity of the prophetic word is at stake.

In verses 21-23 we hear YHWH's response. His opponents are identified as the people of his own village, Anathoth (see 1:1). It is not surprising that Jeremiah's stance would have caused problems for his family and members of his village.

Since YHWH is just, one should expect to be able to lodge a complaint and be heard. Jeremiah's complaint is that sinners are thriving (compare Job 21:7). YHWH should plant the just (Psalm 1:3), not the wicked! Jeremiah knows (and therefore YHWH must know) that their religious posturing is hypocritical. If they are prospering now, surely the just YHWH must see to it that they are punished for their treachery. Jeremiah wants to see them taken to the slaughter. What his enemies proposed against him (verse 19), he now wants for them (verse 3).

18"YHWH, inform me so that I can know." It was then that you showed me what they are up to. 19For my part I had been like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter. And I did not know it was against me that they devised schemes, saying, "Let us destroy the tree with its fruit, let us cut him off from the land of the living, so that his name will no longer be remembered!"

20But you, YHWH of hosts, who judge righteously, who test the heart and the mind, let me see your retribution upon them, for to you I have committed my cause.

21Therefore thus says YHWH concerning the people of Anathoth, who seek your life, and say, "You shall not prophesy in the name of YHWH, or you will die by our hand"— 22therefore thus says YHWH of hosts: I am going to punish them; the young men shall die by the sword; their sons and their daughters shall die by famine; 23and not even a remnant shall be left of them. For I will bring disaster upon the people of Anathoth, the year of their punishment.

1You will be in the right, YHWH, when I lay charges against you; but let me put my case to you. Why does the way of the guilty prosper?

Why do all who are treacherous thrive? 2You plant them, and they take root; they grow and bring forth fruit; your name is on their lips yet far from their hearts.

3But you, YHWH, know me; You see me and test me – my heart is with you. Pull them out like sheep for the slaughter, and set them apart for the day of slaughter.

Things will get a lot worse

**4How long will the land mourn,
and the grass of every field wither?
For the wickedness of those who
live in it
the animals and the birds are
swept away,
and because people said, "He is
blind to our ways."**

**5If you have raced with foot-runners
and they have wearied you,
how will you compete with horses?
And if you fall down when the going
is easy,
how will you fare in the thickets
of the Jordan?**

**6For even your kinsfolk and your own
family, even they have dealt treacherously
with you; they are in full cry after you. Do
not believe them, if they speak friendly
words to you.**

**7I have forsaken my house,
I have abandoned my heritage;
I have given the beloved of my heart
into the hands of her enemies.**

**8My heritage has become to me
like a lion in the forest;
she has lifted up her voice against me
therefore I hate her.**

**9Is the hyena greedy for my heritage
at my command?
Are the birds of prey all around her?
Go, assemble all the wild animals;
bring them to devour her.**

**10Many shepherds have destroyed
my vineyard,
they have trampled down my portion,
they have made my pleasant portion
a desolate wilderness.**

**11They have made it a desolation;
desolate, it mourns to me.
The whole land is made desolate,
but no one lays it to heart.**

Jeremiah grieves over the devastation of nature – all because the people thought that they could go on behaving the way they were, and they would continue to prosper, because (as they wrongly thought) YHWH wasn't paying attention.

YHWH responds to Jeremiah, telling him that things are going to get a lot worse. If he is finding it hard now, how will he manage later?

In verse 6 Jeremiah is told not to trust even the people of his home village (see 11:21-23).

In verses 7-11 Jeremiah is presenting YHWH's feelings about the disaster suffered by Judah. Judah remains YHWH's house, his special inheritance (*nah^alâ*) and the beloved of his heart, but he has had to abandon it. Love (choosing in favour) is exhausted. It has turned to hate (choosing against).

Instead of listening to YHWH, the people have roared at him, like a lion. They have behaved like a hyena or a bird of prey. They will get what they have given. Wild animals will tear them to pieces.

The leaders of the invading forces (the 'shepherds') have destroyed YHWH's vineyard. 'The whole land is made desolate' and no one cares (except, of course, YHWH, for it is his 'pleasant portion').

Verse 12 appears to be a later comment intended to explain the poetic references in the preceding verses.

In verse 13 Jeremiah makes the point that their turning to other gods, or trying alliances with other states, did them no good. Jeremiah lived through three massive invasions, each worse than the one before. In 601-600 when the Babylonian king was preoccupied in the east, Chaldaean, Aramaean, Moabite and Ammonite forces ravaged Judah (see 2Kings 24:2). Then in 598-587 Nebuchadrezzar led the forces that captured Jerusalem. Worst of all was 588-587 when the Babylonian army returned and destroyed the city.

The (post-exilic) prose comment in verses 14-17 focuses on the neighbouring nations that have taken part in the devastation of Judah. YHWH will not let them get away with what they have done. This theme will be expanded in the oracles against the nations (Jeremiah 46-51). Judah's neighbours, too, will suffer exile. But YHWH remains 'compassionate' (verse 15). McKane writes:

The neighbours who gloated over Judah's misfortunes and took advantage of her weakness when she suffered dismemberment and exile (see Obadiah 10ff; Zephaniah 2:8), themselves suffered in turn, as the prophet Jeremiah had predicted. The post-exilic Jerusalem community, effectively separated from the corrupting influences of her neighbours, has nothing to fear, even when these neighbours are restored to their former territories, as scripture predicts. But, according to verses 16-17, their restoration is to be entertained only in so far as they swear allegiance to Yahweh and are integrated into his community.

Verse 16 comes as a surprise. YHWH is extending an invitation to the other nations to join the covenant.

¹²Upon all the bare heights in the desert raiders have come; for the sword of YHWH devours from one end of the land to the other; no one is safe.

**¹³They have sown wheat and have reaped thorns,
they have tired themselves out but profit nothing.
They shall be disappointed in their harvests
because of the fierce anger of YHWH.**

¹⁴Thus says YHWH concerning all my evil neighbours who encroach on the heritage that I have given my people Israel to inherit: I am about to pluck them up from their land, and I will pluck up the house of Judah from among them. ¹⁵And after I have plucked them up, I will again have compassion on them, and I will bring them again to their heritage and to their land, everyone of them.

¹⁶And then, if they will diligently learn the ways of my people, to swear by my name, "As YHWH lives," as they taught my people to swear by Baal, then they shall be built up in the midst of my people. ¹⁷But if any nation will not listen, then I will completely uproot it and destroy it, says YHWH.

¹Thus said YHWH to me, "Go and buy yourself a linen loincloth, and put it on your loins, but do not dip it in water." ²So I bought a loincloth according to the word of YHWH, and put it on my loins.

³And the word of YHWH came to me a second time, saying, ⁴"Take the loincloth that you bought and are wearing, and go now to the Euphrates, and hide it there in a cleft of the rock." ⁵So I went, and hid it by the Euphrates, as YHWH commanded me.

⁶And after many days YHWH said to me, "Go now to the Euphrates, and take from there the loincloth that I commanded you to hide there."

⁷Then I went to the Euphrates, and dug, and I took the loincloth from the place where I had hidden it. But now the loincloth was ruined; it was good for nothing.

⁸Then the word of YHWH came to me: ⁹Thus says YHWH: Just so I will ruin the pride of Judah and the great pride of Jerusalem. ¹⁰This evil people, who refuse to hear my words, who stubbornly follow their own will and have gone after other gods to serve them and worship them, shall be like this loincloth, which is good for nothing. ¹¹For 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, says YHWH, in order that they might be for me a people, a name, a praise, and a glory. But they would not listen.

What we appear to have is a dramatic action along with explanation carried out by Jeremiah. If he is declaring God's will by dramatising the imminent exile, his dramatic action and words appear as a form of magic intended to bring about what they signify (compare 51:59-64). If the drama takes place after 597, it may be a dramatic portrayal of the exiles rotting in the camps of Babylon, cut off from Judah and so from the land where they experienced YHWH's special love.

Linen was expensive. It represents Judah's 'pride'. Verse 9 reflects on what Judah learned from the exile: humility (its pride - the linen loincloth - was destroyed) and reliance on YHWH.

Verse 10 picks up a recurring theme in the oracles of Jeremiah: the refusal of the people to listen, their stubborn infidelity as the reason for the devastation that befell them. They are 'good for nothing'.

Verse 11 develops the image of the loincloth as an especially intimate piece of clothing. YHWH's relationship with Judah had this special intimacy. Nothing was ever meant to separate them (the loincloth was not to be taken off even for washing, verse 1). YHWH wanted Judah to cling to him and experience a unique intimacy 'but they would not listen'.

Just as a wine-jar is filled to the brim with wine, so Judah will be filled with distress. Just as drinking a wine-jar to the dregs leads to drunkenness, so Judah will be totally bewildered and confused by the calamity that will fall upon her. If wine-jars smash against each other they shatter. So will it be in Judah: the disintegration of the community will add to the chaos of military defeat. The authors of verses 12-14, looking back on the complete destruction of Judah, see it as a sign that YHWH ‘will not pity or spare or have compassion when I destroy them’ (verse 14).

This sounds like a final appeal of Jeremiah for the people to ‘give glory to YHWH your God’ (verse 16). They are like sheep lost on precipitous tracks and abandoned by their shepherds. They are hoping for light (salvation), but all Jeremiah can promise them is more darkness (judgment and exile).

Jeremiah’s heart is broken. He weeps for his people, as YHWH’s flock heads inexorably into exile.

In verses 18-19 Jeremiah is instructed to tell the king and the queen mother to face up to the fact that complete defeat is staring them in the face. The year is 597, the king is Jehoiachin who at 18 has just taken over the throne. The queen mother is Nehushta (see 2Kings 24:8) who is addressed because she is in a position to exert considerable political influence, especially because of the youth of the king and the extreme circumstances. There is no point in their taking refuge in their titles. They should prepare for inevitable exile.

¹²You shall speak to them this word: Thus says YHWH, the God of Israel: Every wine-jar should be filled with wine. And they will say to you, “Do you think we do not know that every wine-jar should be filled with wine?”
¹³Then you shall say to them: Thus says YHWH: I am about to fill all the inhabitants of this land—the kings who sit on David’s throne, the priests, the prophets, and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem—with drunkenness. ¹⁴And I will dash them one against another, parents and children together, says YHWH. I will not pity or spare or have compassion when I destroy them.

¹⁵Hear and give ear; do not be haughty, for YHWH has spoken.

¹⁶Give glory to YHWH your God before he brings darkness, and before your feet stumble on the mountains at twilight; while you look for light, he turns it into gloom and makes it deep darkness.

¹⁷But if you will not listen, my soul will weep secretly in anguish; my eyes will weep bitterly and run down with tears, because YHWH’s flock must go into exile.

¹⁸Say to the king and queen mother; “Take a lowly seat, for your beautiful crowns have fallen from your heads.”

¹⁹The towns of the Negeb are under siege with no one to relieve them; all Judah is taken into exile, wholly taken into exile.

Too late for repentance

- 20Lift up your eyes and see
those who come from the north.
Where is the flock that was
given into your care,
the sheep in which you took
such pride?**
- 21What will you say when they set
as head over you
those whom you have trained
to be your allies?
Will not pangs take hold of you,
like those of a woman in labour?**
- 22And if you say in your heart,
“Why have these things come
upon me?”
it is for the greatness of your
iniquity
that your skirts are lifted up,
and you are violated.**
- 23Can Ethiopians change their skin
or leopards their spots?
Then also you can do good
who are accustomed to do evil.**
- 24I will scatter you like chaff
driven by wind from the desert.**
- 25This is your lot,
the portion I have measured out
to you, says YHWH,
because you have forgotten me
and trusted in false gods.**
- 26I myself will lift up your skirts
over your face,
and your shame will be seen.**
- 27I have seen your abominations,
your adulteries and neighings,
your shameless prostitutions
on the hills of the countryside.
Woe to you, O Jerusalem!
How long will it be
before you are made clean?**

Jeremiah is addressing Jerusalem, conveying YHWH's judgment. The land is empty of inhabitants. This should not cause surprise. McKane (page 308) comments:

Judah has brought disaster on her own head, for she has encouraged a distant power to come to her country as a saviour and has showed it the road by which it could subsequently come as a hostile invader.

When Jeremiah uses the image of the pangs of labour (verse 21; also 4:31; 6:24; 22:23) his focus is not on pain that leads to the joy of giving birth. It is on the severity of the suffering.

Jerusalem is guilty of adultery (worshipping gods other than YHWH). Her punishment is to be stripped naked, exposed, and violated by those with whom she has played the harlot.

Repentance is as impossible for Jerusalem as it is impossible for Ethiopians to change the colour of their skin, or for a leopard to change its spots. The people will be scattered in exile 'because you have forgotten me and trusted in false gods'.

YHWH himself is responsible for the shame that Jerusalem will suffer (compare Nahum 3:5). It is punishment for giving herself over to pagan cult. The image of sexual infidelity is continued. They are behaving with the abandonment of copulating horses.

YHWH can put up with their behaviour no longer. Cleansing, which demands the emptying of the land and exile, cannot be deferred.

Verses 1-16 would appear to be yet another attempt by exilic or post-exilic authors to account for the fact that Jeremiah was a true prophet and so one who was expected to intercede for the people. Yet in spite of this his interceding was not successful. This was because YHWH willed it so (14:11; see 7:16, 11:14). Usually post-Jeremiah supplementary material is in prose. Here the authors incorporate a poetic description of the distress caused by drought, followed by a communal lament. In the context of the Jeremiah scroll the 'drought' is the result of the devastation of the land consequent upon the invasion (14:12).

The market took place in the open square near the gates. Hence 'her gates languish' (14:2).

The doe was known to be especially devoted to her young. Things are so desperate that even the doe abandons them (verse 5).

In verse 7 the text moves from description to petition. Jeremiah is portrayed as identifying with the people's plea, and, in accordance with his prophetic calling, interceding on their behalf. In verse 7 it is acknowledged that the drought is the result of the people's apostasies. They appeal to YHWH to 'act for your name's sake' (verse 7). They attempt to elicit a positive response from YHWH by reminding him that if he does not act the nations will think he is powerless. YHWH should not be behaving as though he were a passing guest with no real interest in Judah. Judah is his home (compare 9:1). YHWH is all-powerful. What is the point of him appearing weak to Judah's neighbours?

¹The word of YHWH that came to Jeremiah concerning the drought:

²Judah mourns

and her gates languish;
they lie in gloom on the ground,
and the cry of Jerusalem goes up.

³Her nobles send their servants
for water;

they come to the cisterns,
they find no water,
they return with their vessels empty.
They are ashamed and dismayed
and cover their heads.

⁴Because the ground is cracked,
because there has been no rain
on the land

the farmers are dismayed;
they cover their heads.

⁵Even the doe in the field forsakes
her newborn fawn

because there is no grass.

⁶The wild asses stand on the bare
heights,

they pant for air like jackals;
their eyes fail because there is
no herbage.

⁷Although our iniquities testify
against us,

act, YHWH, for your name's sake;
our apostasies indeed are many,
we have sinned against you.

⁸O hope of Israel, its saviour in time
of trouble,

why should you be like a stranger
in the land,
like a traveler turning aside for
the night?

⁹Why should you be like someone
confused,

like a mighty warrior who cannot
give help?

Yet you, YHWH, are in our midst,
and we are called by your name;
do not forsake us!

Jeremiah must not intercede

¹⁰Thus says YHWH concerning this people: Truly they have loved to wander, they have not restrained their feet; YHWH does not accept them, now he will remember their iniquity and punish their sins.

¹¹YHWH said to me: Do not pray for the welfare of this people. ¹²Although they fast, I do not hear their cry, and although they offer burnt offering and grain offering, I do not accept them; but by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence I consume them.

¹³Then I said: "Ah, Lord YHWH! Here are the prophets saying to them, 'You shall not see the sword, nor shall you have famine, but I will give you true peace in this place.'" ¹⁴And YHWH said to me: The prophets are prophesying lies in my name; I did not send them, nor did I command them or speak to them. They are prophesying to you a lying vision, worthless divination, and the deceit of their own minds. ¹⁵Therefore thus says YHWH concerning the prophets who prophesy in my name though I did not send them, and who say, "Sword and famine shall not come on this land": By sword and famine those prophets shall be consumed. ¹⁶And the people to whom they prophesy shall be thrown out into the streets of Jerusalem, victims of famine and sword. There shall be no one to bury them—their wives, their sons, and their daughters. For I will pour out upon them the disaster they deserve.

¹⁷You shall say to them this word.

In liturgical laments it is customary (and expected) that God respond favourably. Verse 10 is a prose comment explaining why YHWH did not respond favourably to the liturgical plea (compare Hosea 8:13). It is an authoritative rejection, based on the people's obstinate careering after any god that held out some promise of helping them. They rejected YHWH and so YHWH is 'punishing their sins'.

Once again verse 11 gives the conclusion of the authors as to why it was possible that Jeremiah, though a genuine prophet, was unable to successfully intercede for the people. It was because YHWH willed it that way (see also 7:16, 11:14).

Verse 13 introduces us to the (false) prophets who claimed to be speaking in YHWH's name and who reassured the people that all would be well. Their 'oracles' were well accepted and made it easier for the people to reject Jeremiah. This exilic or post-exilic comment is no doubt based on the struggle Jeremiah did have with the false prophets. 'This place' in verse 13 appears to refer to the temple.

YHWH declares that the false prophets will suffer the fate he is determined to bring upon his unfaithful people.

Verse 16 provides the context for the drought (14:1-9). It is not a seasonal one, but has been brought on by the devastation inflicted by an invading army. Famine follows on the sword (verse 15).

In verses 17-18 Jeremiah is expressing his profound grief at the dreadful suffering of Judah. Either he is already witnessing it, or he knows it is imminent and inevitable.

The fact that the second part of verse 18 is in prose could indicate that it represents a later (and damning) criticism introduced into the text (compare 23:11).

Verse 19 introduces what appears to be a communal lament such as we have already witnessed in 14:7-9. The focus here is, however, not on drought as such, but on the 'terror' of military invasion, siege and defeat.

Too late there is an acknowledgment of sin (compare 3:25), and once again the hope is that YHWH will desist from the punishment in order to keep his reputation intact ('for your name's sake', verse 21, see verse 7). If the throne in Jerusalem is dishonoured, so will YHWH's 'glory'. Appeal is made to the covenant YHWH made with David (see Psalm 89:30-34; Jeremiah 33:21).

The experience of drought lies behind verse 22. The point being made is that YHWH (and not any other god) is the creator. He controls nature, surely he can control military affairs.

God's silence in the face of the plea of 14:17-22 is ominous.

**¹⁷Let my eyes run down with tears
night and day,
and let them not cease,
for the virgin daughter - my people -
is struck down with a crushing blow,
with a very grievous wound.**

**¹⁸If I go out into the field,
look – those killed by the sword!
And if I enter the city,
look – those sick with famine!**

**For both prophet and priest ply their
trade throughout the land, and have no
knowledge.**

**¹⁹Have you completely rejected Judah?
Does your heart loathe Zion?
Why have you struck us down
so that there is no healing for us?
We look for peace, but find no good;
for a time of healing, but there is
terror instead.**

**²⁰We acknowledge our wickedness,
YHWH,
the iniquity of our ancestors,
for we have sinned against you.**

**²¹Do not spurn us, for your name's
sake;
do not dishonour your glorious
throne;
remember and do not break your
covenant with us.**

**²²Can any idols of the nations bring
rain? Or can the heavens give showers?
Is it not you, YHWH our God? We set
our hope on you, for it is you who cre-
ated all this.**

Their fate is sealed

¹Then YHWH said to me: Though Moses and Samuel stood before me, yet my heart would not turn toward this people. Send them out of my sight, and let them go! ²And when they say to you, "Where shall we go?" you shall say to them: Thus says YHWH: Those destined for pestilence, to pestilence, and those destined for the sword, to the sword; those destined for famine, to famine, and those destined for captivity, to captivity.

³And I will appoint over them four kinds of destroyers, says YHWH: the sword to kill, the dogs to drag away, and the birds of the air and the wild animals of the earth to devour and destroy. ⁴I will make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth because of what King Manasseh son of Hezekiah of Judah did in Jerusalem.

This is a powerful argument in support of the authenticity of Jeremiah's prophetic calling, in spite of his failure to intercede successfully. Not even Moses or Samuel (the great prophets and intercessors) could have succeeded in averting divine punishment on Judah.

Verses 2-4 seem to be further elaborations on verse 1. YHWH's intention is fixed. Nothing can prevent utter destruction, even the corpses lying unburied for the birds of prey and the wild animals.

With intercession ruled out, there is nothing to stop the full carrying out of the covenant curses: pestilence, sword, famine and captivity.

In verse 4 there is another list of four destroyers which kill, drag away, devour and destroy.

Focusing special blame on Manasseh (15:4) is typical of the Deuteronomic School (see 2Kings 21:11-17; 23:26; 24:3). Even the heroic goodness of King Josiah was not sufficient to wipe out the sin of Manasseh in introducing worship of the Assyrian god into the Temple sanctuary.

In verses 5-9 Jeremiah is conveying YHWH's sentiments concerning Jerusalem. This is not the first time we have witnessed YHWH lamenting (see 9:9-10; 12:7-13). Jerusalem has brought disaster upon herself by rejecting YHWH (verse 6). There is no point in expecting God to relent (compare Amos 4:6-11).

The 'winnowing' in verse 7 is of people. It is imagined as taking place in the square of the city gates - which is where court was held and judgment passed.

Women have lost their husbands (hence 'widows') and their sons. The carnage has taken place in the full light of day.

Even women who have reached the fullness of motherhood (7 sons, verse 9), and who should expect the esteem of the community, faint away when they hear the news of the death of their boys. The future holds nothing for them but grief.

In verse 10 Jeremiah gives voice to the conflict he is suffering because of his prophetic vocation, the kind of conflict that could be expected were he involved in fraudulent business dealings.

YHWH's response (verse 11) is to ask Jeremiah to trust that it is all for Jeremiah's good, even though he has to put up with opposition.

Verse 12 is obscure. Jeremiah is complaining against local opposition. He seems to be being asked to 'steel' himself against the invasion from the north. His prophetic intervention cannot stop what is determined.

**⁵Who will have pity on you,
O Jerusalem,
Who will bemoan you?
Who will turn aside
to ask about your welfare?**

**⁶You have rejected me, says YHWH,
you turned away from me;
so I have stretched out my hand
against you and destroyed you.
I am weary of relenting.**

**⁷I have winnowed them as with a
winnowing fork
in the gates of the land;
I took their children from them,
I have destroyed my people;
they did not turn from their ways.**

**⁸Their widows became more
numerous than the sand of the seas;
I have brought against the mothers
of youths**

**a destroyer at noonday;
I have made anguish and terror
fall upon her suddenly.**

**⁹She who bore seven has languished;
she has swooned away;
her sun went down while it was
yet day;
she has been shamed and disgraced.
And the rest of them I will give to
the sword
when they confront their enemies,
says YHWH.**

**¹⁰Woe is me, my mother, that you ever
bore me,
a man of strife and contention to the
whole land!
I have not lent, nor have I borrowed,
yet all of them curse me.**

**¹¹YHWH said: Surely I have intervened
in your life for good,
even though I have imposed
enemies on you in a time of
trouble and distress.**

**¹²Can iron break, iron from the north,
and bronze?**

What does it mean to be close to YHWH?

**¹³Your wealth and your treasures I will
give as plunder,
as the price for all your sins,
throughout all your territory.**

**¹⁴I will make you serve your enemies
in a land that you do not know,
for in my anger a fire is kindled
that shall burn forever.**

**¹⁵YHWH, you know;
remember me and visit me,
and bring down retribution for me
on my persecutors.
In your forbearance do not
seize hold of me;
know that on your account I suffer
insult.**

**¹⁶Your words came to me,
and I ate them,
and your words became to me a joy
and the delight of my heart;
for I bear your name,
YHWH, God of hosts.**

**¹⁷I did not sit enjoying the company
of merry-makers;
under the weight of your hand
I sat alone,
for you had filled me with
indignation.**

**¹⁸Why is my pain unceasing,
my wound incurable,
refusing to be healed?
Truly, you are to me like a
deceitful brook, like waters that fail.**

This fragment (15:13-14) seems to be misplaced here. It fits better where it appears again in 17:3-4.

On the fire of God's anger compare Deuteronomy 32:22.

Jeremiah is at breaking-point. He pleads for the experience of close intimacy with YHWH, and wants YHWH to get rid of those who are persecuting him. Otherwise Jeremiah himself will give way under the constant opposition – opposition brought on by his obedience to YHWH.

In verse 16 he acknowledges a profound tension between the delight he experiences from the intimacy he has with YHWH, and the bitterness that comes from the content of the revelations he receives. The intimacy is experienced in receiving YHWH's words. To bear YHWH's name is to belong to YHWH (compare 7:10).

Jeremiah does not seem to be criticising the 'merry-makers' (in line with Psalm 1). Rather he is highlighting the loneliness imposed upon him by his vocation as a prophet who is called to speak words no one wants to hear..

Caught between the sympathy he feels for the people and the content of the judgment from YHWH that he must convey, Jeremiah feels let down by YHWH. He thought the close communion would be refreshing. In fact he feels alone, abandoned and about to collapse from thirst.

God's response (verses 19-21) is hardly the one Jeremiah was hoping for.

YHWH reminds the prophet to repent of his hesitations in YHWH's regard. He must speak only what YHWH instructs him to speak, thus standing his ground and not watering down the message through misguided sympathy with the people. The goal is for the people to listen and repent. For that to happen Jeremiah must not be distracted by feelings of compassion. YHWH does promise: 'I am with you to save you and deliver you' (15:20). However, this is dependent on Jeremiah conforming his will to the mission entrusted to him (verse 19).

Verses 1-9 could be asking Jeremiah to take a symbolic stance and be a powerful sign to his contemporaries that this is not the time to be having children. It could, however, be addressed to the community. How can they bring children into a world on the verge of tragedy.

The text elaborates on the imminent devastation (see 14:11-18; 15:1-4; also 7:33, 8:2) and on Jeremiah's loneliness (see 15:10-18). He is isolated because YHWH has taken from him the mediatory, intercessory, role normally associated with the call of a prophet. He cannot avert the catastrophe. He can only announce it.

Nothing is to be gained by participating in the ceremonial meal associated with mourning. Nothing surpasses the dreadful statement in verse 5. YHWH has taken away his peace, his steadfast love and his mercy!

¹⁹Therefore thus says YHWH:

**If you turn back, I will take you back,
and you shall stand before me.**

**If you utter what is precious,
and not what is worthless,
you shall serve as my mouth.**

**It is they who will turn to you,
not you who will turn to them.**

²⁰And I will make you to this people

a fortified wall of bronze;

they will fight against you,

**but they shall not prevail over you,
for I am with you to save you**

and deliver you, says YHWH.

²¹I will deliver you out of the hand

of the wicked,

**and redeem you from the grasp
of the ruthless.**

¹The word of YHWH came to me: ²You shall not take a wife, nor shall you have sons or daughters in this place. ³For thus says YHWH concerning the sons and daughters who are born in this place, and concerning the mothers who bear them and the fathers who beget them in this land: ⁴They shall die of deadly diseases. They shall not be lamented, nor shall they be buried; they shall become like dung on the surface of the ground. They shall perish by the sword and by famine, and their dead bodies shall become food for the birds of the air and for the wild animals of the earth. ⁵For thus says YHWH: Do not enter the house of mourning, or go to lament, or bemoan them; for I have taken away my peace from this people, says YHWH, my steadfast love and mercy. ⁶Both great and small shall die in this land; they shall not be buried, and no one shall lament for them; there shall be no gashing, no shaving of the head for them. ⁷No one shall break bread for the mourner, to offer comfort for the dead; nor shall anyone give them the cup of consolation to drink for their fathers or their mothers.

⁸You shall not go into the house of feasting to sit with them, to eat and drink. ⁹For thus says YHWH of hosts, the God of Israel: I am going to banish from this place, in your days and before your eyes, the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride.

¹⁰And when you tell this people all these words, and they say to you, "Why has YHWH pronounced all this great evil against us? What is our iniquity? What is the sin that we have committed against YHWH our God?" ¹¹then you shall say to them: It is because your ancestors have forsaken me, says YHWH, and have gone after other gods and have served and worshipped them, and have forsaken me and have not kept my law; ¹²and because you have behaved worse than your ancestors, for here you are, every one of you, following your stubborn evil will, refusing to listen to me. ¹³Therefore I will hurl you out of this land into a land that neither you nor your ancestors have known, and there you shall serve other gods day and night, for I will show you no favour.

¹⁴Therefore, the days are surely coming, says YHWH, when it shall no longer be said, "As YHWH lives who brought the people of Israel up out of the land of Egypt," ¹⁵but "As YHWH lives who brought the people of Israel up out of the land of the north and out of all the lands where he had driven them." For I will bring them back to their own land that I gave to their ancestors.

Verses 4-7 speak of the mourning associated with funeral rites. Gone, too, is the rejoicing associated with marriage rites (verses 8-9). The devastation that is imminent is no time for such rejoicing. There is nothing to celebrate since YHWH has withdrawn his peace, steadfast love and mercy (verse 5).

Not for the first time, blame for the dreadful catastrophe suffered by Judah and Jerusalem and the consequent exile is attributed to the people who have 'worshipped other gods, and forsaken YHWH and have not kept the Torah'(verse 11). In this they have followed the example of their ancestors, but have behaved even worse (verse 12). This must be the case since (according to their understanding) the just YHWH has punished them more.

Verse 13 has the exile resulting from YHWH hurling his stubborn and wayward people out of his land. It speaks, too, of the terror of the unknown (compare 5:15-17; 9:15).

Verses 14-15 suddenly break in between verse 13 and verse 16. They fit better in 23:1-8 where we find them repeated. They were inserted here, perhaps to bring some light into a very dark passage, and appear to be composed in the light of the 'miracle' of the return from exile, which is seen as a new beginning, even greater than YHWH's original act of bringing the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt.

Verse 16 appears to be composed in light of the devastation of Judah. There will be nowhere to hide.

This is because they cannot hide from YHWH (verse 17).

The 'double repayment'(verse 18, compare Isaiah 40:2) may be an allusion to the events of 597 followed by the destruction of the temple and city in 587.

The idols are referred to as carcasses because they are lifeless and because they cause pollution.

Verses 19-21 appear to be a post-exilic (and poor) imitation of Jeremiah's poetry.

Verse 20 applies the ideas of 2:11 to the Gentile world. The worthless idols worshipped by their ancestors were inherited from the Gentile world, and the focus in verses 20-21 moves to this world. The Gentiles will see YHWH's power and come to realise that their gods are not gods at all, but that the true (real) God is YHWH. Our mind goes back to the story of the plagues of Egypt. The powerful display of YHWH's might was meant to show the greatest nation on earth 'that I am YHWH'(Exodus 10:2).

The danger was that the collapse of Judah would be read as a sign of the weakness of Judah's God. The interpretation given here is that, on the contrary, the nations, seeing the power of YHWH in punishing Judah, will be amazed and turn to him.

¹⁶I am now sending for many fishermen, says YHWH, and they shall catch them; and afterward I will send for many hunters, and they shall hunt them from every mountain and every hill, and out of the clefts of the rocks. ¹⁷For my eyes are on all their ways; they are not hidden from my presence, nor is their iniquity concealed from my sight. ¹⁸And I will doubly repay their iniquity and their sin, because they have polluted my land with the carcasses of their detestable idols, and have filled my inheritance with their abominable images.

**¹⁹YHWH, my strength and my stronghold,
my refuge in the day of trouble,
to you will the nations come
from the ends of the earth and say:
Our ancestors have inherited
nothing but lies,
worthless idols of no use.**

**²⁰Can mortal human beings make gods
for themselves gods?
Such are no gods!**

**²¹Therefore I am surely going
to teach them,
this time I am going to show them
my power and my might,
and they shall know that my name
is YHWH.**

Trust only in YHWH

- ¹The sin of Judah is written with
an iron tool;
with a diamond point it is engraved
on the tablet of their hearts,
and on the horns of their altars,
²while their children remember
their altars and their sacred poles,
beside every green tree, and on the
high hills,
³on the mountains in the open country.
Your wealth and all your treasures
I will give for spoil
as the price of your sin
throughout all your territory.
⁴By your own act you shall lose
the heritage that I gave you,
and I will make you serve your
enemies
in a land that you do not know,
for in my anger a fire is kindled
that shall burn forever.
- ⁵Thus says YHWH:
Cursed are those who trust in mere
human beings
and make mere flesh their strength,
whose hearts turn away from YHWH.
⁶They shall be like a person living
destitute in the desert,
and shall not see when relief comes.
They shall live in the parched places
of the wilderness,
in an uninhabited salt land.
⁷Blessed are those who trust in YHWH,
who make YHWH their source of safety.
⁸They shall be like a tree planted by
water,
sending out its roots by the stream.
It shall not fear when heat comes,
and its leaves shall stay green;
in the year of drought it is not anxious,
and it does not cease to bear fruit.

Chapter 17:1-13 employs various 'wisdom sayings' to support the key critique of Jeremiah. The Hebrew text of verses 1-4 is in poor shape (and these verses are not found in the Septuagint Version). They seem to be making the point that Judah's sin is neither superficial nor easily erased. The blood on the horns of the altar from the animals sacrificed to atone for sin witnesses to the reality of sin, but cannot erase it, because, as verse 2 makes clear compulsive infatuation with idolatry is rampant.

Their behaviour is responsible for the loss of the land and the return to 'slavery' in exile.

In verses 5-8 Jeremiah insists that trust is to be placed, not in human beings or human endeavour, but in YHWH (compare Psalm 118:8).

If people trust in human beings, when disaster strikes they will find themselves lost and destitute. Whereas, if they put their trust in YHWH, they will be like a tree whose source of life is not dependent on the barrenness of the locality, because they are drawing on the source of life.

We are reminded of Psalm 1.

Jeremiah's inability to get anyone to heed his words and truly repent helps explain his outburst in verse 9 (see 4:18; compare Genesis 6:5; Psalm 64:6).

Verse 10 is an understanding of YHWH that aims to explain apparent injustices in the world. Only YHWH can see the heart, so only YHWH can judge justly (see Psalm 7:9).

Verse 11 stands on its own. The partridge was thought to steal eggs and hatch them as its own. The young birds were thought to fly off to their own nest. So will it be with those who unjustly acquire wealth. They can't keep it forever.

Verse 12, too, stands alone. If Jeremiah is the author he is glorying in the Jerusalem temple (see 14:21) – soon to be destroyed!

The prose comment asserts that to forsake YHWH (their only hope, verse 13a) means that one's name will not live on after one's death. The name is scribbled in dust and will soon disappear. 'At their end they will prove to be fools' (verse 11).

**⁹The heart is devious above all else;
it is perverse –
who can understand it?**

**¹⁰I YHWH test the mind
and search the heart,
to give to all according to their ways,
according to the fruit of their deeds.**

**¹¹Like the partridge hatching what it
did not lay,
so are all who amass wealth
unjustly;
in mid-life it will leave them,
and at their end they will prove
to be fools.**

**¹²O glorious throne, exalted from
the beginning,
shrine of our sanctuary!**

¹³O hope of Israel! YHWH!

**All who forsake you shall be put to
shame; those who turn away from you
shall be recorded in the dust, for they
have forsaken the fountain of living
water, YHWH.**

**¹⁴Heal me, YHWH, and I shall be
healed;
save me, and I shall be saved;
for you are the object of my praise.**

**¹⁵See how they say to me,
“Where is the word of YHWH?
Let it come!”**

**¹⁶But I have not run away from being
a shepherd in your service,
nor have I desired the fatal day.
You know what came from my lips;
it was before your face.**

**¹⁷Do not become a terror to me;
you are my refuge in the day of
disaster;**

**¹⁸Let my persecutors be shamed,
but do not let me be shamed;
let them be dismayed,
but do not let me be dismayed;
bring on them the day of disaster;
destroy them with double destruction!**

Jeremiah is crying out for healing of spirit, crushed by the insufferable burden of being a prophet at such a dreadful period of his people's history.

The people reject him. Clearly the city has not yet been captured. They are scoffing at Jeremiah for the threats that he claims come from YHWH. They can't and won't believe him. It is impossible (in their mind) that their God would allow such a disaster to befall them.

Jeremiah pleads with YHWH. He has been faithful to the mission given him by YHWH. It is not as if he enjoys conveying threats or wants them to come about. Surely YHWH can do something about the way that the people are treating him. After all he is only the messenger. YHWH knows all this.

Surely YHWH is not on the side of those who are rejecting Jeremiah's message and are also rejecting him.

Understandably, Jeremiah wants YHWH to bring on the 'day of disaster' (compare 12:3). That is the only way that the people will stop making him a laughing-stock and persecuting him. It is necessary, too, to validate the prophetic word, and so YHWH's reputation for speaking the truth.

Jeremiah's anguished plea is met by silence!

This prose comment is perhaps best understood as an indication of the importance of Sabbath observance in post-exilic Judah (compare Isaiah 56:4-5; Nehemiah 13:15-22). Sabbath observance (see the decalogue, Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15) became the key criterion of obedience to the Torah (compare Ezekiel 20:12-21).

The post-exilic authors of the Jeremiah scroll are telling their contemporaries that, if they are faithful to the Sabbath they can look forward to a Messianic Age.

If they are unfaithful, they will suffer the fate threatened by Jeremiah – the fate that led to the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile.

¹⁹Thus said YHWH to me: Go and stand at the People's Gate, by which the kings of Judah enter and by which they go out, and at all the gates of Jerusalem, ²⁰and say to them: Hear the word of YHWH, you kings of Judah, and all Judah, and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, who enter by these gates.

²¹Thus says YHWH: For the sake of your lives, take care that you do not bear a burden on the sabbath day or bring it in by the gates of Jerusalem. ²²And do not carry a burden out of your houses on the sabbath or do any work, but keep the sabbath day holy, as I commanded your ancestors. ²³Yet they did not listen or incline their ear; they stiffened their necks and would not hear or receive instruction.

²⁴But if you listen to me, says YHWH, and bring in no burden by the gates of this city on the sabbath day, but keep the sabbath day holy and do no work on it, ²⁵then there shall enter by the gates of this city kings who sit on the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses, they and their officials, the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and this city shall be inhabited forever. ²⁶And people shall come from the towns of Judah and the places around Jerusalem, from the land of Benjamin, from the Shephelah, from the hill country, and from the Negeb, bringing burnt offerings and sacrifices, grain offerings and frankincense, and bringing thank offerings to the house of YHWH.

²⁷But if you do not listen to me, to keep the sabbath day holy, and to carry in no burden through the gates of Jerusalem on the sabbath day, then I will kindle a fire in its gates; it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem and shall not be quenched.

YHWH the potter

¹The word that came to Jeremiah from YHWH: ²“Come, go down to the potter’s house, and there I will let you hear my words.” ³So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel. ⁴The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.

⁵Then the word of YHWH came to me: ⁶Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says YHWH. Just like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.

⁷At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, ⁸but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. ⁹And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, ¹⁰but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it.

¹¹Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says YHWH: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings.

¹²But they say, “It is no use! We will follow our own plans, and each of us will act according to the stubbornness of our evil will.”

Jeremiah is portrayed as visiting a potter’s house. What he sees there becomes a parable of YHWH’s message that Jeremiah is to share with the people. The basic thrust of the image as understood by the authors of the NRSV translation is that the potter is not satisfied with the form of the clay vessel and so reworks it to produce a better pot. If this is the correct understanding (rather than breaking the unsatisfactory pot and making a separate one), Jeremiah is holding out hope for Judah (the clay). YHWH is offering a second chance.

Verses 7-10 offer a later commentary, accenting the freedom of YHWH (the potter) to change his plan. Judah’s response is crucial. If Judah (the clay) turns from evil YHWH will change his mind and not destroy it. If Judah does evil, YHWH will change his mind and not carry out his good intentions.

Verse 11 is yet another application focusing not on the freedom of the potter to change his mind but on the importance of the clay submitting to the potter’s hands and allowing itself to be formed according to the potter’s desire.

In fact Judah was destroyed (the clay jar was shattered). This must have been because the people did not listen to Jeremiah but continued stubbornly to resist YHWH’s hand.

Verse 13 echoes 2:10-13. Israel's behaviour makes no sense. For the second time Israel is called 'virgin' (see 14:17). She has not produced life.

Verse 14 gives examples of predictability in nature. Sirion (Mt. Hermon) is the highest peak in the Anti-Lebanon range.

Israel, by contrast, is behaving in unnatural ways. Instead of following the ancient, well-tried roads (compare 6:16), the people have gone off the track through worship of pagan deities, causing shock and horror to anyone who watches their foolish behaviour.

They have stubbornly turned their back on YHWH. He will refuse to look upon them, so that the onslaught of the enemy, like the hot wind from the desert, will cause them to shrivel up and be scattered abroad (compare Psalm 1:4). They will experience YHWH's absence (his back, not his face).

¹³Therefore thus says YHWH:

**Ask among the nations:
Who has heard the like of this?
The virgin Israel has done
a most horrible thing.**

**¹⁴Does the snow of Lebanon leave
the crags of Sirion?**

**Do the mountain waters run dry,
the cold flowing streams?**

**¹⁵But my people have forgotten me,
they burn offerings to *idols*;
they have stumbled in their ways,
in the ancient roads,
and have gone into bypaths,
not the highway,**

**¹⁶making their land a horror,
a thing to be hissed at forever.
All who pass by it are horrified
and shake their heads.**

**¹⁷Like the wind from the east,
I will scatter them before the enemy.
I will show them my back,
not my face,
in the day of their calamity.**

Jeremiah complains

18Then they said, “Come, let us make plots against Jeremiah – for instruction shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet. Come, let us bring charges against him, and let us not heed any of his words.”

19Give heed to me, YHWH,
listen to what my adversaries say!
20Is evil a recompense for good?
Yet they have dug a pit for my life.
Remember how I stood before you
to speak good for them,
to turn away your wrath from them.

21Therefore give their children over
to famine;
hurl them out to the power
of the sword,
let their wives become childless
and widowed.
May their men meet death
by pestilence,
their youths be slain by the sword
in battle.

22May a cry be heard from their houses,
when you bring the marauder
suddenly upon them!
For they have dug a pit to catch me,
and laid snares for my feet.

23Yet you, YHWH, know
all their plotting to kill me.
Do not forgive their iniquity,
do not blot out their sin from
your sight.
Let them be tripped up before you;
deal with them while you are angry.

Verse 18 appears to be editorial (compare Ezekiel 7:26), the aim being to provide a context for verses 19-23. It highlights Jeremiah's isolation. His opponents reckon they have enough priests to interpret the Torah, enough wise men to guide their behaviour, and enough prophets to speak to them from YHWH. They don't need this maverick Jeremiah with his constant message of doom, with his (in their view) false threats.

Jeremiah is pleading with YHWH to recognise the injustice of the behaviour of those who oppose him. Jeremiah has done his best to intercede on the people's behalf. He feels deeply for them, even though he sees clearly how horrible their behaviour is.

We are used to Jeremiah warning the people of YHWH's punishment for their behaviour. Verses 21-23 are not presented as a 'word of YHWH'. Rather we have a passionate outburst. Jeremiah wants the people to be punished to revenge the way they are treating him. Jeremiah is no Jesus figure!

Once again, Jeremiah receives no reply.

The core of this scene is an action (the shattering of an earthenware jug at a rubbish tip) carried out by Jeremiah and accompanied by an explanation that uses the shattering as a symbol of the destruction that will fall upon Jerusalem (compare the action in 13:1-9).

The fact that the explanatory sermon is addressed to the 'kings' (plural) of Judah is one among a number of indications that this is a later supplement.

The accusation of worshipping other gods is a constant theme of Jeremiah. The later authors have supplemented this with reference to the dreadful practice of child sacrifice (see Psalm 106:37-38). This is a practice especially associated with King Manasseh (see 2 Kings 21:6,16).

Verse 6 introduces an expansion on 7:31-32. This is the judgment that follows on the indictment. The valley of Hinnom (Ge Hinnom) became a symbol for the self-destruction brought on themselves by those who reject God. In the New Testament the Greek equivalent is used ('gehenna' see Matthew 5:22,29,30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15,33, where it is customarily translated 'hell').

Topheth (see 2 Kings 23:10) would appear to be a cult site in the valley where child sacrifice to the god Molech took place.

Verse 9 describes some of the worst things that took place during the siege of Jerusalem.

¹Thus said YHWH: Go and buy a potter's earthenware jug. Take with you some of the elders of the people and some of the senior priests, ²and go out to the valley of Ben Hinnom at the entry of the Potsherd Gate, and proclaim there the words that I tell you. ³You shall say: Hear the word of YHWH, O kings of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem.

Thus says YHWH of hosts, the God of Israel: I am going to bring such disaster upon this place that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle. ⁴Because the people have forsaken me, and have profaned this place by making offerings in it to other gods whom neither they nor their ancestors nor the kings of Judah have known; and because they have filled this place with the blood of the innocent, ⁵and gone on building the high places of Baal to burn their children in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal, which I did not command or decree, nor did it enter my mind.

⁶Therefore the days are surely coming, says YHWH, when this place shall no more be called Topheth, or the valley of Ben Hinnom, but the valley of Slaughter. ⁷And in this place I will make void the plans of Judah and Jerusalem, and will make them fall by the sword before their enemies, and by the hand of those who seek their life. I will give their dead bodies for food to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the earth. ⁸And I will make this city a horror, a thing to be hissed at; everyone who passes by it will be horrified and will hiss because of all its disasters. ⁹And I will make them eat the flesh of their sons and the flesh of their daughters, and all shall eat the flesh of their neighbours in the siege, and in the distress with which their enemies and those who seek their life afflict them.

¹⁰Then you shall break the jug in the sight of those who go with you, ¹¹and shall say to them: Thus says YHWH of hosts: So will I break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter's vessel, so that it can never be mended. In Topheth they shall bury until there is no more room to bury. ¹²Thus will I do to this place, says YHWH, and to its inhabitants, making this city like Topheth. ¹³And the houses of Jerusalem and the houses of the kings of Judah shall be defiled like the place of Topheth—all the houses upon whose roofs offerings have been made to the whole host of heaven, and libations have been poured out to other gods.

¹⁴When Jeremiah came from Topheth, where YHWH had sent him to prophesy, he stood in the court of YHWH's house and said to all the people: ¹⁵Thus says YHWH of hosts, the God of Israel: I am now bringing upon this city and upon all its towns all the disaster that I have pronounced against it, because they have stiffened their necks, refusing to hear my words.

Some have thought that the breaking of the jar by Jeremiah is an example of sympathetic magic - something familiar to students of ancient Near Eastern and Egyptian cult. This may be so, but McKane (page 459) adds a caution:

It is the quality and profundity of the prophetic utterance, its authentic humanity, its piercing vision of the truth (for prophets do not arrive at the truth without suffering for it), which enable it to be a word of God. It is this and not a power of incantation or sympathetic magic which lends it endurance and enables it to live and be meaningful even in our times.

As regards the idea of later authors supplementing the words and deeds of Jeremiah, McKane (page 457) writes:

We should assume that our extant book of Jeremiah is the product of a complicated, literary history, and the processes by which it arrived at its present shape operated over a long period. The prose of the book of Jeremiah is bound up with these processes. We should think of the extant book and text and commentary, and understand the prose as exegesis operating on a nucleus of material which is sometimes poetry, although in chapter 19 it is prose.

Verses 14-15 are a literary device for linking 19:1-13 to the following chapter.

While the clash between Jeremiah and the high ranking temple official could well represent a genuine historical memory, the text itself appears to be a later recording and comment. Verse 1 is editorial, linking Jeremiah's treatment with the breaking of the jug in chapter 19 and the threats that are recorded there. In verses 1-2 we have the first occurrence of Jeremiah being called a 'prophet' (apart from the Prologue, 1:5), and his ministry being named 'prophesying'.

The temple establishment continues to speak of 'peace'. Not the prophet. Verses 4-6 develop the idea of 'terror' by expanding on the frequent theme of Jeremiah's oracles in relation to the destruction of the city and the ensuing exile in Babylon.

Verse 6 would seem to be founded on a memory of the exilic or post-exilic authors of what happened to Pashhur and his family.

¹Now the priest Pashhur son of Immer, who was chief officer in the house of YHWH, heard Jeremiah prophesying these things. ²Then Pashhur had the prophet Jeremiah flogged, and put him in the stocks that were in the upper Benjamin Gate of the house of YHWH. ³The next morning when Pashhur released Jeremiah from the stocks, Jeremiah said to him, YHWH has named you not Pashhur but "Terror-all-around." ⁴For thus says YHWH: I am making you a terror to yourself and to all your friends; and they shall fall by the sword of their enemies while you look on. And I will give all Judah into the hand of the king of Babylon; he shall carry them captive to Babylon, and shall kill them with the sword. ⁵I will give all the wealth of this city, all its gains, all its prized belongings, and all the treasures of the kings of Judah into the hand of their enemies, who shall plunder them, and seize them, and carry them to Babylon. ⁶And you, Pashhur, and all who live in your house, shall go into captivity, and to Babylon you shall go; there you shall die, and there you shall be buried, you and all your friends, to whom you have prophesied falsely.

⁷YHWH, you have seduced me,
and I was seduced;
you have overpowered me,
and you have prevailed.
I have become a laughingstock
all day long;
everyone mocks me.

⁸For whenever I speak,
I must cry out in anguish,
I must shout, "Violence and
destruction!"
For the word of YHWH has
become for me
a source of reproach and derision
all day long.

⁹If I say, "I will not mention it,
or speak any more in his name,"
then within me there is some-
thing like a burning fire
shut up in my bones;
I am weary with holding it in,
and I cannot.

¹⁰For I hear many whispering:
Terror is all around!
Denounce him! Let us denounce him!
All my close friends
are watching for me to stumble.
"Perhaps he can be enticed,
and we can prevail against him,
and take our revenge on him."

¹¹But YHWH is with me like a
dread warrior;
therefore my persecutors will
stumble, and not prevail.
They will be greatly shamed,
for they will not succeed.
Their eternal dishonour
will never be forgotten.

¹²YHWH of hosts, test the righteous,
you see the heart and the mind;
let me see your retribution upon them
for to you I have committed my cause.

¹³Sing to YHWH; praise YHWH!
For he has delivered the poor
from the hands of evildoers.

Jeremiah is not complaining here of being physically ill-treated. (These verses are not directly related to the previous ones). Rather it is the fact that he has lost all credibility with the community, and finds himself the constant butt of their jokes. This is because of the words that YHWH moves him to utter - words that are always about 'violence and destruction'.

The image that opens verse 7 is a striking one: it is of a virgin who is seduced and violated (see Exodus 22:16; Deuteronomy 22:25).

Jeremiah experiences a profound love-communion with YHWH, but he finds no pleasure in the words that he must utter out of this communion. Part of him would like to be silent, but the truth that emerges from his encounter and his anguish keeps bursting from him. What he finds insufferably painful is that no one is taking any notice of his warnings. Rather, they laugh him to scorn, and he does not experience YHWH's support.

There is a shift in verse 10. Jeremiah is aware that there is a conspiracy that poses a threat to his life (compare Psalm 31:13). He cannot trust even those who appear as his friends.

However he continues to place his trust in YHWH and cries out to him (hence he can be termed 'poor', see verse 13). He is confident that the truth, and not his enemies, will prevail.

Verse 12 is inserted from 11:20, for it expresses well Jeremiah's trust in YHWH. Verse 13, with its plural infinitives, appears to be a liturgical cry of praise from the final editors of the scroll.

Comparisons are drawn between this cry of Jeremiah and the cry of Job (Job 3:3-10). In both we hear a protest against the meaninglessness of a life of senseless 'toil, sorrow and shame'. In the contrast between verses 13-17 and verses 14-18, we see the tension inherent in real faith.

The cities (verse 16) are Sodom and Gomorrah (see Genesis 19:25).

- ¹⁴Cursed be the day
on which I was born!
The day when my mother bore me,
let it not be blessed!**
- ¹⁵Cursed be the man who brought
the news to my father, saying,
"A child is born to you, a son,"
making him very glad.**
- ¹⁶Let that man be like the cities
that YHWH overthrew without pity;
let him hear a cry in the morning
and an alarm at noon,**
- ¹⁷because he did not kill me
in the womb;
so my mother would have been
my grave,
and her womb hold a child
never born.**
- ¹⁸Why did I come forth from the womb
to see toil and sorrow,
and spend my days in shame?**

