

8. JUDGMENT & HINTS OF HOPE

JEREMIAH 21:1 – 25:14

¹This is the word that came to Jeremiah from YHWH, when King Zedekiah sent to him Pashhur son of Malchiah and the priest Zephaniah son of Maaseiah, saying, ²“Please inquire of YHWH on our behalf, for King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon is making war against us; perhaps YHWH will perform a wonderful deed for us, as he has often done, and will make him withdraw from us.”

³Then Jeremiah said to them: ⁴Thus you shall say to Zedekiah: Thus says YHWH, the God of Israel: I am going to turn back the weapons of war that are in your hands and with which you are fighting against the king of Babylon and against the Chaldeans who are besieging you outside the walls; and I will bring them together into the centre of this city. ⁵I myself will fight against you with outstretched hand and mighty arm, in anger, in fury, and in great wrath. ⁶And I will strike down the inhabitants of this city, both human beings and animals; they shall die of a great pestilence.

⁷Afterward, says YHWH, I will give King Zedekiah of Judah, and his servants, and the people in this city – those who survive the pestilence, sword, and famine – into the hands of King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon, into the hands of their enemies, into the hands of those who seek their lives. He shall strike them down with the edge of the sword; he shall not pity them, or spare them, or have compassion.

The authors of the scroll have inserted this passage here as an introduction to the material in chapters 21-24. There are parallels with the events described later in the scroll (see Jeremiah 34:1-6; 37:3-10; 52:4-11). The background is the rebellion instigated by Zedekiah in 588, which led to the siege by Nebuchadrezzar, the capture of Zedekiah, the destruction of Jerusalem and the taking of more of the inhabitants of the city into exile in Babylon.

Pashhur (verse 1) is not the priest Pashhur ben Immer mentioned in 20:1.

Everything else having failed, the king is asking Jeremiah to carry out one of the central functions of a prophet: to intercede with YHWH. Zedekiah is hoping God will do what he did in Egypt against the Pharaoh, and protect Jerusalem as he did in 701 (verse 2; see Isaiah 37:33-37; 2Kings 19:35-36).

Jeremiah tells the king's ambassadors that YHWH has taken sides with the besieging army and is fighting with them against Zedekiah and his subjects, 'with outstretched hand and mighty arm' (verse 5; see Deuteronomy 26:8; Psalm 136:12).

The final statement in verse 6 is a reminder of the pestilence that broke out in the camp of the Assyrians in 701 (see 2Kings 19:35; Isaiah 37:36). There is no hope of this happening again. On the contrary, it is the inhabitants of Jerusalem who will experience the pestilence, for YHWH is angry with them.

Verse 7 is a further expansion, reflecting the experience of what happened at the end of the siege. Jerusalem was captured and its inhabitants slain or taken into exile. YHWH's 'wonderful deed' (verse 2) is directed against Judah, not in favour of it.

The writers responsible for verses 8-10 seem to be drawing in verse 8 on the theme of choice found in the writings of the Deuteronomic School (see Deuteronomy 30:15). To the people Jeremiah is to offer the possibility of hope.

Jeremiah is presented as conveying to the people YHWH's determination that Jerusalem will be burnt. Verse 10 echoes Amos 9:4 which is in reference to Samaria.

Verse 9 reflects the fact that not all the inhabitants were killed. Some lived on: those considered valuable were taken into exile; the others left behind.

Verses 11-12 are a separate unit: an oracle in which Jeremiah reminds the king of his responsibility to see that justice is done, and done expeditiously, to protect the oppressed (this is developed in the prose expansion, 22:1-5). If there is to be an escape, it will be through the exercise of justice.

Verses 13-14 constitute yet another separate oracle, addressed against the argument that Jerusalem is impregnable because of its position (on a 'rock' surrounded by valleys). Jerusalem cannot escape God's judgment. It will be burnt like a forest and its environs will be caught up in the conflagration.

⁸And to this people you shall say: Thus says YHWH: See, I am setting before you the way of life and the way of death. ⁹Those who stay in this city shall die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence; but those who go out and surrender to the Chaldeans who are besieging you shall live and shall have their lives as a prize of war. ¹⁰For I have set my face against this city for evil and not for good, says YHWH: it shall be given into the hands of the king of Babylon, and he shall burn it with fire.

¹¹To the house of the king of Judah say: Hear the word of YHWH,

¹²O house of David! Thus says YHWH: Execute justice in the morning, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been wronged, or else my wrath will go forth like fire, and burn, with no one to quench it, because of your evil doings.

¹³See, I am against you, O inhabitant of the valley, O rock of the plain, says YHWH; you who say, "Who can come down against us, or who can enter our places of refuge?"

¹⁴I will punish you according to the fruit of your doings, says YHWH; I will kindle a fire in its forest, and it shall devour all around.

To the king of Judah

¹Thus says YHWH: Go down to the house of the king of Judah, and speak there this word, ²and say: Hear the word of YHWH, O King of Judah sitting on the throne of David—you, and your servants, and your people who enter these gates. ³Thus says YHWH: Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been wronged. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place. ⁴For if you will indeed obey this word, then through the gates of this house shall enter kings who sit on the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses, they, and their servants, and their people. ⁵But if you will not heed these words, I swear by myself, says YHWH, that this house shall become a desolation.

⁶For thus says YHWH concerning the house of the king of Judah:

You are like Gilead to me,
like the summit of Lebanon;
but I swear that I will make you
a desert,
an uninhabited city.

⁷I will prepare destroyers against
you,
all with their weapons;
they shall cut down your choicest
cedars
and cast them into the fire.

The authors of this sermon are reflecting on the essential duty of the king. In light of the fact that the palace did become ‘a desolation’, they are aligning themselves with the prophet Jeremiah (see 21:12) in blaming the failure of the king and his advisers to be faithful to the essential demands of Yahwism. The king is to act ‘with justice and righteousness’ (verse 3; see Psalm 72; Isaiah 9:7; 1Kings 10:9; Proverbs 8:20. He is to care for ‘the alien, the widow and the orphan’ (verse 3).

The king is subject to the Torah, like everyone else.

Jeremiah is conveying YHWH’s words to the king, telling him that the Davidic dynasty will be cut down (like the forests of Gilead and Lebanon).

This is yet another attempt to deal with the amazement caused by the destruction of YHWH's city. It fits with Jeremiah's teaching that the destruction resulted from apostasy: the abandonment of the covenant and worshipping other gods. Verses 8-9 draw on Deuteronomy 29:23-25 and 1Kings 9:8-9. This abandoning of the covenant is manifest in the failure of justice noted in verse 3.

Jeremiah's words in verse 10 could be speaking of the death of Josiah (609) and the imminent exile to Egypt of his son and successor, Jehoahaz (2Kings 23:30-34). They can apply also to the death of Jehoiakim (598) and the imminent exile to Babylon of his son and successor, Jehoiachin.

The prose commentary (verses 11-12) speaks of Shallum, son of Josiah. One possibility is that Shallum received the throne name Jehoahaz (though see 1Chronicles 3:15). Jehoahaz was chosen as king in Jerusalem in the hope that he would carry on the policies of his father, Josiah. Necho, the Egyptian pharaoh, replaced him with his brother Eliakim who took the throne name Jehoiakim (see 2Kings 23:34). Jehoahaz was exiled to Egypt.

⁸And many nations will pass by this city, and all of them will say one to another, "Why has YHWH dealt in this way with that great city?" ⁹And they will answer, "Because they abandoned the covenant of YHWH their God, and worshipped other gods and served them."

¹⁰Do not weep for him who is dead, nor bemoan him; weep rather for the one who is about to be banished, for he shall return no more to see his native land.

¹¹For thus says YHWH concerning Shallum son of King Josiah of Judah, who succeeded his father Josiah, and who went away from this place: He shall return here no more, ¹²but in the place where they have carried him captive he shall die, and he shall never see this land again.

- ¹³Woe to him who builds his house
by unrighteousness,
and his upper rooms by injustice;
who makes his neighbours work
for nothing,
and does not give them their wages;
¹⁴who says, "I will build myself a
spacious house
with large upper rooms,
windows will be set in it,
it will be panelled with cedar,
and painted with vermilion."
¹⁵Are you a king
because you compete in cedar?
Did not your father eat and drink
and do justice and righteousness?
Then he prospered.
¹⁶He judged the cause of the poor
and needy;
and he prospered.
Is not this to know me? says YHWH.
¹⁷But your eyes and heart
are only on your dishonest gain,
for shedding innocent blood,
and for practicing oppression
and violence.
¹⁸Therefore thus says YHWH concern-
ing King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of
Judah:
They shall not lament for him,
"Alas, my brother!" "Alas, brother!"
They shall not lament for him,
"Alas, lord!" "Alas, his majesty!"
¹⁹With the burial of a donkey he shall
be buried—
dragged off and thrown out beyond
the gates of Jerusalem.

Jeremiah is speaking out against King Jehoiakim, who, in spite of the tribute imposed by Egypt (2Kings 23:35) is determined to make his palace luxurious, while ignoring his duty of seeing to justice for the poor. He is treating the people like slaves, demanding that they labour for nothing. The irony was that he died in his bed just before the siege (see 2Kings 24:5-7). It was his son and the people who suffered the consequences of his injustice and foolish political decisions.

Jeremiah contrasts Jehoiakim's behaviour with that of his father Josiah. His criticism goes to the heart of what it means to 'know' YHWH. It consists in hearing the cry of the poor and taking up their cause.

Verse 17 reflects 2Kings 24:4, which condemns Jehoiakim for shedding innocent blood.

There will be no mourning for Jehoiakim when he dies. Moreover his corpse will be treated like the corpse of an ass: dumped outside the city as food for the vultures and wild animals (compare Jeremiah 36:30). In fact Jehoiakim enjoyed a royal burial (2Kings 24:6). The poetry of verse 19 is declaring the truth that he died in shame. The pomp was a sham.

The prophet is addressing Jerusalem and its 'shepherds' (leaders). If they go to the highest mountain ranges (Lebanon to the north, Bashan to the north-east bordering Syria, and Abiram to the south-east in Moab) in the hope that their lament will be heard by the gods ('lovers') that they have been appealing to, they will achieve nothing. These neighbouring nations will suffer the same fate as Judah: they too will be taken into exile. Once again we have in the oracles of Jeremiah a foundation for the later 'oracles against the nations' (see Jeremiah 46-51).

Verse 24 declares that even if Coniah (that is Jeconiah, who took on the throne name Jehoiachin) were to be YHWH's signet ring, and so possess YHWH's authority, he and his mother would still be torn off and sent into exile. In other words, the closeness to YHWH of the new king, who succeeded his father Jehoiakim just before the siege, is not the issue. Jerusalem's fate is sealed. There is no point in the exiles holding out any hope of returning.

Verses 28-30 express amazement at the terrible destiny of the young king. He had no time to do wrong as king, yet he was cast out into exile, and with him the Davidic dynasty came to an end. He had sons in exile (1Chronicles 3:17-18), but they did not 'rule again in Judah'.

This strong anti-Jeconiah statement may express the stand of the anti-Zerubbabel party in post-exilic Yehud. Zerubbabel was Jeconiah's grandson (1Chronicles 3:17-18).

**²⁰Go up to Lebanon, and cry out,
and lift up your voice in Bashan;
cry out from Abarim,
for all your lovers are crushed.**

**²¹I spoke to you in your prosperity,
but you said, "I will not listen."
This has been your way
from your youth,
for you have not obeyed my voice.**

**²²The wind shall carry away
all your shepherds,
and your lovers shall go into captivity;
then you will be ashamed and
dismayed
because of all your wickedness.**

**²³O inhabitant of Lebanon,
nested among the cedars,
how you will groan when pangs
come upon you,
pain as of a woman in labour!**

**²⁴As I live, says YHWH, though King
Coniah son of Jehoiakim of Judah were
the signet ring on my right hand, even
from there I would tear you off ²⁵and give
you into the hands of those who seek your
life, into the hands of those of whom you
are afraid, even into the hands of King
Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon and into the
hands of the Chaldeans. ²⁶I will hurl you
and the mother who bore you into another
country, where you were not born, and
there you shall die. ²⁷But they shall not
return to the land to which they long to
return.**

**²⁸Is this man Coniah a despised broken
pot, a vessel no one wants? Why are he
and his offspring hurled out and cast
away in a land that they do not know? ²⁹O
land, land, land, hear the word of YHWH!**

**³⁰Thus says YHWH: Record this man as
childless, a man who shall not succeed in
his days; for none of his offspring shall
succeed in sitting on the throne of David,
and ruling again in Judah.**

¹Woe to the shepherds who lead astray and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says YHWH. ²Therefore thus says YHWH, the God of Israel, to the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says YHWH.

³Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. ⁴I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says YHWH.

⁵The days are surely coming, says YHWH, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ⁶In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: "YHWH is our righteousness."

Verses 1-2 echo Jeremiah's oracles (22:22; 10:21) to blame bad leadership for the exile. They offer a theological reflection on the catastrophe of the exile. This comment is included here in order to round off the sayings addressed to the king and his advisers.

Verses 3-4 are a later reflection on verses 1-2. If they were composed after the return from exile in Babylon, they express disappointment at the imperfect situation in Jerusalem, and give expression to the Messianic hope that one day all would be restored under faithful leadership.

Jeremiah's focus is on the lead up to the catastrophic events of 597 and 587.

Verses 5-6 are better seen as a later expression of hope based, not on historical events or the behaviour of known kings, but rather on faith in YHWH and his fidelity. The authors are looking outside history for an intervention of YHWH. Verses 5-6 are Messianic; that is to say at a time when there is no king, they look forward to a time when a righteous king will be given them by YHWH. Jewish disciples of Jesus saw him as fulfilling this hope.

Mattaniah (Josiah's son and Jeconiah's uncle, see 2Kings 24:17) took on the throne name Zedekiah (צִדְקִיָּהוּ). The Messiah will be what Zedekiah failed to be: one who shows that 'YHWH is our righteousness' (יְהוָה צִדְקֵנוּ) – reversing the elements in the name 'Zedekiah'. The Davidic king is called to mediate the righteousness of YHWH (see Jeremiah 21:12; 22:13-19; 2Samuel 12:1-7; 15:1-6).

In the Greek Septuagint Version verses 7-8 are found after verse 40. This is an indication that these verses form a separate unit. The Hebrew Masoretic text places them here, for they represent a further development of the theological reflection found in verse 3. They hold the hope that one day YHWH will bring about an Exodus of all Israel, not just from Egypt as in the first Exodus, but from every land to which they have been dispersed.

The editorial heading 'Concerning the prophets' is introduced here because, as verse 11 indicates, the following oracles focus on prophets (rather than kings).

In verse 9 Jeremiah speaks of the profound confusion that he experiences because of the words that he receives from YHWH. Verses 10-12 are an example. The word 'adultery' could refer to the breakdown of family morality that is rampant in the community, or it could refer to religious infidelity and apostasy.

In verse 11 we find that those who should have countered this breakdown are themselves compliant with it. The resistance to divine enlightenment means that the community, which is on a slippery path, has no light to go by, and so will inevitably stumble and fall.

⁷Therefore, 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," ⁸but "As YHWH lives who brought out and led the offspring of the house of Israel out of the land of the north and out of all the lands where he had driven them." Then they shall live in their own land.

**⁹Concerning the prophets:
My heart is crushed within me,
all my bones shake;
I have become like a drunkard,
like one overcome by wine,
because of YHWH and because of
his holy words.**

**¹⁰"The land is full of adulterers;
because of the curse the land
mourns,
and the pastures of the wilderness
are dried up.
They lead evil lives,
and their power is corrupt.**

**¹¹Both prophet and priest
commit sacrilege;
even in my house I have found
their wickedness, says YHWH.**

**¹²Therefore their way shall be to them
like slippery paths in the darkness,
into which they shall be driven
and fall;
for I will bring disaster upon them
in the year of their punishment",
says YHWH.**

**¹³In the prophets of Samaria
I saw a disgusting thing:
they prophesied by Baal
and led my people Israel astray.**

**¹⁴In the prophets of Jerusalem
I have seen a shocking thing:
they commit adultery and walk
in lies;
they strengthen the hands
of evildoers,
so that no one turns from
wickedness;
all of them have become
like Sodom to me,
and its inhabitants like Gomorrah.**

**¹⁵Therefore thus says YHWH of hosts
concerning the prophets:
“I am going to make them eat
wormwood,
and give them poison to drink;
for from the prophets of Jerusalem
ungodliness has spread throughout
the land.”**

**¹⁶Thus says YHWH of hosts:
Do not listen to the words of the
prophets who prophesy to you;
they are deluding you.
They speak visions of their own,
not from the mouth of YHWH.**

**¹⁷They keep saying to those who
despise the word of YHWH,
“It shall be well with you”;
and to all who stubbornly follow
their own stubborn hearts,
they say, “No calamity shall come
upon you.”**

**¹⁸For who has stood in the council
of YHWH so as to see and to hear his
word? Who has given heed to his word
so as to proclaim it?**

Jeremiah is reminding his contemporaries of what happened in Samaria (721), and he focuses blame on the prophets who claimed to speak for God but who lent their support to the religious corruption, and so led the people astray.

Things are no better in Jerusalem where those who claim to speak in God’s name are not only failing to speak out against the moral corruption around them, but are themselves part of it. ‘Adultery’ (verse 14) often refers to infidelity to YHWH, but it can also refer to disregard of the sanctity of marital fidelity (see 29:23).

The false prophets are responsible for the widespread decline in religious and moral standards (compare 14:13-15). They are to be tried and proven guilty when the potion they drink brings about their death.

McKane writes (page 584):

Prophets who proclaim easy peace [shalom] in the presence of arrogant unbelief, self-assertive stubbornness, and a way of life that has settled down to wickedness, are not spokesmen for Yahweh. Response to the word of Yahweh is a strenuous exercise and is profoundly disturbing; it shakes the foundation of settled ideas and modes of behaviour. It calls for the greatest spiritual effort to amend what is wrong in ideas and attitudes and to make a new beginning.

False prophets offer an unconditional guarantee of security. God’s peace is unconditionally offered, but it is not unconditionally received. It demands a genuine welcome and a commitment to let grace reform us.

Verse 18 offers a profound analysis of the prophetic charism (compare Job 15:8).

In stark contrast to the wishful thinking of the false prophets, Jeremiah paints a picture of what is actually happening as the whirlwind approaches. The people might choose to trust the words of the false prophets, but when they experience what actually takes place they will see how wrong they were. The people are unrelenting in evil. YHWH is unrelenting in judgment.

Verses 21-22 cut to the heart of the phenomenon of false prophesy. False prophets head off in a direction without waiting on God's direction. They are not 'sent' (contrast Jeremiah 1:7). They speak without first listening to God. If they were YHWH's instruments they would have 'stood in YHWH's council' (verse 22; see verse 18), and they would know the mind of God and be declaring his will to the people, not supporting the people in their wayward thinking and wayward lives.

Verses 23-24 is a separate oracle. The key point being made is that God's scrutiny is not limited within the bounds of what is now happening. God is near (compare Deuteronomy 30:11-14), but he 'fills heaven and earth' and sees everything. His knowledge is complete and infallible. Nothing is hidden from him.

**¹⁹Look, the storm of YHWH!
Wrath has gone forth,
a whirling tempest;
it will burst upon the head of
the wicked.**

**²⁰The anger of YHWH will not subside
until he has executed and
accomplished his aims.
When that time comes you will
understand it clearly.**

**²¹I did not send the prophets,
yet they ran;
I did not speak to them,
yet they prophesied.**

**²²But if they had stood in my council,
then they would have proclaimed
my words to my people,
turning them from their
wicked ways and evil deeds.**

**²³Am I a God near by, says YHWH,
and not a God far off?**

**²⁴Who can hide in secret places so that
I cannot see them? says YHWH.
Do I not fill heaven and earth?
says YHWH.**

²⁵I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name, saying, "I have dreamed, I have dreamed!" ²⁶How long? Will the hearts of the prophets ever turn back—those who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart? ²⁷They plan to make my people forget my name by their dreams that they tell one another, just as their ancestors forgot my name for Baal. ²⁸Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let the one who has my word speak my word faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat? says YHWH.

²⁹Is not my word like fire, says YHWH, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?

³⁰See, therefore, I am against the prophets, says YHWH, who steal my words from one another. ³¹See, I am against the prophets, says YHWH, who use their own tongues and say, "Says YHWH." ³²See, I am against those who prophesy lying dreams, says YHWH, and who tell them, and who lead my people astray by their lies and their recklessness, when I did not send them or appoint them; so they do not profit this people at all, says YHWH.

The extraordinary events of the capture and destruction of Jerusalem and the temple of YHWH at the hands of the Babylonian forces opened up the whole question of authentic and false prophecy. It was Jeremiah who warned of the coming catastrophe, against those who assured the leaders and the people that what Jeremiah was telling them could not be right. Jeremiah was rejected, but proved right; those who opposed him proved wrong.

Verses 25-32 deal with the difficulty of discerning genuine prophecy from the statements of those who claim to speak in YHWH's name but who are only mouthing their own deluded convictions. As one would expect discernment is easier with hindsight. This passage is a warning against those who would pronounce in God's name without attempting to truly listen for YHWH's inspiring word.

Verse 29 is the only verse that attempts to establish criteria for making this discernment. It has been understood in various ways. One way is to look at the effect that inspiration has on the prophet. The word of YHWH overwhelms the prophet, burning away all that is of his own imagining, and shattering the prophet's own preferred way of thinking. Another way is to think of the effects which the prophetic word has on those who hear it.

Either way there is a power in the word of YHWH that is not found in the flights of fancy of those who claim to speak in YHWH's name but whose words comfort without making demands.

In the history of Rabbinic interpretation we find constant reference to verse 29. They thought of a hammer striking flint, and the myriad of sparks that shot forth. Because the word of God was thought of as being rich in mysterious meanings, they hoped to discern a 'thousand' meanings in the word, a 'thousand' shafts of light coming from the genuine words of prophecy, enlightening those who read and study it in countless ways. Since their origin is in God, one should expect these words to hold infinite meanings and power.

The authors of this final reflection on chapter 23 are asserting, once again, that it was Jeremiah, and not the reassuring ‘peace prophets’ who proved correct. By playing on two meanings carried by the Hebrew *mašā’*, ‘oracle’ and ‘burden’, they recapture the scoffing rejection of Jeremiah, whom his opponents accused of having nothing to say from YHWH except words of doom, thus claiming YHWH’s authority for his own pessimism, and forgetting YHWH’s predilection for his own people, and city and temple.

As it turned out Jeremiah was right and those who rejected him were wrong. It was his opponents whom YHWH found a ‘burden’ and they would be ‘cast off’ (into exile).

YHWH’s words were a ‘burden’ to Jeremiah, but he bore them well and uttered them faithfully. Rather than reject the messenger, they should have listened to him and shared his burden by taking the trouble to change their behaviour. Rather than scoffing at the prophet, they should have listened to him, eager to hear what proved to be a genuine word from YHWH.

³³When this people, or a prophet, or a priest asks you, “What is the burdensome word of YHWH?” you shall say to them, “You are the burden, and I will cast you off, says YHWH.”

³⁴And as for the prophet, priest, or the people who speak of “YHWH’s burden”, I will punish them and their households.

³⁵Thus shall you say to one another, among yourselves, “What has YHWH answered?” or “What has YHWH spoken?” ³⁶But “the burden of YHWH” you shall mention no more, for the burden is what he entrusts to the one who bears his word. You pervert the words of the living God, YHWH of hosts, our God.

³⁷Thus you shall ask the prophet, “What has YHWH answered you?” or “What has YHWH spoken?” ³⁸But if you say, “the burden of YHWH,” thus says YHWH: Because you have said these words, “the burden of YHWH,” when I sent to you, saying, You shall not say, “the burden of YHWH,” ³⁹therefore, I will surely lift you up and cast you away from my presence, you and the city that I gave to you and your ancestors.

⁴⁰And I will bring upon you everlasting disgrace and perpetual shame, which shall not be forgotten.

¹YHWH showed me two baskets of figs placed before the temple of YHWH. This was after King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon had taken into exile from Jerusalem King Jeconiah son of Jehoiakim of Judah, together with the officials of Judah, the artisans, and the smiths, and had brought them to Babylon. ²One basket had very good figs, like first-ripe figs, but the other basket had very bad figs, so bad that they could not be eaten. ³And YHWH said to me, "What do you see, Jeremiah?" I said, "Figs, the good figs very good, and the bad figs very bad, so bad that they cannot be eaten." ⁴Then the word of YHWH came to me: ⁵Thus says YHWH, the God of Israel: Like these good figs, so I will regard as good the exiles from Judah, whom I have sent away from this place to the land of the Chaldeans. ⁶I will set my eyes upon them for good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up, and not tear them down; I will plant them, and not pluck them up. ⁷I will give them a heart to know that I am YHWH; and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart. ⁸But thus says YHWH: Like the bad figs that are so bad they cannot be eaten, so will I treat King Zedekiah of Judah, his officials, the remnant of Jerusalem who remain in this land, and those who live in the land of Egypt. ⁹I will make them a horror, an evil thing, to all the kingdoms of the earth—a disgrace, a byword, a taunt, and a curse in all the places where I shall drive them. ¹⁰And I will send sword, famine, and pestilence upon them, until they are utterly destroyed from the land that I gave to them and their ancestors.

It is understandable that those who stayed back in Judah would think of themselves as the specially favoured of God, in contrast to those whom God punished by having them sent into exile. They would also see Zedekiah as carrying on the Davidic dynasty.

This passage turns the table on such an idea. Its authors intend to see Jeconiah as the true king in exile, and the exiles who went into Babylon (and returned, see verse 6) as the ones who carried on the authentic faith of Israel (and planted it back in Judah on their return). These are the 'good figs'. Compare Ezekiel 11:14-21.

By contrast they see Zedekiah and those who stayed behind and supported him in rebelling against Babylon (and who were, therefore, responsible for the destruction of the city and its temple), as the ones rejected by YHWH (the 'bad figs').

Verse 7 is a fine statement of the covenant. Just as the assumption was that the exile occurred because the people refused to repent, the return from exile must mean that YHWH is creating a new beginning by giving them a 'new heart' to make it possible for the exiles to repent 'with their whole heart'. Compare Ezekiel 36:24-28.

Verses 8-10 proclaim God's rejection of Zedekiah and the 'bad figs' who supported him. The language is from the curse tradition (see Deuteronomy 28:37).

The Greek Septuagint Version here, as in many places of the Jeremiah scroll, points to an earlier (and briefer) Hebrew text, that has been expanded to produce the Masoretic Hebrew text.

The authors of verses 1-7 are portraying Jeremiah as looking back over his career as a prophet, and they locate this reminiscence in 605 (see also 36:1), the year of the Babylonian victory over Egypt and Assyria at Carchemish. According to their calculation, Jeremiah's prophetic career began in 627 (see also 1:2).

Jeremiah is accusing the people of stubbornly refusing to listen to the word that YHWH was speaking through him, as they persistently rejected the words of the other prophets that YHWH kept sending them (see verse 4).

Verse 5 seems to be formed out of 23:22 – yet another example of the authors of the prose commentary using Jeremiah's words in their composition.

In 605 there was still the possibility of their 'remaining upon the land' (verse 5). It all depended on their repenting and ceasing from worshipping other gods.

¹The word that came to Jeremiah concerning all the people of Judah, in the fourth year of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah (that was the first year of King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon), ²which the prophet Jeremiah spoke to all the people of Judah and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem: ³For twenty-three years, from the thirteenth year of King Josiah son of Amon of Judah, to this day, the word of YHWH has come to me, and I have spoken persistently to you, but you have not listened. ⁴And though YHWH persistently sent you all his servants the prophets, you have neither listened nor inclined your ears to hear ⁵when they said, "Turn now, everyone of you, from your evil way and wicked doings, and you will remain upon the land that YHWH has given to you and your ancestors from of old and forever; ⁶do not go after other gods to serve and worship them, and do not provoke me to anger with the work of your hands. Then I will do you no harm." ⁷Yet you did not listen to me, says YHWH, and so you have provoked me to anger with the work of your hands to your own harm.

Judah, a ruin and a waste

⁸Therefore thus says YHWH of hosts: Because you have not obeyed my words, ⁹I am going to send for all the tribes of the north, says YHWH, even for King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon, my servant, and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants, and against all these nations around; I will utterly destroy them, and make them an object of horror and of hissing, and an everlasting disgrace. ¹⁰And I will banish from them the sound of mirth and the sound of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the sound of the millstones and the light of the lamp. ¹¹This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years.

¹²Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, says YHWH, making the land an everlasting waste. ¹³I will bring upon that land all the words that I have uttered against it, everything written in this book, which Jeremiah prophesied against all the nations. ¹⁴For many nations and great kings shall make slaves of them also; and I will repay them according to their deeds and the work of their hands.

In verse 9 the Greek Version refers to 'the tribes of the north', but does not identify them with Nebuchadrezzar, which appears as a later clarification to an earlier Hebrew text. It is significant that the later editors speak of Nebuchadrezzar as YHWH's 'servant' (compare Isaiah 45:1), thereby insisting on the fact that Nebuchadrezzar's victory was not because Babylon's god is stronger than YHWH. Rather, he is acting in accordance with YHWH's will. Verse 9 also refers to the destruction of Judah's neighbours, thus forging a link with the oracles against the nations that are to follow.

Some take the 'seventy years' as measuring from the destruction of Jerusalem (587) to the completion of the second temple (516). However, seventy is a symbolic number and could stand here for the fullness of time as determined by God (compare Isaiah 23:15,17; Zechariah 1:12; 7:5; 2Chronicles 36:21; Daniel 9:2). It is significant that it does point to a silver lining on a very dark cloud (verse 9).

In verses 12-14 our attention shifts to the punishment YHWH will enact upon Babylon. YHWH willed the destruction of Jerusalem as a punishment to shock the people into repentance. That does not mean that YHWH approved of the terrible behaviour of Babylon, which they would have to pay for in God's good time.

Reference to 'this book of Jeremiah' (verse 13) indicates that we are reading a text from later commentators. The authors of the Jeremiah scroll are attempting to explain how Babylon was doing YHWH's will in destroying Jerusalem and the temple, but that they, like Judah, would be punished for their injustices.