

## **2. 'TO BUILD & TO PLANT' (1:10)**

**JEREMIAH 30-31**

**<sup>1</sup>The word that came to Jeremiah from YHWH:  
<sup>2</sup>Thus says YHWH, the God of Israel: Write for yourself in a document all the words that I have spoken to you.**

**<sup>3</sup>For the days are surely coming, says YHWH, when I will restore the fortunes of my people, Israel and Judah, says YHWH, and I will bring them back to the land that I gave to their ancestors and they shall take possession of it.**

**<sup>4</sup>These are the words that YHWH spoke concerning Israel and Judah:**

In 1:10 we were told that Jeremiah was appointed ‘to pluck up and pull down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant’. The bulk of the scroll focuses on the plucking up, pulling down, destroying and overthrowing. Here in chapters 30-31 (building on 29:10-14) we hear of building and planting. We are taken beyond Judah’s infidelity to the transcendent faithfulness of YHWH.

Verses 1-4 are editorial. They relate the content of chapters 30-31 to the authoritative figure of Jeremiah. The authors of the material in these two chapters echo the sentiments of the ‘School’ that added Isaiah 40-55 to the Isaiah scroll towards the end of the Babylonian Exile.

Verse three is eschatological and Messianic in that it looks beyond circumstances of the ancient and dispersed northern kingdom of Israel, and the prevailing circumstances of Judah as part of a small province in the Persian Empire, to a time when, in fidelity to his promises, and at a time of his choosing, YHWH would intervene to ‘restore the fortunes of my people Israel and Judah’.

Verse 4 attributes the material in chapters 30-31 to YHWH. Jeremiah’s oracles were not all about divine punishment. Chapters 30-31 are inserted here to provide some balance to the words of doom addressed by Jeremiah to Judah. It is understandable that Jeremiah’s oracles against Judah have taken precedence, especially at a time when the events of 597-587 were still raw, and it was judged necessary to establish Jeremiah as a genuine prophet, even though he foretold the catastrophe that no one thought possible.

Those compiling the scroll are saying that Jeremiah’s oracles were not all gloom and doom. Because of his faith in YHWH he had a message for the whole of Israel (including Judah). Without detracting from what he said about divine punishment (words that proved to be true), he also spoke of YHWH’s fidelity, and so doom could not have the last word.

Though verse 5 is introduced by ‘Thus says YHWH’, verses 5-7 are not in the form of an oracle. The oracle itself begins at verse 10, and is introduced by the post-exilic prose expansion in verses 8-9.

Verses 5-7 focus on the terror of the catastrophe with which we are familiar: the capture of Jerusalem in 597 and its destruction in 587.

Verses 8-9 introduce the hope that is the focus in chapters 30-31. Yes, the exiles from Judah and those left behind are under a foreign yoke, but YHWH will break it. They are YHWH’s chosen people. In the past YHWH freed them from the yoke of Egypt. He will do so again. They are to serve YHWH, not be enslaved by foreigners. The mention of ‘David’ holds out the hope of being ruled by a king of David’s dynasty (even if the hope is eschatological, and so ‘Messianic’; compare Amos 9:11; Hosea 3:5; Ezekiel 34:24; 37:24).

The oracle (verses 10-11) is not found here in the Septuagint. It is repeated in Jeremiah 46:27-28, where it is also in the Septuagint. If we were to read these two verses on their own, we could easily think that they came from that part of the Isaiah scroll composed in exile (Isaiah 40-55). Perhaps it was the same group responsible for the words of consolation and hope in both the scroll of Isaiah and that of Jeremiah. Whoever was responsible, they judged these words to be a fitting expression of the hope that Jeremiah experienced when his focus was not on Judah’s infidelity, but on the faithfulness of YHWH to the covenant.

**<sup>5</sup>Thus says YHWH:**

**We have heard a cry of panic,  
of terror, and no peace.**

**<sup>6</sup>Ask now, and see,  
can a man bear a child?**

**Why then do I see every man  
with his hands on his loins  
[like a woman in labour]?**

**Why has every face turned pale?**

**<sup>7</sup>Alas! that day is so great  
there is none like it;  
it is a time of distress for Jacob;  
because of it he cries out in pain.**

**<sup>8</sup>On that day, says YHWH of hosts, I will  
break the yoke from off his neck, and  
I will burst his bonds, and foreigners  
shall no longer enslave them. <sup>9</sup>But they  
shall serve YHWH their God and David  
their king, whom I will raise up for  
them.**

**<sup>10</sup>But as for you, have no fear,  
my servant Jacob, says YHWH,  
and do not be dismayed, O Israel;  
I am going to save you from far away,  
and your offspring from the land  
of their captivity.  
Jacob shall return and have quiet  
and ease,  
and no one shall make him afraid.**

**<sup>11</sup>For I am with you, says YHWH,  
to save you;  
I will make an end of all the nations  
among which I scattered you,  
but of you I will not make an end.  
I will chastise you in just measure,  
and I will by no means leave you  
unpunished.**

YHWH will restore Judah

**<sup>12</sup>For thus says YHWH:**

**Your hurt is incurable,  
your wound is grievous.**

**<sup>13</sup>There is no one to uphold  
your cause,**

**no medicine for your wound,  
no healing for you.**

**<sup>14</sup>All your lovers have forgotten  
you;**

**they care nothing for you;  
for I have dealt you the blow  
of an enemy,  
the punishment of a merciless foe,  
because your guilt is great,  
because your sins are so numerous.**

**<sup>15</sup>Why do you cry out over your hurt?**

**Your pain is incurable.  
Because your guilt is great,  
because your sins are so numerous,  
I have done these things to you.**

**<sup>16</sup>Therefore all who devour you  
shall be devoured,  
and all your foes, everyone of them,  
shall go into captivity;  
those who plunder you shall be  
plundered,  
and all who prey on you I will  
make a prey.**

**<sup>17</sup>For I will restore health to you,  
and your wounds I will heal,  
says YHWH,  
because they have called you  
an outcast:**

**“It is Zion; no one cares for her!”**

Whoever put verses 12-17 together had plenty of material from Jeremiah's oracles to draw on (see 3:22; 8:15; 8:22; 10:19; 14:17; 14:19; 15:18; 17:14). All of these statements speak of sickness that is incurable: there is no healing. Isaiah 17:11 also uses the expression 'incurable pain'.

In verses 16-17 there are two significant shifts.

Firstly, we are reminded that the suffering endured by the people of Judah and Jerusalem is the work of YHWH who is punishing them for their sin. Judah's enemies, too, will suffer punishment for their sins (verse 16).

Secondly, again because it is YHWH who is seeing that the punishment is inflicted, there will be a reversal (verse 17). The incurable sickness (verse 12) can be cured.

At the time of composition (seemingly after the population has been taken into exile) Jerusalem ('Zion') is in a dreadful state. But it is not without hope. Because YHWH is YHWH, healing will come. The nations fail to understand YHWH and his special relationship with Jerusalem when they mock her saying 'no one cares for her!'

The context for these words of hope is a Judah – the last surviving tribal area of ‘Jacob’ – that has been devastated by war. Because of the fidelity of YHWH the authors know that one day the towns and family dwellings will be restored.

The merriment seems to be of a general nature, arising out of a community that once again knows peace.

The use of ‘ruler’ (mōšēl) rather than king (melek) might argue against a Messianic intention in verse 21. In any case the focus is on the intimate communion with YHWH that the ruler, whoever he might be, will enjoy (compare Deuteronomy 17:15).

Verse 22 is absent from the Septuagint. It may be a late insert used as a summary statement and drawing on 7:23, 11:4, 24:7 and 31:33.

We have already encountered verses 23-24 in Jeremiah 23:19-20. Here in this context YHWH’s anger is directed against ‘the wicked’ who are Judah’s enemies and who are responsible for the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile. Nothing can take away from the terrible catastrophe that Judah has brought upon itself by its failure to listen to the prophetic word. But, since YHWH is judging the nations as well, there is place for hope.

In God’s good time (31:1) the covenant will be restored.

<sup>18</sup>Thus says YHWH:

**I am going to restore the fortunes  
of the tents of Jacob,  
and have compassion on his  
dwellings;**

**the city shall be rebuilt upon  
its mound,  
and the citadel set on its rightful site.**

<sup>19</sup>**Out of them shall come thanksgiving,  
and the sound of merrymakers.**

**I will make them many, and they shall  
not diminish;**

**I will make them honoured,  
and they shall not be disdained.**

<sup>20</sup>**Their children shall be as of old,  
their congregation shall be  
established before me;**

**and I will punish all who oppress  
them.**

<sup>21</sup>**Their prince shall be one of their own,  
their ruler shall come from their  
midst;**

**I will bring him near, and he shall  
approach me,  
for who would otherwise dare  
to approach me? says YHWH.**

<sup>22</sup>**And you shall be my people,  
and I will be your God.**

<sup>23</sup>**Look, the storm of YHWH!**

**Wrath has gone forth,  
a whirling tempest;  
it will burst upon the head of  
the wicked.**

<sup>24</sup>**The fierce anger of YHWH will not  
turn back**

**until he has executed and  
accomplished what he intends.  
When that day comes you will be  
fully enlightened.**

<sup>31:1</sup>**At that time, says YHWH, I will be the  
God of all the families of Israel, and they  
shall be my people.**

<sup>2</sup>Thus says YHWH:

The people who survived the sword  
found grace in the wilderness;  
he [YHWH] went to give rest  
to Israel.

<sup>3</sup>YHWH appeared to them from afar:

I have loved you with an  
everlasting love;  
therefore I have continued my  
faithfulness to you.

<sup>4</sup>Again I will build you,  
and you shall be built,  
O virgin Israel!

Again you shall take your  
tambourines,  
and join in the dance of the  
merrymakers.

<sup>5</sup>Again you shall plant vineyards  
on the mountains of Samaria;  
the planters shall enjoy the fruit.

<sup>6</sup>For there shall be a day when  
sentinels will call  
in the hill country of Ephraim:

“Come, let us go up to Zion,  
to YHWH our God.”

It is possible that those responsible for the Jeremiah scroll are quoting here from an oracle uttered by Jeremiah. However, it may be that we have here an exilic oracle reminding those who are facing the journey back to Judah of YHWH's faithfulness to their ancestors during the Exodus, and encouraging them to place their trust in YHWH's faithful love, and to undertake the journey through the 'wilderness'(verse 2) back to the Promised Land.

Whatever evils they have brought upon themselves by their infidelity, YHWH can say: 'I have loved you with an everlasting love'(verse 3).

There will be restoration (see 1:10). There will again be rejoicing (see 7:34; 16:9; 25:10; 31:4-6; 33:11). The land will again produce in abundance (see verse 5).

The oracle includes the hope that they will once again live in the 'mountains of Samaria'. When that happens those 'in the hill country of Ephraim' will be summoned 'to Zion, to YHWH our God'. The temple will be rebuilt.

It is YHWH who has come from afar (from Judah) to comfort the exiles. We recall the words of Hosea:

It was I who taught Ephraim to  
walk, I took them up in my arms;  
but they did not know that I healed  
them. I led them with cords of hu-  
man kindness, with bands of love.  
I was to them like those who lift  
infants to their cheeks. I bent down  
to them and fed them.

– Hosea 11:3-4

In the closing years of the Babylonian Exile, a group of writers (probably temple-singers who were also responsible for composing some of the psalms) worked on the Isaiah scroll. They are responsible for Isaiah chapter 40 to 55.

It is likely that it is this same group who worked on the Jeremiah scroll and who contributed to chapter 31. The parallels between the material here and that found in the Isaiah 40-55 are clear (compare verse 10 with Isaiah 40:11; verse 11 with Isaiah 51:10-11; verses 12-13 with Isaiah 60:5 and 58:11).

For YHWH as a 'father to Israel' see Hosea 11:1-9. The reference to 'my first-born' (verse 9) takes the reader back to the Exodus (see Exodus 4:22).

The focus is on 'Zion' (verse 12; see the reference to 'here' in verse 8). References to 'Jacob' (verses 7 and 11), 'Israel' (verses 7, 9 and 10), and 'Ephraim' (verse 9) demonstrate that the authors have the big picture in mind. They are not simply referring to a community of exiles returning to Judah. They are reminding their readers of YHWH's special love for all his people.

The reversal that YHWH promises (verses 13-14) reminds us of Psalm 30:11.

You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy.

**<sup>7</sup>For thus says YHWH:  
Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob,  
raise shouts for the chief of the nations;  
proclaim, give praise, and say,  
"YHWH has saved his people,  
the remnant of Israel."**

**<sup>8</sup>See, I am going to bring them  
from the land of the north,  
and gather them from the farthest parts  
of the earth,  
among them the blind and the lame,  
those with child and those in labour;  
a great company, they shall return here.**

**<sup>9</sup>With weeping they shall come,  
with consolations I will lead them back,  
I will let them walk by brooks of water,  
on a level road in which they shall not  
stumble;**

**for I have been a father to Israel,  
and Ephraim is my firstborn.**

**<sup>10</sup>Hear the word of YHWH, O nations,  
and declare in the distant coastlands:  
"He who scattered Israel will gather him,  
and will keep him as a shepherd tends  
his flock."**

**<sup>11</sup>For YHWH has ransomed Jacob,  
and has redeemed him from a power  
too strong for him.**

**<sup>12</sup>They shall come and sing aloud on the  
height of Zion,  
and they shall be radiant over the  
goodness of YHWH,  
the grain, the wine, and the oil,  
the young of the flock and the herd;  
they shall be like a watered garden,  
and they shall never languish again.**

**<sup>13</sup>Then shall the young women rejoice  
in the dance,  
the young men and the old shall be merry.  
I will turn their mourning into joy,  
I will comfort them, and give them  
gladness for sorrow.**

**<sup>14</sup>I will give the priests their fill,  
and my people shall be satisfied with  
my bounty, says YHWH.**

**15Thus says YHWH:**

**A voice is heard in Ramah,  
lamentation and bitter weeping.  
Rachel is weeping for her children;  
she refuses to be comforted  
because they are no more.**

**16Thus says YHWH:**

**Keep your voice from weeping,  
and your eyes from tears;  
for there is a reward for your work,  
says YHWH:  
they shall come back from the land  
of the enemy;**

**17there is hope for your posterity,  
says YHWH:**

**your children shall come back to  
their own country.**

**18Indeed I heard Ephraim pleading:**

**“You disciplined me, and I took  
the discipline;  
I was like a calf untrained.  
Bring me back, let me come back,  
for you are YHWH my God.**

**19For after I had turned away  
I repented;**

**and after I had come to my senses,  
I struck my thigh;  
I was ashamed, and I was dismayed  
because I bore the disgrace  
of my youth.”**

**20Is Ephraim my dear son?**

**Is he the child I delight in?  
As often as I speak against him,  
I still remember him.  
Therefore I am deeply moved  
for him;  
I will surely have mercy on him,  
says YHWH.**

The Ramah referred to here would appear to be the Ramah to which the prisoners from Judah were taken in chains (see 40:1). It is in the tribal territory of Benjamin. Hence the reference to Benjamin's mother, Rachel, who was also the mother of Joseph, the largest of the northern tribes, encompassing Ephraim and Manasseh.

The focus of this passage is on the north (Ephraim), now viewed in the light of the return of Judah. Surely the northern tribes, long since taken into exile, will return as well, so that all Israel will be liberated by YHWH! Rachel's 'work' (verse 16) in bearing Joseph and Benjamin will be rewarded.

In verses 18-19 we hear the pleading of Rachel's lost child. Ephraim acknowledges her sin and laments her shame (striking the thigh, verse 19, is a ritual demonstration of this).

In Verse 20 YHWH is pictured as a mother. The author (like Hosea and the temple singers responsible for Isaiah 40-55) uses feminine images to express YHWH's feelings towards her son. 'I will surely have mercy on him' uses the noun and verb derived from the Hebrew word for 'womb' (רָחַם אֶרְחַמֶנִּי).

Verses 21-22 appear to be a separate oracle, addressed to those in exile who are hesitating to return. There are echoes here of the writing of the temple singers responsible for chapters 40-55 of the Isaiah scroll.

The final line of verse 22 appears to be a proverb, and involves clever word-play in Hebrew. Interpreting its meaning necessarily involves guess work. Perhaps it is a further statement of reversal.

The prose of verses 23-26 appears to be eschatological. That is to say it is attempting to describe not what is or what is expected in the near future, but rather a statement of faith based on belief in the eternal fidelity of YHWH. The author recognises it as a 'pleasant dream', but one that he has to awaken from to live in a situation where the hope has not yet been realised.

Verses 27-30 are also eschatological. Based on YHWH's promises, Israel will grow and know prosperity, when the time is right. YHWH has seen to the destruction of his people, because of their infidelity. He will also see to their reconstruction.

The proverb in verse 29 is found also in Ezekiel 18:2. The point being made in verse 30 is parallel to that found in Deuteronomy 24:16. It is not individualism versus tribalism. What we have is a declaration that YHWH will establish a new order which sinners will be powerless to disrupt. God's justice transcends human sin, and those who set out to disrupt God's order will experience frustration. They will suffer for their sin, but will not set in process an evil that will bring about (as before) the collapse and punishment of the whole people.

**<sup>21</sup>Set up road markers for yourself,  
make yourself guideposts;  
consider well the highway,  
the road by which you went.  
Return, O virgin Israel,  
return to these your cities.**

**<sup>22</sup>How long will you waver,  
O faithless daughter?  
For YHWH has created a new  
thing on the earth:  
a woman protects a man.**

**<sup>23</sup>Thus says YHWH of hosts, the God of Israel: Once more they shall use these words in the land of Judah and in its towns when I restore their fortunes: "YHWH bless you, O abode of righteousness, O holy hill!" <sup>24</sup>Farmers and those who move around with their flocks will live together there. <sup>25</sup>I will satisfy the weary, and all who are faint I will replenish. <sup>26</sup>Thereupon I awoke and looked, and my sleep was pleasant to me.**

**<sup>27</sup>The days are surely coming, says YHWH, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals. <sup>28</sup>And just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says YHWH. <sup>29</sup>In those days they shall no longer say: "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." <sup>30</sup>But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge.**

**<sup>31</sup>The days are surely coming, says YHWH, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. <sup>32</sup>It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their lord, says YHWH.**

**<sup>33</sup>But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says YHWH: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.**

**<sup>34</sup>No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know YHWH,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says YHWH; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.**

Like the previous verses the perspective here is eschatological.

The promise of a ‘new covenant’ (verse 31), written ‘on their hearts’ (verse 33) finds echoes in Ezekiel:

I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh.

– Ezekiel 11:19 (see 18:31; 36:26)

No other tradition ever qualifies the ‘covenant’ with the word ‘new’. The authors of this hope-filled statement seem to be involved in critical dialogue with the Deuteronomic School:

Circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer.

– Deuteronomy 10:16

YHWH your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, so that you will love YHWH your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live ... Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, “Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?” Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, “Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?” No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

– Deuteronomy 30:6,11-14

The Jeremiah passage is stating that the problem with the former covenant was that the people did not keep it. YHWH, however, remains their ‘lord’ (verse 32) and so will not abandon his responsibility for them. He is promising a renewed covenant when the exiles return and live in obedience of heart. They will ‘know YHWH’ (thus reversing 5:1-5; 8:7); that is, they will live in righteousness and justice (see 2:8; 22:15-17). The hope is that, based on YHWH’s fidelity (not on any quality of the people), the sins of the people will be forgiven and the Torah will be written on their hearts. The result will be that the people will be compliant and disciplined teaching will not be necessary (see Deuteronomy 11:19), so receptive will be their minds and hearts.

Even Holladay, who claims as many verses as possible for Jeremiah himself, locates verses 35-40 as material added in the time of Nehemiah (mid fifth century).

Verse 35 echoes Isaiah 51:15 – another reminder of the relationship between the group responsible for adding Isaiah 40-55 to the Isaiah scroll and the group involved in adding to the Jeremiah scroll. Verse 35 is an expression of the conviction that YHWH is responsible for the order we find in creation (YHWH ‘gives’) and also of the chaos (YHWH ‘stirs up’).

Verse 36 is making the point that just as it is impossible for the order fixed by YHWH to change, so is it impossible for YHWH’s choice of Israel to change.

Verse 37 restates the same point using another image. Israel can be assured of a blessed future because of YHWH’s fidelity – and YHWH is the creator of a constant creation.

Verses 38-40 grow out of the experience of the reconstruction of Jerusalem under Nehemiah. They envisage a rebuilt and expanded Jerusalem that ‘shall never again be uprooted or overthrown’.

The tower of Hananel appears to have been on the north wall (see Nehemiah 3:1; 12:39; Zechariah 14:10). The Corner Gate appears to have been on the north-west wall (see 2Kings 14:13; 2Chronicles 26:9). Gareb Hill is not mentioned elsewhere. The anti-clockwise movement of the text would suggest that it was south-west; and Goah on the south-east. The Horse Gate was in the east wall (see Nehemiah 3:28).

Jeremiah 31:35-40 [Greek 38:35-40]

**<sup>35</sup>Thus says YHWH,  
who gives the sun for light  
by day  
and the fixed order of the  
moon and the stars for light  
by night,  
who stirs up the sea so that its  
waves roar –  
YHWH of hosts is his name:**

**<sup>36</sup>If this fixed order were ever to  
cease from my presence, says  
YHWH, then also the offspring of  
Israel would cease to be a nation  
before me forever.**

**<sup>37</sup>Thus says YHWH: If the heav-  
ens above can be measured, and  
the foundations of the earth be-  
low can be explored, then I will  
reject all the offspring of Israel  
because of all they have done,  
says YHWH.**

**<sup>38</sup>The days are surely coming,  
says YHWH, when the city shall  
be rebuilt for YHWH from the  
tower of Hananel to the Corner  
Gate. <sup>39</sup>And the measuring line  
shall go southwards, straight to  
the hill Gareb, and shall then  
turn to Goah. <sup>40</sup>The whole valley  
of the dead bodies and the ashes,  
and all the fields as far as the  
Wadi Kidron, to the corner of the  
Horse Gate toward the east, shall  
be sacred to YHWH. It shall never  
again be uprooted or overthrown.**

