

Jeremiah Lecture Notes—Summer 2011
Sin & Judgment: Jer. 3:6-4:4; 17:1-13; 6:1-30

Jeremiah 3:6-4:4—A Call to Return

--This section of Jeremiah concerns a common theme of returning to Yahweh, but the passage is far from a literary unity. 3:6-18 is in prose, while 3:19-4:4 is in poetry (and continues the thoughts of 3:1-5), with a few verses in question. This arrangement draws the reader's attention to the nature of the Book of Jeremiah as a collection of prophetic sayings, loosely connected by themes.

--The reader should note the continual use of the words "turn" and "return," usually reflecting the generous use of the Hebrew verb *shuv* (שׁוּב) in the passage.

--3:6-11—Judah and Israel

^{JER 3:6} During the reign of King Josiah, the LORD said to me, "Have you seen what faithless Israel has done? She has gone up on every high hill and under every spreading tree and has committed adultery there. ⁷ I thought that after she had done all this she would return to me but she did not, and her unfaithful sister Judah saw it. ⁸ I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries. Yet I saw that her unfaithful sister Judah had no fear; she also went out and committed adultery. ⁹ Because Israel's immorality mattered so little to her, she defiled the land and committed adultery with stone and wood. ¹⁰ In spite of all this, her unfaithful sister Judah did not return to me with all her heart, but only in pretense," declares the LORD.

^{JER 3:11} The LORD said to me, "Faithless Israel is more righteous than unfaithful Judah."¹

--God has divorced Israel, apparently here the Northern Kingdom, for her insistence upon living in adultery—spiritual adultery of idolatry. The reference to "every high hill" and "every spreading tree" likely refers to Baal and Asherah worship, which was typically practiced in outdoor open air shrines.

--Likewise, the reference to "stone and wood" certainly refers to the idols that the people of Judah worshipped. Committing "adultery" with those idols could be a spiritual reference to the people of Judah giving themselves to the gods of the land, rejecting the love of Yahweh; but it could also be a reflection, even if a veiled and covert one, to the sexual nature of their worship practices. They had *literally* committed adultery, as well as spiritually, because they even joined themselves physically to the gods of the land.

--The true tragedy here, however, is that Judah saw it and is now repeating the actions of her sister to the north.

--*Shuv* is used here in two different ways. In verse 7, the LORD says that He thought Judah would certainly "return" to Him after witnessing the destruction of Israel. This is a hopeful word from the Lord, but in verse 9 He states that the Judah did not "return," at least not with "all her heart."

--Her repentance (possibly the reforms of Josiah?) was half-hearted and insincere. As Fretheim wrote, "Judah cannot even repent properly! Judah is adjudged to be more guilty than Israel."² The point here is not that Judah is guiltier than Israel,

¹ All Scripture NIV unless otherwise noted.

² Fretheim, *Jeremiah*, 81.

but that Judah should have learned from the experiences of Israel. Because of their failure to learn, the people of Judah are even more culpable for their actions.

3:12-14—Return to me!

¹² Go, proclaim this message toward the north:

“‘Return, faithless Israel,’ declares the LORD, ‘I will frown on you no longer, for I am merciful,’ declares the LORD, ‘I will not be angry forever.

^{JER 3:13} Only acknowledge your guilt-- you have rebelled against the LORD your God, you have scattered your favors to foreign gods under every spreading tree, and have not obeyed me,’” declares the LORD.

^{JER 3:14} “Return, faithless people,” declares the LORD, “for I am your husband. I will choose you--one from a town and two from a clan--and bring you to Zion.”

--This message proclaimed “toward the north” appears to be directed to Israel, the northern kingdom, which the Assyrians had earlier destroyed and exiled. These words would suggest that some hope for Israel (a remnant?) remained.

--In these verses, *shuv* is used as a plea from the LORD to return to Him, leaving their rebellion behind. If they will only turn back to Him, He will love them again, which implies that He loves them still. This is the broken heart cry of a jilted and broken-hearted lover, if we may be so bold as to apply those terms to Yahweh.

--As Hosea redeemed Gomer in Hosea 3, so Yahweh will return Israel to Himself. He will receive her and bring her back to Him, but the call is for them to turn back so that He can receive them back.

3:15-18—Future Hope after Exile

¹⁵ “Then I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will lead you with knowledge and understanding. ¹⁶ In those days, when your numbers have increased greatly in the land,” declares the LORD, “men will no longer say, ‘The ark of the covenant of the LORD.’ It will never enter their minds or be remembered; it will not be missed, nor will another one be made. ¹⁷ At that time they will call Jerusalem The Throne of the LORD, and all nations will gather in Jerusalem to honor the name of the LORD. No longer will they follow the stubbornness of their evil hearts. ¹⁸ In those days the house of Judah will join the house of Israel, and together they will come from a northern land to the land I gave your forefathers as an inheritance.”

--These verses either predict or presuppose exile, since the Ark of the Covenant seems to be lost and both houses of Israel will return “from a northern land.”

--After the exile, God will give them faithful shepherds. This statement presupposes that the current (or previous) shepherds were not “after [God’s] own heart.” Rather than lead with “knowledge” and “understanding,” the shepherds of Jeremiah’s day were self-centered, arrogant, and oppressive. The Book of Jeremiah will return to this theme in Jer. 23.

--At that time, the Ark of the Covenant will “not be missed” or “remembered,” rather the LORD will be in their midst on his throne. Like Is. 2 and Mic. 4, the nations will join in Jerusalem to worship the LORD. Thus, this text becomes what one may rightly see as an eschatological vision. Only the divine work of God will bring about this situation, as portrayed in Jer. 31, Is. 9 and 11, and Ezek. 36. This is a great spark of hope in a dismal word of judgment.

3:19-25—Call and Response

--3:19-22a—God’s Call

JER 3:19 “I myself said,

“‘How gladly would I treat you like sons and give you a desirable land,
the most beautiful inheritance of any nation.’”

I thought you would call me ‘Father’ and not turn away from following me.

JER 3:20 But like a woman unfaithful to her husband,

so you have been unfaithful to me, O house of Israel,” declares the LORD.

JER 3:21 A cry is heard on the barren heights, the weeping and pleading of the people of Israel,
because they have perverted their ways and have forgotten the LORD their God.

JER 3:22 “Return, faithless people; I will cure you of backsliding.”

--In these verses, the Lord calls Israel as a pleading parent and husband for his wayward child or wife. Verse 19 (“give you a desirable land”) suggests exile. Perhaps this text is after the fall of Judah, when the prophet is still calling them to return to God and thus be restored. Or, it could be a prediction of exile still to come, written to those who would later go into exile. The attribution of this type of prophetic text to a later hand is the scholarly norm, although the practice could be questioned, based upon the scholars’ lack of adequate information on prophetic speech and forms.

--Like Jeremiah 2 and 3:1-5, these verses deal with Judah as an unfaithful wife, therefore one deserving punishment. Yet they are called to return to Yahweh and be healed. Their distress will be removed and they will once again be the bride of Yahweh.

--3:22a is a play on Hebrew words, using *shuv* in both a positive (“return”) and negative (“backsliding” or “turning”) way. Furthermore, the root similar *sabab* is also used to describe their turning from God. Thus, Bright translated the phrase: “Turn back, backsliding sons, I would cure your backslidings!”³ One might compare Hosea 14: 1, 4, to this verse.

--3:22b-25—The People’s Response

“Yes, we will come to you, for you are the LORD our God.

JER 3:23 Surely the idolatrous commotion on the hills and mountains is a deception;
surely in the LORD our God is the salvation of Israel.

JER 3:24 From our youth shameful gods have consumed the fruits of our fathers’ labor--
their flocks and herds, their sons and daughters.

JER 3:25 Let us lie down in our shame, and let our disgrace cover us.

We have sinned against the LORD our God, both we and our fathers;
from our youth till this day we have not obeyed the LORD our God.”

--These verses represent a powerful act of repentance. To “lie down” and “let our disgrace cover us” suggests even a liturgical response of repentance. The people of God accept full responsibility of their sins from the beginning of their history with Yahweh. The reader is left to ponder the context of these actions, however. Were they real, or hoped for? Is this, then, a post-exilic text, akin to the penitent texts of Ezra and Nehemiah? Or is this a prophecy of times of repentance to come?

--4:1-4—Return to the Covenant

JER 4:1 “If you will return, O Israel, return to me,” declares the LORD.

“If you put your detestable idols out of my sight and no longer go astray,

³ J. Bright, *Jeremiah*, Anchor Bible, 20.

JER 4:2 and if in a truthful, just and righteous way you swear, ‘As surely as the LORD lives,’ then the nations will be blessed by him and in him they will glory.”

JER 4:3 This is what the LORD says to the men of Judah and to Jerusalem:

“Break up your unplowed ground and do not sow among thorns.

JER 4:4 Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, circumcise your hearts, you men of Judah and people of Jerusalem, or my wrath will break out and burn like fire because of the evil you have done— burn with no one to quench it.”

--These verses are clear call to return to the covenant. The three terms in v. 2 are common prophetic terms referring to the proper relationship of the people to God in covenant:

“truthful,” or literally “with truthfulness/faithfulness” (Hebrew *‘emeth* אֱמֶת); “just,”

literally “with justice” (Hebrew *mishpat* מִשְׁפָּט); and “righteous,” literally “with

righteousness” (Hebrew *ts^edaqah* צְדָקָה). These words tend to summarize the prophetic understand of the covenant relationship, which is as much horizontal as vertical. The person who swears allegiance to Yahweh must live in covenantal faithfulness to Yahweh, putting away idols and remaining in fidelity to God.

--Two powerful images follow to describe what this repentance might look like.

1. The first is literally “plow up your unplowed soil,” and pictures a farmer plowing a field for the first time. The farmer must prepare the soil for the coming planting. Like the ground must be plowed and the weeds and rocks removed, so the person must be prepared for God’s work in his or her life. A farmer does not throw seed on unplowed ground, for he knows that it will not grow (i.e. Mark 4). In the same way, God’s work will be accomplished only as a person is readied for the reception of God’s promise.⁴ The reader should note that, as plowing unplowed ground is difficult work, so returning to the LORD is no easy task. The language of this image is related to similar message in Hosea 10:12.
2. The second metaphor is circumcision. Significantly, the rite of circumcision was a part of the covenant with Abraham. Hence, here it is connected with returning to the covenant. The proclamation that the people of Judah needed to be spiritually circumcised reveals an important truth: One can be physically connected to God’s people without being spiritually connected to God. God will honor rebellion and allow one to go away from Him, only receiving the rebellious after the difficult and painful work of circumcising the heart and plowing the ground.

--Jeremiah presented God’s pathos vividly in these verses. The reader sees God’s deep sorrow that his beloved has committed adultery and his red hot anger that will destroy those who refuse to return to him. This concept of God’s anger does not abide well with the modern, western, Christian view of God (and most Jewish views, for that matter!). Nonetheless, God’s anger is vividly portrayed in these verses. What shall one do with it?

⁴ See Fretheim, *Jeremiah*, 88, for a discussion of this passage.

Jeremiah 17:1-13—Who Do You Trust?

--These verses are divided into a promise of exile to come (vv. 1-4) and a call to trust in the LORD (vv. 5-13).

--17:1-4—Yahweh's anger

JER 17:1 "Judah's sin is engraved with an iron tool, inscribed with a flint point, on the tablets of their hearts and on the horns of their altars.

JER 17:2 Even their children remember their altars and Asherah poles beside the spreading trees and on the high hills.

JER 17:3 My mountain in the land and your wealth and all your treasures I will give away as plunder, together with your high places, because of sin throughout your country.

JER 17:4 Through your own fault you will lose the inheritance I gave you.

I will enslave you to your enemies in a land you do not know, for you have kindled my anger, and it will burn forever."

--These verses are interesting and difficult for several reasons. First, these verses are absent from LXX. Second, the Masoretic Text is corrupt, esp. in v. 2. Third, 17:3-4 is a doublet of 15:13-14. All of these points cause scholars to question the originality of these verses here, probably unnecessarily.

--The altar was intended to be a place of sacrifice and penitence. In the case of Judah, however, the altar was a monument to their sins, with the sins engraved upon it.⁵ Their hearts are corrupt (thus the need for circumcision in Jer. 4:4).

--Judah's actions will lead to her loss of inheritance. God gave His people a great inheritance: the land, the temple, His presence. However, they had squandered that inheritance on the idols of the land. The price of apostasy is the wrath of God.⁶

17:5-13—Trust in Yahweh, or Else

JER 17:5 This is what the LORD says:

"Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from the LORD.

JER 17:6 He will be like a bush in the wastelands; he will not see prosperity when it comes.

He will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives.

JER 17:7 "But blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him.

JER 17:8 He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream.

It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green.

It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit."

JER 17:9 The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?

JER 17:10 "I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind,

to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve."

JER 17:11 Like a partridge that hatches eggs it did not lay is the man who gains riches by unjust means.

When his life is half gone, they will desert him, and in the end he will prove to be a fool.

JER 17:12 A glorious throne, exalted from the beginning, is the place of our sanctuary.

JER 17:13 O LORD, the hope of Israel, all who forsake you will be put to shame.

Those who turn away from you will be written in the dust

because they have forsaken the LORD, the spring of living water.

--These verses are a treatise on the importance of trusting in God, who alone is trustworthy. The one who trusts in humanity—flesh—is turning away from God. Like

⁵ The author is indebted to Mel Gnatkowski, "Translation and Exegesis of Jeremiah 17:1-13," Seminary Paper presented at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, Fall 1986, for many insights in this section.

⁶ See above on 4:4.

Psalms 1, the prophet contrasts the one who trusts in Yahweh with the one who does not. Trusting in humanity, or oneself, is like looking for life and sustenance in the desert. But trusting in Yahweh is like the tree planted by the spring, always having a source of strength, even in times of drought.

--No one can understand the human heart. Or can they? Only the Lord can examine and understand the deceitfulness of the human heart. In fact, the LORD can see into the heart and “mind” (literally “kidneys” or “inner parts”), here signifying the innermost parts of the person. Jeremiah emphasized that God judges people not only for their actions, but also for their thought, motives, and feelings.

--Jer. 17:13c is a doublet of 2:13. The people had rejected the trustworthy spring and sought out sustenance in a supply that could not satisfy. They had trusted in what was untrustworthy.

Jeremiah 6:1-30—Stand and Look

JER 6:10 To whom can I speak and give warning? Who will listen to me?

Their ears are closed so they cannot hear.

The word of the LORD is offensive to them; they find no pleasure in it.

JER 6:11 But I am full of the wrath of the LORD, and I cannot hold it in.

“Pour it out on the children in the street and on the young men gathered together;

both husband and wife will be caught in it, and the old, those weighed down with years.

JER 6:12 Their houses will be turned over to others, together with their fields and their wives,

when I stretch out my hand against those who live in the land,”

declares the LORD.

JER 6:13 “From the least to the greatest, all are greedy for gain;

prophets and priests alike, all practice deceit.

JER 6:14 They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious.

‘Peace, peace,’ they say, when there is no peace.

JER 6:15 Are they ashamed of their loathsome conduct? No, they have no shame at all;

they do not even know how to blush.

So they will fall among the fallen; they will be brought down when I punish them,”

says the LORD.

JER 6:16 This is what the LORD says:

“Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths,

ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.

But you said, ‘We will not walk in it.’

JER 6:17 I appointed watchmen over you and said,

‘Listen to the sound of the trumpet!’ But you said, ‘We will not listen.’”

--These verses are a prophetic cry for realism. The reader might picture the prophet crying out for the people of Judah to look at themselves honestly. Can they not see the injustice? Can they not see their stubbornness? Can they not see their greed? Can they not see their justification of rebellion? Can they not see the fallacy of the “All is well” cry from their leaders and teachers? Are they not ashamed?

--The answer to all of these questions is clearly “no.” They should be able to see these things, but they can not. Many (Most? All?) of these questions could also be asked of the opulent western church, but they would have to move to another subject. Or would it? We must hear these words. We must ask these questions, lest we “fall among the fallen.”

--Brueggemann points out that the leadership believed that their “policies and propaganda” brought a society that was “harmonious, properly functioning, and life-

giving. But, says this poet: ‘It is a lie. It is not so.’”⁷ Furthermore, he points out that chaos, not conflict, is the opposite of *shalom*, the root meaning of which is well-being or security. The prophet called on his hearers to recognize the chaos around them, both present and coming. Christians must be people who reject the lies around them and speak the truth. First, however, they must learn to blush, which Brueggemann defines as “moral sensitivity.”⁸

--The LORD’s call is to “stand at the crossroads” and “ask for the ancient paths,” the “good way,” the way of the LORD. They must return to their foundation, their covenant relationship with Yahweh, founded during the time of Moses at Mount Sinai. While one may move into the future boldly, God’s Word does not change, his basic desire for His people. He still calls His people to faithfulness to the principles of His Word: fidelity in relationship, singularity of worship, concern for the needy and the oppressed (i.e. generosity instead of greed).

--We, too, must look back and determine whether we have moved off of the path of faithfulness. Are we drawing our own map into the future, justifying attitude and behaviors that are contrary to God? Most importantly, are we placing idols of wood and stone (see Jer. 3:9, or of steel, concrete, glass and electronics) on His throne?

--We, too, must find His path and walk in it. One is never justified to find Yahweh’s path and look at it! When one finds the “good way,” God’s way, that person must then walk in it. Any other response is disobedience, rebellion, and infidelity.

⁷Walter Brueggemann, “A World Available for Peace: Images of Hope from Jeremiah and Isaiah,” *Like Fire in the Bones: Listening for the Prophetic Word in Jeremiah*, ed. P. D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 169.

⁸*Ibid.*, 170.