

Jeremiah 7: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Jeremiah chapter 7. The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord. Stand in the gate of the Lord's house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Hear the word of the Lord, all you men of Judah, who enter these gates to worship the Lord.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Amend your ways and your deeds, and I will let you dwell in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words. This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.

For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly execute justice one with another, if you do not oppress the sojourner, the fatherless, or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own harm, then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers forever.

Behold, you trust in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, We are delivered, only to go on doing all these abominations.

Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, I myself have seen it, declares the Lord. Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it because of the evil of my people Israel.

[1 : 32] And now, because you have done all these things, declares the Lord, and when I spoke to you persistently you did not listen, and when I called you you did not answer, Therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name, and in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your fathers, as I did to Shiloh.

And I will cast you out of my sight, as I cast out all your kinsmen, all the offspring of Ephraim. As for you, do not pray for this people, or lift up a cry or prayer for them, and do not intercede with me, for I will not hear you.

Do you not see what they are doing in the cities of Judah, and in the streets of Jerusalem? The children gather wood, the fathers kindle fire, and the women knead dough, to make cakes for the Queen of Heaven.

And they pour out drink offerings to other gods, to provoke me to anger. Is it I whom they provoke, declares the Lord? Is it not themselves to their own shame?

Therefore thus says the Lord God, Behold, my anger and my wrath will be poured out on this place, upon man and beast, upon the trees of the field, and the fruit of the ground.

[2 : 42] It will burn, and not be quenched. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Add your burnt offerings to your sacrifices, and eat the flesh. For in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I did not speak to your fathers, or command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices.

But this command I gave them, Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people, and walk in all the way that I command you, that it may be well with you.

But they did not obey or incline their ear, but walked in their own counsels, and the stubbornness of their evil hearts, and went backward and not forward. From the day that your fathers came out of the land of Egypt to this day, I have persistently sent all my servants, the prophets, to them, day after day.

Yet they did not listen to me, or incline their ear, but stiffened their neck. They did worse than their fathers. So you shall speak all these words to them. But they will not listen to you.

You shall call to them, but they will not answer you. And you shall say to them, This is the nation that did not obey the voice of the Lord their God, and did not accept discipline. Truth has perished.

[3 : 53] It is cut off from their lips. Cut off your hair and cast it away. Raise a lamentation on the bare heights, for the Lord has rejected and forsaken the generation of his wrath.

For the sons of Judah have done evil in my sight, declares the Lord. They have set their detestable things in the house that is called by my name, to defile it. And they have built the high places of Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I did not command, nor did it come into my mind.

Therefore, behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when it will no more be called Topheth, or the valley of the son of Hinnom, but the valley of slaughter, for they will bury in Topheth, because there is no room elsewhere.

And the dead bodies of this people will be food for the birds of the air and for the beasts of the earth, and none will frighten them away. And I will silence in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, for the land shall become a waste.

Jeremiah chapter 7 is one of the most famous and important chapters in the whole book. Within it, Jeremiah challenges the prevailing temple ideology, which has come to legitimate the oppression and injustice of the society.

[5 : 15] Jerusalem and its leaders believe that their possession of the temple grants them immunity from God's judgment. Jeremiah challenges this in no uncertain terms, making clear that there is no future for Jerusalem apart from obedience.

The Lord's challenge to Jerusalem through Jeremiah identifies the way that the temple and its worship have been rendered integral to the injustice of the entire system. The temple is presumed to suggest that the Lord underwrites the regime, that the boiling part of oppression that Jerusalem has become basks in the Lord's good favor.

One could argue that the temple has started to function as a sort of idol. People look to and trust in it rather than the Lord. The temple has become a symbol of national superiority, attachment to its cult, the safe higher ground from which all other peoples and nations and sinners can be judged. Judah believes that as it looks to the grandeur of the building and as it goes through the motions of the sacrifices, it can manipulate God, that it has some sort of claim upon God that is granted through this building.

Jeremiah exposes the deceptive words of the prophets. This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, perhaps a threefold repetition as a means of parody.

[6 : 29] The underlying question is one of trust. Where is trust being placed? Trust is here being placed in the building itself, in a way that disregards and dishonors the God who placed his name there.

In the starkest of possible terms, the Lord describes the way that they have come to regard his house as a den of robbers. The house of the Lord, the place of worship for all nations, has become a place that malefactors can flee to for refuge, a place of supposed asylum from their crimes and their sins.

Jeremiah catalogues the sins of the people in a way that recalls the Ten Commandments. Steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known.

Rather than coming to the house of the Lord to have serious dealings with him, coming to the house of the Lord has become a way to escape reckoning with him. However, those who treat the temple in this manner are in for a nasty surprise.

Jeremiah directs their attention to Shiloh, where a temple complex had previously arisen around the tabernacle. That sanctuary had been destroyed in the Battle of Aphek as the Ark of the Covenant was removed from it and the worship of Israel was torn apart.

[7 : 40] Its priests suffered the most severe of judgments, Eli the high priest and his two sons Hophni and Phinehas dying on the same day. In the books of Samuel, the destruction of Shiloh for the wickedness of the people is historical background for the rise of the Davidic dynasty.

The temple was built by David's son Solomon and it would have been very easy to take the narrative form of the books of Samuel as an invitation to contrast the unfaithfulness of that former sanctuary with the faithfulness of the new sanctuary set up by David and Solomon.

Yet Jeremiah's prophecy invites comparison. The presumption that underlies the prevailing ideology of the temple is punctured. If God judged Shiloh for its sins, why should he not judge

Jerusalem?

Their persistent disregard for the word of the Lord, their failure to pay attention to the many warnings that he has given them, has doomed them to a similar fate to the northern tribes, the nation of Israel.

The temple will not save them from their fate. If Jeremiah hoped that he might save the people from destruction by his prayers and intercessions, that hope is dispelled in the verses that follow.

[8 : 48] The Lord specifically forbids Jeremiah from praying for the people. Their fate is sealed. God is past hearing any prayer on their behalf. The catastrophe about to befall them will not be mitigated.

If Jeremiah were to question the Lord's judgment on this point, the Lord directs him to the activity of the people in Judah and Jerusalem. An entire network of activity has grown up around the worship of the Queen of Heaven, children gathering wood, fathers kindling fire, women kneading dough, idolatry conscripting the united efforts of the household.

The worship in view here is likely the worship of Ishtar, an Assyrian and Babylonian idolatry that was imported into the land under the reign of Ahaz, reaching its height during the reign of Manasseh.

Through this idolatrous practice, the people are bringing shame upon themselves. While it might rightly seem that they are provoking the Lord to anger, they are also acting to their own dishonor and ruin.

In verses 21 to 28, we see a theme that is common throughout the prophets, the contrast between obedience and sacrifice. What was most important in the covenant was always obedience.

[9 : 55] They were to hear the word of the Lord and obey. God wanted the ear of his people, a circumcised ear. He wanted their hearts more than he wanted any number of sacrifices.

Sacrifice was not the foundational covenant reality. This is something that we see in Amos chapter 5 verses 21 to 25. I hate, I despise your feasts and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. Take away from me the noise of your songs, to the melody of your harps, I will not listen, but let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Did you bring to me sacrifices and offerings during the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? Hosea chapter 6 verse 6 For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

Micah chapter 6 verses 6 to 8 With what shall I come before the Lord and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?

[11 : 06] Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

He has told you, O man, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God? The same challenge is given to King Saul by Samuel.

And Samuel said, Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice and to listen than the fat of rams.

For rebellion is as the sin of divination and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has also rejected you from being king.

For all of their sacrifices, Judah is failing in the most fundamental covenant task, which is that of hearing the Lord and obeying him. They have rejected his law, they have also failed to listen to his prophets.

[12 : 08] The Lord has persistently sent messengers to them from the day that they went out from Egypt and they have repeatedly rejected him. And the Lord tells Jeremiah that his message will face the same deaf ears and stiffened necks.

They will not accept discipline. They cannot hear, they cannot obey the word of the Lord. And now, as a result, truth has been cut off from the land. They have given themselves over purely to the lie, to the deceptive and comforting truths of the false prophets, who assure them that there is peace when there is no peace, who give them the false assurance of the temple cult, when they have been rebelling against the word of the Lord and face his catastrophic judgment.

The final verses of the chapter describe massive defilement of the land. The people of Judah have done evil before God's sight. They have polluted the land with their idolatries and with the blood of their sons and daughters which they have offered to their false gods.

In the poetic justice of the Lord's judgment, their bodies will litter the valley within which they once offered the lives of their children. As they have dishonored the land of the Lord, their bodies will be dishonored.

They will not even be buried, but will become food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth. The city of Jerusalem and the other cities of Judah will be silenced, the voices of joy and celebration being cut off from them.

[13 : 28] The defiled land will become a wasteland. A question to consider. The word of the Lord through Jeremiah in this chapter is a direct assault to the way that the building and the sacrificial worship of the temple have been perverted into props for the endemic and pervasive injustice and spiritual infidelity of the society of Judah.

The very divine appointment of the temple and the technical orthodoxy of its sacrificial worship rendered them apt for a form of idolatry. What are some of the signs by which we might recognize were something similar occurring to our religious buildings and practices?