

Jeremiah 8: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Jeremiah chapter 8 Death shall be preferred to life by all the remnant that remains of this evil family, and all the places where I have driven them, declares the Lord of hosts.

You shall say to them, Thus says the Lord, When men fall, do they not rise again? If one turns away, does he not return? Why then has this people turned away in perpetual backsliding? They hold fast to deceit, they refuse to return. I have paid attention and listened, but they have not spoken rightly. No man relents of his evil, saying, What have I done?

Every one turns to his own course, like a horse plunging headlong into battle. Even the stork in the heavens knows her times, and the turtle-doves, swallow and crane keep the time of their coming. But my people know not the rules of the Lord. How can you say, We are wise, and the law of the Lord is with us? But, behold, the lying pen of the scribes has made it into a lie.

[1 : 30] The wise men shall be put to shame, they shall be dismayed and taken. Behold, they have rejected the word of the Lord. So what wisdom is in them? Therefore I will give their wives to others, and their fields to conquerors, because from the least to the greatest, everyone is greedy for unjust gain.

From prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, Peace, peace, when there is no peace. Were they ashamed when they committed abomination?

No, they were not at all ashamed. They did not know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among the fallen. When I punish them, they shall be overthrown, says the Lord.

When I would gather them, declares the Lord, there are no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree. Even the leaves are withered, and what I gave them has passed away from them.

Why do we sit still, gather together, let us go into the fortified cities and perish there? For the Lord our God has doomed us to perish, and has given us poisoned water to drink, because we have sinned against the Lord.

[2 : 37] We looked for peace, but no good came. For a time of healing, but behold terror. The snorting of their horses is heard from Dan. At the sound of the neighing of their stallions, the whole land quakes.

They come and devour the land and all that fills it, the city and those who dwell in it. For behold, I am sending among you serpents, adders that cannot be charmed, and they shall bite you, declares the Lord.

My joy is gone. Grief is upon me. My heart is sick within me. Behold the cry of the daughter of my people from the length and breadth of the land.

Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her king not in her? Why have they provoked me to anger with their carved images, and with their foreign idols? The harvest is past.

The summer is ended. And we are not saved. For the wound of the daughter of my people is my heart wounded. I mourn, and dismay has taken hold on me. Is there no balm in Gilead?

[3 : 37] Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of the daughter of my people not been restored? Jeremiah chapter 8 verses 1 to 3 concludes the temple sermon of chapter 7.

At the end of chapter 7 the bodies of the slain littered the valley of the son of Hinnom, defiling it and being food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the field. The beginning of chapter 8 describes the extension of this judgment to include those who had formerly been buried.

The bones of rulers formerly buried with the highest of honors will be disinterred, and will be scattered upon the ground, bleached white beneath the heat of the sun. Kings, officials, priests, and prophets, who had formerly worshipped the sun and the moon and all the host of heaven, would have their bones placed out before them.

Their bones scattered like dung upon the surface of the ground, they would steadily be bleached by the creations that they once served. Disinterment of bones is a profound form of dishonoring, a taking back of honors formerly given, and a refusal of the rest of the burial place.

Perhaps in the most famous instance of this, Josiah of Judah disinterred the bones of false priests and prophets and burnt them on the altar of Bethel to defile it. The final state of the people is described in the grimmest of terms.

[4 : 53] They will prefer death to life in what can be seen as a fulfillment of the curse of the covenant in Deuteronomy chapter 28 verses 64 to 68. And the Lord will scatter you among all peoples from one end of the earth to the other.

And there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone, which neither you nor your fathers have known. And among these nations you shall find no respite, and there shall be no resting place for the sole of your foot. But the Lord will give you there a trembling heart and failing eyes, and a languishing soul. Your life shall hang in doubt before you.

Night and day you shall be in dread, and have no assurance of your life. In the morning you shall say, If only it were evening. And at evening you shall say, If only it were morning.

Because of the dread that your heart shall feel, and the sights that your eyes shall see. And the Lord will bring you back in ships to Egypt, a journey that I promised that you should never make again.

And there you shall offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves. But there will be no buyer. Chapter 7 and the first three verses of chapter 8 were predominantly prose.

[6 : 03] Now it returns to poetry. And the first three verses play upon the word for turn in Hebrew. Using several related forms of the verb, it gives ironic comment upon the state of Israel.

Whereas people typically pick themselves up if they fall down, or turn around if they have gone in the wrong direction, Judah is incorrigible in their rebellion and backsliding. They will not return.

They will not repent. While one might accuse them of being fickle, they prove steadfast in their holding to deceit. Earlier Jeremiah accused them of being like a well that kept its evil fresh.

Like a horse racing into battle, they plunge headlong into their error, and will not be turned aside from it. Compared to wild animals that faithfully keep to their ways and their migratory patterns, Judah's obstinate unfaithfulness is shameful.

Such an unfavorable comparison with animals can also be found in Isaiah chapter 1, verses 2-3. Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth, for the Lord has spoken.

[7 : 03] Children have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib, but Israel does not know. My people do not understand.

Just as the people might protest their performance of the sacrifices, and their possession of the temple of the Lord, Here they claim that they are wise and that they have the law of the Lord with them. Presumably referring to the leaders of the people, they pride themselves on their possession of the insight that the Torah gives them, and yet they both fail to observe it, and they pervert it in their teaching.

They make it into a lie. The wisdom that the people of God were promised in Deuteronomy chapter 4 was the law, but now they have rejected the word of the Lord. They have no wisdom in them. They have become unfit for their purpose, and so they will be cast out. Returning to the statements of chapter 6, verses 12 to 15, the Lord declares that they will suffer from the covetousness that they have practiced.

Their wives, their fields, their possessions will be given into the hands of others who desire them. Once again, poetic justice. As Walter Brueggemann notes, there are three indictments in verses 11 to 13.

[8 : 13] First, the leaders, the priests, and the prophets who should have been speaking truthfully about the sick condition of the people have failed to do so. They have not blown the warning trumpet. Rather, they have wrongly reassured the people that they are living in times of peace.

But there is no peace. The judgment of the Lord is upon them. Second, they have become shameless. They have lost the ability to be embarrassed at their sin. They felt no sense of the judgment of the Lord and the holiness of the Lord before which they stood.

Third, they failed to produce the fruits that the Lord wanted from his people. Israel was like a vine, the planting of the Lord that was supposed to yield its fruit in its season. And yet when the Lord came to inspect it, there were no fruits.

The moral fruits of a faithful society were not found in her. Indeed, her very leaves had withered. The imagery of the Lord judging his vine might remind us of Isaiah chapter 5 or Psalm 80. While Israel might think of itself as having special claim upon the Lord, that the Lord is on their side, that the Lord is in their pocket even, the imagery here shifts things around. They are the vine of the Lord's planting, which he has planted in order that it might bear fruit.

[9 : 23] If they do not bear fruit, then they are fit only to be burned. Verses 15 to 16 describe the approaching judgment. They had been led to expect peace, but now judgment is coming upon them and its terror with it.

The snorting of powerful military horses is heard in the northernmost territory of Dan. The land itself shudders as it awaits the inevitable doom that is coming upon it. The land itself will be devoured before them and all its inhabitants.

From the stamping and the snorting of the horses descending from Dan, we move to a different image of serpents that the Lord has sent among his people. Serpents like those sent among the people in Numbers chapter 21, as a result of their rebellion in the wilderness.

These serpents, however, will not be able to be charmed. There will be no bronze serpent to look to this time. They will be poisoned by this approaching army. In verses 13 to 17, the speech of the Lord flanks the speech of Jeremiah in the middle.

In verses 18 to 21, this order is reversed. Lamentations of Jeremiah flank his speaking on behalf of the people, and in the middle of the entire section the Lord speaks.

[10 : 31] Jeremiah laments over the people. The imagery at this point turns more to the themes of sickness. His heart is sick. The daughter of his people have a great wound that cannot be healed.

Dismay takes hold of the wounded prophet's heart. The people themselves lament from the city. They wonder where the Lord is. Is he not the king of the people? They have been reassured by their religious leaders that the Lord is on their side unconditionally.

They have the temple. They have the law. They have the sacrifices. Surely God is for them. And yet God is nowhere to be found. The official theology has proven to be a dangerous lie.

Besieged by their enemies. The harvest passes. The summer ends. And all the fruits that will be gathered in within it. And yet they are not delivered. They are going to face famine for the winter. And will not be able to sow for the coming year. At the center of this section the question of the Lord rings out. Why have they provoked me to anger with their carved images and with their foreign idols?

[11 : 29] The people wonder where God has gone. But they have defiled his land. And filled the very city where the Lord has placed his name with their idolatries. Why would the Lord not judge such a people?

Once again the pathos of the prophet who laments the state of a people that he has been forbidden to pray for. And of the indignation of the Lord over their treachery is powerfully illustrated in these verses.

The people have been described as sick and wounded. The final verse of this chapter ends with a three-fold rhetorical question. Is there no balm in Gilead? Gilead was a region in the Transjordan that was famous for its balm.

Balm was used as perfume, as body oil or as medicine. Gilead also seems to have been a place where healers were to be found. There is plenty of balm in Gilead. There are physicians there too. But the health of the people of Judah has not been restored because they have rejected their true healer, the Lord. A question to consider.

[12 : 28] What can we learn from the way that the prophecy of Jeremiah, like so many other prophecies, intersperses the words of the prophet himself, imagined words of the people, and the word of the Lord?

What purpose might this be serving?