

# Jeremiah 13: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[ 0 : 0 0 ] Jeremiah chapter 13 Thus says the Lord to me, Go and buy a linen loincloth, and put it around your waist, and do not dip it in water. So I bought a loincloth according to the word of the Lord, and put it around my waist.

And the word of the Lord came to me a second time, Take the loincloth that you have bought, which is around your waist, and arise, go to the Euphrates, and hide it there in a cleft of the rock.

So I went and hid it by the Euphrates, as the Lord commanded me. And after many days the Lord said to me, Arise, go to the Euphrates, and take from there the loincloth that I commanded you to hide there.

Then I went to the Euphrates and dug, and I took the loincloth from the place where I had hidden it. And behold, the loincloth was spoiled, it was good for nothing. Then the word of the Lord came to me, Thus says the Lord, Even so will I spoil the pride of Judah, and the great pride of Jerusalem. This evil people who refuse to hear my words, who stubbornly follow their own heart, and have gone after other gods to serve them and worship them, shall be like this loincloth, which is good for nothing.

[ 1 : 1 1 ] For as the loincloth clings to the waist of a man, so I made the whole house of Israel, and the whole house of Judah cling to me, declares the Lord, that they might be for me a people, a name, a praise, and a glory.

But they would not listen. You shall speak to them this word, Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, Every jar shall be filled with wine. And they will say to you, Do we not indeed know that every jar will be filled with wine?

Then you shall say to them, Thus says the Lord, Behold, I will fill with drunkenness all the inhabitants of this land, the kings who sit on David's throne, the priests, the prophets, and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

And I will dash them one against another, fathers and sons together, declares the Lord. I will not pity, or spare, or have compassion, that I should not destroy them.

Hear, and give ear. Be not proud, for the Lord has spoken. Give glory to the Lord your God, before he brings darkness, before your feet stumble on the twilight mountains.

[ 2 : 1 6 ] And while you look for light, he turns it into gloom, and makes it deep darkness. But if you will not listen, my soul will weep in secret for your pride. My eyes will weep bitterly and run down with tears, because the Lord's flock has been taken captive.

Say to the king and the queen mother, Take a lowly seat, for your beautiful crown has come down from your head. The cities of the Negev are shut up, with none to open them.

All Judah is taken into exile, wholly taken into exile. Lift up your eyes and see, those who come from the north, where is the flock that was given you, your beautiful flock?

What will you say when they set as head over you, those whom you yourself have taught to be friends to you? Will not pangs take hold of you, like those of a woman in labour? And if you say in your heart, Why have these things come upon me?

It is for the greatness of your iniquity that your skirts are lifted up, and you suffer violence. Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots?

[ 3 : 2 2 ] Then also you can do good, who are accustomed to do evil. I will scatter you like chaff, driven by the wind from the desert. This is your lot, the portion I have measured out to you, declares the Lord, because you have forgotten me, and trusted in lies.

I myself will lift up your skirts over your face, and your shame will be seen. I have seen your abominations, your adulteries and neighings, your lewd whorings, on the hills in the field.

Woe to you, O Jerusalem! How long will it be before you are made clean? Jeremiah chapter 13 opens with a symbolic action, likely from Jeremiah's earlier ministry.

This is followed by oracle material concerning it. Symbolic action is a mode of presentation of the divine word, through something akin to an enacted parable. Jack Lumbum rightly argues for the importance of distinguishing this from a sort of sympathetic magic, some attempt at manipulation through actions performed upon representative objects.

Jeremiah performs a similar symbolic action at the beginning of chapter 19 with the pottery jug. Several other such actions are found throughout the book. Indeed, Jeremiah himself serves as something of a sign to the people.

[ 4 : 40 ] The symbolic action itself involves a loincloth, a loose, fitting garment worn around the loins next to the skin. The loincloth is a more intimate garment than many others.

It would also have been worn by the priests. Jeremiah is instructed not to wash the loincloth. The wearing of the loincloth and the later bearing of the loincloth are related. We should also bear in mind the stage-by-stage revelation of what Jeremiah is to do with this loincloth.

When Jeremiah begins the symbolic action, he and any of the people watching him have no idea of where it is going to go. This might have invited their curiosity, which would have served the effectiveness of the sign.

Presumably a period of time elapses between the first word of the Lord given to Jeremiah and the second, and during that period of time his wearing of this loincloth, with no explanation given as to its purpose, might provoke conversation, especially as it was never washed.

After having performed the first stage of the symbolic action in wearing the loincloth, Jeremiah is instructed to take the loincloth and bring it to some place where he hides it in the cleft of the rock.

[ 5 : 45 ] There's no reference to a river or to a particular place on the Euphrates here, and many have argued that it is not actually a reference to the Euphrates at all. Rather, it might be a reference to a place called Pera, which was only about five miles from Jerusalem and had the sort of rocky situation that would be suitable for performing this particular sign.

The southern bank of the river Euphrates might not have had the same rocky conditions. Other commentators have suggested that Jeremiah might have gone to the Euphrates in a vision, otherwise we have to explain his taking a round trip of several hundred miles twice over.

Derek Kidner, however, argues that the laborious nature of such a journey to the Euphrates itself would have been part of what would have made it an effective sign. That said, if Jeremiah did go to the Euphrates, it is highly unlikely that anyone accompanied him.

Had he merely gone to Pera, about five miles away, it is quite likely that a number of witnesses would have been there to see the action performed. Once again, in performing this symbolic action, Jeremiah does not know what will happen next.

Once again, a significant amount of time elapses, and then the Lord instructs him to return to the place where he placed the loincloth. When he takes out the loincloth, lo and behold, it's good for nothing.

[ 6 : 57 ] At this point, the word of the Lord comes to him to explain the significance of the symbolic action. First of all, the Lord gives the primary key to the meaning of the enacted parable. The loincloth represents his people.

Just as the loincloth has been spoiled, so his people will be spoiled. The fact that they are good for nothing is seen in the way that they refuse to listen to his words, they stubbornly follow their own hearts, and they have gone after their idols to worship them.

The purpose of the loincloth was always to cling to the body of a person. As a people of the Lord's creation, the purpose of Israel was always to cling to him. Just as the loincloth has an intimate relationship with the body of the wearer, so Judah and Israel were supposed to have an intimate relationship with the Lord, their God.

They were to be the Lord's special possession, a manifestation of the holiness of his name, his praise, and also his glory. And their clinging to the Lord was always to take the form of listening to his voice and faithfully obeying.

This opening symbolic action and oracle is followed by a second prose account. It isn't clear whether the statement every jar shall be filled with wine is proverbial or situational.

[ 8 : 06 ] Brueggemann and Clemens, as well as Craigie, Kelly and Drinkard, all argued that Jeremiah is repeating a proverb here, whereas Lumbum suggests that the setting is that of a feast with wine, whichever it is, the meaning is not too difficult to discern.

There is a shift from the jars that are filled with wine to the people that are filled with wine. The Lord tests people with wine, with the wine of his fury and wrath. Here the effect of the Lord's filling the people with wine is to render them intoxicated and unstable in their feet.

They totter and are dashed into each other. Perhaps the connection between the people and the jars is to be continued into verse 14, within which the unstable jars of the people smash into each other, to the destruction of all involved.

The unheeding people are instructed to hear and give ear in verse 15, where a warning is delivered to them. Before the Lord brings judgment upon them, they are called to give glory to him.

If they do not, while like shepherds they look for the light of the coming morning, the Lord will bring a deeper darkness upon them. Jeremiah describes the way that he will weep for the people if they fail to respond in verse 17.

[9:12] In verses 18 and 19, there is judgment proclaimed upon the leaders of the people, more particularly upon the king and the queen mother, perhaps in this case Jehoiakim and his mother Nehushta.

If they are the figure's address, this would likely have been shortly before 597 BC, with the first deportation from Jerusalem. 2 Kings chapter 24 verse 12 describes this, Verse 20 seems to continue this address to the king and the queen mother.

In verse 18, there is the loss of the beautiful crown, and in verse 20, there is the loss of the beautiful flock. The exiled king and queen mother have suffered the loss of the people that were once committed to their charge.

The text of verse 21 is very difficult, and many scholars debate whether some words have been omitted, or whether the text has been distorted in some other manner in its historical transmission. The meaning of the text might be similar to Jeremiah chapter 4 verses 30 to 31. Judah has been unwise in its choice of its friends. And you, O desolate one, what do you mean that you dress in scarlet, that you adorn yourself with ornaments of gold, that you enlarge your eyes with paint?

[10:32] In vain you beautify yourself. Your lovers despise you. They seek your life. For I heard a cry as of a woman in labour, anguish as of one giving birth to her first child, the cry of the daughter of Zion, gasping for breath, stretching out her hands, Woe is me!

I am fainting before murderers. Judah and Jerusalem, assured in their innocence, wonder, Why have these things come upon me? To which the Lord makes clear that it is on account of their great sin.

The judgment that comes upon them is euphemistically compared to the cruel indignities suffered by women taken captive in warfare. Judah, the adulterous bride who has abandoned the Lord, and whom the Lord has now abandoned, is no longer the exalted queen.

She is a common captive of war, stripped of her finery, reduced to a slave, likely to be raped by her enemies. Similar imagery is found in Ezekiel chapter 16 verse 39, And I will give you into their hands, and they shall throw down your vaulted chamber, and break down your lofty places.

They shall strip you of your clothes, and take your beautiful jewels, and leave you naked and bare. Again in Nahum chapter 3 verse 5, Behold, I am against you, declares the Lord of hosts, and will lift up your skirts over your face, and I will make nations look at your nakedness, and kingdoms at your shame.

[11:53] The same image is also used in Isaiah chapter 47 verses 1 to 3, of Babylon itself. Come down and sit in the dust, O virgin daughter of Babylon. Sit on the ground without a throne, O daughter of the Chaldeans.

For you shall no more be called tender and delicate. Take the millstone and grind flour. Put off your veil. Strip off your robe. Uncover your legs. Pass through the rivers.

Your nakedness shall be uncovered, and your disgrace shall be seen. I will take vengeance, and I will spare no one. As we see in the marital parable of Ezekiel chapter 16, the Lord had blessed and dressed his people.

Israel was clothed in marital dress, with the clothing of a priestly and a royal figure. All of that will be removed from her, and she will be utterly ravaged by her enemies. At a number of points in the prophecy of Jeremiah, he speaks of the way that Jerusalem and Judah did not just commit evil in an accidental way, but had become committed to evil.

It had become like a well designed to keep its evil fresh. Here the analogy that he turns to is the skin of an Ethiopian, or the spots of a leopard. Jerusalem and Judah's evil has become as distinctive and unchangeable as either the Ethiopian's skin or the leopard's spots.

[ 13 : 09 ] Against some later racist commentators, it's important to notice that the comparison between the evil of Judah and the Ethiopian's skin does not rest on any association between the skin colour and evil, rather the point is that as an Ethiopian's skin would have distinctively and unchangeably marked him out in the context of 6th century BC Judah, so Judah itself is marked out by its sin.

In consequence of Judah's iniquity, judgment will fall upon it, a judgment that is described in three images. They will be scattered like chaff driven by the wind from the desert. This takes up imagery that we see in Psalm 1 concerning the wicked on the day of judgment.

The second image is an ironic one of the parceling out of land. Judah is going to be uprooted from the land, from their sin, but a new lot is being apportioned to them. The portion that the Lord is measuring out for them is a portion of shame and dishonour, an inheritance that they're receiving on account of their sin.

The final imagery is similar to the one in verse 22. Judah is the unfaithful, adulterous, and prostituting bride, and as a result she is going to be stripped of her finery by the Lord.

As her royal skirts are removed, she is laid bare before her enemies, who will utterly humiliate her. The horrific sexual imagery implied here should not be sugar-coated. It is of a piece with the other jarring sexual imagery that is used of Judah and Jerusalem in the book of Jeremiah.

[ 14 : 32 ] Judah is the beloved bride of the Lord who is turned adulterous, and then turned into a prostitute that will throw herself before any man. Pathetically she dresses up as if to seduce former lovers who are now going to destroy her, and now she is stripped of all her finery and reduced to a war slave to be raped by her captors.

The horrific ugliness and cruelty of the image may turn our stomachs, but it is well calculated to communicate the pathos, the horror, and the true scandal of the story of Judah.

A question to consider. What are some other examples in Scripture of symbolic actions?