

Jeremiah 18: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 19 January 2021

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[0 : 0 0] Jeremiah chapter 18. The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord, Arise and go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words. So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel, and the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do.

Then the word of the Lord came to me, O house of Israel, Can I not do with you as this potter has done? declares the Lord. Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.

If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it. And if that nation concerning which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it.

And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will build and plant it. And if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it.

Now therefore say to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, Thus says the Lord, Behold, I am shaping disaster against you, and devising a plan against you. Return everyone from his evil way, and amend your ways and your deeds.

[1 : 1 9] But they say, That is in vain. We will follow our own plans, and will everyone act according to the stubbornness of his evil heart. Therefore thus says the Lord, Ask among the nations, Who has heard the like of this?

The virgin Israel has done a very horrible thing. Does the snow of Lebanon leave the crags of Syrian? Do the mountain waters run dry, the cold flowing streams?

But my people have forgotten me. They make offerings to false gods. They make them stumble in their ways in the ancient roads, and to walk into side roads, not the highway, making their land a horror, a thing to be hissed at forever.

Everyone who passes by it is horrified and shakes his head. Like the east wind, I will scatter them before the enemy. I will show them my back, not my face, in the day of their calamity.

Then they said, Come, let us make plots against Jeremiah, for the law shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet.

[2 : 2 3] Come, let us strike him with the tongue, and let us not pay attention to any of his words. Hear me, O Lord, and listen to the voice of my adversaries. Should good be repaid with evil?

Yet they have dug a pit for my life. Remember how I stood before you, to speak good for them, to turn away your wrath from them. Therefore deliver up their children to famine. Give them over to the power of the sword.

Let their wives become childless and widowed. May their men meet death by pestilence. Their youths be struck down by the sword in battle. May a cry be heard from their houses, when you bring the plunderer suddenly upon them.

For they have dug a pit to take me, and laid snares for my feet. Yet you, O Lord, know all their plotting to kill me. Forgive not their iniquity, nor blot out their sin from your sight.

Let them be overthrown before you. Deal with them in the time of your anger. Jeremiah chapter 18 begins with the Lord's direction to Jeremiah to go to the house of the potter.

[3 : 2 7] The theme of pottery will be important in chapter 19 as well. As a metaphor, the relationship between the potter and the clay is one that's used for God's relationship with his people on a few occasions in scripture.

In Isaiah chapter 45 verses 9 to 11. Woe to him who strives with him who formed him, a part among earthen parts. Does the clay say to him who forms it, What are you making?

Or, Your work has no handles. Woe to him who says to a father, What are you begetting? Or to a woman, With what are you in labour? Thus says the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, And the one who formed him, Ask me of things to come.

Will you command me concerning my children and the work of my hands? Isaiah chapter 64 verse 8. But now, O Lord, you are our father, We are the clay, And you are our potter.

We are all the work of your hand. Most famously, this imagery is taken up by the Apostle Paul in Romans chapter 9 verses 18 to 24. So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, And he hardens whomever he wills.

[4 : 32] You will say to me then, Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will? But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is moulded say to its moulder, Why have you made me like this?

Has the potter no right over the clay To make out of the same lump One vessel for honourable use, And another for dishonourable use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, Has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, In order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, Which he has prepared beforehand for glory, Even us whom he has called, Not from the Jews only, but also from the Gentiles.

Familiar as we may be with uses of the imagery of the potter and the clay, We should beware of some of the assumptions that we might bring to this text. Christian uses of this imagery have often focused on the Lord's power and determination, Apart from and prior to anything that the clay has a part in.

The Lord as the potter determines what the clay should be, And the clay becomes that thing. The clay has no agency or determination in the matter. The clay cannot resist its maker. The clay cannot change its maker's mind.

However, while the symbol of the potter and the clay here in Jeremiah Does emphasise the sovereignty of the Lord, It is the dynamic process of forming the clay, Not the prior decision of what to form it into, That is focused upon here.

[5 : 55] And here comes the real surprise. In the Lord's use of this symbolism with Jeremiah, The potter's purpose for the clay is resisted by the clay, And as a result, the potter's purpose for the clay changes.

There is a dynamic relationship between the potter and the clay here, That while representing the potter's sovereignty, Simultaneously emphasises his responsiveness to the material that he is working upon.

And while Jeremiah has followed the Lord's direction, And has seen the potter perform these actions upon the clay, Now the Lord's word comes to him, And he is granted to understand the meaning of what he has seen.

The Lord presents two different scenarios. The first in which the Lord has determined some disaster upon a nation, And the second in which the Lord has determined to bless a nation. In the first case, if the nation responds in a positive way to its maker, Then the Lord will relent of his intention to destroy it.

In the second contrasting scenario, If the Lord had purposed to bless a nation, And it responds in a negative way, Doing evil and not listening to the voice of the Lord, Then the Lord can relent of the good that he intended to do to it, And it can be destroyed.

[7 : 01] It is in this context that Jeremiah gives a word of warning to the people of Judah. The Lord has a purpose to destroy them. But yet, in the analogy of the potter and the clay, There is the hope that if they truly repent, The Lord might relent and they might not suffer his judgment.

But yet, in verse 12, We see that they have been stubborn in their evil way. They have not repented. They have not turned or responded. God's warnings have gone unheeded. Verse 13 contains a homonym of the word used for stubbornness in verse 12, In the term used for horrible thing.

Israel's infidelity is unprecedented, Even among the pagan nations. The pagan nations don't abandon even false idols. But Israel has abandoned the living and true God.

And when Israel, the Lord's people, abandon the Lord, They become monstrous. They cease to be themselves. The Lord makes this point by contrasting their infidelity With the fidelity of the created order.

The snow of Lebanon does not leave the crags of Syrian. The mountain waters do not run dry. The created order is faithful in its paths. But Israel has abandoned their God.

[8 : 08] The result has been disorientation and decay. Israel has wandered off on false paths. And their land has become desolate. A site of death and destruction. As they have forgotten the Lord, The Lord will scatter them before their enemies.

As they have turned their backs on him, So in the day of Judah's calamity, He will turn his back on them. As a prophet declaring the Lord's judgment upon the people, Jeremiah seems to have faced rising opposition.

And in verse 18, We have a window into conspiracies made against him. Jeremiah has become a public enemy. The leading authorities feel threatened by him. And they intend to take him out.

There are three forms of public authority mentioned here. Who rule by three different modes of speech. The priest rules by means of the law. The wise rule by means of wise counsel.

And the prophet rules by means of the word of the Lord. Jeremiah's bearing of the effective word of God, That bears testimony against them, Is a threat to the authority of each of these figures.

[9 : 07] He declares the wise to be foolish, The priests who have forsaken the law, And the prophets to be speaking empty words of falsehood. If Jeremiah is not opposed, Their authority is placed in jeopardy.

They seek to oppose him by striking him with their tongue. This might mean speaking against him publicly, In forms of slander and gossip. But most likely it means something even beyond that, That they will make official charges against him.

Back at the time of his call in chapter 1, The Lord had promised to be with Jeremiah against all of his enemies. In chapter 1 verse 8, Do not be afraid of them, For I am with you to deliver you, Declares the Lord.

In verses 17 to 19, But you, dress yourself for work, Arise and say to them everything that I command you. Do not be dismayed by them, Lest I dismay you before them.

And I, behold, I make you this day a fortified city, An iron pillar and bronze walls, Against the whole land, Against the kings of Judah, Its officials, Its priests, And the people of the land.

[10 : 08] They will fight against you, But they shall not prevail against you, For I am with you, Declares the Lord, To deliver you. In verse 18, The authorities had said, Let us not pay attention to any of his words.

The same verb is used in verse 19, When Jeremiah calls to the Lord to hear him. The implied false testimony of Jeremiah's adversaries in verse 18, Sets up a juridical context.

Faced with false witness, Jeremiah calls upon the Lord to judge, To give ear to his case, And to listen to the voice of his adversaries. He calls upon the Lord to minister justice in his difficult situation.

He has been faithful in his calling. He has prayed for the deliverance of the people, That God's wrath might not come upon them. And yet now they are repaying him with evil for the good that he has done.

At this point the prophet prays, Not for their deliverance, But for their judgment, That God's just vengeance will come speedily upon them. God is the faithful and just God, The God who stands by his word, And stands by his prophet.

[11 : 09] He is the God who will bring judgment to bear Upon people who forsake him, And the people who oppose his word. And Jeremiah, confident in these facts, Turns to the Lord in his distress.

Their sins must not be forgiven, Their iniquities not blotted out. The time for their destruction has come. A question to consider.

Was it appropriate for the prophet Jeremiah To pray for the destruction of his enemies? Why or why not?