

Jeremiah 19: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Jeremiah chapter 19. Thus says the Lord, Go buy a potter's earthenware flask, and take some of the elders of the people, and some of the elders of the priests, and go out to the valley of the son of Hinnom, at the entry of the potsherd gate, and proclaim there the words that I tell you.

You shall say, Hear the word of the Lord, O kings of Judah, and inhabitants of Jerusalem. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Behold, I am bringing such disaster upon this place, that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle, because the people have forsaken me, and have profaned this place by making offerings in it to other gods, whom neither they nor their fathers, nor the kings of Judah have known, and because they have filled this place with the blood of innocents, and have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal, which I did not command or decree, nor did it come into my mind. Therefore, behold, days are coming, declares the Lord, when this place shall no more be called Topheth, or the valley of the son of Hinnom, but the valley of slaughter.

And in this place I will make void the plans of Judah and Jerusalem, and will cause their people to fall by the sword before their enemies, and by the hand of those who seek their life.

I will give their dead bodies for food to the birds of the air and to the beasts of the earth. And I will make this city a horror, a thing to be hissed at. Everyone who passes by it will be horrified, and will hiss because of all its wounds.

And I will make them eat the flesh of their sons and their daughters, and everyone shall eat the flesh of his neighbour in the siege and in the distress, with which their enemies and those who seek their life afflict them.

[1 : 44] Then you shall break the flask in the sight of the men who go with you, and shall say to them, Thus says the Lord of hosts, So will I break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter's vessel, so that it can never be mended.

Men shall bury in Topheth, because there will be no place else to bury. Thus will I do to this place, declares the Lord, and to its inhabitants, making this city like Topheth.

The houses of Jerusalem, and the houses of the kings of Judah, All the houses on whose roofs offerings have been offered to all the hosts of heaven, and drink offerings have been poured out to other gods, shall be defiled like the place of Topheth.

Then Jeremiah came from Topheth, where the Lord had sent him to prophesy. And he stood in the court of the Lord's house, and said to all the people, Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Behold, I am bringing upon this city, and upon all its towns, all the disaster that I have pronounced against it.

Because they have stiffened their neck, refusing to hear my words. The metaphor of the potter and the clay was introduced in chapter 18. Now it is developed further in chapter 19.

[2 : 55] This chapter should be connected with the oracles of chapter 7 verse 30 to chapter 8 verse 3. 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.

At that time, declares the Lord, the bones of the kings of Judah, the bones of its officials, the bones of the priests, the bones of the prophets, and the bones of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, shall be brought out of their tombs, and they shall be spread before the sun and the moon, and all the host of heaven, which they have loved and served, which they have gone after, and which they have sought and worshipped.

[4 : 16] And they shall not be gathered or buried, they shall be as dung on the surface of the ground. Death shall be preferred to life by all the remnant that remains of this evil family, in all the places where I have driven them, declares the Lord of hosts.

The narrative here provides a background for earlier oracles. We should remember that the material of Jeremiah is not placed in chronological order. A similar connection can be seen between chapter 26 and Jeremiah's temple sermon in chapter 7, verses 1 to 15.

Chapter 19 expands upon the material of chapters 7 to 8. Jack Lumbum argues that verses 1 to 13 are four oracles in prose narrative form.

The second half of verse 3 to verse 5, 6 to 9, the second half of verse 11, and then verses 12 to 13. These are broken into two by directives given to Jeremiah in verses 1 to the first half of verse 3, and verse 10 to the first half of verse 11.

There is a similar opening to this chapter as there is to chapter 13, where Jeremiah was instructed to buy the loincloth. This time he is buying a flask or decanter. Lumbum notes that it is generally identified as an expensive ring-burnished decanter.

[5 : 33] He is witnessed by elders of the people and elders of the priests. These are leading figures and Jeremiah presumably has their attention at this point. He has been instructed to perform this symbolic action by the Lord and he will perform it before prominent representatives of the authorities.

This is performed in the valley of the son of Hinnom. In chapter 28, verses 1 to 3 of 2 Chronicles, and in chapter 33, verses 1 to 6 of 2 Chronicles, Ahaz and Manasseh had both burned their sons in this valley.

In 2 Kings, chapter 23, verse 10, we read of King Josiah, The worship of Molech and the practice of child sacrifice in the context of it was a particularly serious form of idolatry that is spoken of on several occasions in scripture.

Topheth, in the valley of the son of Hinnom, had become synonymous with this particularly egregious form of child sacrifice, in Leviticus chapter 20, verses 2 to 5, we read, Say to the people of Israel, Any one of the people of Israel, or of the strangers who sojourn in Israel, who gives any of his children to Molech, shall surely be put to death.

The people of the land shall stone him with stones. I myself will set my face against that man, and will cut him off from among his people, because he has given one of his children to Molech, to make my sanctuary unclean, and to profane my holy name.

[7 : 02] And if the people of the land do at all close their eyes to that man when he gives one of his children to Molech, and do not put him to death, then I will set my face against that man, and against his clan, and will cut them off from among their people, him and all who follow him in whoring after Molech.

The practice of sacrificing children to Molech is condemned on several other occasions in scripture. In Psalm 106, verses 36 to 39, Archaeological work has confirmed claims about child sacrifice and the worship of Molech in related cults in various parts of the ancient Mediterranean world.

The practice of child sacrifice to Molech in Israel was drawn from the Canaanites, who probably took it from the Tyrians. Jeremiah goes out to the valley by way of the potsherd gate, presumably a place of broken pottery.

This would be a very suitable location for Jeremiah's prophetic condemnation and his symbolic act. It's also identified as the dung gate, which would also be symbolically fitting for his prophecy.

The Lord is going to bring a signal disaster upon them on account of their idolatry and their violence. While the expression in verse 6, Behold the days are coming, often introduces positive messages of anticipated salvation, here it introduces a statement of the most severe judgment.

[8 : 40] The valley of the son of Hinnom and Topheth will become places defiled by their slain and a place of their destruction. This is also spoken of in Isaiah chapter 66, verse 24, the last verse of that book.

And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me, for their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.

The place will be renamed. It will become a lasting place of shame and dishonour, erasing its former identity. The valley of the son of Hinnom is the New Testament Gehenna, which is a powerful image of hell in the Gospels.

It will become a site where many bodies are disposed of, like rubbish, without the dignity of a proper burial, their bones picked clean by scavengers and bleached under the sun. Judah had sacrificed their children in that location, and now their own bodies will be cast there.

Judah itself will become a warning sign of the Lord's judgment, a cautionary tale, a byword among passers-by, who would remark upon its grim fate. Indeed, when the siege came upon them, the people who had offered their children to idols would eat their own children's flesh.

[9 : 52] We might here remember the story of the two women in the siege of Samaria in 2 Kings chapter 6. One of the most serious curses of the covenant was also concerning this eating of children in Deuteronomy chapter 28, verses 53 to 57.

And you shall eat the fruit of your womb, the flesh of your sons and daughters, whom the Lord your God has given you, in the siege and in the distress with which your enemies shall distress you.

The man who is the most tender and refined among you will begrudge food to his brother, to the wife he embraces, and to the last of the children whom he has left, so that he will not give to any of them any of the flesh of his children whom he is eating, because he has nothing else left, in the siege and in the distress with which your enemies shall distress you in all your towns.

The most tender and refined woman among you, who would not venture to set the sole of her foot on the ground because she is so delicate and tender, will begrudge to the husband she embraces, to her son and to her daughter, her afterbirth that comes out from between her feet, and her children whom she bears, because lacking everything she will eat them secretly, in the siege and in the distress with which your enemies shall distress you and your towns.

Jeremiah was instructed to break the decanter as a symbolic act before the witnesses, who represented the people and their leaders. They too will be broken beyond repair, and their waste pieces will be cast into Topheth, and the rest of the city itself will become like that defiled Topheth.

[11 : 23] The chapter ends with Jeremiah returning to Jerusalem, where he declares judgment again in the court of the temple. A question to consider.

Reading chapter 18 verses 1 to 12 and chapter 19 verses 1 to 13 alongside each other, how should we relate their two sets of narratives and oracles concerning Judah and pottery?

