

Jeremiah 31: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Jeremiah chapter 31. At that time, declares the Lord, I will be the God of all the clans of Israel, and they shall be my people. Thus says the Lord, the people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness. When Israel sought for rest, the Lord appeared to him from far away.

I have loved you with an everlasting love, therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you. Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel. Again you shall adorn yourself with tambourines, and shall go forth in the dance of the merrymakers. Again you shall plant vineyards on the mountains of Samaria. The planters shall plant, and shall enjoy the fruit.

For there shall be a day when watchmen will call in the hill country of Ephraim, Arise and let us go up to Zion, to the Lord our God. For thus says the Lord, Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and raise shouts for the chief of the nations.

Proclaim, give praise, and say, O Lord, save your people, the remnant of Israel. Behold, I will bring them from the north country, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth.

Among them the blind and the lame, the pregnant woman, and she who is in labour together. A great company they shall return here. With weeping they shall come, and with pleas for mercy I will lead them back.

[1 : 21] I will make them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble. For I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn. Hear the word of the Lord, O nations, and declare it in the coastlands far away. Say, He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd keeps his flock.

For the Lord has ransomed Jacob, and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him. They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd.

Their life shall be like a watered garden, and they shall languish no more. Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. I will turn their mourning into joy. I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow.

I will feast the soul of the priests with abundance, and my people shall be satisfied with my goodness, declares the Lord. Thus says the Lord, A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping.

Rachel is weeping for her children. She refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more. Thus says the Lord, Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears, for there is a reward for your work, declares the Lord.

[2 : 41] And they shall come back from the land of the enemy. There is hope for your future, declares the Lord. And your children shall come back to their own country. I have heard Ephraim grieving. You have disciplined me, and I was disciplined, like an untrained calf.

Bring me back, that I may be restored, for you are the Lord my God. For after I had turned away, I relented, and after I was instructed, I struck my thigh. I was ashamed, and I was confounded, because I bore the disgrace of my youth.

Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he my darling child? For as often as I speak against him, I do remember him still. Therefore my heart yearns for him. I will surely have mercy on him, declares the Lord.

Set up road markers for yourself. Make yourself guideposts. Consider well the highway, the road by which you went. Return, O virgin Israel. Return to these your cities.

How long will you waver, O faithless daughter? For the Lord has created a new thing on the earth. A woman encircles a man. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel.

[3 : 49] Once more they shall use these words in the land of Judah, and in its cities, when I restore their fortunes. The Lord bless you, O habitation of righteousness, O holy hill.

And Judah and all its cities shall dwell there together, and the farmers and those who wander with their flocks. For I will satisfy the weary soul, and every languishing soul I will replenish.

At this I awoke and looked, and my sleep was pleasant to me. Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of man and the seed of beast.

And it shall come to pass that as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring harm, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, declares the Lord.

In those days they shall no longer say, The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge. But everyone shall die for his own iniquity. Each man who eats sour grapes, his teeth shall be set on edge.

[4 : 50] Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord.

For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord. I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their guard, and they shall be my people.

And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, Know the Lord, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

Thus says the Lord, who gives the sun for light by day, and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar.

The Lord of hosts is his name. If this fixed order departs from before me, declares the Lord, then shall the offspring of Israel cease from being a nation before me forever.

[5 : 55] Thus says the Lord, If the heavens above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth below can be explored, then I will cast off all the offspring of Israel, for all that they have done, declares the Lord.

Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when the city shall be rebuilt for the Lord, from the tower of Hananel to the corner gate, and the measuring line shall go out farther, straight to the hill Gerab, and shall then turn to Goa.

The whole valley of the dead bodies and the ashes, and all the fields as far as the brook Kidron, to the corner of the horse gate toward the east, shall be sacred to the Lord.

It shall not be plucked up or overthrown any more forever. Jeremiah chapter 31 is arguably the most famous part of the entire book, with its promise of the new covenant in verses 31 to 34.

The words of this prophecy are taken up in the New Testament, where they are related to the new situation established through the work of Christ. However, in Christians' use of the words of this prophecy, the context in which they were originally delivered, and the initial horizon to which they look, can easily be forgotten.

[7 : 02] The chapter opens with what is called the covenant formula, the statement that the Lord will be his people's God, and that they will be his people. In the context here, it's an assurance of restoration of the covenant bond.

God will once again claim the people as his own, all of the clans of Israel, restoring them to his land and being present in their midst once more. At a number of points in the book of Jeremiah, the deliverance expected after exile is related to the earlier deliverance of the exodus.

Here the current situation of the people is described in language purposefully redolent of that earlier experience of deliverance from a foreign land. They had escaped the sword of Egypt and found grace in the wilderness.

We might think here of the Lord's forgiveness of the people in chapters 32 to 34 of the book of Exodus, after the sin with the golden calf, and then they were brought into rest in the promised land.

A similar pattern of events will happen again. The people who have survived the sword of the Assyrians and the Babylonians find grace in the land of their exile, and they will be brought back into rest in the land.

[8 : 05] Just as the Lord heard the cries of the children of Israel in Egypt, so he has heard the cries of his people in exile. He assures the people of his steadfast, everlasting love for them.

He may have judged and punished them on account of their sin, but he will bring them back to himself, restore them in his land, and renew his fellowship with them once more. Once again, the programmatic language of building and planting is used.

The Lord will build them, and they will assuredly be built up. They will go out with tambourines and dancing, just as Miriam and the women of Israel celebrated with tambourines and dancing after the Lord's defeat of the Egyptians at the Red Sea.

Along with the Lord's building, there will be planting. They will plant vineyards on the mountains of Samaria, the former capital of the northern kingdom of Israel. They will have the freedom and the security necessary to engage in agriculture.

Planters will plant, and they will enjoy the fruit. And the nation will be joined together, southern and northern kingdom reunited in the true worship of God. Mount Ephraim, a promontory for watchmen in the southern mountains of Ephraim, would be a place for summoning people to pilgrimage to Zion.

[9 : 12] The words of this passage chiefly seem to be addressed to the people of the northern kingdom of Israel, who were displaced and deported by the Assyrians, while other foreign peoples were placed in their land. The reference to the virgin Israel, to Samaria, to the hill country of Ephraim, all seem to have reference to the northern kingdom more particularly.

In the context of the Babylonian captivity of the southern kingdom of Judah, the reference of these words would naturally expand to include the Judahites too, but it seems that they were first delivered to a context of Israelite captivity rather than Judahite.

The hope that emerges is of a unified restoration to the land. Judah and Israel brought back together and made one nation under their shepherd David. In the verses that follow, the Lord who scattered Israel will gather him as a shepherd.

He will lead them back from the north country, bringing them on a straight path near water where they can drink. It won't just be the strong, it will be the blind and the lame, the pregnant woman and she who is in labour, the weak and vulnerable of the people along with everyone else.

With weeping, presumably in repentance and pleas for mercy from the Lord, the Lord will gather them back. He will establish them once more and their mourning will be turned into rejoicing and song.

[10 : 24] The land, which was becoming barren as a result of their sin prior to the exile, will now be restored to fruitfulness and life. There will be an abundance of grain and wine and oil.

The flocks and the herds will multiply. Ultimately, the source of all this goodness will be the Lord himself. He is the giver of all good gifts and his loving favour is the greatest gift of all.

Behind and within all of these gifts is his goodness. In the narrative of the book of Genesis, the story of Rachel is often a tragic one. Her sister Leah is fruitful while she is barren.

While she does end up bearing two children, later on she is cursed by her husband unwittingly as a result of her taking the teraphim of her father Laban. Her son Joseph is hated and betrayed by his brothers and sold into the land of Egypt.

On the way to Bethlehem, she dies giving birth to his brother Benjamin. Rama was associated by some with the place of her death and her voice as that of the bereaved mother in the borderlands of the tribal lands of her sons Ephraim and Benjamin cries out in the desperation of another bereavement.

[11 : 27] Her sons have now gone far from her once again into the land of exile. The tribe of Ephraim enjoyed firstborn rights within the land of Israel. Ephraim was one of the two sons of Joseph along with Manasseh and he was given the firstborn portion by Jacob in the book of Genesis.

Indeed, the word Ephraim is often used as a synecdoche for the whole of the northern kingdom. Ephraim is the main tribe and so he stands for the whole just as Judah, the main tribe of the southern kingdom, can stand for the entirety of that nation.

In many ways, the end of the book of Genesis is a story of lost sons and their return. It is the playing out of what at first seems to be the tragedy of Rachel which is later revealed to be a tragicomedy.

Sons once considered entirely lost return with great blessing and there is a similar hope held out here. Rachel is instructed to stop weeping. There is a reward for her work.

Her children will be restored to her both in physical return and also in their hearts being turned back to the Lord. Ramah had taken on a further significance beyond the death place of Rachel.

[12:31] In chapter 40 verse 1 we see that it was a stopping point as part of the deportation of the exiles to Babylon. From this place of national bereavement, the harrowing cries of the inconsolable bereaved mother cry out.

The deep memory of ancient loss and the recently opened wound of the deported exiles come together at this point. The claim that Rachel will be rewarded is a strange one. As Rabbi David Foreman has observed, the word is not the one that we would expect.

We would expect the Lord to tell her to stop weeping, assuring her that he has taken compassion upon her and that she will be comforted. But the statement is rather that there is a reward for her work.

Once again, it seems that the deep memory of the stories of Genesis is stirring here. In Genesis chapter 30 verses 14 to 18, we have an account of a strange interaction between the two sisters, Leah and Rachel.

In the days of wheat harvest, Reuben went and found mandrakes in the field and brought them to his mother Leah. Then Rachel said to Leah, please give me some of your son's mandrakes. But she said to her, is it a small matter that you have taken away my husband?

[13:37] Would you take away my son's mandrakes also? Rachel said, Then he may lie with you tonight in exchange for your son's mandrakes. When Jacob came from the field in the evening, Leah went out to meet him and said, You must come in to me, for I have hired you with my son's mandrakes.

So he lay with her that night, and God listened to Leah, and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son. Leah said, God has given me my wages because I gave my servant to my husband.

So she called his name Issachar. Understanding this strange episode requires that we perceive the significance of Reuben's mandrakes. It's not the mandrakes themselves, it's the person who picks them.

It's the firstborn son of Leah. As Foreman observes, the mandrakes are valuable because they're the firstborn son of Leah's gift to her, a token of his love for his mother. Leah felt that her sister Rachel had become a rival to her and taken her husband from her, and now she felt that she was taking her son too.

Jacob may not really love her as he loves Rachel, but at least her son Reuben loves her. For her part, Rachel had felt a great rivalry with her sister because her sister bore many sons while she was barren.

[14:46] The two sons that her handmaid Bilhah had borne to Jacob had been named after the rivalry that she had with her sister. Dan, because the Lord had judged her case, and Naphtali, because she had wrestled with great wrestling with her sister.

In this episode, however, she's trying to heal the breach. No longer is she presenting herself as a rival to her sister. She gives to her sister what was once taken from her, relations with the man that she loves, Jacob.

And Leah, through this union, has a child called Issacah. Issacah's name means wages or reward. Here, where the Lord says that there is a reward for what she has done, there seems to be a reference back to that old memory, the memory of the way that Rachel had tried to heal the breach in the family, a breach that ultimately led to tragic consequences.

In the restoration of her children of the northern kingdom, and indeed, all of the children of both of the kingdoms, the great matriarch Rachel would be rewarded for the reconciliation that she tried to bring to the divided family of Jacob.

Her tragic story of lost sons and dying in childbirth would reach a redemptive end, as her sons would all be returned to her. As with the story of the Exodus, the deep memory of Israel is being brought to mind here, as a source of comfort, assurance, and orientation as they face the future.

[16:04] These verses are perhaps most familiar to Christians from the context of Matthew chapter 2, where they appear in the context of the massacre of the innocents. In that chapter, there is another fainter echo of the story of Rachel, in the earlier reference back to Micah chapter 5 verse 2, in which context, the shadow of Rachel hangs heavily over a text that proves to be greatly redemptive.

Along with the weeping of the disconsolate mother, The pathos of the Lord himself is seen in his relationship to Ephraim. He has heard the cries of the disciplined child, a child now repenting of his former sins, and the heart of the Lord yearns for his son in the far country.

He constantly remembers him. He will have mercy upon him, and he will be restored. Verses 21 to 22 address, presumably, the Judahite exiles. They are supposed to mark the path that they go into exile.

The Lord assures them that they will return by the same route. They will take up residence in their old cities once more. A woman formerly described as an adulterous bride, as a harlot, and also as a widow, is now described as a virgin daughter.

When the Lord redeems them, their youth and their purity will be restored to them. However, now they are still wavering. They are still faithless. That transformation still has to occur. In chapter 30 verse 6, there was a reversal described, as the strong men were described like pregnant women.

[17:25] Ask now and see, can a man bear a child? Why then do I see every man with his hands on his stomach like a woman in labour? Why has every face turned pale? The second half of verse 22 is difficult to interpret.

Does it have a positive or a negative meaning? What does it mean for a woman to encircle a man? Is it some allusion to birth? Reading it alongside the reversal of chapter 30 verse 6 makes most sense, I think.

The image here is of the weakness of the people of Judah. As they went off into exile, the mighty men of Judah were so sapped of their strength that they needed to be protected by the women.

Verses 23 to 26 seem to record a reassuring dream that Jeremiah has.

To the dispirited and disheartened exiles who are so lacking in strength, the word of the Lord comes about the restoration of Jerusalem and all of the life of the land of Judah. The land and the city of Jerusalem will be blessed once more.

Both the urban life of its cities and the rural life of its farms will prosper and thrive once more. A people now afflicted by panic, fear, weakness and want within would find satisfaction and rest.

[18:33] The Lord declares his commitment to restore both the house of Israel and the house of Judah, sowing them with the seed of man and the seed of beast. The idea of sowing people can also be found in the book of Hosea chapter 2 verses 21 to 23.

And in that day I will answer, declares the Lord, I will answer the heavens and they shall answer the earth and the earth shall answer the grain, the wine and the oil and they shall answer Jezreel and I will sow her for myself in the land.

A similar use of imagery underlies Jesus' parable of the sower. While some in Judah and Israel might fear that the Lord was so committed to putting them into exile as a result of their sins and now has largely abandoned them and no longer considers them in their exile state, he assures them here that he is every bit as committed to restoring them to the land as he was to driving them away from it as a result of their sin.

Another possible fear of the exiles is that they will never escape the dark shadow of their father's sins. The northern kingdom of Israel had been more or less doomed after the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, sins in which his successors of several different dynasties largely continued.

The southern kingdom for its part seemed to be doomed as a result of the sins of Manasseh. Many people here draw attention to the principle in Deuteronomy of sons not being put to death because of the sins of their fathers.

[19:50] In Deuteronomy chapter 24 verse 16 Fathers shall not be put to death because of their children nor shall children be put to death because of their fathers. Each one shall be put to death for his own sin.

Some scholars have suggested a move into a sort of moral individualism at this point. Each person will have to give account of himself and will only suffer the consequences of his own sins. However, in scripture there are numerous examples of sons suffering as a result of their father's sins and as I have already noted, both Israel and Judah seem to be doomed as a result of the sins of particular kings even after some degree of subsequent reformation.

A more helpful parallel passage is found in Ezekiel chapter 18 verses 1 to 4 and then in verse 20.

The word of the Lord came to me. What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel?

The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge. As I live, declares the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. Behold, all souls are mine.

The soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine. The soul whose sins shall die. The soul whose sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son.

[21 : 04] The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself. The principle as it's developed in Ezekiel chapter 18 seems to be more specific.

Blaming the sins of the fathers for the suffering that was coming upon them as their sons was an easy way of abdicating responsibility for the sins that they were committing. It was also a fatalistic statement, a statement that there was no hope of turning things around.

Being doomed from the start by the sins of those that preceded them, there was no hope of a new beginning. By denying the applicability of the proverb, the Lord is making two particular points. First, that if they suffer, they will suffer on account of their own sins, sins that continue in the path set by the fathers.

Also, that they will experience a new beginning. They will no longer have to exist in the shadow of the sins of kings like Manasseh and Ahaz. Verses 31 to 34 are the most famous verses in the whole book, verses that are found in the New Testament, both alluded to and explicitly cited.

From the day that the Lord had delivered them from Egypt, the problem for Israel had always been their unfaithfulness. God had given them a great covenant, but they had broken it. The Lord had written his law on tablets of stone that were stored in the Ark of the Covenant at the heart of the tabernacle, and yet the people had broken them time and again.

[22 : 21] While they may have declared the affirmation of it in covenant ceremonies, the word of the Lord lay outside of them, and they resisted it. The promise of the new covenant is that the Lord will place his law in the heart of his people, so that the consistent problem of the covenant, the people themselves, would be addressed.

It would be through this that the covenant formula, I will be their God and they shall be my people, would actually come to its true fruition. With the law in their hearts, the people would be marked out as the Lord's special possession, and with the law in their hearts, they would walk in his ways.

This would also lead to a movement away from the old order that was dominated by mediation, with God being at some distance from his people, with intermediaries having to be interposed between the people and the Lord, in order that the people might have some sort of knowledge of him.

In this new covenant order, the knowledge of the Lord would be enjoyed more generally by the people. The Lord would be close to and knowable by them. This would be enjoyed from the least of them to the greatest, from the youngest child to the oldest elder, from the richest to the poorest, from the king on his throne to the slave in the mine.

Knowledge of the Lord would entail knowledge of the covenant, and also the knowledge that's characterized by obedience, walking in his ways, doing justice and righteousness. All of this would be possible because the Lord had forgiven the sins of Judah.

[23 : 39] The sins for which they had been cast into exile were no longer held against them. They could now enjoy a clean slate and a new start. Now refounded on a new footing, the people were no longer fated to live out the old patterns of rebellion followed by punishment.

All of this, we should consider, is a fulfillment of prophecies like Deuteronomy chapter 30 verses 1 to 6, where the Lord declared that he would circumcise the heart of his people after all the curse and the punishment to come upon them that they'd been scattered to foreign lands.

He would draw them back, gather them back into the land, and he would change their heart. And so the covenant would be fulfilled as the Lord forgave his people and dealt with their heart problem that had always been the great underlying issue.

The immediate horizon of Jeremiah's prophecy is the restoration from exile. This is what the prophecy immediately relates to. As the people are brought back to the land, their hearts will be turned back to God.

They will know the Lord in a new way, in a way that they did not know him before. It will be a period where they are no longer defined by the sins that defined them in the past. It will also be a period where there will no longer be large-scale national apostasy.

[24 : 49] Individuals may apostatize, but the larger nation will be faithful. These are significant and decisive shifts for the people of God. This is an initial fulfillment of what has greater fulfillment in the work of Christ and a greater fulfillment yet in the age to come.

This feature of different levels of fulfillment of promissory statements in scripture is something that we see on a number of occasions. For instance, the prophecy about David and his son that the Lord gives in 2 Samuel chapter 7 refers to the son that David will have and speaks of the establishment of his kingdom forever.

Its initial and immediate referent is Solomon, but it looks beyond Solomon to things that will be fulfilled in a greater figure yet. When we apply the promise of the new covenant, as the book of Hebrews does, to the work of Christ, we should be careful not to uproot it from its original historical context, which refers to the return from exile.

On the other hand, we must be careful not to see it terminating entirely upon the return from exile. The return from exile always opens out into a greater promissory reality that the Lord holds out to his people, a promissory reality that is not completely fulfilled in the first instance, but looks towards a greater resolution and will finally be realised only through the work of Christ.

For those wondering whether the Lord still has a purpose for Israel, whether there is hope after the Lord has cast Israel into exile, verses 35 to 37 give assurance. The Lord, who has created all things, has also created Israel, and just as he has committed to the patterns of the creation, the sun for light by day, and the order of the moon and the stars by night, so he has committed to Israel. [26 : 27] He has not abandoned them. Nothing can separate Israel from the love of God. The immeasurable character of the heavens and the foundations of the earth correspond to God's immeasurable grace to the people who have sinned against him so many times.

From these assurances of the refounding of Israel's relationship with the Lord comes another promise of the Lord's establishment of his people again in the land. The city of Jerusalem will be rebuilt and expanded.

Formerly defiled places will be recovered and made sacred to the Lord. And any cycle of tearing down and plucking up will be arrested as the Lord, having built and planted his people within the land once more, will give them security and rest there.

A question to consider. How can we as Christians relate this passage concerning the new covenant to our life as the people of God in the church without doing violence to its original context?

How might we develop the continuity between the original context and our own?