

Jeremiah 10: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Jeremiah chapter 10 Hear the word that the Lord speaks to you, O house of Israel. Thus says the Lord, Learn not the way of the nations, nor be dismayed at the signs of the heavens, because the nations are dismayed at them.

For the customs of the peoples are vanity. A tree from the forest is cut down, and worked with an axe by the hands of a craftsman. They decorate it with silver and gold.

They fasten it with hammer and nails, so that it cannot move. Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field, and they cannot speak. They have to be carried, for they cannot walk.

Do not be afraid of them, for they cannot do evil, neither is it in them to do good. There is none like you, O Lord. You are great, and your name is great in might.

Who would not fear you, O King of the nations? For this is your due. For among all the wise ones of the nations, and in all their kingdoms, there is none like you. They are both stupid and foolish.

[1 : 0 1] The instruction of idols is but wood. Beaten silver is brought from Tarshish, and gold from Euphaz. They are the work of the craftsmen, and of the hands of the goldsmith.

Their clothing is violet and purple. They are all the work of skilled men. But the Lord is the true God. He is the living God, and the everlasting King. At his wrath the earth quakes, and the nations cannot endure his indignation.

Thus shall you say to them, The gods who did not make the heavens and the earth shall perish from the earth and from under the heavens. It is he who made the earth by his power, who established the world by his wisdom, and by his understanding stretched out the heavens.

When he utters his voice, there is a tumult of waters in the heavens, and he makes the mist rise from the ends of the earth. He makes lightning for the rain, and he brings forth the wind from his storehouses.

Every man is stupid and without knowledge. Every goldsmith is put to shame by his idols, for his images are false, and there is no breath in them. They are worthless, a work of delusion.

[2 : 0 9] At the time of their punishment they shall perish. Not like these is he who is the portion of Jacob, for he is the one who formed all things, and Israel is the tribe of his inheritance.

The Lord of hosts is his name. Gather up your bundle from the ground, O you who dwell under siege. For thus says the Lord, Behold, I am slinging out the inhabitants of the land at this time, and I will bring distress on them, that they may feel it.

Woe is me because of my hurt. My wound is grievous. But I said, Truly this is an affliction, and I must bear it. My tent is destroyed, and all my cords are broken.

My children have gone from me, and they are not. There is no one to spread my tent again, and to set up my curtains. For the shepherds are stupid, and do not inquire of the Lord.

Therefore they have not prospered, and all their flock is scattered. A voice, a rumor, behold it comes, a great commotion out of the north country, to make the cities of Judah a desolation, a lair of jackals.

[3 : 16] I know, O Lord, that the way of man is not in himself, that it is not in man who walks to direct his steps. Correct me, O Lord, but in justice, not in your anger, lest you bring me to nothing.

Pour out your wrath on the nations that know you not, and on the peoples that call not on your name. For they have devoured Jacob, they have devoured him and consumed him, and have laid waste his habitation.

In Jeremiah chapter 10, the Lord declares the powerlessness of the idols in which the nations trust. Israel's God is the Lord, the creator of heaven and earth. He is the one who has the power to direct the course of history.

Idols are powerless, and those who trust in them are foolish, but Israel's portion is the Lord. Verses 1 to 10 have a bookended or chiasmic structure. It begins with the ways of the nations, and the fact that they are dismayed at the heavens.

And in verse 10, we see the nations not being able to endure the Lord's indignation. The description of idols as creations of silver and gold is seen in verse 4, and then also in verse 9.

[4 : 24] After that, the idols are described like scarecrows in verse 5, which parallels in verse 8 with the description of their instruction being like wood. At the very heart of the section, in verses 6 to 7 is a doxology concerning the Lord, juxtaposing the incomparable king of the nations with the wise of the nations, among which none like the Lord can be found.

Challenges to idolatry are found in a number of the other prophets, perhaps most famously in the book of Isaiah, in Isaiah chapter 40 verses 18 to 25. To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him?

An idol? A craftsman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold, and casts for it silver chains. He who is too impoverished for an offering chooses wood that will not rot.

He seeks out a skilful craftsman to set up an idol that will not move. Do you not know? Do you not hear? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?

It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers, who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to dwell in, who brings the princes to nothing, and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness.

[5 : 42] Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows on them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble.

To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him, says the Holy One. Another such statement against the idols of the nations is found in Isaiah chapter 44, verses 10 to 17.

Who fashions a guard, or casts an idol that is profitable for nothing? Behold, all his companions shall be put to shame, and the craftsmen are only human. Let them all assemble, let them stand forth, they shall be terrified, they shall be put to shame together.

The ironsmith takes a cutting tool, and works it over the coals. He fashions it with hammers, and works it with his strong arm. He becomes hungry, and his strength fails.

He drinks no water, and is faint. The carpenter stretches a line, he marks it out with a pencil. He shapes it with planes, and marks it with a compass. He shapes it into the figure of a man, with the beauty of a man, to dwell in a house.

- [6 : 50] He cuts down cedars, or he chooses a cypress tree, or an oak, and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest. He plants a cedar, and the rain nourishes it. Then it becomes fuel for a man.
- He takes a part of it, and warms himself. He kindles a fire, and bakes bread. Also he makes a god, and worships it. He makes it an idol, and falls down before it.
- Half of it he burns in the fire. Over the half he eats meat. He roasts it, and is satisfied. Also he warms himself, and says, Aha! I am warm. I have seen the fire.
- And the rest of it, he makes into a god, his idol, and falls down to it, and worships it. He prays to it, and says, Deliver me, for you are my god. The idols are characterized in these verses, as those that lack the power to move, in verse 4, to speak, to walk, to do good, or to do evil, in verse 5.
- They are described as vapor, or vanity, or emptiness. The Lord wants his people to notice what they are made of. Getting people to reflect upon what something is constructed of, is one of the best ways to overturn a fetish.
- [7 : 58] We like to think in the modern world that we are beyond idolatry. Many of us might think it ridiculous that people could look at such a physical object, and see in it a god. Yet we have not moved beyond the human tendency to fetishize things.
- There are times when we might need to be reminded of the way that we impute value to things. We may not be constructing idols of wood and silver and gold, but we can spend so much of our lives chasing after paper and plastic.
- Indeed, to heighten the sense of emptiness, we don't even need plastic or paper. Mere pixels on a screen can become all determinative for some people's sense of self-worth.
- We invest our sense of our social status, and many men, their masculinity, in mere constructions of steel. Like the idols that Jeremiah speaks about, these are things that focus our desire.
- They dominate our imaginations. They are what we begin to live for. People will surrender their dignity. They will betray family and friends. They will abandon values they once held dear, merely to pursue these empty things.
- [9 : 02] If we think we have escaped the pull of idolatry that we see in the book of Jeremiah, perhaps we simply haven't looked closely enough at the largely empty things that we can devote our lives to.
- The Lord is contrasted with all of these things. He is the living God. He is the creator of all. Before him, the earth quakes. The nations devote their energies to the service of silver and gold and wood, to paper, to plastic, to pixels.
- But the people of God devote themselves to his worship. The gods represented by these idols did not make the heavens and the earth, and they shall perish before the God who made all of these things.
- He is the God with the power to act. Walter Brueggemann writes, The verbs used to speak of Yahweh are indicative of the power of this God. He made. He established.
- He stretched out. Verse 12. He utters. He sends up. Makes rise. He makes. He brings out. Verse 13. He formed. Verse 16. The language is of creation, which is done by Yahweh's powerful speech and by Yahweh's forming activity.
- [10 : 08] The modes of creation of both Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 are captured in these verbs. In Genesis 1, God creates by powerful speech. In Genesis 2, Yahweh makes by acting as a potter.
- Both modes are utilized in our text. The appellations of Yahweh are stunning. True God. Living God. Everlasting King. Portion of Jacob. Lord of hosts.

This God has the power for life, the capacity to work a real newness, to cause life where there is only death and chaos. Besides being the creator God over all of the false idols of man's creation, he is the God of Israel, who has chosen Israel for himself as his own inheritance.

[11:17] It is at the time of judgment or punishment that the power of the true God to act and the powerlessness of the idols is truly exposed. Verses 17 and following return to describing the judgment that is about to fall upon the people of Judah.

As for you, son of man, prepare for yourself an exile's baggage and go into exile by day in their sight. You shall go like an exile from your place to another place in their sight.

Verses 19 to 20 are another lamentation of the prophet over the anticipated judgment that will come upon the people. It will involve a loss of home, the tent being destroyed, all the cords being broken, and a loss of children.

And the flock of the people are scattered. And as a result, the judgment from the north country, the judgment that he has been speaking about from chapter 1 onwards, will come upon them, leaving Judah and Jerusalem a desolate place and a lair of wild beasts.

He is acutely aware of the limitations of human knowledge and intention. We have our purposes and intentions. We think that we understand what we are doing. But we neither understand our way nor direct our paths.

[13:28] The chapter concludes with his request that the Lord judge the nations that are devouring Judah. At the end of the book, we will see this request being answered. The nations, and especially Babylon, will be brought down by the Lord.

How might Jeremiah's statements of verses 23 and 24 instruct us in our search for guidance from the Lord?

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