

Jeremiah 3: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Jeremiah chapter 3. If a man divorces his wife and she goes from him, and becomes another man's wife, will he return to her? Would not that land be greatly polluted? You have played the whore with many lovers, and would you return to me, declares the Lord?

Lift up your eyes to the bare heights and see. Where have you not been ravished? By the waysides you have sat awaiting lovers, like an Arab in the wilderness. You have polluted the land with your vile whoredom. Therefore the showers have been withheld, and the spring rain has not come. Yet you have the forehead of a whore. You refuse to be ashamed. Have you not just now called to me?

My father, you are the friend of my youth. Will he be angry forever? Will he be indignant to the end? Behold, you have spoken, but you have done all the evil that you could.

The Lord said to me in the days of King Josiah, Have you seen what she did, that faithless one, Israel? How she went up on every high hill, and under every green tree, and there played the whore.

And I thought, After she has done all this, she will return to me. But she did not return, and her treacherous sister Judah saw it. She saw that for all the adulteries of that faithless one, Israel, I had sent her away with a decree of divorce.

[1 : 2 0] Yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear, but she too went and played the whore. Because she took her whoredom lightly, she polluted the land, committing adultery with stone and tree.

Yet for all this, her treacherous sister Judah did not return to me with her whole heart, but in pretense, declares the Lord. And the Lord said to me, Faithless Israel has shown herself more righteous than treacherous Judah.

Go and proclaim these words towards the north, and say, Return, faithless Israel, declares the Lord. I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful, declares the Lord.

I will not be angry forever, only acknowledge your guilt, that you rebelled against the Lord your God, and scattered your favours among foreigners under every green tree, and that you have not obeyed my voice, declares the Lord.

Return, O faithless children, declares the Lord, for I am your master. I will take you, one from a city and two from a family, and I will bring you to Zion.

[2 : 2 1] And I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding. And when you have multiplied and been fruitful in the land, in those days, declares the Lord, they shall no more say, The ark of the covenant of the Lord.

It shall not come to mind, or be remembered, or missed. It shall not be made again. At that time Jerusalem shall be called the throne of the Lord, and all nations shall gather to it, to the presence of the Lord in Jerusalem.

And they shall no more stubbornly follow their own evil heart. In those days the house of Judah shall join the house of Israel, and together they shall come from the land of the north, to the land that I gave your fathers for a heritage.

I said, How I would set you among my sons, and give you a pleasant land, a heritage most beautiful of all nations. And I thought you would call me my father, and would not turn from following me.

Surely as a treacherous wife leaves her husband, so have you been treacherous to me, O house of Israel, declares the Lord. A voice on the bare heights is heard, the weeping and pleading of Israel's sons.

[3 : 27] Because they have perverted their way, they have forgotten the Lord their God. Return, O faithless sons, I will heal your faithlessness. Behold, we come to you, for you are the Lord our God.

Truly the hills are a delusion, the orgies on the mountains. Truly in the Lord our God is the salvation of Israel. But from our youth the shameful thing has devoured all for which our fathers laboured, their flocks and their herds, their sons and their daughters.

Let us lie down in our shame, and let our dishonour cover us. For we have sinned against the Lord our God, we and our fathers, from our youth even to this day. And we have not obeyed the voice of the Lord our God.

Jeremiah chapter 2 introduced marital imagery. Harkening back to a honeymoon period, where Israel followed him in the wilderness, the Lord condemns Israel for their forgetfulness and their unfaithfulness.

Judah is addicted to their promiscuous pursuit of idols. The Lord sought covenant love from them, but they scandalously abandoned him, the fountain of living waters, for broken cisterns that they had dug, and for the waters of Egypt and Assyria, from whom they hoped for security, against the rising threat of Babylon in the north.

[4 : 41] Here in chapter 3, the marriage metaphor will be explored further, and the prophecy will move to the question of repentance and return to the Lord. The marriage metaphor, first introduced positively, with reference to a time when Israel willingly followed the Lord, curdled as chapter 2 told of Israel's many adulteries.

Having heard of Israel and Judah's adulteries, chapter 3 begins with divorce. Deuteronomy chapter 24 verses 1 to 4 gives a law concerning divorce.

When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favour in his eyes, because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, and puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house, and if she goes and becomes another man's wife, and the latter man hates her, and writes her a certificate of divorce, and puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house, or if the latter man dies, who took her to be his wife, then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled, for that is an abomination before the Lord, and you shall not bring sin upon the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance.

Presenting such a situation, where a man had divorced his wife, and become another man's wife, the Lord asks whether restoration of the original relationship would be possible.

Even in the unlikely scenario, where a man and a woman desired to restore their relationship after extreme betrayal and infidelity, the law would have struck the way. Israel had multiplied her lovers, and betrayed the Lord time and again.

[6 : 21] Presented with the analogy, it is clear that Judah's return, and the restoration of the bond would be out of the question. The union would be irrevocably severed. The whole land has been polluted by their unfaithfulness.

Like an unfaithful wife who had pursued her affairs in every room, and on every piece of furniture of the family home, the entire land that the Lord had given to his people was defiled by their adultery, poisoned by their persistent idolatry.

Like a stranger's underwear found under the sofa, or hidden letters detailing trysts discovered in open drawers, throughout the land there are sites where Judah has forsaken the Lord, worshipping gods of wood and stone.

Could a wife who had been as brazenly adulterous and had been rejected by her husband return to him? Emphatically not. If this is the case for such a wife, how much more for Judah?

We might ask whether the Lord had in fact divorced Judah. It does not seem that he had, although commentators disagree on the question. The analogy highlights the extreme jeopardy in which Judah stands, and the immense mercy that they are presuming upon.

[7 : 28] The analogy of divorce is also present in Isaiah chapter 50 verse 1, which rejects the idea that the Lord had divorced his people, or sold them into slavery, as if to his creditors.

Thus says the Lord, Where is your mother's certificate of divorce, with which I sent her away? Or which of my creditors is it to whom I have sold you? Behold, for your iniquities you were sold, and for your transgressions your mother was sent away.

The book of Hosea notably develops the metaphor of the promiscuously adulterous wife who was taken back by her husband, symbolising the Lord's restoration of his relationship with his wayward people.

The land of Israel, in contrast to Egypt, depended heavily upon the rain for its irrigation. One of the curses of the covenant was the stopping of rain, perhaps most famously experienced in the drought of Elijah.

Amos chapter 4 verse 7 to 8 speaks of such a judgment too. I also withheld the rain from you when there were yet three months to the harvest. I would send rain on one city, and send no rain on another city.

[8 : 34] One field would have rain, and the field on which it did not rain would wither. So two or three cities would wander to another city to drink water, and would not be satisfied.

Yet you did not return to me, declares the Lord. The Lord has withheld the rain, yet Judah has not returned to him. Ironically, they are worshipping fertility symbols on dry hilltops in a parched land, having rejected the fountain of living waters.

They are like a stubborn whore who will refuse to acknowledge any sin, and who is beyond shame. Now they seem presumptuously to be turning their faces to the Lord, believing that he is a soft touch.

With flattering and fine-sounding words, they think that they can win a reprieve from judgment, even while they are willfully persisting in their sin. While limits for the dating of other prophecies can be figured out, the allegory of the unfaithful sisters in verses 6 to 7 is, as Jack Lundbaum notes, the only passage in chapters 1 to 20 with some explicit date attached, occurring sometime during the days of King Josiah.

It allegorises the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah as two sisters. Lundbaum suggests that we should regard it as a peshah, an interpretative commentary upon the surrounding oracles, as it draws so heavily and extensively from the prophecies around it, from the end of chapter 2 to the beginning of chapter 4.

[9 : 57] He identifies 17 verses from which the allegory borrows its expressions. A similar allegory of two sisters is found in Ezekiel chapter 23, introduced in verses 1 to 4 of that chapter.

The word of the Lord came to me, Son of man, there were two women, the daughters of one mother. They played the whore in Egypt. They played the whore in their youth. There their breasts were pressed and their virgin bosoms handled.

Ahola was the name of the older, and Aholabah the name of her sister. They became mine, and they bore sons and daughters. As for their names, Ahola is Samaria, and Aholabah is Jerusalem.

The Lord here presents himself in anthropomorphic terms, like a husband watching his wife in her adulteries, pathetically believing that, once she had sunk to a particular point, she would return to him.

But she never did. Eventually, for all of her sins, the Lord sent Israel away, finally, with the decree of divorce, into exile. However, Judah, who had watched all of this, was brazen in her own unfaithfulness, taking her adulteries lightly.

[11 : 03] While it seemed as if Judah had returned to the Lord during the reforms of the reign of Jeziel, tragically, this return was more in appearance than in reality. Hope has not been utterly extinguished, though, but Judah's feigned return, all while her heart wandered away from the Lord, made her even worse than her divorced sister Israel.

Even despite the rebellion of faithless Israel, the Lord still proclaims his kindness to her, seeking to woo her back if she would only repent. The relationship might be restored, even with divorced Israel, bursting the banks of the analogy as if the grace of the Lord exceeds both the limits of the law and the extent of the forgiveness that could be expected from any human husband.

If they only openly acknowledged what they had done and sought forgiveness, they might be recovered, the broken relationship might be repaired. If Judah learned anything from Israel, it should be that, despite all that Israel had done, the mercy and the grace of the Lord was extended to them still, if they would only receive it.

Judah may come off worse than Israel on account of their largely feigned return, but the Lord here makes plain that an unfeigned return would lead to their restoration. Like the lost son of the parable, the father's love still yearns for his estranged child in the far country.

Addressing his faithless children, Israel and Judah, the Lord calls for them to return, whether from the lands of their exile or addressing unfaithful people in the land from the waywardness of their hearts.

[12 : 34] He is their master, their true master, not the false master who assumed that name, Baal. Any who return, the Lord will eagerly restore to Zion, the numbers of the regathered remnants steadily increasing.

He will establish them in the land, making them fruitful, granting them good rulers and guides. In the days of restoration that would follow this, things would be very different. The context of these verses need not be presumed to be after the destruction of Jerusalem and the presumed loss of the Ark of the Covenant.

The point is that the Ark is eclipsed by Jerusalem itself. However, a date later than the reign of Josiah might make more sense. Lundbaum suggests that the earliest likely date is 597 BC, when the first wave of Judahite exiles left for Babylon.

The Ark and the Mercy Seat were temple furniture symbolizing the Lord's throne in the heart of the temple in the Holy of Holies. But Jerusalem itself would become the throne of the Lord, the holy city, much as we see in Revelation, where the new Jerusalem takes on the cube-like proportions of the Holy of Holies.

When the days of their restoration arrived, nations from all around would gather to the presence of the Lord in Jerusalem, as Micah and Isaiah had foretold. Micah chapter 4, verses 1 to 4.

[13 : 52] It shall also come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established at the highest of the mountains, and it shall be lifted up above the hills, and people shall flow to it, and many nations shall come and say, Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways, and that we may walk in his paths.

For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between many peoples, and shall decide disputes for strong nations far away, and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks.

Nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more, but they shall sit every man under his vine, and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid, for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken.

At this time, Israel and Judah would both return from their exiles in northern countries, and be joined together in possession of the land that the Lord gave to their forebears as an inheritance.

This joining together of the two peoples is also spoken of in Ezekiel chapter 37, verses 15 to 23. After their return, the Lord would lovingly restore both of them together in his land.

[15 : 07] The word of the Lord came to me, Son of man, take a stick and write on it for Judah and the people of Israel associated with him. Then take another stick and write on it for Joseph, the stick of Ephraim, and all the house of Israel associated with him, and join them one to another into one stick that they may become one in your hand.

And when your people say to you, Will you not tell us what you mean by these? Say to them, Thus says the Lord God, Behold, I am about to take the stick of Joseph that is in the hand of Ephraim and the tribes of Israel associated with him, and I will join with it the stick of Judah and make them one stick that they may be one in my hand.

When the sticks on which you write are in your hand before their eyes, then say to them, Thus says the Lord God, Behold, I will take the people of Israel from the nations among which they have gone and will gather them from all around and bring them to their own land, and I will make them one nation in the land on the mountains of Israel, and one king shall be king over them all, and they shall be no longer two nations and no longer divided into two kingdoms.

They shall not defile themselves any more with their idols and their detestable things or with any of their transgressions, but I will save them from all the backslidings in which they have sinned and will cleanse them and they shall be my people and I will be their God.

The passage is full of the pathos of the Lord, yearning for the restoration of his wayward and rebellious sons. He recalls the way that he first established them in the land, anticipating that, in showing them such great favour and honour, that they would respond with faithfulness and by reciprocating his love, regarding him as their father.

[16 : 52] However, they were treacherous like an adulterous wife. In the concluding verses of the chapter, we might see what is a futile lament of Israel's children to their false gods to restore them.

They have forgotten the Lord and so call out to gods who cannot save them. Then the voice of the Lord calls to them, the father who longs for their return from their rebellion. If they will but come back to him, he will heal their faithlessness.

He will address the deep heart condition behind it all, circumcising their hearts, as Deuteronomy chapter 30 verse 6 had promised, overcoming their addiction to idolatry and restoring their hearts to him.

The verses that follow are the voice of an imagined penitent people who respond to the invitation of the Lord. As if coming to their senses after a long period of altered consciousness or intoxication, they recognise that they have been trapped in dangerous and destructive delusions all this time.

The true source of salvation is only the Lord their God. The gods to whom they had looked merely devoured them and all of their labours and possessions. What did they have to show for all of their worship of the Baals, of Asherah, of Molech and other false gods?

[18:06] The loss of their children to the fire, countless sacrifices devoted to a worse than worthless object, years of their lives squandered and expended in fruitless labour and the dishonour of exile after it all.

As the horror of what they had pointlessly wasted came upon them and the immense value of what their rebellion had stolen from them came to their awareness, they mourned it most deeply.

A question to consider, where else in Scripture might we get some sense of the catastrophic toll of sinful rebellion upon the lives of the people who give themselves to it?

