

Jeremiah 4: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Jeremiah chapter 4 If you return, O Israel, declares the Lord, to me you should return. If you remove your detestable things from my presence, and do not waver, and if you swear, as the Lord lives, in truth, in justice, and in righteousness, then nations shall bless themselves in him, and in him shall lay glory.

For thus says the Lord to the men of Judah and Jerusalem, Break up your fallow ground, and sow not among thorns, circumcise yourselves to the Lord, remove the foreskin of your hearts.

O men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, bless my wrath, go forth like fire, and burn with none to quench it, because of the evil of your deeds. Declare in Judah, and proclaim in Jerusalem, and say, Blow the trumpet through the land.

Cry aloud, and say, Assemble, and let us go into the fortified cities. Raise a standard towards Zion. Flee for safety, stay not, for I bring disaster from the north, and great destruction.

A lion has gone up from his thicket, a destroyer of nations has set out. He has gone out from his place, to make your land a waste. Your cities will be ruins, without inhabitant.

[1 : 14] For this, put on sackcloth, lament and wail, for the fierce anger of the Lord has not turned back from us. In that day, declares the Lord, courage shall fail both king and officials.

The priests shall be appalled, and the prophets astounded. Then I said, Our Lord God, surely you have utterly deceived this people in Jerusalem, saying, It shall be well with you, whereas the sword has reached their very life.

At that time it will be said to this people and to Jerusalem, A hot wind from the bare heights in the desert toward the daughter of my people, not to winnow or cleanse.

A wind too full for this comes for me. Now it is I who speak in judgment upon them. Behold, he comes up like clouds, his chariots like the whirlwind. His horses are swifter than eagles.

Woe to us, for we are ruined. O Jerusalem, wash your heart from evil, that you may be saved. How long shall your wicked thoughts lodge within you? For a voice declares from Dan, and proclaims trouble from Mount Ephraim.

[2 : 17] Warn the nations that he is coming. Announce to Jerusalem, besiegers come from a distant land. They shout against the cities of Judah. Like keepers of a field are they against her all around, because she has rebelled against me, declares the Lord.

Your ways and your deeds have brought this upon you. This is your doom, and it is bitter. It has reached your very heart. My anguish, my anguish, I writhe in pain.

O the walls of my heart, my heart is beating wildly. I cannot keep silent, for I hear the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war. Crash follows hard on crash.

The whole land is laid waste. Suddenly my tents are laid waste, my curtains in a moment. How long must I see the standard, and hear the sound of the trumpet? For my people are foolish.

They know me not. They are stupid children. They have no understanding. They are wise in doing evil. But how to do good they know not. I looked on the earth, and behold, it was without form and void.

[3 : 19] And to the heavens, and they had no light. I looked on the mountains, and behold, they were quaking. And all the hills moved to and fro. I looked, and behold, there was no man, and all the birds of the air had fled.

I looked, and behold, the fruitful land was a desert, and all its cities were laid in ruins before the Lord, before his fierce anger. For thus says the Lord, The whole land shall be a desolation, yet I will not make a full end.

For this the earth shall mourn, and the heavens above be dark. For I have spoken, I have purposed, I have not relented, nor will I turn back. At the noise of horsemen and archer, every city takes to flight.

They enter thickets, they climb among rocks. All the cities are forsaken, and no man dwells in them. And you, O desolate one, what do you mean that you dress in scarlet?

That you adorn yourself with ornaments of gold? That you enlarge your eyes with paint? In vain you beautify yourself. Your lovers despise you. They seek your life.

[4 : 24] For I heard a cry as of a woman in labour, anguish as of one giving birth to her first child. The cry of the daughter of Zion gasping for breath, stretching out her hands.

Woe is me, I am fainting before murderers. Judah has rebelled against the Lord. Israel, their sister nation, was sent away into exile on account of their unfaithfulness.

However, the Lord offers the prospect of forgiveness and restoration together as one new people in his land, to both of them, if only they will repent. Even when things have gone so far, there remains a way back for them.

The Lord, in the face of all their countless infidelities, still holds out his hands to Judah. The offer of restoration to a penitent nation continues at the start of chapter 4, which later moves into the darker discussion of the devastation that awaits the impenitent nation that Judah actually is.

Verses 1 and 2 present three conditions upon which restoration could occur. First, Judah must return to the Lord. Second, they must remove their idols from his land and not waver in their rejection of idolatry.

[5 : 34] Judah's fickleness and their inability to commit themselves to the Lord with an undivided heart had marked their apparent yet short-lived and shallow repentances to this time.

Third, their confession of the Lord's name should be married with commitment to truth, justice and righteousness throughout their communal life. They had come to treat worship as a sort of attractive facade, masking all the gross injustices that pervaded the edifice of their society.

If only they performed the sacrifices, sang the psalms and said the prayers, the Lord might not notice the way that they were oppressing the poor or doing injustice to their neighbours. The covenant always aimed at deep integrity of heart and action and of word and behaviour.

If Judah amended its practice in these respects, turning back to the Lord with their whole hearts, not only would they be restored, but the blessing would extend beyond them to the nations around.

Israel had been established to be a light to the world, but in its unfaithfulness it performed the opposite function. It caused the name of the Lord to be blasphemed among the nations. However, if they were to repent of their sin and change their behaviour, the surrounding nations would honour the Lord, glorifying him on account of his reflections seen in his people.

[6 : 51] The life of the covenant would flow out beyond the borders of Judah into the wider world. Verses 3 and 4 further develop the conditions of Judah's return to the Lord using two images, an agricultural and a covenantal one.

The agricultural imagery of ploughing and sowing is also found in Hosea chapter 10, verses 12 to 13. Sow for yourselves righteousness, reap steadfast love, break up your fallow ground, for it is the time to seek the Lord, that he may come and rain righteousness upon you.

You have ploughed iniquity, you have reaped injustice, you have eaten the fruit of lies. Jeremiah has also used the imagery of firstfruits back in chapter 2, verse 3.

Judah needs to bear fruit to the Lord, and this requires renewal, the reclaiming of land that has lain fallow. They have backslidden, and they need to return to what they formerly did.

If there is to be a good harvest in the future, it requires devotion to the difficult task of renewal here and now. The second image is that of circumcision. While circumcision was of the foreskin, it was the sign of the covenant.

[8 : 01] It took an often wayward organ that is perhaps most powerfully symbolic of the boasting of the flesh, of man's power and virility by which he seeks to form the world in his image, and pruned it for the covenant, marking it out with a sign indicating God's power and promise.

In the process, it rendered the organ functional as it ought to be functional. As an analogy, this could be extended to other organs. Hearts and ears are also wayward organs that need to have the flesh pruned and to be devoted to their appropriate purpose in obedience to the Lord of the covenant.

Deuteronomy chapter 10, verse 16 uses this imagery. Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart and be no longer stubborn. In Deuteronomy chapter 30, verse 6, the imagery reappears, but now in the form of promise.

And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul that you may live.

Deuteronomy emphasised the necessity of obedience of the law coming from the heart. The law was to be fulfilled by loving the Lord with the entirety of heart, soul and might. Here in Jeremiah chapter 4, the imagery is used as a charge, attached with a warning of the Lord's wrath if they do not repent.

[9 : 20] Later in the book, the Lord will declare his promise to write his law upon the hearts of his people. In chapter 1, in the vision of the boiling pot facing away from the north given to Jeremiah, the threat that faces Judah from the north was presented.

Here that threat appears again, as the passage moves from the theme of repentance and restoration with which the opening verses of the chapter had been concerned, moving on to the theme of judgment.

Verses 5 to 10 portray a situation of emergency. Judah is being invaded from the north and everyone must flee to the fortified cities. This invasion is arriving at the Lord's own direction, to judge his people for their gross unfaithfulness to the covenant.

In 597 BC, the Babylonians would come upon Judah from the north. However, as Jack Lundbaum observes, the north also had associations with powers of destruction more generally.

Babylon is the lion that has emerged from its thicket. Egypt and Babylon were already depicted as roaring lions back in chapter 2 verse 15. This lion is described as a destroyer of nations.

[10 : 27] He will lay Judah waste. Behind the lion is the Lord himself, who roars with his fierce anger against the sin of the land. All the leaders of the people will be dismayed as the day of the Lord's judgment comes upon them.

Jeremiah's own voice comes in at this point, reflecting upon the way that the Lord has blinded the people to their precarious state. The Lord had warned his people on numerous occasions.

However, as his people preferred the comforting lie over the truth, the Lord gave them over to their delusions. In chapter 6 verses 13 to 14, the Lord describes the behavior of those who were charged to act as the watchmen of Israel.

Jeremiah marvels that even when the sword is up against their throat, Judah is utterly oblivious to the severity of their situation.

Verses 11 to 18 dramatically describe the onslaught of judgment upon Judah. The pace is moving quickly. It will arrive like a scorching wind from the desert, not as the gentle wind that grants relief, or as the wind that separates the wheat from the chaff at the time of harvest.

[11 : 47] This is a cruel wind of divine judgment. The enemy advances on Judah like clouds and like a whirlwind, with horses who move as swiftly as eagles. They are destroying everything in their path.

And as the hearer's imagination is caught up in the image of this advancing judgment, as the terrified messengers bring news, as the watchmen strain for sight of the approaching enemy, and as the fearful people prepare for the moment when the attack will hit, the Lord delivers another last-ditch call to the people to repent, so that they might be spared such an awful fate.

And then they are plunged into the vision of approaching judgment once more. Messengers race down from Dan, then from Mount Ephraim. The enemy is rapidly approaching, and will all too quickly engulf them.

Soon they are surrounded on all sides. This is a judgment they have brought upon themselves through their own deeds. Here the prophet's voice appears again. His heart is racing.

He feels the approaching terror, and he knows its outcome. He has a sort of pre-traumatic stress. The terrifying din of war and its devastation battering his imagination, waking him up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat, or causing him to break down in anguished tears.

[13 : 02] His mind is bombarded with the sights and sounds and smells of warfare. The earth quakes with the force of approaching horses and chariots. Weaponry and armour catches the sunlight.

Swords cleave limbs from bodies. Horrific cries of orphaned children, and of women robbed of their husbands, rend the air. In his mind's eye he sees bloodied and torn standards flying over mangled bodies of the slain.

There is the deafening crash of falling masonry, as walls are breached and houses brought down. Every breath is attended by the taste of burnt or rotting flesh.

The prophet is a mouthpiece of the Lord, but also a model for the people in appropriate response to and sensitivity to the word of the Lord. Here in the prophet we see a response that sharply contrasts with the blithing sensibility of the nation that he is addressing.

Jeremiah's prophecies are filled with drama, with passion, pathos and colour, as the Lord and his prophet Jeremiah try to shake a sin-drunk people to a sense of their terrible situation.

[14 : 06] The Lord's voice returns in verse 22. The people are insensible and stupid. What wisdom they seem to possess is merely cunning in the ways of wickedness, but they are utterly incapable of doing good.

Jeremiah lamented in the immediately preceding verses, and now this might be regarded as the Lord's own lament over his people. In verses 23 to 28 we find a remarkable piece of poetry, as Jeremiah describes in prophetic hyperbole the aftermath of the coming judgment in terms that unmistakably darkly echo the creation account of Genesis chapter 1.

The Lord's judgment is returning the land to its primeval, formless and empty state. Jeremiah writes, Genesis chapter 1 verse 2 reads, The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

What introduces God's creative work in Genesis follows his destructive work in Jeremiah. If Genesis chapter 1 is the account of how the Lord renders the world a habitable land, these verses in Jeremiah are about how he renders it desolate and beyond habitation, turning out the lights over his rebellious people.

As Lambum observes, the repeated expression, I looked and behold, is a grim echo of God's looking at his creation in Genesis chapter 1, for instance in verse 31, The creation here is being dismantled.

[15 : 48] The Lord will not make a final end.

The possibility of some restoration is held open. The three verses with which the chapter concludes move through three images of Judah and Jerusalem in their plight.

First, we hear the noise of the approaching horsemen as people desperately take flight from the doomed cities, climbing on rocks, hiding in thickets. Second, there is the image of Jerusalem as a prostitute, foolishly dressing itself for seduction, when her lovers are turning on her to kill her.

She is pitiable, even in her perversity. Perhaps we might here recall the behaviour of Jezebel at the approach of Jehu, moments before she suffered a bloody death.

The final image is that of a pregnant woman, about to give birth. Walter Brueggemann describes this powerfully. In verse 31, the metaphor is again dramatically shifted.

[17 : 06] Out of the resolve of Yahweh, the army still approaches. But now Judah is not an alluring prostitute. Now Jerusalem is cast in a new role as a helpless, exposed woman in labour.

What catches the ear of the poet, and any who will hear, is the cry of pain. The cry sounds like a labour pain. Only labour pains are to give birth. The work of newness.

The poet listens more carefully. The cry of the city is in fact a cry for help. A death cry. For the invaders, sent by Yahweh, are about the predictable business of rape and murder.

The metaphor belongs in the same trajectory with the image utilised in chapter 2 verse 2 as bride, in chapter 3 verse 1 as faithless wife, in chapter 4 verse 30 as prostitute.

Jerusalem is a street woman who gives birth, and is overwhelmed by the army in what should have been a moment of joy. The poet presses to find a metaphor raw enough to carry the truth.

[18 : 04] Jerusalem is under judgement, about to be done in. Jerusalem may not know it, but the city is as shameful as a prostitute, as helpless as a woman in labour, exposed and endangered now, because the betrayed husband has had enough of fickleness, and will tolerate no more.

Death must come. No one stands with Jerusalem to grieve, or to rescue. A question to consider.

What lessons might we learn from the extensive use of rhetoric in conveying the prophetic message?