

Jeremiah 2: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Jeremiah chapter 2. The word of the Lord came to me, saying, Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem. Thus says the Lord. I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown. Israel was holy to the Lord, the first fruits of his harvest. All who ate of it incurred guilt. Disaster came upon them, declares the Lord.

Hear the word of the Lord, O house of Jacob, and all the clans of the house of Israel. Thus says the Lord. To enjoy its fruits and its good things. But when you came in, you defiled my land, and made my heritage an abomination. The priests did not say, Where is the Lord? Those who handled the law did not know me. The shepherds transgressed against me. The prophets prophesied by Baal, and went after things that do not profit.

Therefore I still contend with you, declares the Lord. And with your children's children I will contend. For cross to the coasts of Cyprus and see, or send to Kedar and examine with care. See if there has been such a thing. Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory, for that which does not profit.

Be appalled, O heavens, be shocked, be utterly desolate, declares the Lord. For my people have committed two evils. They have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.

Is Israel a slave? Is he a home-born servant? Why then has he become a prey? The lions have roared against him. They have roared loudly. They have made his land a waste. His cities are in ruins, without inhabitant.

[2 : 1 1] Moreover the men of Memphis and Tappanhes have shaved the crown of your head. Have you not brought this upon yourself, by forsaking the Lord your God, when he led you in the way?

And now, what do you gain by going to Egypt, to drink the waters of the Nile? Or what do you gain by going to Assyria, to drink the waters of the Euphrates? Your evil will chastise you, and your apostasy will reprove you. Know and see that it is evil and bitter for you to forsake the Lord your God.

The fear of me is not in you, declares the Lord God of hosts. For long ago I broke your yoke, and burst your bonds, but you said, I will not serve.

Yes, on every high hill, and under every green tree, you bowed down like a whore. Yet I planted you a choice vine, wholly of pure seed. How then have you turned degenerate, and become a wild vine? Though you wash yourself with lye, and use much soap, the stain of your guilt is still before me, declares the Lord God.

How can you say, I am not unclean? I have not gone after the bales? Look at your way in the valley. Know what you have done. A restless young camel running here and there, a wild donkey used to the wilderness, in her heat sniffing the wind.

[3 : 2 9] Who can restrain her lust? None who seek her need weary themselves. In her month they will find her. Keep your feet from going unsharred, and your throat from thirst. But you said, It is hopeless, for I have loved foreigners, and after them I will go.

As a thief is shamed when caught, so the house of Israel shall be shamed. They, their kings, their officials, their priests, and their prophets, who say to a tree, You are my father, and to a stone, You gave me birth.

For they have turned their back to me, and not their face. But in the time of their trouble they say, Arise and save us. But where are your gods that you made for yourself? Let them arise, if they can save you, in your time of trouble.

For as many as your cities are your gods, O Judah. Why do you contend with me? You have all transgressed against me, declares the Lord. In vain have I struck your children, they took no correction. Your own sword devoured your prophets, like a ravaging lion.

And you, O generation, behold the word of the Lord. Have I been a wilderness to Israel, or a land of thick darkness? Why then do my people say, We are free, we will come no more to you?

[4 : 45] Can a virgin forget her ornaments, or a bride her attire? Yet my people have forgotten me, days without number. How well you direct your course to seek love, So that even to wicked women you have taught your ways.

Also on your skirts is found the lifeblood of the guiltless poor. You did not find them breaking in. Yet in spite of all these things, you say, I am innocent, surely his anger has turned from me.

Behold, I will bring you to judgment, for saying, I have not sinned. How much you go about changing your way! You shall be put to shame by Egypt, as you were put to shame by Assyria.

From it too you will come away, with your hands on your head. For the Lord has rejected those in whom you trust, and you will not prosper by them. Jeremiah chapter 2 is a collection of oracles which present a comprehensive indictment of an unfaithful people.

Developing various metaphors, it challenges Judah to regard its situation and its behaviour in a different light, that they might be startled into a new awareness of the severity of their apostasy.

[5 : 54] The chapter begins with one of the most common and important images for the people of God, as the bride of the Lord. This is an image that is frequently used in both Old and New Testaments.

Here the image is used to remind Judah of the honeymoon period of the Lord's relationship with Israel. It might seem to be in contrast to many other biblical portrayals of the Exodus generation, that in the initial departure from Egypt, they are described as akin to a bride following her bridegroom in loving dependence, the Lord providing for his people in the wilderness with the manna and the water from the rock, the people responding with loving devotion, or hesed, covenant love, a term more commonly used with reference to the Lord himself.

Such covenant love was what God desired of his people more than anything else, as we see in Hosea chapter 6 verse 6, for I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

Israel's loving devotion, however, would turn out to be fickle and short-lasting. It is possible, however, that the image here refers less to the initial departure from Egypt than it does to the period immediately prior to the entry into the land, a time at which Israel was much more faithful.

The fathers of verse 5 don't appear to be either the patriarchs or the Israelites of the first wilderness generation. Rather, they are most likely the ancestors who first entered into the promised land.

[7 : 20] The image of Israel as the young bride here recalls positive relations in the past. It also introduces a crucial image of Israel as the bride of the Lord, who owes him her devotion.

This will be explored in different directions in later oracles. We see a similar image explored in Ezekiel chapter 16 verses 8 to 14, which reads, When I passed by you again and saw you, behold, you were at the age for love, and I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness.

I made my vow to you and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Lord God, and you became mine. Then I bathed you with water and washed off your blood from you and anointed you with oil.

I clothed you also with embroidered cloth and shod you with fine leather. I wrapped you in fine linen and covered you with silk, and I adorned you with ornaments and put bracelets on your wrists and a chain on your neck.

And I put a ring on your nose and earrings in your ears and a beautiful crown on your head. Thus you were adorned with gold and silver, and your clothing was of fine linen and silk and embroidered cloth.

[8 : 27] You ate fine flour and honey and oil. You grew exceedingly beautiful and advanced to royalty, and your renown went forth among the nations because of your beauty, for it was perfect through the splendor that I had bestowed on you, declares the Lord God.

The image of Israel as the bride of the Lord is a powerful one. It foregrounds the deeper character of the nation's relationship with the Lord. While the law given at Sinai was a covenant, not dissimilar to the treaties of other ancient Near Eastern nations, the effective dimension of the Lord's covenant with his people is of paramount importance.

The Lord desires that his people love him with all of their heart, soul and might, reciprocating his love for them. He isn't merely looking for their obedience. As Jacques Lundbaum observes, the oracle with which the chapter begins also connects with Jeremiah's call.

The youth of Jeremiah connects with the youth of Israel at her call, and his holiness with Israel's holiness to the Lord. The second part of the opening oracle introduces a different image, that of the firstfruits of a harvest.

The firstfruits of Israel's harvest were devoted to the Lord as an expression of the fact that the entirety was a gift gratefully received from his good hand. Israel herself was the firstfruits of the Lord.

[9 : 44] We can see this in the description of Israel as the Lord's firstborn son, the firstborn son being described as the firstfruits of his father's strength, in Genesis chapter 49 verse 3 and Deuteronomy chapter 21 verse 17.

As Israel was brought out from Egypt, they were the firstfruits of the womb, and the firstborn sons of Israel were set apart through the Passover. The firstborn sons were later replaced by the Levite males.

These firstborn sons, and later the Levite males, stood for the entire nation in its status as God's firstborn. Here the language of firstfruits is more immediately connected with agricultural themes.

Israel is the dedicated nation, the firstfruits of the nations more generally. There is an implicit promise here that the Lord's purpose extended beyond Israel, comprehending the wider body of nations.

Israel was to be the firstfruits of the Lord's harvest, not the only fruits. In Revelation chapter 14, for instance, the 144,000 redeemed of Israel are described as redeemed as the firstfruits for God and the Lamb of mankind.

[10 : 51] As the Lord's firstfruits, Israel was the Lord's treasured possession, his own allotted heritage, as Deuteronomy chapter 32 verses 8 to 9 claims. Any who threatened or sought to claim that possession for themselves were attacking what belonged to God himself and suffered great punishment as a result.

Jeremiah's oracles have a poetic character to them, and in verses 5 to 9 the oracle has a concentric or chiasmic or there-and-back-again structure, with the Lord's bringing his people out of Egypt and into the Promised Land at the heart of it.

The central section is flanked by statements about the failure to say, where is the Lord? The next elements concern Israel's going after unprofitable things in verses 5 and 8.

The outer bookends concern the people's fathers in verse 5 and their children's children in verse 9. These verses return to the imagery and to the language of the opening oracle, picking up the central theme of Israel going out after the Lord in the wilderness, which is described.

The oracle is not merely addressed to Judah, but also to Israelites, whether in the territory of the former northern kingdom, some of which still remained, or living in exile.

[12 : 03] The Lord condemns Israel, and especially their leaders, by Jeremiah for their failure to remember him, and all that he has done for them, his deliverance of them from Egypt, and his care for them in the wilderness.

The Lord had brought them into a fruitful and plentiful land from the wilderness, and not only had they forgotten him, but they had defiled his land. The priests, the rulers of the people, and the prophets had all failed.

At the heart of their failure was a failure of memory. In verse 2, the Lord remembered Israel's covenant love in the wilderness. However, Israel had failed to remember their corresponding honeymoon experience of their bridegroom.

Where is the Lord who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who led us in the wilderness, in the land of deserts and pits, in the land of drought and deep darkness, in the land that none passes through, where no man dwells?

Israel did not ask that question. A central task of Israel was that of memory, of recalling the foundational narrative, a task that is repeatedly stressed in the book of Deuteronomy.

[13 : 04] They had failed in this most basic duty. Despite Israel's great unfaithfulness and shameful forgetfulness, the Lord does not just give up on them. He will contend with them, and with their children's children.

He will not surrender them to their sin and rebellion. Israel's sin is unprecedented. The Lord directs their attention west to Cyprus and east to Qadar, the land of northern Arabia, to see whether there is any other nation that has so abandoned their gods.

And this is even among idolaters. Israel, however, has exchanged the Lord, their glory, for something that does not profit. They have swapped that which set them apart from all the other nations for something less than worthless.

Psalms 106 verse 20 reads, They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass. The folly and the rebellion is compounded by the gross ingratitude.

Deuteronomy chapter 32 verses 15 to 18. But Jashurim grew fat and kicked. He grew fat, stout and sleek. Then he forsook God who made him and scoffed at the rock of his salvation.

[14 : 11] They stirred him to jealousy with strange gods. With abominations they provoked him to anger. They sacrificed to demons that were no gods, to gods they had never known, to new gods that had come recently, whom your fathers had never dreaded.

You were unmindful of the rock that bore you and you forgot the God who gave you birth. Paul makes a similar claim about people exchanging the glory of God for worthless idols in Romans chapter 1 verses 22 to 23.

Claiming to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

God calls the heavens to bear witness to the scandalous character of Israel's apostasy. In Deuteronomy the heavens were appointed as one of the witnesses to the covenant. Here, as the sin of Israel is laid bare before them, they are expected to be appalled.

This is a betrayal of the most intimate and blessed relationship. The sin of Israel is twofold. They forsook the Lord, the fountain of living waters, the one whose grace was the source of all their life and blessing, and in his place they constructed cisterns.

[15 : 19] Indeed, cisterns that were broken and hence useless. Cisterns are holes dug in the ground to collect water, but if they aren't properly sealed, all of the water will seep out of them.

Israel's hewing of broken cisterns might be a metaphor for their construction of idols with their own hands, rather than looking to the living God. Verse 14 begins with a rhetorical question, to which the presumed answer is no.

Israel is not just a lowly-born nation doomed to a bad fate, to be preyed upon by other nations. No, Israel is the bride of the Lord. Israel is the firstborn son and the heir of the Lord's own land.

Israel's fate is entirely and tragically self-inflicted. There was no reason why it had to be this way. The Lord describes the state of the land, whether in the present or the near future, laid waste by the young lions of Egypt and Babylon.

Whether referring to it as a past event or something about to occur, Jeremiah speaks of the Egyptians shaving the crown of Judah's head. This might be a reference to Pharaoh Necho's killing of Josiah at Megiddo, taking Jehoahaz into captivity and appointing Eliakim as king in his place, changing his name to Jehoiakim.

[16 : 31] This all occurred on account of their forsaking of the Lord. Judah responded to their predicament by adopting a foreign policy of turning to Egypt and Assyria, who formed an anti-Babylonian coalition for aid.

However, this would ultimately prove powerless to save Judah, which would be overcome by the Babylonians. In the image of drinking of the rivers of these two nations, we might recall the earlier comparison of the Lord to living waters that Judah was replacing with hewn-out cisterns.

Judah is turning to the hewn-out cisterns of its idols and to the rivers of these foreign nations, Egypt and Assyria. But there is living water for Israel with the Lord, if they would only turn to him.

Walter Brueggemann, writing about this passage, observes that in verses 20 to 28, there are a series of false assertions of identity from Judah. Verse 20, I will not serve.

Verse 23, I am not unclean. I have not gone after the bales. Verse 25, it is hopeless. Verse 27, saying to a tree, You are my father, and to a stone, You gave me birth.

[17 : 35] Verse 27, saying in the time of their distress, Arise and save us. Judah has committed itself to falsehood and is living by such lies. Commentators differ on the translation of verse 20.

Craigie, Kelly and Drinkard, for instance, hold that we should understand the Lord to be the one who broke the yoke, the yoke of slavery in Egypt, so that Israel might serve him. Shamefully, ungrateful Israel refused to serve the Lord.

Lundbun, by contrast, argues that it is Israel who broke the yoke, the yoke in this case being the yoke of service to the Lord. In verses 20 to 22, there are three successive images of Israel's unfaithfulness and pollution.

They are like an adulterous whore, promiscuously prostituting herself at every idol shrine, forsaking the Lord, their divine husband, for idols that are no gods. They are like a choice vine of the Lord's own planting that has turned wild, producing bitter grapes.

We might think here of Isaiah's indictment of Judah in his Song of the Vineyard in Isaiah chapter 5, verses 1 to 4. Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard.

[18 : 42] My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines. He built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it.

And he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it?

When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? The third image is one of stubborn and defiling bloodstains on their clothes or body that cannot be expunged, no matter how hard they scrub at them with lye and soap.

Their guilt clings to them before God, however they try to free themselves of it. Judah might protest her innocence, but her actions in the valley testify against her. The valley here might refer to her actions with Baal of Peor, as a number of older commentators argue, or perhaps to the valley of the son of Hinnom, and the child's sacrifice to Molech that had occurred there.

The Lord compares Judah to a young camel that won't keep a straight course, or to a wild donkey in heat, trying to catch and follow the scent of a male for the sake of copulation, nothing stopping her in her quest.

[19 : 57] Judah is like a brute beast in heat, in its addiction to idolatry. It is pointless to try to restrain her or to bring her back. Like an addict cornered in their addiction, Judah turns to excuses, claiming that they are powerless to resist the law of idolatry.

The Lord declares that they will be like a thief caught in the act, openly humiliated in their idolatry, in which they have turned to fertility symbols of wood and stone. The tree was typically associated with Asherah, the fertility goddess, and the stone with her male counterpart, although they seem to be mixed in order here.

Israel has turned away from the Lord, towards the idols that they are serving, showing the Lord a sign of contempt in the process. But the Lord will put them to shame, as he turns his back on them.

Judah, in the time of its distress, will call to the Lord for deliverance, but will not receive it from the Lord. Their many gods, if they are really gods, should be able to rise and save Judah.

The Lord abandons them to these powerless and worthless idols. Judah accuses the Lord, but he challenges their supposed grounds for doing so. They have transgressed, they have not responded to correction, they have killed the prophets that the Lord has sent to them.

[21 : 10] The Lord had dealt with them time after time, and they had rejected him persistently. In response to Judah's accusation, the Lord presents Judah with his own challenge. Taking up the imagery of the opening oracles of the chapter, he asked Judah whether he, the God who led Israel through the wilderness, was himself like a wilderness and a land of darkness to Israel.

The betrayal is all on Judah's side. They have treated the Lord himself as a wilderness from which they want to be delivered. The Lord also takes up the nuptial imagery again. The virgin or the bride dresses in glorious clothing on the wedding day.

This day is rich with memories, but Israel seems to have forgotten hers entirely. They act as if they had no husband at all. The chapter ends with ironic praise for Israel and how gifted they are in their pursuit of unfaithfulness, so practiced that they could teach the adulteresses and whores their skills.

Their clothing is stained with the blood of the poor, whom they have oppressed. Yet even when stained with innocent blood, Israel stubbornly asserts its guiltlessness. They seem to have the false impression that the passage of time has absolved them of their guilt, that the stain has faded as time has passed.

But there will be a reckoning. Very soon Egypt would put them to shame. They have put their trust in human beings to come to their aid, but those parties were themselves rejected and would be shamed.

[22 : 32] A question to consider. What are some other places in Scripture where the imagery of Israel as the bride of the Lord is explored?

