

Jeremiah 14: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 15 January 2021

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[0 : 0 0] Jeremiah chapter 14. The word of the Lord that came to Jeremiah concerning the drought. Judah mourns, and her gates languish. Her people lament on the ground, and the cry of Jerusalem goes up. Her nobles send their servants for water. They come to the cisterns, they find no water.

They return with their vessels empty. They are ashamed and confounded, and cover their heads, because of the ground that is dismayed, since there is no rain on the land. The farmers are ashamed. They cover their heads. Even the doe in the field forsakes her newborn fawn, because there is no grass. The wild donkeys stand on the bare heights. They pant for air like jackals.

Their eyes fail, because there is no vegetation. Though our iniquities testify against us, act, O Lord, for your namesake. For our backslidings are many. We have sinned against you. O you hope of Israel, its saviour in time of trouble. Why should you be like a stranger in the land, like a traveller who turns aside to tarry for a night? Why should you be like a man confused, like a mighty warrior who cannot save? Yet you, O Lord, are in the midst of us, and we are called by your name. Do not leave us. Thus says the Lord concerning this people. They have loved to wander thus. They have not restrained their feet. Therefore the Lord does not accept them. Now he will remember their iniquity, and punish their sins. The Lord said to me, Do not pray for the welfare of this people. Though they fast, I will not hear their cry. And though they offer burnt offering and grain offering, I will not accept them. But I will consume them by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence.

Then I said, Our Lord God, behold, the prophets say to them, You shall not see the sword, nor shall you have famine. But I will give you assured peace in this place. And the Lord said to me, The prophets are prophesying lies in my name. I did not send them, nor did I command them or speak to them. They are prophesying to you a lying vision, worthless divination, and the deceit of their own minds.

Therefore thus says the Lord concerning the prophets who prophesy in my name, although I did not send them, and who say, Sword and famine shall not come upon this land. By sword and famine, those prophets shall be consumed. And the people to whom they prophesy shall be cast out in the streets of Jerusalem, victims of famine and sword, with none to bury them, them, their wives, their sons, and their daughters. For I will pour out their evil upon them. You shall say to them this word, Let my eyes run down with tears night and day, and let them not cease. For the virgin daughter of my people is shattered with a great wound, with a very grievous blow. If I go out into the field, behold those pierced by the sword, and if I enter the city, behold the diseases of famine. For both prophet and priest ply their trade through the land, and have no knowledge. Have you utterly rejected, Judah? Does your soul loathe Zion? Why have you struck us down, so that there is no healing for us?

[3 : 1 1] We looked for peace, but no good came. For a time of healing, but behold terror. We acknowledge our wickedness, O Lord, and the iniquity of our fathers, for we have sinned against you. Do not spurn us for your namesake. Do not dishonor your glorious throne. Remember and do not break your covenant with us.

Are there any among the false gods of the nations that can bring rain? Or can the heavens give showers? Are you not he, O Lord our God? We set our hope on you, for you do all these things.

Jeremiah chapter 14 is introduced as the word of the Lord that came to Jeremiah concerning the drought. This introduction might refer to the entirety of chapters 14 and 15. There is no indication of the date given here, and although the drought was clearly very severe, we have no reference to it in the books of Kings or Chronicles. This is another of Jeremiah's prayers of lament. As a nation, Israel depended upon the rains for its irrigation. While the land of Egypt was primarily irrigated through the Nile, Israel depended upon the rains, and a lack of rain could be devastating for the land and its people.

Prayer for rain was often associated with the Feast of Tabernacles, and one of the curses of the covenant was the cutting off of rain. Deuteronomy chapter 11 verses 16 to 17.

Take care lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them. Then the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you, and he will shut up the heavens, so that there will be no rain, and the land will yield no fruit, and you will perish quickly after the good land that the Lord is giving you. Deuteronomy chapter 28 verses 22 to 24.

[4 : 52] The Lord will strike you with wasting disease, and with fever, inflammation, and fiery heat, and with drought, and with blight, and with mildew. They shall pursue you until you perish.

And the heavens over your head shall be bronze, and the earth under you shall be iron. The Lord will make the rain of your land powder. From heaven dust shall come down on you, until you are destroyed.

The most famous drought, of course, was the drought on Israel during the reign of King Ahab. In 1 Kings chapter 18 verses 5 to 6, Ahab and Obadiah have to go throughout the land searching for grass for the horses and the mules, who are about to die on account of the prolonged drought. Here the experience of the drought is described as a sort of nationwide mourning. Judah is in mourning, and her personified gates are languishing. Similar imagery is also used in Isaiah chapter 3 verse 26. And her gates shall lament and mourn, empty she shall sit on the ground. Even the nobles of the land struggle to obtain water, they send out their servants, who come back empty. The farmers of the land are also dismayed, as are the beasts. The doe forsakes her newborn fawn, as she struggles to find the food that she needs.

Another description of the impact of a drought upon the animals of the land can be found in Joel chapter 1 verses 18 and 20. How the beasts groan, the herds of cattle are perplexed because there is no pasture for them, even the flocks of sheep suffer. Even the beasts of the fields pant for you because the water brooks are dried up, and fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness. The wild donkeys are even going blind, as they are malnourished without the grass that they need. The whole land is in a state of mourning. And in verses 7 to 9, there is a confession of sin. This is presumably Jeremiah confessing on behalf of the whole people. Jeremiah acts as the prophet interceding for the people.

There are various examples of communal confessions of sin, or a prophet confessing on behalf of the people in the scripture. Daniel chapter 9 is such an example. In 1st Samuel chapter 7, the people ask Samuel to pray for them. Jeremiah, speaking for the people, acknowledges that the drought has come upon them on account of their sin. They have broken the covenant, and so they are suffering the covenant curse.

[7 : 11] Nonetheless, they look to the Lord. The Lord can act to save his people for his name's sake. The people are his people, called by his name. However, appealing to the Lord as the hope of Israel, its saviour in time of trouble. Jeremiah asks why the Lord should be like a stranger in the land, someone who is just passing through and staying for the night. His commitment to the people does not seem to be expressed in his actual deliverance of them. In an especially bold statement, Jeremiah calls upon the Lord not to act like a mighty man or a warrior who is unable to save his people. The Lord is in the midst of his people. The people are called by his name. Jeremiah beseeches the Lord to act on behalf of them. Yet he receives a discouraging answer from the Lord. The people have delighted to stray away from him, and now the Lord will not accept them. The time has come to bring their sins upon them in judgment. The Lord forbids Jeremiah from praying for the people. This is not the first time that this has happened. We see the same thing in Jeremiah chapter 7 verse 16 and chapter 11 verse 14. As for you, do not pray for this people, or lift up a cry or prayer for them, and do not intercede with me, for I will not hear you. And again, therefore do not pray for this people, or lift up a cry or prayer on their behalf, for I will not listen when they call to me in the time of their trouble. The Lord has doomed the people to destruction by sword, famine, and pestilence. It is too late to try and escape their faith through fasts, prayers, and sacrifices. The time has passed, and now their judgment is inevitable. But even though the Lord declares this judgment, Jeremiah has to contend with competing prophets who are giving a very different sort of message. Their message is one of false reassurance, telling the people that everything is going to be okay, that no judgment is going to fall upon them. In Jeremiah chapter 6 verses 13 to 15, this struggle that Jeremiah faced with the false prophets is also described.

For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain, and from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, Peace, peace, when there is no peace. Were they ashamed when they committed abomination?

No, they were not at all ashamed. They did not know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among those who fall. At the time that I punish them, they shall be overthrown, says the Lord.

In Jeremiah chapter 28, we have an example of Jeremiah's struggle with false prophets, with Hananiah, who prophesies peace and deliverance from Babylon. Jeremiah confronts Hananiah and declares to him, The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms. As for the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of that prophet comes to pass, then it will be known that the Lord has truly sent that prophet. Another famous example of struggling with false prophets is in 1 Kings chapter 22.

2 As the prophet Micaiah prophesies defeat for Ahab and Israel in the battle, and struggles with Zedekiah, who prophesies otherwise. Here the Lord announces that the judgment that they had denied would come upon them, that the false prophets, their wives, their sons, and their daughters, would all suffer death by famine and sword, and no one would be able to bury them. The chapter ends with Jeremiah being instructed to deliver a lament to the people. He describes the devastation of the drought, but also sees ahead to the effects of the sword and the consequent famine in the city.

[10 : 45] Even beyond the drought, Judah faces destruction at the hand of foreign invaders. The sickness of the nation, however, is pervasive. Neither the prophet nor the priest lead the people into truth. The prophet's eyes run down with tears, but yet he's been instructed not to pray for the people.

Nonetheless, hoping against hope, he pounds in desperation upon the closed heavens. Perhaps in the Lord's mercy, he might give some more favorable answer. Once again, he confesses the people's sin, their sin and the sins of their fathers. Once again, he appeals to the covenant.

He appeals to the Lord's honor, the honor of his name. He appeals to the Lord's power. None of the false gods of the nations can bring rain. None of them have that power. In expressing the Lord's praise in this way, he's calling for the Lord to act, to display his power, mercifully to demonstrate his might over the false gods and deliver his people. Yet pound as he might, no answer seems to be forthcoming.

A question to consider. Can you think of occasions when the Lord heeded intercession for his people? Can you think of any differences between this occasion in Jeremiah and those?