

Commentary on Jeremiah and Lamentations

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Introduction to Jeremiah

We can only guess that Jeremiah was born between 650 and 640 BC, in the village of Anathoth, a few kilometers north and somewhat east of Jerusalem. This barren hilltop village was one of the original Cities of Refuge granted to the priests and Levites. We believe he was a descendant of the Zadok who replaced the disgraced Abiathar after Solomon caught the latter taking part in the attempted coup of Adonijah. Thus, Jeremiah was surely eligible for active priesthood, but we can't be sure the politics of the time allowed him to actually serve in the Temple. We know his ministry began during the reign of Josiah and they were roughly age mates.

Jeremiah eagerly supported the reforms of Josiah. However, the long legacy of Manasseh that had buried the Law in the first place had taken root in the souls of the leadership, making them rebellious to the bitter end. Thus, God had to cut short the life of that righteous king to make way for the final act of wrath that took them from the Promised Land. We sense Jeremiah had precious little joy in his service as prophet, so we call him the "Weeping Prophet." His was a painful life with some four decades of service against all odds, knowing his message would find little traction with much of anyone. The book evinces a deep sensitivity over what must have been a monumental frustration with something so painfully obvious: Unless Jehovah ruled the nation, there could be no nation. False patriotism and man-made solutions were a complete waste. It was his painful duty to declare that it was too late, and the doom was certain, that the nation should surrender and take her lumps.

There was at least one very strong political party in the royal court: the Pro-Egypt Party. It was the strongest and the primary source of Jeremiah's grief. While there may also have been a Pro-Babylon Party, Jeremiah was not a member of any party. His call for surrender to the rising Babylonian Empire was no reflection of political activism, but a deep concern for repentance. Without covenant faithfulness, Israel had no claim to her name, much less the protecting hand of her God. The Lord had specifically revealed to Jeremiah His demand that Judah submit peacefully to His use of Babylon as punishment for violating the Covenant. Jeremiah had precious little support for this call from the leadership of Judah, so obsessed were they with the supposed wisdom of human statecraft. There's no doubt that Jeremiah faced accusations of treason. God's rescue from Assyria during Isaiah's prophetic service left the leaders thinking Zion was inviolable regardless of actual holiness; no one could prove them wrong. Even when Babylon successfully captured Zion, as Jeremiah warned would happen, the partisans blamed Jeremiah for discouraging the city's defenders.

Most scholars warn us that the book is most certainly not in chronological order. Given the text itself tells us the whole thing was rewritten at least once, we should expect that Jeremiah and his scribe put things in the order that mattered to them most. The burden is upon us to grasp the message as presented.

Chapter 1

Jeremiah begins typically by presenting his credentials. What matters most to us was his membership in the priesthood. We cannot know whether he actually served in the Temple for

sure, but that he was eligible as a descendant of Zadok. In 627 BC, the Lord called him to service as prophet. He continued in that service until the Exile, some forty years later.

Then Jeremiah launches into a description of his calling. As with all Hebrew writing, it is at least partly symbolic, meant to convey the impact, not some objective description of the event itself. How would you describe a conversation with God? God is a Spirit and speaks to the human spirit, readable only to the heart; the intellect struggles merely to discern from the heart what is required. The passage includes the notion that God foreknew Jeremiah prior to birth and planned to use him this way. Even while still rather young, God commanded him to receive the Word and speak it with boldness. Worthiness was not the issue, since no man was worthy in God's sight. The issue was the power of God and His sovereign choice. The impact of Jeremiah's service was destroying false structures of the human mind and rebuilding the truth of God.

Two things were important for Jeremiah's service. First was to understand the power of God's Word as something alive, which the Lord stood behind and made it happen. So, he gave Jeremiah a vision of an almond sapling (*shaqed*) to symbolize how God kept track of things. That God stood guard over His word (*shoqed*) was a play on words, but also, we note the almond was the first plant to betray spring, by sprouting before any other.

Second, the Lord showed him a boiling cauldron, tipping away from the north. Given the impenetrable desert between Mesopotamia and Palestine, anything attacking Judah from anywhere but Egypt or from the sea would have to come from the north. In this case, it was the rising Babylonian Empire. The image is a vast horde of people streaming out of the north, seething and ready to lay siege to Jerusalem. The pagan defiance of many in the Judean leadership had gone too far and for too long. Judgment was set, and there was no appeal.

Thus, the message from God was sure and unalterable. Jeremiah had no excuse for hesitating. He was to be strong; if he faltered at all, God would leave him to stand on his own. He could humble himself before God or be forcibly humbled at the hands of human oppressors. In God's power, he was stronger than anything the whole nation could muster. They would try to fight Jeremiah's message and would surely fail.

Chapter 2

Now begins the message of Jeremiah to his people. The next few chapters seem repetitious, yet full of poetic imagery few can match today. The material appears to be a collection of messages, perhaps mostly delivered early in his ministry. Repetition is a key element in Hebrew verse; restating the same symbolic reference in different words is so common that we call it "Hebrew Parallelism." As always, we focus not on the precise meaning of the words themselves, because they are merely the signposts to reality. Jeremiah would have easily memorized the imagery and the context and could repeat any message at any time in different words because the symbols were the message, not the words. The targets of his preaching were in Jerusalem.

The sense of this chapter is a direct accusation against Israel, which is now mostly Judah, that

she has deserted God. The first few verses call to mind the purity and simplicity of unadorned holiness. When we have nothing but the Lord, things are fine. Add in a few comforts and suddenly these become more important than the Comforter. God eagerly defended Israel in the Wilderness when she had little to lose. Now He can't find her hiding in all that stuff. He won't defend those who won't stay close to Him.

Then God asks what He might have done that justified their unfaithfulness. They had nothing in Egypt. He redeemed them at great cost to Egypt, in defiance of Death itself, giving them something more valuable than they ever knew. However, once they had stuff, no one sought His face. This is a crime against Creation itself. Nations do have Laws and not one of the nations had trouble clinging to their non-existent gods, so what is it with Israel who knows the One True God? She traded Him for the false idols belonging to other nations.

Was not Israel the freest of all nations? Why do ambitious sinners now press her hard? It seems Jeremiah mentions the death of Josiah at the hand of Pharaoh, now their erstwhile liege lord. Who wants to keep running down to Egypt like some on-call slave, seeing that Jehovah had humbled that same empire for the sake of Israel? This is a direct slam on the Pro-Egypt Party. If God can defeat Egypt so easily without an armed host, using all natural disasters, how can that faction hope to find salvation in Egypt against God? How could they claim they were still faithful to Him?

Jeremiah then uses poetic language to produce guttural images in the same place we would use the most degrading terms today. Israel is no different from a royal princess who preferred being a crack whore. When confronted, she simply says there is no hope for her, so get lost. How disgusting! Caught in the act, Judah's leaders are swimming in shame. They treat dead objects with the reverence of parents fondling a baby. Fine, let them call on their rock and tree gods when things go wrong. Don't call on Jehovah, seeing they can't be bothered so much as to respond to direct punishment.

So the people whom God took from slavery, nurtured as His own precious child, this is the nation that tells God they are too good for His restraints. They have ignored Him more days than they served Him since the Exodus. Yes, Israel could teach crack whores a thing or two about brazen criminal acts. They seem to believe that God is actually tied to that stone temple on Mount Zion and that it won't matter what they do, because He can't afford to let misfortune come to the city. They redefine their sins, somehow calling them "righteousness." When God is through with their allies, the only companions Judah will find are sorrow and grief.

Again, the point is Judah's leadership has long drifted away from what they were under Moses and Joshua. They have so deeply entangled themselves in worldly wisdom, versus the simplicity of standing with God and His Word, that they can't imagine what Jeremiah is yammering about.

Chapter 3

The Law of Moses was binding on Israel. Jesus said in many ways that Moses' Law was actually much weaker than God's personal standard. For example, Moses permitted divorce, but Jesus declared that was not good enough for someone who actually intended to cling to the Lord. In Israel, a woman divorced could legally remarry. But the first man could not take her back again, as that was spiritual pollution of the land. On a moral level, we can see how that would weaken the community's stability. The first husband had surrendered all claims and the divorce for that first marriage was irrevocable. God said He would have been willing to weaken that stricture if only His own nation would repent after having chased after, not just one, but countless other suitors.

We recognize the symbolism of idolatry as adultery. God goes on to describe in vivid imagery the woman who ran away from her husband. Then it seemed she committed herself to having illicit relations over every possible square inch of the land. Not content to defile it symbolically through one act, she made very certain to defile it all directly. Did she imagine it wouldn't matter? It was directly why God withheld the rain. Did that punishment make any difference? No, rather like an insufferable arrogant gutter wench, Judah tells God to get lost. God holds out His hand of forgiveness, but taking that hand means repentance.

Compare them to the Northern Kingdom up to 722 BC, when Assyria took her away. A hundred years after the fall of Samaria, Josiah ordered reforms according to the rediscovered scrolls of the Law. Under a half-century of Manasseh's rule, the people had long forgotten them. Even to that last day before destroying Samaria, God offered to forgive the Northern Kingdom. Even now, a century after exile, He would gladly call her back to the land if the people would reaffirm the Covenant and pray for repentance. She remained divorced by her own choice. In addition, Judah, her sister, seemed to have learned nothing from that lesson. Indeed, what they whored after were not even real gods, but sticks and rocks.

In many ways, Israel was more righteous than Judah was. Therefore, in a symbolic act, God commanded Jeremiah to stand on the road leading north toward the crossing of the Euphrates, over which the Northern Kingdom had been led away, and call her to return. All anyone ever had to do was agree with God – confess – His judgments, calling "sin" what He called "sin." For repentance God held out the promise of godly leaders; He has always fed those who hungered for His Law. In like manner, those who hunger for His Laws will find the higher spiritual truth of His personal revelation. Indeed, once full repentance has its way in the human soul, they could forget the Ark of Covenant, because they would no longer need a tangible ritual object. The Law would be contained in their hearts and His throne would be in their souls. Here Jeremiah declares clearly that God's will is far more than a simple written code of laws, but a matter of His own divine Presence in the heart. That promise remained open to Israel long after she faded from history and to Judah as well, but fully realized in Christ.

Finally, Jeremiah sings a song of what life is like when people embrace the Spirit of the Lord. The Land of Promise never was on this earth but is a place in the soul. It's a place where people are quick to confess their sinful natures, who trust in nothing they could do, see or touch, but trust only in the Lord. Such people remain eternally prostrated before Him, for they cannot depart that consciousness of His holiness blazing against their fallen nature. They also know His mercy and grace.

Chapter 4

There are three levels of involvement with God, aside from outright disobedience. At the lowest level, one can simply go through the motions, rather as a slave who has no choice. While this had never been acceptable, at any given time, a significant portion of the nation stayed at that level. What God required of Israel was a second, higher level, honestly embracing Him as their true sovereign, their Lord. The Lord portrayed Himself consistently as an Eastern Potentate and a Desert Nomad Sheikh. The assumptions of that Eastern feudalism applied fully, as if the Israelis were born in His domain. Everyone in such a cultural setting presumably could simply accept the reality and go along with it. Those who did so with an honest intent were in a position to know Him personally as an adopted family member and were celebrated on that day much as a new birth. People seeking God sincerely were in a position to know Him on that third and highest level of spiritual communion.

If Israel had simply accepted Jehovah as her ruling Sheik, everything promised in the Covenant would have come true: reasonable prosperity, social stability and security from threats. At the time of Jeremiah, most of Israel, and the leadership in particular, did not even serve as slaves, because of their open rebellion. Aside from the seductive call of pagan idolatry, their primary failure was struggling to replace the Law with human wisdom, rather like our modern obsession with science. Human reason has its place in discerning what a man should do in life, but only if there was no specific word from the Lord or no conspicuous imperative from His Spirit. For those without a living spirit, His commands came through His prophets. Jeremiah begins this chapter reminding Judah that God had always kept His promises and everything they hoped to gain by human wisdom was already theirs under the Covenant. However, they had to trust the Lord's leading hand and let Him alone be God.

If they would do this, their grand success against all the various threats would draw the rest of humanity to their example. Even if they were to repent now, says Jeremiah, that example would still serve. Therefore, it's not enough to simply carve off a bit of skin in some odd ritual called "circumcision." It is necessary actually to embrace the whole Law of God, not in mere performance, but a full commitment. Anything less was a guaranteed loss of protection. They would call their army together and flee to the fortified cities, but it would do them no good against the enemy God called to punish them.

Coming down from the north would be the massive mighty armies of Babylon. They might as well don the sackcloth and ashes now, because it's too late. The leadership, including the false court prophets, would all be dumbfounded when nothing in which they trusted helped them. While the common English translation of verse 10 suggests blasphemy, we have to understand the dramatic symbolism. Jeremiah suggests that the people were lulled into a sense of false security when, during Isaiah's ministry, the Lord saved Judah from Assyria by a mighty miracle, despite the king's hard heart against trusting Jehovah. Thus, the people decided that surely God would not let Zion be taken regardless of their sin. They just could not believe Babylon would succeed.

Thus, because they thought they had God over a barrel, as it were, the nation was in for a rude awakening. First, there is the image of a blowing sandstorm. If you tried to winnow your grain in it, the grain would blow away leaving you sand in its place. So would it seem to them when Babylon came. Thus, keep an eye to the north, even as you sin, and mark their progress, Jeremiah warns them. Sure, many of the people accepted Josiah's reforms with grumbling tolerance, but only in shallow ritual observances. Their sinful desires radiated out from their evil hearts.

Jeremiah found this heartbreaking, to say the least. However, it was the same sorrow God felt, knowing He would have to let the disaster fall on His beloved Israel. Funny how wise and discerning they were in measuring just how much they could get away with, yet were utterly ignorant of simple childlike trust. So, the land would become as if things were back at Creation – formless and void. The earth itself would tremble and melt for fear of God's wrath. Yet while every city would be destroyed, a precious, slender remnant would be preserved with a heart for God.

So, having chased after all these other gods, who will support them and care for them when it's all gone? It won't matter what they do to make themselves appealing. Like expensive makeup and clothes on a battered old crack whore, none of Judah's many suitors will pay her any attention. That is, except perhaps they might try to rob her. There would be no rescue from sorrow in That Day.

Chapter 5

The Lord tells Jeremiah to investigate thoroughly and survey the entire population of Jerusalem. Would he find anyone, a single individual, who was seeking God's truth and justice? For the sake of that one, the Lord would spare the entire city. But no, the only time they call on His Name is to swear falsely. The leaders of the kingdom are incorrigible.

Could it be all these folks are the poor and ignorant, expected to get some things wrong? Check again with the reputed great men of the city. No, they have utterly forsaken every part of the Covenant. Creation itself is aghast and wild creatures gather around, even coming boldly inside the city, since it is hardly civilized any more. There is no hindrance to their predations. Indeed, the people are wilder than the beasts themselves, recognizing nothing higher than the lusts of their flesh. Judah will be like a vineyard whose terraces and hedges are broken down; only a

tiny remnant will be saved. If they don't want the Covenant demands, they must not want its protections.

In their arrogance, they have blasphemed Jehovah. They say He wouldn't dare let harm come upon them for their sins. The people claim that the prophets who speak from the Spirit are filled with mere wind. The Hebrew word (*ruwach*) is the same for spirit and wind. Fine, let that wind become fire in Jeremiah's mouth and those people like wood. A mighty nation with an ancient culture will come upon the land, whose every weapon is death itself. They will speak a language Judeans don't understand – since Judah won't listen to messages in her own tongue. So vast will be the invading armies that they will devour all the produce of the kingdom as a side dish to their rations. They will pull down every fort, the great battlements in which Judah trusts, because she doesn't trust in the God who made her a nation.

Nevertheless, there will be that small remnant He will save. If nothing else, that remnant must be the ones who can cry out to Jehovah, asking why their nation was destroyed, so that Jeremiah can tell them it was for their sins. If you can't serve your own God in the Promised Land, but go after the gods of foreigners, then perhaps you would prefer to serve foreigners far away from your home. Having a home is a package deal, restricted to the Covenant of the one and only God.

Yes, He is the God who made all things. Do you not fear Him? This God can hold back with mere sand the crashing waves of the vast ocean. Yes, He is the God who gave you ears with which you will not hear, who gave you eyes by which you refuse to see. He regulates the very seasons upon which you depend for growing food, and He can turn them into chaos.

With God's own people, who alone among all the nations have His divine revelation, it seems every man is a greedy hedonist. The leaders look for new ways to defraud everyone. Instead of defending the unfortunate, as God commanded, they take advantage of the situation to rape them. And you wonder why God dares to punish you? What words can express such an outrage? God expresses astonishment Himself at such arrogance. The prophets He called have decided to speak only what pays; the priests of the Temple teach from their own imaginations. Does no one bother to see what God has revealed in His Word? You won't have a clue when the Covenant curses come upon you.

Chapter 6

It's the same with every nation when the Lord sends a prophet to warn them of doom. By the time things have gotten that far, the people are highly unlikely to repent. The one notable example was Nineveh. God had warned Jeremiah that his mission to His own people would seem futile in human terms, but that he should fortify himself against that impression. Judah was shameless in rejecting the now ancient Covenant of Moses and was out of time.

In times of war, folks from the Tribe of Benjamin typically fled to Jerusalem because it was fortified, and they presumed God protected it for the sake of the Temple. Now God warns that

the city is unsafe. Better would it be to flee south, to the ridgeline on the way to Hebron, where Jeremiah indicates two high peaks were used for signals to rally people. It would be safer than the City of Zion, a tender target for the Babylonian shepherders, whose flocks would denude the countryside of all forage. Jeremiah depicts the siege commanders as driving the attackers relentlessly.

Jeremiah's writing is full of literary devices. The dreadful sight of siege mounds against the city and clearing all trees in sight was no worse than the dreadful oppression of Judah's ruling class, taxing everything that moves. Judah was like a fountain bubbling over with evil. The government was odious to God and abandoning Judah was in their best interest. Better was the conquest by Babylon than that Judah's foul sins should provoke God to destroy Zion utterly if His Presence remained in the Temple. So, He would prod Babylon to keep plundering like vineyard workers leaving nothing to glean from the harvest.

Jeremiah's frustration was actually God's. The leaders would satirize the prophetic truth. God had His belly full and was about to vomit. No one would escape His wrath. The leaders had made the people greedy; even the priests and official prophets were taken with corruption. They would speak the ritual blessing *shalom*, but God could offer them no peace, since they had shamelessly destroyed all that made for the blessings of God's peace.

Even should Jeremiah stand on the highway like a living detour sign, warning people to seek the ancient paths of holiness, they would prefer the path of modern human wisdom. Sound the trumpet of warning and they plugged their ears. Perhaps the rest of humanity would listen, then, when God foretells Judah's doom. Judah had the material prosperity to buy the finest incense for the Temple but couldn't be bothered to actually know what the Covenant required. Fine; let them have the sin they so deeply desired; it will destroy them all.

The forces of Babylon would include troops from a great many nations, peoples Israel had never heard of all converging on the City. There will be not the slightest hint of mercy. God would ensure a most alarming scene of cruelest armament. The people would see it and their hearts would fail. Their fighting spirit would die without so much as a single battle cry against the invasion. Seasoned warriors of Judah would hide in their bedrooms, closets and basements. Before anyone strikes a single blow, the nation would begin to wail over the bitterest losses to come.

Some translations offer an ambiguous wording in verse 27; it has stumped many, but the context calls for us to see God setting Jeremiah as a test. He is commanded to thoroughly assay the people's hearts, so that no one would have an excuse and claim they didn't know they had sinned. Jeremiah's ministry would expose any hidden false motives. Like an assayer of metals, God would use the prophet to show that they are base metals, cheap slag and at best so utterly impure it would be as coins called "silver" but mostly lead.

This is the calling upon Jeremiah and God's charge against Judah.

Chapter 7

Jeremiah establishes here the basic theme of his prophecy against Judah. The first point is their false reliance on the Temple by which they felt God was obliged to protect the city at all costs. The logic of talisman magic perverts the nature of divine power, blasphemously pulling it down under human control. This led to the second point, which was that their religion had devolved into mere lip service, a keeping of empty ritual. It blasphemously reduces God to a slot machine. Thus, the third item was the return to the rancid polytheism of Manasseh's reign, including burning children to Molech in the Hinnom Valley. This makes Jehovah just one of many Gods competing for their attention.

The Lord commanded Jeremiah to stand in the main gate of the Temple Plaza. This was the ceremonial entrance used by the officials and the bulk of traffic in and out of the Temple. The message that followed echoed repeatedly in Jeremiah's writing.

God's protection of the Temple, and thus the City of Jerusalem, was conditional. If the people devoted themselves to obeying the Covenant as an expression of God's personal demands, then protection was sure. The covenant said much about God's concept of justice. Keep peace between neighbors by upholding God's standards; don't take unfair advantage of poor folks, particularly widows and orphans, who were the most vulnerable in that society. Reduce corruption that saw the innocent executed for political convenience and stop the adulterous idolatry. People who flagrantly violated these wishes of God had no standing in His Temple. Their presence was an insult to God unless they came to repent. Otherwise, the people were using God's House to hide crime.

With the Conquest under Joshua, some 800 years earlier, God commanded Israel to erect the Tabernacle at Shiloh. It was just a short time later that the nation began to trust in the Ark of Covenant as a mere talisman. They took it into battle against the Philistines, and then lost the battle, the Ark and Shiloh as well. The history narrative of Scripture declines to describe the sacking of Shiloh, but Jeremiah mentions it as something all too memorable. If God did not protect His own Ark of Covenant when the people sinned in those days, why would they assume the Temple would protect their sins now?

Jeremiah was warned not to bother praying for Judah. Intercession was closed. There was cause enough for this found in one single issue. In an elaborate ritual, children would gather wood, the household head would use it to build a special fire, on which the family would bake sweet cakes shaped like and dedicated to Ashtarte (AKA: Ishtar, Venus, Easter, etc.). Then they poured out expensive drink offerings to other deities associated to her. Given they used all their resources that God provided under the Covenant promises, to insult Him publicly, He would ensure Babylon spared nothing – people, animals, vegetation – nothing. The consuming fire of wrath would then burn the stones and dirt left.

So, Judah should just continue blithely with her extravagant offerings, ritual meals and so on, as if that stuff mattered to God. The first commandments from Mount Sinai had to do with recognizing Jehovah was the One and Only God. Then He informed them that He was now

their Emperor, and they were His vassals. He issued His basic legal policy, along with some detailed examples of how to make it work. Finally, almost as an afterthought, He explained what the rituals and trappings should be. Judah managed to get the rituals only but wanted no part of the Law's deeper demands. They preferred their own intellectual reasoning and legalistic dodging of the fundamental claims of God. So far gone were they that God warned Jeremiah they would hardly listen to his preaching.

Indeed, they had long since hardened their hearts and no longer possessed any means to understand. Not that they would notice, but Jeremiah shaved his head, a powerful image of sobriety and sorrow over sin. Then he was to go and wail on the bare hilltops, in recognition that God had rejected His people. Who would have thought the people of Jehovah would resurrect the degrading worship of Molech? They had reconsecrated the ritual sites in the Hinnom Valley in a spot called Tophet. God would see to it the site would be desecrated beyond repair, filled with dead bodies, too many to bury. Carrion eaters would infest the place, making it ritually unusable to any religion in that time.

The streets of the City would fall silent, except for the occasional wind whirling the dust along. Devoid of life, it would also finally be devoid of sin and evil.

Chapter 8

The Babylonian attack would be more than mere conquest, more than the insult of leaving the dead to rot in the open. A common practice in that part of the world was for victors to haul the bones of royalty out of graves as a crushing insult to their victims. Babylon would rub it in, emptying every grave, even of the common folks. They would dedicate this act to the very same astrological deities with which Judah had committed idolatry. Anyone seeking to rebuild the ruins would have a very repulsive task of first removing the human remains thickly spread over the whole area.

This would happen because of the incomprehensible refusal of the nation to repent. You would think a fresh discussion of the Law would provoke some bit of shame and guilt, but not in Judah. Nature itself obeys God's ways better than His own people. They make so much of this divine election to give them His revelation, God's eternal Word carried over from the earliest days after Creation, but they can't be bothered to actually live by it. They had already begun to objectify a very personal covenant, which process led to the Pharisees and the Talmud. So, God says if they refuse to let the Law possess their hearts, they shall not possess the Land any longer, or even any part of their household property. So brazen was their rejection of truth that they had forgotten how to blush.

He would totally strip them of every promised blessing of the Law. The warning did not provoke the slightest remorse. So foreign had they become, God had to reveal His wrath through Babylon, making it His own army. The plague of bronze-colored serpents during the Exodus would be a fond memory compared to what was coming.

Who would stand and weep, cry aloud over the loss of Judah? Jeremiah sees what is coming

and words fail him. How could they boldly provoke the God who lived in their midst? Every blessing and gift of Jehovah was stood on its head. The very notion of healing would be forgotten, a legend of the dim past, because the people rejected the call to repent.

Chapter 9

God feels the same deep sorrow that drives Jeremiah to tears, wishing he had yet more tears he could weep, plus an utter weariness of flagrant and willful rejection of the Covenant. The Word has always been life and outside it is sure death. Knowing that covenant death precedes literal death only prolongs the sorrow. None of us would want to be around to see a nation crumble spiritually, any more than we want to watch our own family decimated.

They had become so very proud of their ability to deal sharply with each other. It's bad enough to be hostile to strangers, but slander and covetousness had ripped the social fabric of Judah, turning it into some sort of competitive game like target archery. They actually searched out creative new ways of committing petty fraud. How could God not punish them for this direct insult to Himself?

Thus, Jeremiah is permitted to see in stark vision what such decay brings. Covenant death is complete; there is nothing left to recover. Thus, they would see in the symbolism of how Babylon carried out her sieges. She collected all domestic animals, eating some immediately and driving the rest to the rear as plunder. All crops not yet harvested or easily consumed where they stand are burned. Even common wild songbirds are driven off. There has been no spiritual harvest for a very long time. The Holy City will become the haunt of repulsive carrion eaters. Thus would it be with all the cities, for that symbolizes the current residents in moral terms.

Jeremiah asks the rhetorical question on behalf of God: Why should such a vision haunt him? Why such devastation that even nomads would avoid? Because Judah had chosen any route available except the path of the Covenant. Most of them plumbed the intellectual depths of mere human wisdom when they weren't bowing to idols. Bitter they have been to God and bitter will be their end. If scattering them among the Gentiles is not bad enough, He will send assassins after them to exterminate them there.

So Jeremiah is encouraged to establish an academy to teach every living female to wail with skill. Write dirges about the devastation to come because they won't have time to write new songs when it arrives. Let them wail for real, not simply for practice, because death will come on the morning breeze, like a sudden gust of wind, and the streets will be bare of playing children. The carcasses of the mighty men will be piled like a harvest cut down, but not gathered, forgotten in the field.

The wisdom of wise men and the riches of the wealthy – can it save them? Only Jehovah can save. Know His ways; know Him. That's what makes for great men. God would love to pour out His blessings if He could find any such men.

Chapter 10

God did not save Israel from Egypt so she could be like all the other nations. Aside from

marking seasons, celestial events don't mean anything. Look at the pretty lights and feel small, but don't get any wild notions about them being deities. Let the rest of the world act silly about them if they like, but don't forget that they also bow before sticks of wood. Sure, they carve them, plate them with precious metals and drape them in expensive fabrics. Yet, unless someone nailed them down, these highly decorated sticks would fall over. They can't even move themselves. What kind of deity claims to rule your lives if it can't move itself? Don't worship at their shrines.

God is singular, in the sense that there is no other god. He rules all nations. Not a man on earth can claim so much as a thin slice of His wisdom, much less could powerless fancy sticks. We know where the wood, silver, gold and fabrics come from, but no one was around to see God come into being. If He so much as becomes angry, all Creation shakes and quakes. Humanity as a whole cannot face Him. Should the earth perish, all those idols would disappear with it.

Everything you see in the natural world is the work of God. No, not like some clock wound up and let go, but His hand actively keeps things working. Should He take His hand away, everything would come apart. The artisans should look upon their idols with embarrassment. What kind of god is that? Jehovah has chosen Israel to correct such foolishness, simply by living His Laws.

Obviously, they have forgotten this, so it's time to pack. He will reject everyone in the kingdom of Judah. Sing the song of Empty Tent! Raiders will lead your children away like livestock. Indeed, the nation's shepherds aren't paying attention to the flock and certainly not to God. Because of their arrogance, refusing to humble themselves, let them discover that there is no one left to rule. A thundering sound from the north will take their sheep away.

Jeremiah confesses that mankind does not chart its course. So, he willingly submits to the judgment of God, but cries for justice as mercy, not as wrath. Let God save His wrath for the heathens who don't know Him. May He in mercy remember how those nations have mistreated Israel. It's about to happen again.

Chapter 11

The long reign of Manasseh was perverse in every way. He made Jerusalem the capital of pagan worship in that region and modified the Temple courts to accommodate this. The priests and Levites had gotten quite cynical. It was just a job, and the rituals were the full extent of their responsibilities, forgetting the God who prescribed them. People had forgotten the reading and study of the Covenant. You would be hard pressed to find a readable copy in the city. At the very end of that long reign, Babylon took Manasseh prisoner, where he repented and found forgiveness. Upon his return to Jerusalem, he made a few moves to recover the old Covenant ways but died before it got very far.

His son simply reasserted the sins of his father, steadily becoming more perverse so quickly that his own servants killed him after just a couple years on the throne. Young Josiah was wholly different. In the first two decades of his reign, he cleaned up as much as possible, even to the

point of desecrating and removing all the pagan altars and executing their priests who would not repent. We call it Josiah's Revival. After two decades, as he sought to repair the Temple from a century of neglect and abuse, the workers stumbled across an ancient scroll of the Law. No one had read the Law in Jerusalem for two generations, so the contents were shocking. The curses listed in this Covenant were dire, indeed. After checking to ensure its authenticity, Josiah could not weep hard enough for what he feared. This greatly strengthened his efforts at removing idolatry and other corruption.

Naturally, the entrenched wealthy ruling class that had profited from the idolatry resisted. We get the feeling that a majority of the citizens were as cynical as the priests were, going through the motions at best and literally praying to their pagan gods for a chance to reassert their old ways. In the midst of this, Jeremiah bluntly asserts that this Covenant Law was still in force, unchanged since the Exodus. The curses still applied, and the blessings were entirely conditional on Israel's faithfulness.

The people were unmoved by Jeremiah's tireless public denunciations of idolatry. God notes that they had a deity for every city and town and every street of Jerusalem had a pagan shrine. They had their chance with God working through Josiah to encourage repentance. They refused. Their time was up; their doom was written in Heaven. God ordered Jeremiah to stop interceding for the people. We should read the difficult language in verse 15 as God calling the nation a whore, trying to buy her way out of trouble. The rituals meant nothing, so the Temple meant nothing and could not protect them. The people were just so certain that what happened under Hezekiah, with God miraculously driving the Assyrian army away, would surely be the example for the future, regardless how they had reduced things to mere empty ritual. The symbol of a rich life, the olive tree, was now broken and set on fire.

In the priestly City of Anathoth, Jeremiah's hometown, the priests had long since adopted the notion that empty ritual was the whole of their religious duties. The preaching of Jeremiah was a direct attack on them, too. God warned him they had plotted to assassinate him if he dared come home. Jeremiah's curse on them was entirely consistent with the Law, based on God judging the thoughts and intentions of the heart and He promised to honor it. When the time came, the men would be executed, and their families would die of starvation. God supported the preaching of Jeremiah, and held the priests accountable on the very standard Jeremiah preached.

This all helps us understand that the business of shallow and empty legalism went far, far back into Israel's traditions. We also see that the priestly slide into mere formalism, the cynicism and apparent lack of belief in anything beyond this life, was around well before they called themselves Sadducees.

Chapter 12

In Jeremiah's mind, there is no questioning the righteousness of God's judgments. Rather, they tend to be beyond his understanding. Shortly after his calling to prophesy, his own kin in the

town of Anathoth threatened Jeremiah. He wanted to understand why God allowed such wickedness to continue for such a long time on earth. Why does it appear that the wicked prosper, when they scarcely manage lip service to a God they disobey? Jeremiah pleads with God to remove them as lambs fattened for feasting, since all Creation mourned under their abuse.

God's answer is not direct, and this would be rather common from an Eastern Potentate. Instead, he answers Jeremiah's real need for courage to stand against apparent difficulty and failure. If Jeremiah finds it difficult to stay out of the hands of mere foot soldiers, how can he handle an attack from charioteers? If the farms and towns of his homeland are too rough, how will he handle the jungle that grew along the banks of the Jordan in those days? Jeremiah hadn't faced any real troubles yet. Brace yourself, the Lord says. Treachery would get worse, even from Jeremiah's own immediate family, but the worst came from those who tried to seduce him with sweet talk.

In God's own time His wrath falls. God laments how Judah has turned against Him, threatening and blaspheming. Like an arrogant carrion eater with fancy plumage, the rougher vultures will destroy her. What Judah does to God's true followers will be done to her in far greater measure. Would God use such hideous pagan nations to punish His own? God had done so repeatedly in the past and this time was no different. He had even used nature to punish Israel, such as embarrassingly poor harvests.

Indeed, does God not punish the heathen for their sins, too? There will come a time when the Lord will surely rescue His people from the nations who take them prisoner. But once the punishment of Judah is finished, if those nations repent, as He demanded of Judah, He will also heal them as He would Judah. The whole point in having a nation of His own was to manifest what other nations should be doing, how they should relate to Him. Therefore, nations that taught Israel to stray into idolatry, she could then teach to repent and live. However, while God will eventually find a way to redeem Israel even when she strays, the other nations won't get as many chances, because they don't have a direct covenant with God.

As always, it is necessary to read between the lines to understand Hebrew prophetic writing. Israel-the-mission would not fail, despite the failure of Israel-the-nation. But a great many lives in that nation will be lost in the process, sometimes in horrifying ways, because they often proved themselves no better than any other people, people who have no direct revelation from God. So, while Israel has favors from God not available to other nations, this is only because the standards for her are much higher. The mission of bearing God's revelation is what matters, and everything else in this picture is secondary.

Chapter 13

Biblical linen was the woven fabric made from the thin fibers peeled off dried flax stalks. The husk was allowed to rot some, then dried to fracture it so that the underlying fibers would be easier to extract. The inner pith was discarded. Linen is considerably stronger than cotton but tends to break eventually when sharply folded. Otherwise, it is light and cool to wear, dries

quickly and resists water damage better than most other natural fibers. The fiber was faintly stiff but softened progressively with each wash.

Jeremiah purchased a linen garment as commanded. There is some ambiguity whether it was a sash or more like a pair of undershorts. The word for “loins” covers everything between the lower ribs and tops of the legs, but seems more a reference to the backside of the body, not the front. At any rate, this fine, off-white wrapping symbolized the nation of Israel made to cling to God. They were to be a pure and treasured extravagance to bring Him glory.

Then the Lord sent Jeremiah some 400 miles (643km) north to the nearest crossing of the upper Euphrates River. There he was to hide it among the rocks of the riverbank. Then he went back home. Quite some time later, he made the long journey back to retrieve the sash. It had rotted; it was tattered and useless. The heart of Israel had wandered far, far from God. Having departed from their mission, they had become worthless. So let the worthless things they desired come and carry them across the Euphrates River into Babylon.

God quotes what appears to be an ancient boozier’s call for more wine. Whatever it meant, God told Jeremiah to use it as a parable for giving Judah all the drunkenness that she wanted, filling the sinners like wineskins. They would crash into each other and burst like bloated skins, so filled with sin, arrogance and self-will.

The human pride of Judah’s leadership was dangerous, even as it seemed to climb the heights of intellect. It was like hiking in the mountains at twilight. You may think you are up high enough to catch the last rays of the sun, but God would turn their climb into the dark valley of death. Jeremiah pleaded with them to repent and humble themselves before God. He pointedly warned in a dirge that the royal family would be dragged away in chains at the head of the nation.

Jeremiah asked the royal household to picture it. In the face of a massive invasion from the north, would the royal house even care about the people over whom they ruled? How will they face God? God will turn things upside down; the people they exploited would be God’s friends and stewards of His mission, while the royals would be His enemies. They would be whining about the bad situation instead of noticing their sins were exposed. Too late, for the evil had become their actual nature and they were no longer capable of even understanding righteousness.

Jeremiah ends this lament by warning the royal family that their mighty kingdom would disappear like stubble in a stiff wind. With it go their fame and the human greatness they sought. The lies for which they traded away God’s covenant would become their open shame, exposed as if prostitutes caught by their kinfolk, paraded through town with their skirts pulled up over their faces, their privates displayed like a public accommodation. So, God feels about idolatry as adultery.

Chapter 14

The land of Palestine today is semi-desert; the natural climate is rather dry. It was

common for city folks to catch all the rainwater they could from roofs and store it in cisterns, often cut into the ground. The limited rainfall is heavier at higher altitudes, which means there is a general drop in rainfall from moderate in the north, to very little in the south. A single year without significant rainfall means certain famine; more years make it far worse.

Jeremiah records his conversations with God regarding a drought that struck during his ministry. It helps to emphasize just how very far Judah had departed from the Covenant, as God consistently assures that He is normally quick to relent. First is the dramatic description of how severe this drought was. Reading between the lines, we see that this is precisely where Judah was spiritually. God found no hint of fruitfulness, not so much as a dry wisp of brown grass. The weather matches their Covenant obedience.

Jeremiah confessed without hesitation that this is entirely just. He laments that God acts like a stranger passing through, with no concern for what happens in the land. Is the depth of sin so great God cannot overcome it by His power? God responds by saying that Judah has consistently fled from His forgiveness. They never knew Him, so why should He offer anything but wrath?

Just as it does no good for the people to cry out, as they do so with insulting shallowness, God also forbids Jeremiah interceding on their behalf. The Covenant clearly offered generous promises and just as clearly balanced them with the threat of specific curses. God promises here to reverse *shalom*. Instead of safety will be the sword; instead of prosperity, famine; instead of health, pestilence. Does it make any difference that the only thing the people hear are lying prophets? The prophets will be the first to receive His wrath, by fitting the punishment to their lies. However, the people who chose to listen to them will die in great numbers, too many to bury.

Jeremiah freshly warns them of their impending doom. The battle dead will be scattered in the countryside, while the city will be clogged with those dead from pestilence and famine. Meanwhile, the prophets and priests go about their business as usual, paying no attention to God's Covenant Word, as if they were foreigners who never heard of Jehovah.

Jeremiah makes one final plea for God to return to Zion and rekindle His Spirit in the people, to revive their hearts, for they were unable to return on their own. If for no other reason than His own glory, could He not give it one more try? There is certainly nowhere else any man could turn.

Chapter 15

The message continues from the previous chapter. The Lord declares that His judgment against Judah is written in Heaven. Moses and Samuel together could not persuade God to change His mind on this, because the conditions were set before either of them was born. This is God's justice, His character. Further, the destiny of each individual was set, as well. One might end up in one of four ways: unable to fend off attacking soldiers,

unable to fend off marauding dogs, or collapsing and devoured by birds or carrion eaters. All of this was compliments of the reign of Manasseh. Thus, we see again how God's justice works, with wrath falling generations behind the time a sentence is declared, which explains in part why it could not be averted under any circumstances by the time Jeremiah begins his ministry. Even the best Josiah could do was not enough to revive faithfulness.

Jeremiah describes the judgment in dramatic terms of God's sorrow reflected back upon those who caused it. It was wrath like a child delivered bringing multiple sorrows as if by a multiple birth. For this harsh message was Jeremiah born, to face the unjust wrath of those to whom he was sent.

God promises to protect the righteous remnant, those who still serve Him. Nothing could stop the crushing army of Babylon now and they will surely plunder the land. She would force many into exile in a distant land until His wrath had run its course. However, He would preserve them. Jeremiah pleads that God's wrath would, indeed, fall upon those who were not righteous. In particular, he pleaded against those who persecuted him for speaking the Word of God, which Word Jeremiah loved dearly. It captured his soul, and he was unwilling to disobey, so he was by no means a part of those who had rejected God. His zeal for God burned relentlessly, but there was no satisfaction, and no one seemed to repent.

God responds with the same promise to Jeremiah that He makes to all who remain faithful. Thus, as a part of the righteous remnant, Jeremiah need not fear exile. Because Jeremiah would seek to rescue what was just from the pervasive consuming evil, he would remain God's very own voice among the people. He was to remain an outcast, in that he stood where everyone else should have been standing. Let them join him, but he must remain steadfast in his lonely vigil for truth. Yet, he was by no means alone, since God protected him. His righteousness was like a mighty fortress against all attacks. No one would be able to take his life while God had need for Jeremiah's service.

Chapter 16

Jeremiah was an outcast among his own people because he stood with God, Whom his nation had abandoned. God now instructs him to make no common cause with the people. God's wrath was sure and even marrying and having children would be a serious mistake, given that Jeremiah would have to watch them die. Worse, the Babylonians would carry away the few who survived before they could bury their loved ones. For Jeremiah to maintain the purity of his message, he must remain aloof from their sorrow and rejoicing both. The whole gamut of social activity was rooted in sin, and God would not bless Jeremiah's socializing with them, as if it was business as usual. All of this would symbolize God's bereavement of His people.

As soon as anyone asks, and every time they ask, Jeremiah's burden was to explain afresh their sins. Deep in idolatry, making up new ways to depart from the God of Israel, they bluntly

refused to hear His Word. Since they cannot bear the Covenant, they shall not face its blessings, either. The distant land to which they will be carried knows nothing of their God. Israel shows no favor to her God; He will return the favor.

However, on the far horizon is the faintest glimmer of a new dawn. The nation that once spoke of the God who brought them out of Egypt will begin speaking of the God who brought them back from Exile. God may turn from favoring them, but He would not forget them.

Hardly forgotten; He will not simply punish them once and be done with it. The Babylonian army will fish them and hunt them down until they have captured or killed the last vestige of Judah. Jehovah will always know where His people are, to the last living soul. No darkened corner of any soul is closed to Him. First, He will ensure they get an abundant recompense for their sins, since they dared to defile His Promised Land with idolatry, which offends Him as much as a rotting human corpse offends our sensibilities.

Western minds have a hard time following the train of Hebrew logic here. After hearing such a pronouncement from God, Jeremiah bursts into song about the Gentiles coming to seek Him. However, it makes sense to God, because if His own people can't be bothered to seek Him, His power and glory alone are enough to invade the consciousness of all humanity. In light of Israel's adultery, the whole world is lined up to take her place, like eager suitors for His favor. What fake deity, what dumb idol can compare with Him?

Therefore, God offers the testimony of Jeremiah as the one last chance to recognize their sin. He will bring His hand of judgment to bear upon them in ways carefully matching the prophecy of Jeremiah so that no one goes into exile without the sure knowledge that they had been warned. They will not forget His name.

Chapter 17

The Lord promised that Judah would have no excuse once the ministry of Jeremiah ended. Here He sums up His claim against her.

At least as early as the Psalms published in David's reign do we encounter the image of God's will written on the heart. Given that Hebrew people viewed the heart as the seat of the will and the symbol of commitment, it is a parable for being committed to His rule. In the case of Judah during Jeremiah's time, their hearts were stone on which sin was inscribed. They were so deeply committed to sin that no rescue was possible. The sin was written in blood, smeared on the horns of their pagan altars. For this cause, He would allow plundering of the Temple grounds, a direct contradiction to the false belief commonly held in Judah that God simply must protect His own Holy Place. Since Judah had cast aside the rich intellectual Hebrew heritage, she would never find it again. This literally came true, as the nation drifted far into first materialism and superstition, then Hellenism.

Hellenism, and the Western Civilization that grew from it, makes man the measure of all things. God curses those who rely on what man can do from his own resources. Such a man resembles

the stunted Dwarf Junipers that stand in dreary isolation, barely surviving in the high deserts south of Palestine. The man who draws his entire orientation on life from the revelation of God is like the galleria of giant trees growing along any year-round stream. Such men know that God sees all things and can read the very inner commitments of a man's will. Not merely as natural consequences, but God actively enforces His moral laws by the consequences of human commitments. It won't matter what men of wealth plan because they cannot amass enough to bribe God as Judge.

God will inscribe the soil with the names of those who turn away from the invitation to learn His ways, perhaps on a tombstone, but He will not write them into the Book of Life. Whom the Lord acknowledges will see His grace. People who mocked surrounded Jeremiah, asking where were the curses the Covenant warned were coming. Everyone demanded that God act according to their timetable. Jeremiah was in no particular hurry but stayed on the job as shepherd of souls in Judah. Nor was he eager to see wrath fall on his people, though he warned of it faithfully. Jeremiah prayed all the things they wished for him would instead fall on themselves.

The Lord commanded Jeremiah to appear at all the gates of the city with a message about keeping the Sabbath. In his day, it was the first thing people forgot as they drifted away from holiness. It was the last thing anyone could teach them again. Sabbath observance becomes the symbol, the gateway of all the other sins, rather as the gates of the city served. The root here is greed. People would forget the Sabbath limitations for the sake of economic opportunity and efficiency, and then begin to oppress those they employ, demanding an inhumane level of service. It becomes the excuse for a wealth of sin.

Jeremiah announced that if they were faithful, not merely in ritual observance, but could actually care about the demands of the Covenant, they could still be saved from Babylon. If their sins continued, using the gates of the city as traffic in sin, merchandising immorality and injustice, then everything they've worked for will be taken from them. Those gates would be set on fire, and the last thing they would see is the flames still rising as their captors drag them away in chains.

Chapter 18

The leaders of Judah had already begun to drift from the mystical view of their Hebrew ancestors, having embraced a simplistic legalism, which produced empty ritual observance. Thus, they justified their idolatry, as if they weren't taking anything away from Jehovah by adding other deities. They assumed God was bound by His own Laws to protect them as He had in the past.

Thus, the Lord told Jeremiah to hike down to the lowest southern quarter of the city, to the Potter's Field. There we see the typical procedure on the wheel, where a flaw justifies the potter simply starting over, squashing the piece back into an amorphous lump before trying again. Does Judah feel God's hands are any more restrained than this potter is? It is the same with every nation of men on the fallen earth. When God sends

prophets to warn of their doom, and they repent, God will relent. If he can save the pot, the potter loses less time on his work. If something he makes doesn't turn out well, he can start over while it's wet. He can also smash it as unfit once it has been dried or fired. Should Judah, as the remnant of Israel, fail her mission, God can start over with a New Israel.

So this parable commands the people of Judah afresh to repent, lest they become a shattered pot. Their response: "How can we give up so much great progress and go backwards?" Their current ways were working too well in their estimation and there was no going back.

The Lord inspired Jeremiah to offer a poetic parable. He compares Judah to a betrothed virgin who played the harlot. Even Gentile nations know better than that. It's so utterly unnatural that it compares to snow disappearing from the higher elevations just to the north of Palestine, which mountains apparently never knew drought. This business of worshiping idols and chasing after human wisdom is a clear departure from the very fundamental nature of Hebrew identity. In days to come, people traveling the caravan routes through Palestine would be stunned at the sudden desertion, an entire nation carried away. God will turn His face away from them.

In reply, the Judeans planned to accuse Jeremiah of being a false prophet, punishable by death. Their argument would be the very nonsense that started this chapter, the notion that God was bound by His own promises regardless of how they acted. Thus, they insisted Jehovah was under contract to keep the priests teaching the Law, the Scribes would keep explaining it, and "real" prophets would keep testifying of God's promises. Jeremiah had just said this was all going to end, and the nation dragged off to Babylon.

They wouldn't listen to Jeremiah, but he pleaded with God to hear him. Such a deep perversion is begging for God's wrath. Jeremiah asks God to notice all this. He had worked so hard to heal them, but they wanted only to hurt him. So, he prays that God would indeed carry out the threats cited in previous chapters, with graphic portrayals of defeat in war and devastation with a ravenous appetite.

Chapter 19

Prior to baking, a clay vessel could be remolded. Once committed in the kiln, there was no turning back. Judah was like a fired pot, hardened against the molding hand of God.

The Hinnom Valley ran around the south end of Zion's ridge, meeting with the Kidron before turning south. The high ridge on the south side shaded much of the valley during the heat of the day. This shaded space was also the site of the original Canaanite worship of Molech, the pagan god whose image was built around a furnace. When heated, into his brazen arms some would throw their children as sacrifices. During the reign of Manasseh and a few others, people had rekindled this filthy practice and so it was during Jeremiah's time.

The Potsherd Gate was closest to the source of clay, as well as a handy location for dumping shards of broken pottery. Eventually it would become the general refuse gate as the means to

defile the site of Molech worship. However, this narrative takes place long before that; the shrine was active at this point. Jeremiah obtained a basic water jar, a thin-walled shell with a narrow neck. He was to call some of the elder priests and social leaders, those most likely to understand the import of his statement.

Jeremiah raises the issue of the shrine in direct view of the gate just above the valley floor. It was called the Tophet – “a drum” – the instrument beaten loudly to drown out the cries of Molech’s victims. It was also called Valley of Hinnom, after some long-forgotten hero, but it would become under Babylon the Valley of Slaughter. She would lay siege to the city above. Disease and starvation would take those who escaped the sword. Instead of offering their infants to Molech, they would eat them.

This was because Judah had gone far, far down the path of evil, so deeply committed and worthless that there was no use in keeping them around. Like a useless water jug, God would shatter them, because He could do nothing else with them. The valley would become a place of tombs, until there was no longer any place left to bury. It seemed every structure in the city had some pagan shrine on the roof, so each of them would be defiled like Tophet.

Jeremiah then returned directly to the Temple Plaza and cried out the judgment of God against Judah. Like a cheap water flask, the necks of the people were stiff, refusing to bow their heads before God. So, their necks would be broken; the city was doomed totally.

Chapter 20

Jeremiah was faithful to God and to the prophetic calling. He delivered the message of warning. This was also in the nation’s best interest, so he was being faithful to Judah. For his service, Jeremiah’s reward was punishment. Pashhur was a priest who was also commander of the Temple Guard. He assaulted Jeremiah and had him clapped in stocks. These were posted near the main gate just off the Temple Plaza, which exposed Jeremiah to shame and abuse.

Released the next day, Jeremiah delivered a personal message from God. Pashhur’s name meant something akin to “Liberty,” as one whose fetters were broken in pieces. Yet, instead of the shattered symbol of confinement surrounding him, God thought of him as a terrorist, calling him “Fear on Every Side.” That’s because his life would become terrifying to himself and all his friends. God singled him out with what amounts to a Hebrew pun. He would watch all his friends die. While their bodies would remain in Zion, his would be marched off alive to Babylon. He would die and be buried there, instead. Indeed, because of men like Pashhur, Babylon would plunder and destroy the entire city.

It’s not as if Jeremiah was so intrepid and brave. He came to the prophet’s calling because God compelled him. It was quite against his wishes, because he knew it would mean sorrow and persecution. He lived in a society hostile to the Covenant that gave it life. He protested that such a calling was unjust, robbing him of what every man sought in life. He resolved not to prophesy at all, but he couldn’t keep quiet. It was like a raging fire inside. Here was a nation that had reduced Jehovah to their junior partner. Any suggestion that He would abandon them or His

own Temple was blasphemy to their ears. Everywhere he went, people were blathering about how they must be vigilant against the loss of their fine and comfortable life, and not permit anyone to question the leadership. They warned Jeremiah not to report what God had said to Him, or they would report him to the authorities. They kept trying to distract him from his mission, looking for any excuse to oppress him.

In his heart of hearts, Jeremiah knows God promised to protect him from their schemes. It wouldn't even matter if Jeremiah knew their motives, because God was quite able to sort them out Himself. So, he gave God the glory for keeping an eye on the downtrodden. Still, this was all very depressing as a human experience. Jeremiah takes a cue from Job in assessing what it felt like. He honestly wished at times that he had died in the womb.

Chapter 21

Zedekiah was the youngest son of Josiah, placed on the throne by Babylon after her second invasion of Judah, passing through on their way to Egypt for a renewed contest with Pharaoh. Because that battle dragged on in stalemate, Zedekiah joined several neighbors in defying Nebuchadnezzar. While the battle on the border of Egypt ended without victory for either side, Babylon was still in control on their side of that border. She was still able to chase all Judah's new allies back home, placing them under siege, along with Jerusalem. This is the scene, around 589 BC before the full army arrives.

We discern easily that Jeremiah did not organize his prophetic writings in chronological order. He had been warning the nation for some years that they must surrender and be good servants of Babylon. This was God's direct command, not just calculated advice. Now he jumps to the scene where they are under siege.

This Pashhur is not the same as in the previous chapter. Zedekiah secretly respected Jeremiah but lacked the strength of character for actual rule at all, much less righteous rule. Thus, this inquiry is utterly out of place, since he knows he is in the wrong. He sent a priest to inquire formally, with empty lip service about how God has been so gracious. He asked about their fates at the hand of Babylon's impending attack. Jeremiah must have sighed inwardly, because the message had not changed in several decades. Still, he answers formally, if tersely.

God tells Zedekiah that, to the degree he resists with armed force, his own weapons will be used against him. The walls will be a mere inconvenience to the invaders. Indeed, God Himself was riding with the Babylonians and was now the fiercest warrior in their horde. Plagues will strike every living thing in the city. Those few who survive the battles and pestilence will face execution in the most gruesome manner.

God then tells the people of the city that they had better plan on going out to surrender themselves and the sooner the better for them. To the royal household, God reminds them of the covenant obligations placed on David from the start: To dispense God's justice or be victims of it. Even the folks out in the country around Judah had been arrogant, daring anyone to come against them. It was the same nonsense about God being somehow obliged to protect them, as

He had against the Assyrians. These very people would reap the fruit of their rebellion against God and now against Babylon.

Chapter 22

It's hard to keep track of the kings in their rapid succession during this period of instability leading up to the Exile. Josiah died in battle against Pharaoh Necho, who was going up against Babylon at the northern crossing of the Euphrates in Syria. Pharaoh took Josiah's son Shallum to Egypt as a hostage and put Jehoiakim in his place. This man was evil because not only did he take the full weight of tribute from the people, but built up his fine palace with forced labor from the same people. Coniah (AKA Jeconiah, Jehoiachin) succeeded him and was taken captive after the first Babylonian siege, replaced by Zedekiah. Thus, we see this chapter covers the period before the previous chapter.

Jeremiah is sent to address the royal household of David as a whole. Should there be any hope of maintaining this dynasty, it will be in maintaining the mission of executing God's justice under the Covenant of Moses. Notwithstanding God's very personal favor for the Davidic line, they were not indispensable, and neither was Jerusalem. Loyalty to their Lord was the key to longevity.

In the context of Jehoiakim's evil reign, the Lord reveals His viewpoint on things. Josiah is dead and there's no sense weeping over him. His son, Shallum lived, but would never see home again, so weep for him. By implication, weep also for the foolishness of trusting Egypt. Then He bluntly castigates Jehoiakim for this obsession with his palace and his personal wealth. He was utterly lacking in Josiah's piety, which was in the tradition of David's. His greed and arrogance ensured that no one would miss him when he was gone. We can't know if this prophecy was fulfilled literally, but Jeremiah points out this would be treated as an onager, a common domestic animal that did not merit burial, only disposal. Unlike those who might weep for Josiah without reason, or for Shallum with good reason, no one would weep for Jehoiakim for any reason.

His successor was no better. Coniah revived all the worst of the pagan idolatry, pursuing "lovers" in the Eastern Highlands across the Jordan. Apparently, Coniah had come to love this area, keeping a large number of his personal flocks there under the care of shepherds in his service. Ancient mountaintop shrines to Baal and Astarte were everywhere. Nestled in his palace of Lebanon cedar, he would never see it again. We get the feeling he was a Mama's boy, because she is included in the sentence of exile to Babylon. While Coniah did have several sons, it didn't matter, because not one of them ever saw the beloved palace, which was destined for the flames.

Chapter 23

This chapter is a classic case of sharing ineffable divine truths in symbolic language,

applying in multiple contexts. Most genuine prophecy exhibits this multi-contextual meaning.

Today we rightly condemn any government that is oppressive, whose agents are abusive. In this specific context, Jeremiah condemns the kings of Israel and Judah who had failed God's commission to execute His justice. He refers to them as shepherds utterly devoid of pastoral character. The quintessential image of good government is the shepherd, the one who genuinely loves his flock and takes risks on their behalf. Straying sheep aren't corrected by beating and harsh treatment, but by the gentlest means possible. Judah's recent kings failed this high standard.

There is a play on the word translated "take care of" (*paqad*), which describes a primary function of shepherds hovering over the flock, keeping track of them, paying attention to their needs and responding to their cries. Those were God's sheep, and the kings His appointed shepherds. All rulers are accountable to God for those they rule. Since they have refused this duty, but consumed the benefits of rule unjustly, God will "take care of" these shepherds in their sins and it won't be fun. He promises to gather His sheep from wherever the shepherds' sins have driven them. In this context, we know this includes both the promises to bring Judah back from the impending Exile, but also prophecies of the Messiah who would gather the scattered sheep of God from all nations. The promise of giving them good shepherds is more directly related to the Messianic Kingdom of Heaven.

Against that image, the vision of the spiritual kingdom shines as bright as the sun. The phrase variously translated to mean "a new age is coming" seldom means anything else. Yet, to some degree, the Return did echo this bright vision, as these rulers were considerably better than those who succeeded Josiah. However, the primary meaning is Christ, the only true King of Justice. There is no extensive record of the phrase, "the Lord who brought us back from Exile" (Babylon was reached by going north from Jerusalem) replacing the much older "the Lord who brought us up out of Egypt." Rather, we see it as an image frequently associated with Christ.

After castigating the civil rulers, Jeremiah launches into a deeply sorrowful complaint against the false prophets and priests. Both shared the duty of leading the people morally, in terms of rightly teaching the meaning of the Law of Moses and its implications as God's Justice. The sense of shock and mourning leaves him reeling as the prophet notes that they serve every deity except Jehovah. They laid moral traps for the people, driving them into darkness. Their work was poisoning the souls of the people and God was going to reward them appropriately; these were false shepherds, too. It was bad enough that all the prophets of Samaria served pagan idols, but in God's own Temple, these scoundrels of Judah weren't simply tools of politics, but were serving their own lusts. God compares them to the leaders of Sodom and Gomorrah.

How does one prophet substantiate his claims against the others? How does he go up against the establishment, with all its trappings and certifications of generations in professional service? Most of the court prophets were priests who claimed to use their office to seek word from the Lord. Simply speak the truth; those seeking the truth will

know. Jeremiah mocks them as they mouth the ancient phrases deceitfully. Most everyone preferred the official propagandists, who reassured them that God was obliged to protect them, since the Temple was there in the city. God declared that not one of them had actually bothered to consult Him. In the end, their destruction would be the proof haunting the foolish listeners as they were led away into Exile.

Jeremiah lays out as plainly as possible his dispute with these popular charlatans. They have dreams, but not from Heaven. If they had a word from God, it would have a powerful spiritual impact. But this was just a pretty speech, wishful thinking. We know the condemnation went far beyond the apparent meaning in this context. Precious few priests even bothered to return when Darius declared they could go home. By the time Jesus was born, the priests were the most powerful and most secularized of all Jews. That they could prophesy at all was completely unintentional, as was the case with Caiaphas.

Chapter 24

It matters not whether this was a vision or a real incident God used to set the matter before the prophet. What we have is a basket of the best figs next to a basket of the worst.

This business of figs is not some random parable. They had long symbolized the fruitfulness of the nation itself and came to symbolize the Messiah. But in typical Hebrew logic, the associations are expansive, not narrow and precise. Among other things, figs represent everything the Covenant was meant to accomplish. God had created and shaped the Nation of Israel to manifest His glory. That happened in spite of Israel's rejection of her mission. The mission was her calling to show the world what obeying God looked like, including the blessings, the fuller meaning of *shalom* – living in stability and security regardless of the circumstances around her. Resting under one's own fig tree, with its huge leaves and dense shade from the midday heat and bad weather was the very image of *shalom*. A bad crop or no crop at all meant Israel had failed that mission of having and demonstrating God's peace.

We have to recall that there were three deportations. King Josiah died at Megiddo trying to block Pharaoh Neco's northern march against Babylon. This made Judah a tributary to Egypt. Neco needed all the resources he could get, so ordered Josiah's eldest son Jehoahaz to report to his camp in Syria. He removed Judah's crown and ordered the younger brother Eliakim to be his new puppet ruler, under the name Jehoiakim, and then demanded a very heavy tribute. When Egypt lost the war at Carchemish, Babylon summoned Jehoiakim to appear with a large retinue of the royal and noble houses. Nebuchadnezzar took this retinue hostage, the first deportation, including Daniel and his friends.

However, Egypt was not done, and Babylon marched to do battle down on the Egyptian border.

The stalemate provoked Jehoiakim's hopes against Babylon, and he rebelled. It took a while, but Nebuchadnezzar returned and laid siege to the city. Jehoiakim did not survive, and his son Jehoiachin reigned only long enough to surrender and become a hostage. This second deportation took almost the entire upper class and much of the middle class (artisans, skilled engineers, etc.). This left Jehoiachin's uncle Mattaniah in charge, whom Nebuchadnezzar renamed Zedekiah.

Jeremiah had preached all along that Babylonian dominance was God's divine plan and Judah should go along with it. This made him the enemy of the very powerful Pro-Egypt political party.

The Lord said that those taken in the first two deportations would prosper and make some measure of repentance, returning to Him. Eventually, they would return to the land. However, the remaining group of leaders was almost entirely Pro-Egypt and resisted God's will. They were the bad figs, those who defied God's Word. The next siege would destroy the city and most of these would die. The worst sin was in forcing their evil decisions, and the evil consequences, on the peasant population still left in the land. The third deportation left these peasants, but the many Pro-Egyptian members of the nobles who had fled to surrounding kingdoms to escape the Exile were invited back. Gedaliah meant this outreach to bring peace, but they brought only turmoil, as they murdered their governor and fled the returning Babylonian troops, dragging Jeremiah with them down to Egypt. The peasants disappeared from history, which cannot mean good for them.

Chapter 25

Before taking up a chronicle of his life, Jeremiah takes a moment to provide one more item of context. The year is around 604 or 605 BC. Babylon had triumphed over Egypt at Carchemish and the news had just arrived in Jerusalem. Jehoiakim is in his fourth year as king, son of Josiah. Jeremiah's declaration to Judah reviews how he began his ministry from the fourteenth year of Josiah; this has been now 23 years of prophetic ministry.

In all of those years, he never hesitated to face the task. Further, the message had not changed, and Judah still refused to hear. Given the political context of the Pro-Egypt Party leading the way into sin, he takes advantage of the news of Babylon's victory over Egypt to remind them yet again what was coming, what had been coming all along. Nor was Jeremiah alone in this prophecy, but the warnings had been sounded well before his time.

The primary sin of the Pro-Egypt Party, and pretty much everyone else, has been idolatry. Josiah's reforms met resentment, if not direct resistance. His predecessors had too long promoted such deep idolatry that it took Josiah's command of Temple remodeling to discover they had completely forgotten the Law of Moses. They had openly provoked God.

It's not as if He didn't notice. Assyria failed, but Babylon would easily overwhelm the defenses

of Judah and destroy the city. Whether he knew it or not, Nebuchadnezzar was Jehovah's appointed servant, gathering all the armies of the Mesopotamian Valley to conquer every nation within reach. People passing by what was left of Jerusalem would be making ritual gestures to ward off the evil that came upon the city. The fat and sassy residents could not imagine what was about to fall on them.

Jeremiah offered a nice round number of seventy years as the time it would take to bring down Babylon in her turn for her own sins. He had kept a written record of his prophecies so that people could eventually read them to realize his message all along had been true. He tells the parable of the poisoned cup God had prepared for His people and the surrounding nations. They would all drink deeply and be stunned. Even Pharaoh and his hordes would fall, as would all the nations in that region. In the end, Babylon (in Hebrew nicknamed "Sheshach") would drink the last drop herself and be destroyed.

Nevertheless, let not Judah imagine that there was any escape for her. She was God's own, and her punishment would be all the more severe. Starting from the Temple itself, the wrath of God would pour forth like wine from grapes stomped in the vat. It would flow over Judah, and then to all the ends of the earth. Typical of all Hebrew poetry, this is filled with non-literal hyperbole and intentionally avoids distinguishing between God's wrath on the nation from God's final wrath on all sin. It's all one thing in spiritual terms. God will descend in wrath on His own flock and the shepherds who tended them for Him were hardly immune. What fate befell the sheep would strike the shepherds first. He compares His wrath to a lion in the sheepfold, which would naturally kill the shepherds first, since they were the biggest hindrance.

Yet, let no one mistake: The whole point was to avenge the heavy oppression that naturally flows from idolatry. You cannot separate the two, for no oppressor can claim God's approval; all oppression comes from idolatry. To oppress is to challenge directly God's Laws.

Chapter 26

This middle portion of Jeremiah's prophetic writing is autobiographical, running 20 chapters or so. The first scene opens sometime shortly after the death of Josiah, thus about 609 BC. Bear in mind that most of Josiah's court staff was still in place. Jehoiakim was Pharaoh's puppet and is about to tip his hand as quite loyal to his liege. There is some natural partisan friction within the palace court, but it would appear that the Temple staff was never actually on board with Josiah's reforms, nor was a majority of the leaders closer to the people.

So just after the new king takes his throne, Jeremiah is dispatched to the Temple, to make sure he catches the most important ears of Judah as they perform their seasonal ritual worship. The message recorded here summarizes chapter 7, ending with the warning that Jerusalem would replace the name of the city Shiloh in the curse, "May the Lord make you Shiloh." Shiloh was the original site of the Tabernacle destroyed by the Philistines after they captured the Ark of the Covenant during the Period of Judges.

This message was, of course, politically incorrect. It is no different from today when simply

speaking certain obvious truths contrary to popular social fantasies; it is an invitation to persecution and even prosecution. The mob did not assault Jeremiah directly but detained him. The noise brought out the royal household, those who were still loyal to Josiah's reforms. They had complete legal authority to judge any uproar in the Temple and ceremonially took their seats in the gate of the Temple to hear the complaint against Jeremiah. It was the same vehement demand that everyone speak the officially approved lie, insisting that God was duty bound to protect the Temple and City regardless of their sins. He took out Assyria; Babylon is no better. Naturally, as with modern politics, it deflects attention from the actual cause of God's wrath – sin.

Jeremiah answered honestly that God sent him. The princes from the judgment seat reminded the crowd how this was no departure from the previous messages God proclaimed through other recognized prophets. Among the elders of the people were a few who were faithful, and they rose up to testify of the prophet Micah, an associate of Isaiah a century before, who gave the same warning. The king, then Hezekiah, led the nation in repentance and saved the city.

Jeremiah escaped the mob's wrath that day. Others were not so fortunate. We know nothing of Urijah aside from this passage. He echoed the message of Jeremiah, but by that time Jehoiakim had reorganized the royal court to his liking. They issued a warrant against the life of Urijah, and he fled to Egypt. Since the king was a puppet of Egypt, there was no trouble arranging extradition, so Urijah was escorted back to stand before Jehoiakim. The king himself executed the prophet and had his body tossed rudely among the common graves.

God alone knows why, but what Urijah lacked was the strong support of a defender. Jehoiakim could remove his father's loyal aides from their official positions, but he couldn't really do anything to harm them, nor even disarm them. Thus, Jehoiakim's cousin, Ahikam stood as protector over Jeremiah. This same man was the father of poor Gedaliah. Babylon appointed Gedaliah governor over the few remaining households in Jerusalem after the Exile, but the Pro-Egypt Party to whom he extended an olive branch murdered him.

Chapter 27

There is a strong scholarly effort to show that Jeremiah likely did not actually mean Jehoiakim in the first paragraph (verses 1-11), but Zedekiah. If you research it, the primary issue boils down to whether you trust the Masoretic Text or the Septuagint more, as the latter has Zedekiah in the first paragraph. It is difficult to trust either text all that much, since both were the result of very slanted viewpoints. Besides, elsewhere in Jeremiah's writing there is a similar message to Jehoiakim. We should have no trouble imagining Jeremiah using this symbolic yoke throughout his latter years of service.

At any rate, the central issue is the image of the yoke. The unmistakable message is that God appointed Babylon to rule that region of the earth. Jeremiah uses a figure of speech about this lasting to the third generation of Babylon's ruling dynasty, meaning no one should expect to live long enough to see it end. Could Judah bring herself to accept this state of affairs, then God would prevent further losses. The same message applied to all

the little kingdoms bordering Judah, all equally restive under Babylon's yoke. When any of them sent emissaries to discuss their plans to revolt against Babylon, Jeremiah sent back with them his message from Judah's True Lord, Jehovah.

We know for sure that Zedekiah got this message, as did the priests and just about everyone in the city. We can see Jeremiah walking around the city and nearby areas with this thing, calling out to everyone that they should accept this yoke. Intentionally, Jeremiah made his symbolic yoke fairly lightweight, using sticks of wood and pieces of leather. It was bearable.

He also raises the image of Temple treasures. Over the centuries, people would bring fancy stuff as offerings, sometimes purpose made to use as Temple service hardware. Babylon had taken the nicest stuff with the first round of hostages under Jehoiakim. The false prophets insisted that they would return soon, implying Egypt would defeat Babylon, so they should all ally with Pharaoh and get their plunder back. Jeremiah warns that if these were real prophets, they should be praying God doesn't take the rest of them, the ones in use that weren't so fancy. On top of that were all the vast chunks of bronze in the pillars, the laver, and other fixtures. If they continue to resist, the Temple would not even be left standing.

Chapter 28

Hananiah was the son of a well-known prophet, and a huckster who sold whatever the people were buying. As Jeremiah was still wearing his lightweight yoke, Hananiah confronted him publicly with the bold declaration it would take less than two years for Babylon's power to be broken. At the very time, Nebuchadnezzar was putting down a revolt, so this was plausible on the human level of awareness. When this revolt supposedly succeeded, the exiles and all the confiscated Temple treasures would return.

Jeremiah gave God the glory and agreed this would surely be a good thing. However, Hananiah had committed himself to a timetable in the name of the Lord. Many prophets in times past had prophesied horrific things. Given human nature from the Fall, it was a safe bet. Human governments were quick to get into fights over the silliest things. Besides that, plagues were frequent enough in those days that all it needed was a smart boy to be vague enough and he could sound like a prophet as well, since the true test of a prophet is when their warnings came true. The world is a nasty place and doom-n-gloom was always a safe bet for those aspiring for attention. However, to predict peace was sticking your neck out. In a very subtle way, Jeremiah was suggesting Hananiah was a huckster and not a very bright one, at that.

In response to this challenge, Hananiah grabbed Jeremiah's light yoke and broke it to symbolize his message that Babylon would lose her grip on Judah. He insisted this was a word from God.

Meanwhile, God had a word for Hananiah. By provoking people to resist the easy yoke Babylon had offered so far, Hananiah was asking for serious trouble on behalf of the crowd to which he was playing. The result of this unrest against Babylon would be a much firmer response. God

had not given Hananiah any such message, but had intended the dominance to last longer than just about any man alive at that time. God spoke to the culture of the times by overstating the case, saying even the wild animals of the land would need Babylon's permission to go about their business.

Hananiah was a liar and God would not let men lie in His name. He abused his social position for blasphemy and would not live long enough to see his own prophecy fail. In less than a year, he was to die. Thus, it happened seven months later.

Chapter 29

Exile to Babylon was not slavery, but a form of house arrest. It was holding hostages near the imperial throne against the good behavior of the greater part of the nation back home in Judah. From each conquered nation, Nebuchadnezzar did the same. He also took artisans and builders from each nation for his plans to rebuild the palace and temples in his capital.

As a prophet, Jeremiah communicated God's message in writing and oratory. He wrote a letter carried by the regular courier service King Zedekiah sent to Babylon. They carried tribute, various items of imperial business, as well as any traffic to and from the exiles. It appears the courier group included the sons of some famous good guys. Shaphan was the scribe who helped with Josiah's Temple renovation and was part of the team finding the lost Books of Moses. Hilkiyah was the priest who found the scrolls.

The original mission of Israel was to demonstrate God's justice by living His Laws and reaping the covenant blessings. Upon the basis of this good showing, they should expect people from other nations to be drawn with a desire to participate. Thus, the identity of Israel was in the covenant, not simply DNA. Further, they were to send prophets to other nations to warn them to repent and turn to Jehovah. They did such a poor job of the obedience part that they hardly bothered to get around to sending prophets anywhere. Yet, God was still offering His covenant, if they would remain faithful while in exile.

This was a rich opportunity for mission work among many other nations, as there were many select hostage groups in the various suburbs of Babylon. God wanted them to settle in for the long haul – roughly seventy years – and be loyal to the government under which He had placed them. They could reap His covenant blessings as they would anywhere else. Their fame would travel far and wide were they to obey.

Those back home in Judah were not going to get such a good deal, because they had been unfaithful. With the exiles away from the political pandering of the Judean Court, they could more easily choose the righteous path. The plans for Judah were unpleasant, because the politics had an iron grip on things there. Indeed, if anyone was to step back from the situation, they would realize that the primary motive behind the false prophets was the same silly political pandering, but slapping God's name on top of it. Statecraft built on mere human wisdom was the excuse for rejecting the clear commands from God under the Covenant.

However, there were false prophets among the Exiles. One Shemaiah sent back by return courier a message encouraging the priests to have the Temple Guard arrest

Jeremiah for something akin to religious treason. That is, Jeremiah dared to encourage folks to reject the party line of the dominant Pro-Egypt political machine. Shemaiah was a major supporter of those agitating the Exiles to keep a sharp eye out for intelligence and opportunities to make trouble and encourage Egypt to rise once more against Babylon. Jeremiah responded by stating God's prophecy that Shemaiah and his whole family would die before they even had a chance to see what happened to the other Exiles. They would not return alive.

Chapter 30

Basic principle: God hates sin. It cannot abide in His Presence. When He calls someone to Him, sin must be removed. To the degree one is sinful, so much of his life is torn apart by divine wrath against sin. Some are so deeply wedded to it that nothing is left when God's wrath has run its course. To the degree one confesses willingly and sacrifices his all to Him, so he lives.

The Lord directed Jeremiah to record his prophecies in writing. The narrative of that message would end with the Restoration. Sinners have made themselves slaves of sin and God willingly allows them to choose that slavery until sin itself has run its course. In giving sin its head, they run into His wrath, but He always provides a path to return.

Jeremiah draws a moving poetic image of that wrath, describing Judah in a most pitiful state of sorrow. This is the consequence of breaking the Covenant continually. At some point, they will be purged. God will rescue His people, His mission and His living message on the earth. Notice that this is not about individuals, but a nation that will return more determined to walk in His ways. This is about the role of His servant. Those in His service are at peace; they live in shalom. Should all nations be destroyed, He will always have a nation of His own. However, His nation is pure and holy; He will not fail to notice their sins.

He depicts Judah at that time under Babylon, completely used up by sin. No one wants Judah anymore. There is no point in whining about it, because this is justice. But the same justice will go even harder against those whom the Lord uses to afflict and correct His people. Then He will restore whatever is left of His nation and build them up in His glory again. They will be ruled by their own, not some stranger. Notice how He points out that this all requires a ruler and nation whose heart belongs to Him. Unspoken is the obvious logic: Those who will not serve Him unconditionally will not be His. His wrath is the other blade edge of His love and grace. It's the same depth of passion either way. They'll have plenty of time to think it over in Exile.

Of course, there was a literal Restoration. It was nothing like the glorious vision Jeremiah offers here. That's because in standard Hebrew prophetic logic, it was the pale earthly representation of a much greater divine event. The Kingdom of the Messiah was the ultimate reality of which Jeremiah wrote.

Chapter 31

Here is one of the most quoted chapters from Jeremiah, appearing in the New Testament and in many songs today. The soaring vision of Messianic promise is hard to match.

Critical to understanding Jeremiah here is the necessity of viewing history as a revelation of underlying moral truth, not as something studied in its own right. Against the earthly viewpoint of mankind is the heavenly view of the Spirit. Thus, we hear echoes of the Exodus in the second verse, referring to those who survived the 40 Years' Wandering, yet encompasses a reference to anyone God keeps alive during times of His wrath. Tribulation is God's way of whittling away those who lack what it takes to profit from purification. This links the image of rest after the Conquest with rest after the Return, and the ultimate rest of those who enter the Kingdom of the Messiah.

There was no literal fulfillment of the following verses. Continuing to echo elements of the Conquest, when Israel refrained from eating the produce of the Canaanite viticulture until they could replace it, we hear celebration of the young virgin Israel at her founding. Then she was quick to celebrate any holy day with sincerity, quite unlike the empty ritual observance of Jeremiah's day. The only people God wants to gather from Exile will be those who were willing, which wasn't very many. Rather, this is a vision of the Messianic Kingdom that drew souls from across the entire human race, taking up the mission Israel had always refused. This was the mission of taking God's revelation to all mankind. People touched by this renewed mission would bubble over with boundless joy at the liberty to commune with God.

Jeremiah pictures Rachel's ghost weeping as the Exiles mustered for their long march to Babylon. Though the location of her grave is still uncertain, tradition places it near the town of Ramah in Benjamin, just a few miles north of Jerusalem. This area would have made a good staging ground for mass movements – a wide open plain right on the ancient highway running north. Sin took Rachel's children away and sin eventually brought forth a Herod who thought nothing of murdering her children later. But God would calm her sorrow eventually, because the children would be replaced with a much greater number of new souls. This would come at the price of repentance, but that path is well marked.

The imagery of Israel as a nation applies to Judah in Jeremiah's day. There would be a new Israel, a nation reborn uniting the torn kingdoms. This would come from tearing down the remains of the old and starting fresh. Jeremiah pointedly says that the ways of the earthly laws would no longer apply, using an old proverb about sour grapes. Under the Law, the sins of one generation inevitably fall heaviest on those who follow. In the Spirit Realm, this would not apply because there are no generations in eternity. Community and heritage, life and death, were God's divine will for fallen man on the earth. In the Spirit Realm, each soul stands eternally and individually before the Lord, who grants spiritual life without reference to DNA. Breaking with your own past would be the norm, not a sin. This establishes the ground for understanding what follows.

The Lord had concrete plans for a New Covenant, of which the Law was merely a shadow. Moses was a temporary arrangement that would end completely when the Messiah came. He would place His Spirit in His servants; knowing His will would be a matter of obeying that living Presence, not reciting words from a book. The Law required teaching and a long legacy of oral tradition, but the Law of Love requires hearing from your own source inside.

This New Israel would be eternal. The Old Israel was tied to the earth. While obedience to the Law could mitigate natural currents of events over time, the fallen nature of mankind guaranteed everything would eventually collapse. When the Spirit of God is set loose among men, the fallen nature dies and His eternal life force changes the fundamental nature of what men are. Those granted spiritual birth become His very own blood kin, an extension of His being. The Covenant of the Law provided a clear breaking point and Judah of Jeremiah's day had crossed it. Yet the infection carried on, so that even the Returnees could never quite recover what was lost – the heritage of sin falling upon the children. Rather, only in the spiritual Kingdom of the Messiah could anyone enter into an unbreakable covenant. The New Kingdom of the Spirit would have a new City of Light that no army could destroy.

Chapter 32

This chapter features Jeremiah in the third person, probably written by his friend Baruch, but included here as pertinent to the theme. Jeremiah provides a rather solid date for us. By current reckoning, the narrative describes an event in 587 or early 586 BC. Jerusalem is under siege, but not yet fallen to the Babylonian forces. Jeremiah was in prison for what amounts to treason, in that he preached surrender, given God has revealed that He will certainly give Babylon the victory.

We don't know what prison was like in those days, but apparently it was more like house arrest in this case. They held Jeremiah in a section of the palace in Jerusalem devoted to the purpose of confinement. It was likely a suite of open cells with a larger common court area. They could receive visitors, with somewhat of the "business as usual" routine of life taking place, simply without the freedom for the prisoners to come and go at will.

On the other hand, this is not business as usual for anyone else, since the city is under siege. We don't know how much traffic, if any, came and went in the city, but the objective was to starve them out. Yet it seems that in most cases in ancient times, certain individuals came and went under established terms of amnesty. Moreover, Jeremiah's hometown of Anathoth was now completely in enemy hands. Yet his cousin managed to come and meet with Jeremiah in prison. He came to ask if Jeremiah would exercise the right of redemption on some agricultural property back in their hometown area. Most likely Hanamel was in debt and at risk of losing this family heirloom and wanted Jeremiah to buy it to keep in the family. Hanamel would use the price to pay toward his debt. The people in the prison court were capable of rendering normal service in verifying the business transaction. One deed was left open for quick reference. Another was sealed to prevent tampering against the possibility of challenge in court, when it could be opened for proof, then probably resealed before the court in case it comes up again.

Jeremiah had received word from the Lord that this was going to happen; when it came true, he realized that there was a critical message in it. But he confessed to God he was completely at a loss to understand. God's answer was to remind Jeremiah that He was indeed the God he knew.

The point of all this was the symbolism. Confidence in buying a piece of property, putting the deed into long-term storage, even while in prison and under siege, demonstrates the very message Jeremiah had been preaching. Yes, the Babylonians would win and take them all away. But then God would change things and send them back to the land from Babylon. Jeremiah's title to the property would still be valid, so he could pass it to his relatives. In other words, it would remain within the clan, as God intended. People would be coming back and reclaiming their ancestral lands and homes, and this deed would be instrumental in reducing the chaos from such a thing.

At the same time, God reminds Jeremiah how that future event is itself symbolic of something very far into his future. There would come a time when God would redeem the entire history of Israel in His Son.

Chapter 33

God speaks. His revelation is unilateral, coming forth even when He knows no one is listening. It is also invariably good news by definition, for it is always truth. Any problems that arise are inevitably with our understanding, not with His power to fulfill. While still in the palace prison during the siege, Jeremiah received another visit from God in the form of several related messages, in large part because Jeremiah was listening. He records the conversation in terms of defensive walls and sieges.

God identified Himself as the Creator of all things. He is open to approach from any part of that creation, willing to reveal more than anyone could possibly understand. The walls of Jerusalem were about to fall; without His protection, they were merely so many loose rocks. Those walls contained falsehoods without number, the sins of Judah. The walls protecting God's truth were eternal, mysterious only in the sense that moral perversion would keep you out. Those who walk in truth can come and go at will. His nature is to reveal without limits, not to hide truth. The limits are on our side of the equation.

God notes that the residents of Jerusalem had cannibalized every non-essential structure in the city, including the palace, to add greater fortification to the walls. It was a waste of time, as was the massing of defensive forces. He condemned the whole thing from Heaven, under wrath for sin against the Covenant. However, they could recover it all sometime in the future, when God would restore the city and the nation. This could happen only after He had taken their sins away. The joy of serving the Lord would return.

When Babylon was through, every street would be filled with rubble, unfit for even wild animals to inhabit. However, upon the Restoration, the streets would be filled instead with rejoicing, resounding with the ancient rituals of praise. Indeed, so peaceful would things be that the shepherds would bed down their flocks in the open areas near the city. It would be the same in every city in the land.

The Lord promises still more. He would restore the Davidic royal family with the legendary peace and security of David's reign. The city would be nicknamed *Yahweh*

Tzidkenu – Jehovah our Righteousness. Nothing would ever interrupt this restoration of the monarchy again. The Temple priests and Levites would again serve in unbroken rotation, and the offerings would never be lacking.

Can there be found a way to violate the covenant between God and His Creation? As surely as day and night follow in sequence, so God would renew His covenant and calling upon the households of David and Levi. They would themselves become a great nation beyond counting. There would be no more mocking against the Nation of Israel. God reaches out with His mercy and forgiveness.

Anyone with an ounce of historical knowledge realizes that this cannot be made literally true. While the Return did see a measure of this restoration, most of the priests refused to leave Mesopotamia. Well before Jesus was born, the royal house faded into obscurity and the political government drifted into the hands of the priests who did return. What God is promising is true on another plane, the only one that matters: the Realm of the Spirit. To this day, and until the end of days, Jesus Son of David reigns and His kingdom cannot end.

Chapter 34

Jeremiah links two events subtly. In the first, he delivers a promise God made to Zedekiah. The context is during the battles leading up to the final Siege of Jerusalem. Given the scale of things in that time, it would be a couple of years before the city actually fell to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar's massive forces included conscripted troops from each allied and conquered nation of the empire. Such a massive army was easier to move south along the coastal plains. They would divide their forces into multiple formations that would turn east and advance inland into the interior of the Judean Hill Country.

There were several narrow valleys often used in times past by smaller forces, typically lightly equipped companies. Babylon was pulling up siege engines and there were only two valleys broad enough for wheeled traffic. The northern of the two was narrower, guarded by Azekah. This fort held a commanding view above the Valley of Elah from the northern slope. The other was Lachish, even larger and better fortified, a bit farther south along the coastal ridge. These two forts lasted some time before falling to Babylonian troops. Once past these, the wheeled traffic could take advantage of the better roads approaching Jerusalem from the south.

Well-fortified cities could require months or years for a siege to break through. During the time that Lachish and Azekah were holding out, preparations for the inevitable final battle continued, with scouts from both sides ranging the various routes between Jerusalem and these two forts. Jeremiah brought word to Zedekiah that the Lord had determined to deliver Jerusalem into Babylon's power. They would destroy it completely and Zedekiah would not escape. Indeed, he would see Nebuchadnezzar face to face. God promised Zedekiah would not be executed in this meeting but would be taken alive off to Babylon. What Jeremiah did not record here was the obvious implication that the king had better surrender before it was too late.

Zedekiah refused. Instead, he tried to buy off the Lord's wrath. Over the history of the

nation since the Exodus, it appears that one of the laws most often violated was the law of Sabbatical Release. When Israelites were reduced to poverty, they could take out a loan, repaid by indentured service. The Law limited this to six years; in the seventh they must go free unconditionally (Exodus 21:2; Deuteronomy 15:1-18). During the siege, the nobles renewed their commitment to this provision with the Ritual of Covenant. This meant cutting a sacrificial animal in half, with the blood pooling in a hollow between the halves. The participants walked between the two halves, wading through the gore in a symbolic affirmation: If they should fail to keep the covenant, the same thing done to the animal should be done to them and their descendants. More likely, this whole thing was a cynical gesture, given the expense of feeding slaves when the fields and flocks were inaccessible during the siege. Besides, they could conscript freed men for battle.

However, during the siege, we know that the Egyptian army approached from the south and forced Nebuchadnezzar to lift the siege of Jerusalem temporarily while he maneuvered to face this attack. As soon as the heat was off, the former slave owners reneged on their blood oath and Zedekiah allowed them to retake their slaves. For this treachery, God promised things would go very hard for the noble and royal families. Thus, while Zedekiah was one of the few survivors of this final destruction of Jerusalem and he did see Nebuchadnezzar's face, it was the last thing he saw, along with the execution of his own sons. Nebuchadnezzar had Zedekiah's eyes put out.

Chapter 35

The Lord shows what it means to be faithful to a covenant. During the first siege by Babylon, when Jehoiakim ruled (circa 606 BC), He instructed Jeremiah to test the Rechabites inside the Temple precincts, using one of the many rooms added onto the main structure. As a priest, Jeremiah had access to these rooms. Assembling the Rechabites in this large room, Jeremiah pours wine in the common drinking vessels of that day, mostly bowls.

We know the Rechabites as a tribe of the Kenites. It's not certain that they were a nation so much as a class of people recognized by their lifestyle as confirmed nomadic tent dwellers. The Kenites had been around that part of the world since before Abraham, migratory and scattered. Moses fled to them for refuge before his call in the wilderness, marrying a daughter of the tribal chief, Jethro. They worshiped Jehovah by another name, joined Israel during the Exodus and partially merged with the tribe of Judah. When Israel began to occupy or build the cities of Palestine, the Kenites remained in their tents. Much later, during the Divided Kingdom, Jehu got their support under the chief, Jonadab, in rousting the Baal cults from the Northern Kingdom.

At about that time, Jonadab called his people into a covenant with God. They confirmed their nomadic lifestyle, which meant tents and none of the comforts of villages or towns. This also meant no sedentary arts such as growing crops, only keeping their flocks. Finally, since they

grew no vineyards, they consumed no wine. When Jeremiah offered these men wine, they refused to drink, reciting their covenant. Indeed, the only reason their tents were inside Jerusalem was to escape the Babylonian troops raiding the countryside.

While Jeremiah stood in their presence, the Lord gave him a message for the people in the city. No one had to remind the Rechabites of their covenant. They had steadfastly avoided wine all these centuries without further prompting. Yet the Lord had sent numerous prophets to Israel and sent them often. Judah couldn't even remember what her covenant required, much less did she observe it. This serves as a reminder of how utterly just was the wrath God had warned was coming upon the city.

Only the Rechabites would escape. The Lord noted their faithful adherence to their covenant and promised there would always be Rechabites standing in His good favor, someone surviving to carry this covenant forward.

Chapter 36

Reading and writing are separate skills. In an age when writing materials were prohibitively expensive for most people, being able to read was sufficient to be considered literate. Thus, writing was a highly professional skill, producing a clean and small script so as not to waste materials. The Lord commanded Jeremiah to purchase a blank scroll and dictate to a scribe the contents of his prophecies up to that point, which was late in Jehoiakim's reign (605-604 BC). The whole point of this exercise was to give the leadership one last chance to repent.

The scribe for the job was Baruch, a close friend and associate. As Jeremiah dictated his messages, so Baruch wrote. The process would have been rather slow. We can't know just how it was that Jeremiah remembered everything. It may have been a miracle, some talent of Jeremiah's or perhaps something in his education. It need not have been a matter of memorizing word for word, since that was not a typical concern of ancient Hebrew literary culture. That kind of obsession arose much later as a result of Hellenizing influences.

When it was finished, Jeremiah noted that he was forbidden to enter the Temple grounds, no doubt from having already preached against the Pro-Egypt Party and in favor of submitting to Babylon. Thus, he asked Baruch to wait until a fast day. This would bring most of Judah to the Temple to hear the reading and provide a proper frame of mind to hear the message. It seems Baruch read the scroll around December 604 BC.

The first reading was in the public courts area in the New Gate of the Temple Plaza. The senior sitting judge was Gemariah, of a noble family that had consistently supported Jeremiah and was faithful to God. Gemariah's son, Michaiah, was listening; he reported a summary of the message to the royal scribes. The whole point up to now was allowing those most familiar with the Law of Moses to hear God's case against the nation. Word of this message quickly spread among the royal staff. The princes would be more than simply the sons of the reigning king, but all those in the royal family still living who had been sons of any previous king. They were still in the line of succession in some way. They commissioned an officer of the royal court, Jehudi, commanding Baruch to read the scroll in their assembly.

Upon hearing the whole reading, these men were in shock. As royal advisers, they knew they had to tell the king of God's wrath. First, they made sure of the source, asking Baruch, in what amounts to swearing under oath in court of law, how he came to write his prophecy. Baruch responded he wrote exactly what Jeremiah dictated, word for word. Knowing how the king would respond, these men cautioned Baruch to hide himself and Jeremiah from the royal bodyguard. They then reported to Jehoiakim a summary of the message, but kept the scroll itself in the scribal repository in the palace. When the king heard their summary, he sent his officer Jehudi to retrieve the scroll. Jehudi read the scroll in the king's hearing.

The pages of scrolls were glued together. The writing would be right to left, three or four columns to a sheet. After each such page, the king sliced it off with a scribal knife and threw it in a warming brazier near his throne, which was burning during that time of year. Thus, Jehoiakim dramatically showed his contempt for the message of Jeremiah. Worse, not a single one of his close advisers seemed concerned. However, there were better men in attendance who did object, asking the king not to burn the scroll. Instead, the king ordered his officers to arrest Jeremiah and Baruch. Only God's hand prevented it.

Aside from the expense of the papyrus, though, Jeremiah and his message were unaffected. God commanded Jeremiah to get another scroll and have Baruch rewrite the prophecy. The Lord added a personal message to Jehoiakim. Complaining to Jeremiah as if it were his personal political message was simply an excuse to ignore God. Because of the king's contempt for the warnings, God would ensure that none of his sons would hold the throne and his body would be left to rot without burial. While neither Scripture nor historical record tells us how Jehoiakim died, we know that his son ruled only a few months before Babylon carried him away. Even Jehoiakim's retinue was doomed.

Meanwhile, Jeremiah and Baruch produced another copy of Jeremiah's prophecy, adding more material besides. This leaves us with the understanding that Jeremiah probably had more editions until arriving at the text we have today. Compare that to Jehoiakim, whose very end remains unknown today.

Chapter 37

The date is probably 588 BC, during the final Siege of Jerusalem. Jehoiakim is gone and his son Coniah (Jeconiah) taken after a previous siege. Following the surrender of Jerusalem that time, Coniah was deposed and his uncle Zedekiah, son of Josiah, was the chosen puppet. Zedekiah was a weak, fearful king. He allowed the Pro-Egypt nobles who gained power under his predecessors to push him around. At the same time, he also feared Jeremiah and his God, but not nearly enough. The nobles viewed Jeremiah's warning to surrender as betrayal.

Zedekiah sent officers to request Jeremiah pray for the city during this siege. These men were no friends of Jeremiah, and we can be sure this scene included some political pressure on Jeremiah to change his message. There was no official threat and Jeremiah remained free. As promised, Pharaoh sent troops to relieve the city. Because it was much better tactically to meet

them on the way in open ground, the Babylonians lifted the siege to avoid the Egyptians catching them in a tight spot.

The Lord commanded Jeremiah to remind everyone not let the temporary change in circumstances fool them. Pharaoh Hophra's troops would be defeated and go home; the Babylonians would come back. Even if someone could crush them, God had appointed the Babylonians to burn the city. If necessary, He would use a handful of wounded troops to carry out His wrath; He was on their side.

So, when the siege troops withdrew, Jeremiah took advantage of the brief interlude to head home and resupply for what he knew was coming, a return of the siege. He never got past the gate of the city facing Benjamin. The captain of the guard there arrested him as a defector, since Jeremiah had preached that people should be ready to surrender. Despite Jeremiah's reasonable explanation, the captain singled him out from others doing the exact same thing and took him into custody. The assembly of princes believed the accusation and ordered Jeremiah to prison. Apparently, the regular prisons were too easy for such a grave offense. They had commandeered the home of Jonathan the scribe as a dungeon. It would have been a large place filled with small basement cells as the preferred conditions for preserving large numbers of scrolls. This would not have been a pleasant place to put humans, though.

Jeremiah passed quite some time there before Zedekiah brought him out and privately asked what God had to say about things. Jeremiah sternly warned the king that he was doomed. Then he asked the king why the harsh confinement in a dungeon. What offense deserved such treatment? Compare Jeremiah's record of accuracy with that of all the other prophets, like the ones who were so sure God would not allow Babylon to come back at all. Jeremiah was faithful in telling Zedekiah the truth. Could the king at least confine him in the regular prison? Zedekiah ordered the change and made sure that the guards fed Jeremiah until there was no food left in the city markets.

Chapter 38

We would be mistaken to think of a siege as quick or particularly rowdy. The whole point was to blockade the city. When folks inside began to starve, there could be a measure of surrender. If not, at some point the defenders would be too weak and supplies too low, when a concerted attack would be more likely to succeed.

Nebuchadnezzar did honor his promises to deal mercifully with surrender, but when his patience was exhausted, it was too late for surrender. This chapter opens late in the siege, but there was still time to obey God's Word.

Jeremiah had prophesied repeatedly that God would spare those who left the city and surrendered. Could he persuade the king to surrender, the whole nation would be spared. Those who resisted the final assault would surely die, for the Lord had determined to give Babylon victory. Those who did not die of starvation or unsanitary conditions would die from the sword. The narrative names the Pro-Egypt Party leaders,

the nobles who intimidated Zedekiah and kept him in line. The names were mostly common, so it's hard to be sure if they are the same men named elsewhere in the Old Testament. Irritated by what they took as treason in time of war, they demanded that Zedekiah execute Jeremiah.

The king was just strong enough to refuse their demand, but allowed them to punish Jeremiah as they saw fit, short of execution. He admits he can't stop them. There were many cisterns in the city, places where the bedrock had been hollowed out to collect rainwater, or to be filled manually. One of those in the royal quarter of the city had a layer of wet mud at the bottom and the nobles threw Jeremiah into this. Any usable water would have been long gone during the siege. We sense that it was not deep enough to smother him, but deep enough to be very uncomfortable.

The English translation of *Ebed-Melech* is simply "royal servant." He is called a *saris*, which does not necessarily mean a eunuch, as the Hebrew word is not that precise, but he's not a slave. The point is this foreigner had more regard for the prophet of God than His own people did. He petitioned Zedekiah privately to rescue Jeremiah and the king granted it. There is some debate over possible textual corruption in the number of men, but it doesn't matter much. The Ethiopian servant obtained some padding to prevent bruising the now aging prophet with the ropes. Jeremiah was rescued and sent back to the royal prison court.

Scholars cannot identify the Third Entrance to the Temple, but it seems likely a hall linking the palace to the Temple, because the conversation was private, and Jeremiah was still in custody. Zedekiah wanted to make absolutely certain Jeremiah had not changed his mind about God's message. Jeremiah objected that the king would not believe him, but would have him executed. Zedekiah swore before Jehovah he would do no such thing, nor hand him over to the Pro-Egypt nobles. So, Jeremiah repeated the same message: Surrender now and you'll live. Resist and you'll die; the city will be destroyed. Zedekiah was worried that Nebuchadnezzar would turn him over to those who had already surrendered to abuse and shame him. This was a common end for kings who dared resist too long against Babylon. Jeremiah promised it would not happen and pleaded with the king to obey the Word of God. Indeed, the greatest risk of shame would be the chant that his harem would make as they were led away to join Nebuchadnezzar's harem, saying he treated his enemies as friends and his God he ignored.

Zedekiah promised Jeremiah would be safe so long as the quartet of Pro-Egypt nobles didn't hear about this conversation. The king suggested Jeremiah lie to them. While they would surely find out the king spoke with him through spies among the staff, no one had been close enough to hear the contents of their discussion. When the nobles demanded Jeremiah recount the conversation, Zedekiah wanted him to say it was merely a petition to stay safely in the royal prison, not the dungeon at the Scribe's Quarters. Sure enough, the nobles demanded to know,

and Jeremiah did as the king asked. They had no evidence contrary, and Jeremiah remained in the prison court until the city fell.

Chapter 39

The siege took a year and a half, with the final breach coming in 586 BC. The section of the eastern city wall nearest the Temple held the opening referred to here as the Middle Gate. The text introduces us to several Babylonian officials by titles now obscure. By taking seats there, they established themselves as the new rulers, the judges of the city and kingdom. Zedekiah with an entourage slipped out that night through a private gate that dropped them lower into the Kidron Valley, where they quickly escaped over the ridge near the Mount of Olives. The pursuit caught up with them near Jericho, which sat on the Lower Jordan Plain. The Babylonian troops had advanced from the coastal Plain of Sharon, so the king was fleeing inland toward the Dead Sea when he was caught.

From there his group was marched to Riblah, a city somewhere north of Damascus, on the upper River Orontes in the modern Bekaa Valley. This served as his western campaign headquarters. It would have taken several days. Legally bound as a tributary of Babylon before letting the Pro-Egypt Party run things, Zedekiah was in rebellion against his own liege. Thus, Nebuchadnezzar pronounced sentence on him for his crime. The sentence was forcing Zedekiah to watch the slaughter of his sons and the nobles with him. It was the last thing he saw, as his eyes were put out.

Meanwhile, the troops destroyed Jerusalem. What could not be burned was dismantled, particularly the wall. Those who had defected before the breach were in one group, taken away in relative comfort. Those still in the city were prisoners, as was just about anyone else rounded up who hadn't already surrendered. The poorest peasants were left in the land, granted ownership of the good agricultural areas.

Nebuchadnezzar knew about Jeremiah, of course. The defectors would have been happy to describe the prophet who saved their lives by advising them to surrender before the fighting started. His prophecy of God's judgment came true. The order for the commanding general was to safeguard Jeremiah. He was turned over to Gedaliah, the son of Ahikam, who had saved Jeremiah's life once before. This Gedaliah was as faithful as his father was and Nebuchadnezzar recognized him so, making him governor of the tiny remnant left behind to keep the land from going wild.

Jeremiah notes that during the siege a word came from God for Ebed-melech, the man who had hauled him up from the cistern. After remarking how the Lord would keep His promise regarding the fate of the city, He promised to preserve Ebed-melech from a premature death as reward for his faithfulness to God's Word and the messenger. Neither the vicious Pro-Egypt nobles nor the Babylonians would harm him.

Chapter 40

During the time when Zedekiah entered into active rebellion against Babylon, allying

with Egypt, he fortified Jerusalem and a couple of other cities already established as centers of defense. As the Babylonian army began moving into the area, there would have been a small group of scouts scattered across the land, along with special troops whose primary function was as couriers. Aside from these, the king would draw into Jerusalem all those who were of any importance to him, while leaving the poorest peasants to fend for themselves. Some of those not so well favored would have fled to neighboring kingdoms. Others had no choice but to ride out the conflict wherever they could hide within the land.

Nebuchadnezzar first took out the defenses on the ridge facing out onto the Plain of Sharon, and then concentrated his efforts on besieging the capital. Anyone worth capturing would be inside. Thus, just about anyone left alive once the city was taken was worthy of capture. Though Jeremiah was known as a man favored by Nebuchadnezzar, he was somehow swept up with the other captives. The troops destroyed the city so the rallying point for marshalling all these upper- and middle-class captives was Ramah.

One of several towns with the same name, this was the Ramah associated with Rachel, the mother of Joseph and Benjamin. It was some 5 miles (8km) north of Jerusalem on the main highway toward Bethel. It sat atop a low hill, with only a gentle slope spreading out in all directions. Here as the captives waited in chains, someone picked Jeremiah out of the crowd. The commanding officer had his chains removed, and in the hearing of the whole crowd of refugees, recounted Jeremiah's prophetic warnings, and how they had been fulfilled. He permitted Jeremiah alone the liberty to decide his fate. The commander was quite willing to bring along Jeremiah back to Babylon as a valued retainer, but the man was free to choose. While he stood considering, the commander advised him to report to Gedaliah, with specific permission to live anywhere in the land, which was now controlled by Babylon. Jeremiah could have gone home to Anathoth and farmed the field he had bought. Before he departed, the commander gave him food and some random item of plunder valuable enough to exchange and get himself established in this new state of affairs.

We note, by the way, Gedaliah was governing from Mizpah, which was quite close to Ramah, but the exact location is in dispute today. It had been the nation's rallying point in times past. Now that Jerusalem was destroyed and forbidden ground, Mizpah was the capital of whatever was left of the nation. Those troops who had been out in the countryside when the victory was declared were allowed to make their way to Mizpah and serve as the governor's guard. These included men from the royal and noble households. The peasants and poor were under this government. Gedaliah swore a covenant with them, insisting the roundup was finished, and that they had Babylon's permission to stay with him. Indeed, he encouraged them to go about their private business of growing food and he would bear the burden of tribute to Babylon. Then the wealthier families who had taken refuge in Moab, Edom and other places were invited to return home and help keep things from going wild. It was late spring or early summer, when grapes and summer fruit ripen. The harvest was already under way and going well.

However, there was something amiss. His new guards warned Gedaliah of some intrigue afoot. The king of the Ammonites far to the east of the Jordan River had managed to convince a certain Ishmael, another member of the royal household, to consider assassinating his cousin, Gedaliah. The most probable explanation would be some promise of support for a rival claim and help to smooth over things with Babylon after killing their chosen governor. At any rate, Gedaliah didn't believe the story. When one of his friends offered to take out Ishmael before he could act, Gedaliah rightly insisted this was not lawful, and he felt certain there was no plot against him.

Chapter 41

Fast-forward a few months, when most of the other crops had been harvested. It was probably early October. Ishmael and ten of his close kin from the royal household came up to visit his cousin Gedaliah at Mizpah, an old fortress now serving as the governor's palace. Playing the gentleman, Gedaliah hosted them well, feeding them. In this ancient culture, sharing food is a sign of peace; God Himself took it as a vow of non-hostility. This shows us that the man Ishmael held his God in contempt, for as soon as they had taken Gedaliah aside for a private moment, they killed him. They managed to do so quietly, and then crept about the fortress as a group, ambushing every armed man in the place. This included Gedaliah's own bodyguard and the Babylonian troops. Aside from the Ammonite king who sent him, Ishmael and his men now had not a friend on the earth or in Heaven.

However, Ishmael was unrestrained by any hint of conscience. None outside the palace knew anything, since they were busy working, so thinly scattered. This time of year would have been the Day of Atonement, but there was no Temple any longer. By now, those in the north were Samaritans, Assyrian imports who replaced the northern tribes of Israel, a separate people now under Babylonian domination, as well. Among them were many who were faithful to the God of Israel, and a contingent came down mourning the loss of the Temple and city of Jerusalem. They bore offerings, probably in wagons or loaded on animals. They had taken appropriate measures to mark themselves as mourners – faces shaved clean, bleeding from small cuts, clothes torn and dusted with ashes. We note that this was the paganized Samaritan style of mourning, but apparently sincere. To test them, Ishmael met them with faux weeping, calling them to come and show honor to the new governor, Gedaliah. They came willingly into his trap. He commenced murdering them, dropping their bodies into an old dry cistern that previous kings had dug to secure water in case the fortress came under siege. He saved ten of the eighty because they had something of significant value he could plunder. Gathering all this together with the support personnel from the fortress and all the royal princesses Babylon had left with Gedaliah, he began a slow progress in the direction of the Ammonite capital.

Had Johanan been truly worried about Gedaliah's life and the probability of Ishmael's crime, he would have stayed close to guard the man. Instead, he comes on the scene after someone who witnessed the train of baggage and captives carted away from Mizpah came to alert him. He quickly gathered his troops and caught up with the slow-moving caravan at the water works of

Gibeon. Ishmael's small contingent of armed men were easily outnumbered, and those he was herding simply drove hard toward the rescuers, leaving Ishmael to make what escape he could. Somehow, he lost two of his ten, probably taken down by the pursuit. Ishmael is not heard from again, escaping to the Ammonites.

Meanwhile, Johanan was well aware that this whole episode would come to the attention of Nebuchadnezzar. Being now the ranking survivor, he rounded up everyone he could find still in the area and added them to the caravan he rescued from Ishmael. Then he led them south toward Egypt. They bedded down that night at the residence of Chimham, which is unknown in modern times.

Chapter 42

God had proved repeatedly over the history of Israel and Judah that when the leaders and people were obedient, no power on earth could stand against them. When they were disobedient, no power on earth could save them. This was the simple matter behind the Covenant of Moses.

After the murder of Gedaliah, the few remaining Judeans came to Jeremiah. They addressed him according to protocol, asking him to seek word from the Lord. What do they do now? They promised to obey whatever it was Jeremiah told them.

Ten days later, Jeremiah had a word from God. He wanted them to stay in the land. The nation had absorbed the penalties. Now for this tiny remnant, the slate was clean. If they stayed in the Land and clung to the covenant, they had nothing to fear from Babylon or anyone else. If they fled to Egypt, they would lose everything they had thought to gain. There would be no peace, no rest, no food, and no safety.

Jeremiah warned them that he knew they had come falsely to inquire of God.

Chapter 43

It is impossible to take any public stand without finding oneself in the middle of a political dispute. God Himself became a political football from the start, most visibly during the Exodus itself. Things had not changed much in almost nine centuries. The rising dominance of the Pro-Egypt Party in Judah was already painfully obvious. The Pro-Babylon Party was in decline, but those few who simply clung to the Covenant regardless of politics were never numerous at any time. As Jeremiah aged, circumstances whittled down the families most likely to support his ministry, but they remained important enough. His younger scribe, Baruch, was of noble birth and could not avoid being associated with the Pro-Babylonian Party. So it was with Jeremiah.

No sooner had Jeremiah delivered his prophetic warning, but the Pro-Egypt partisans burst into objections. They were sure Baruch had put Jeremiah up to this, hoping the Babylonians would come and execute those of the Pro-Egypt Party. They called Jeremiah a liar. Then they rounded up everyone they could lay hands on and marched them off down to Egypt, including Jeremiah and Baruch.

They settled in the city of Tahpanhes in the Lower Eastern Delta of the Nile. It was essentially a

border fortress town. Given Pharaoh had long been influential and allied with Judah's ruling houses, these refugees fleeing Babylon's authority had no problem finding a good reception.

Pharaoh seldom visited the place himself, but there was a building there devoted to imperial business, referred to as "Pharaoh's House." It had a large square paved area in front facing out onto a navigable channel of the Nile Delta, which probably served as a staging area for cargo. Clay or some other material served as mortar holding the paving bricks in place. Jeremiah, with a fresh word from the Lord, went down to this pavement at a time when the leaders of their refugee colony were assembled there. Scraping through the mortar, he pulled up some pavement bricks, digging deep into the underlayer. He dropped in a handful of ordinary stones, and then proceeded to put everything back in place.

It was a symbolic prophetic act. Turning to the nobles, he announced that in a very short time Nebuchadnezzar would attack Egypt and conquer it completely. The Babylonian imperial canopy would shade that very handful of stones now buried under the pavement, because Nebuchadnezzar would use this spot as the first resting place in Egypt for his throne. He would then wear the whole of Egypt as a personal garment and knock down the two tall pillars at Heliopolis devoted to the Sun God. He would sack and burn the other pagan shrines and temples throughout the land. Some of the refugees would die in the fighting, some from other causes, but the rest would be marched off to Babylon.

Chapter 44

Israel's national birth was the Exodus, the miracle of a God who rescued His people from slavery. He humbled Egypt, marched Israel through a wilderness, and then led them to conquer another land highly desirable. One of their greatest sins during the Exodus was whining and wanting to return to Egypt, which had been devastated. The whole idea of returning to Egypt always represented the perverse craving for slavery.

The refugees wasted no time scattering across the land of Egypt. The narrative mentions three cities in the Nile Delta, and then uses a generic term for Upper (Southern) Egypt, Pathros. We aren't told how Jeremiah got his message to them, only that he did. They had seen the destruction of their homes in Judah. They knew why God did it – their unfaithfulness in idolatry. God had warned them repeatedly and vigorously. They refused to hear; they had chosen a sure and sorrowful death.

A particular issue was the failure of men to restrain their wives' idolatry, which by far outstripped that of the men, who in turn seemed not to care too much about any god. This was something born in the time of Solomon, who allowed his foreign wives to bring their deities from home. It became a fashion, a feature of the upper classes. This was particularly offensive to God, hearkening back to the Fall itself, when Adam allowed Eve to make spiritual leadership decisions.

At some point, the Judean community assembled somewhere there in Upper Egypt. The men stoutly defended the sins of their wives. Wasn't life better when they were faithful to Astarte? Jeremiah reminded them that their national God took notice of their spiritual prostitution. The only reason things were bad was because they didn't even understand His Covenant Law, much less care to obey it. All the promises of a good life on the earth were bound up in that Law. They adamantly rejected the Law and rejected their God.

Jeremiah responded that they should indeed be diligent in their idolatry. However, they should know for certain, whereas they swear by Astarte, that God swears by His own Name. His Name will be taken from their mouths, all the Judeans in Egypt. No more will they say, "As the Lord Jehovah lives." He vowed to watch over them only so He could pour out His wrath. Swords and famine would consume them. A tiny handful would escape and return to Judah, only so they could remember His vow in contrast to theirs. As a sign, the current Pharaoh Hophra (Apries) would fall into the hands of his enemies. The fulfillment of this was when he died in battle against his own general, Amasis II during a revolt.

Chapter 45

While this chapter is out of place chronologically, it is well placed for its message. Here the narrative of events ends, and the rest of the book is devoted to prophecies against other nations, plus a final explanation of where things stood, perhaps about the time Jeremiah died.

Back when things were crazy under the reign of Zedekiah, who seemed to change his mind more often than his clothing, he burned the scroll of Jeremiah in the royal court as it was read to him (roughly 605 BC). Baruch was quite young then, a nobleman from a family supporting Jeremiah, faithful to Jehovah. At the very moment his career began, he was in hot water. The royal bodyguard and the Pro-Egypt nobles were hunting him for daring to support this politically unpopular priest and prophet.

We should not see this as Baruch whining when he came to God with his sorrows. He was simply young and didn't quite understand the larger context. Therefore, Jeremiah sent him a message from God to help him maintain his grip on faith.

There is nothing here about Law, though the Law surely warned of such things. Rather, the Lord explains in a few short phrases the nature of things from His perspective. This world is fallen, broken and will not be fixed. God built great opportunities for the Nation of Israel, but knew well beforehand that they would not long take advantage of those opportunities. God knew it would eventually fail, how it would fail and why. He built knowing that it would have to be destroyed, because mankind is fallen and people are generally blind to spiritual realities, even when such higher truth is placed in their hands. That He also offered something to the other nations justifies Jeremiah's prophecies against them in the next few chapters. The whole world is a mess.

Seeking to make much of the situation in this world is a huge mistake. Baruch missed the point of his calling from the Lord. He was not living in a political fulcrum point to accomplish great things for God among men. He was living at a spiritual turning point, so that he could reveal the higher truth as things crumbled politically. Thus, as a scribe of God's revelation, his mission was to ensure that no one had any excuse for whining about the bad events; they would know why. He served that mission well, at no small risk to himself. It was a mistake for Baruch to think that God intended to restore good politics to Judah. Thus, he should have expected persecution and sorrow. However, in the midst of this, Baruch would survive; he would live to serve God in this fashion for quite some years.

As best we can tell, Baruch remained at Jeremiah's side until the elder prophet passed away in Egypt. Baruch had access to both the royal archives and the prophetic archives, the records of the nation's history. That his written product of Jeremiah's prophecy includes more or less verbatim copies from those archives also indicates he himself had a hand in adding to that record, as well as helping to preserve it as a scribe. He would surely have made fresh copies as part of his duties. Baruch is no less a mighty spiritual figure on the biblical landscape than Jeremiah, the prophet he served.

Chapter 46

While the Covenant of Moses bound Israel alone, the Covenant of Noah bound the rest of the nations of the world. Moses was a particular application of the broader demand God made of humanity under Noah. This is not so much about a demand that the nations worship Him, but that they conform to His sense of justice among men. We can be certain Egypt heard numerous prophecies from the Hebrews and ignored the call to justice.

Egypt sought to support the collapsing Assyrian Empire against the upstart Babylonians. Pharaoh Neco marched a vast force against Nebuchadnezzar, then the crown prince, at Carchemish on the Upper Euphrates. Egypt brought up a host of mercenaries from several neighboring kingdoms. In soaring poetry, Jeremiah describes this awesome sight, comparing it to the flooding of the Nile. He also described the resounding defeat that Babylon dealt her in 605 BC. The prophet describes the mercenaries breaking formation and fleeing. Nebuchadnezzar pursued them all the way home, but only the news of his father's demise stopped him from finishing off Egypt at that time. He hurried home to take the throne and put down several revolts.

Some decades later, Nebuchadnezzar led his forces back and conquered Egypt. The Lord had turned His hand against Egypt, says Jeremiah. Nothing she could do would suffice for defense. Again, the mercenaries fled, and Egypt became slaves of Babylon. Jeremiah mocks the bull god, Apis, whose image Egypt normally bore into battle. This time it was more like a lazy fattened cow ready for slaughter. He also says that the temple of the sun god, Amun, by now almost the national god of Egypt, would be

destroyed.

One empire follows upon another, washing across the Promised Land from all directions. The people of Israel were doomed to exile in Babylon but would someday return. Each nation that claims power over the land would end in her turn, but nothing could extinguish the witness of God's light. It was critical to the process that God punish His own people for their defiance of a much clearer revelation of His Justice, as they had His direct word of Law, unlike other nations.

Chapter 47

Jeremiah prophesies against Philistia. Aside from essentially stealing land that God had promised Israel, there were plenty of times she defied God's Laws for Gentiles in other ways.

Jeremiah tells us this prophecy came to him prior to the time Pharaoh attacked Gaza. We have such poor records of Philistine history that we can't be sure when that happened. We know that when Assyria was busy in land, she humbled the Philistines, who had been previously under Egyptian control. At some point, as Assyria's fortunes declined, Egypt suddenly changed course diplomatically and decided to support her former enemy against the rising Babylonians. Pharaoh marched north to meet Nebuchadnezzar in battle at Carchemish in around 605 BC. As best we can tell, when Assyria withdrew from Jerusalem, Philistia probably declared herself no longer tributary to Assyria or Egypt. This would give Pharaoh a reason to crush Gaza on this way north, just before Josiah foolishly went out to meet him at Megiddo. Our best guess is that Jeremiah published this message before 605 BC.

Yet, he prophesies that a far greater threat than Egypt is Babylon. Typically, that part of the world regarded northerly winds as a sign of pleasant weather. The rising floods were something people associated with the Nile. This imagery turns things upside down. It's rather like saying, "This is the end of the world as we know it." It would be so awful that grown men would cry like broken-hearted children. The thundering of innumerable chariots, so easily maneuvered on that coastal plain, would frighten them so much that they could hardly think to grab their children and run.

Jeremiah notes that the Philistines were allied with Tyre and Sidon, which had stoutly resisted Assyria (and Babylon later). This helps support the notion that they had thrown off the Assyrian yoke. However, this invasion from Babylon would cut them off from all Sidonian support, leaving the offshore fortress safe, but unable to send help. There is a subtle implication that the sea-faring nations don't keep faith with each other very well, as the Philistines were basically colonists from Crete (Caphtor).

When the Philistines called upon their gods, cutting themselves and so forth, it would accomplish just about as much as had Baal's prophets on Mount Carmel against Elijah. The whole scene would be hard to watch, even for someone who had suffered the ravages of Philistine raids. However, the wrath of God would not be satisfied until the justice was complete. There was nothing worth saving there.

Chapter 48

Moab was a son of Lot, born after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The people were the cousins of Israel. While not covered under the Covenant of Moses, or that of Abraham, they were under Noah. God had a strong expectation that she understand the basic Semite culture and religious history. She rejected it. This nation hired Balaam to curse Israel as she passed through on the way to Canaan. While Balaam was unable to invoke God's wrath on them, instead learning that God intended no such thing, he tried to use his special knowledge of God's ways to bypass God's promises. Balaam advised Moab to make Israel sin by sending ritual prostitutes into Israel's camp during the season of Ashtarte's annual high celebration. The ensuing immorality broke several laws and resulted in the predicted punishment from God.

The Moabites continually acted as if they were the rightful heirs, and that Lot was the chosen and the covenants were stolen from them. At first Israel had driven them south of the Arnon River, cutting their homeland in half. By Jeremiah's time, not only had Moab regained this rump God gave to Reuben, but also she invaded Judah during Jehoiakim's reign. Throughout the bitter history between them and Israel, the Moabites were known for breaking every treaty and promise, always ready to lie and do whatever it took to spite their cousins.

They were also very famous for their wines. This was one of the best wine regions in that part of the world. Jeremiah makes liberal use of imagery related to this industry. Their relative isolation during this time compared favorably to wine that had not been filtered but was allowed to age with its dregs of grape solids resting on the bottom of the vat or jar. This was highly unusual, giving the image of something quite valuable and almost forgotten. God's punishment was destruction by His hired mercenaries, Babylon. With the final siege of Jerusalem, Nebuchadnezzar also crushed Moab for allying with Zedekiah in revolt. This cache of undisturbed wine jars did not survive the filtering but were dashed to the ground.

The names of chief landmarks are also liberally mentioned, with images of fleeing to the south, out into the wastes or hiding along the cliffs on the shore of the Dead Sea. Jeremiah promises a tiny remnant of the people would survive and return, but the nation itself disappears from history at the time of Jerusalem's destruction.

Chapter 49

Jeremiah offers a series of brief prophecies for several nations. Each of them faced God's wrath in the form of Babylon's conquering forces.

The Ammonites were the northern brothers of Moab, occupying what we today call Jordan. Once Assyria vacated the Northern Kingdom, the Ammonites moved into the tribal lands of Gad. They called their chief god variations on Milcom, apparently the same as the ancient Molech. With their wilderness fortresses so hard to reach, they were arrogant in their sense of security. While they were driven completely out of the stolen Israeli territory, as well as their own, the Lord promised a remnant would return at some later time.

Edom was beyond redemption. She had helped Assyria in attacking Judah and then helped Babylon plunder Jerusalem. She even sold the refugees from Judah, her own kin, into slavery.

For this and her other sins, Jehovah decreed complete destruction, leaving nothing. Indeed, she was driven from her ancestral lands by Bedouin tribes, pushed into southern Judah during the Exile. Then, the Maccabean troops conquered the Edomites and forced them to become Jews. While they remained somewhat separate from the Judeans, they were nonetheless absorbed into the Covenant and kingdom by force.

Jeremiah calls Syria by the names of her major cities: Damascus, Arpad and Hamath. We note that Ben-Hadad was almost a title by this time, used as the name for many of her kings. Babylon quickly humbled Syria.

Also by this time, several eastern tribes had taken the name Hazor, living alongside Kedar (Ishmaelites). Hazor and Kedar were nomads, ranging between Syrian and Arabia, fierce warriors who disappeared into the desert when outnumbered. Nebuchadnezzar was relentless in hunting them down.

Elam was the ancient nation east of Babylon, in the foothills of the Zagros Mountains. It appears that she was planning to take advantage of the fall of Assyria to rival Babylon. We know little of Elamite history for this time, but Jeremiah promises that she will be crushed the first time she even hints of rebelling against her dominant neighbor. Jeremiah also promises that she would return home after some time.

Chapter 50

From God's perspective, human empires are mere tools. When they have served their purpose, He discards them. There is no nation on earth so precious to God that it can't be dismissed, dissolved or destroyed. Even Israel ran out her purpose, refusing to be God's living revelation. Still, He forced her to serve until His Son finished His work on the Cross. Now she is no more.

So it was with Babylon: When her purpose was complete, God planned to destroy her. During the Assyrian Empire, Babylon was a major satrapy, as were the Medes to the east and Persia south of the Medes. Babylon allied with the Medes to rise up and destroy their Assyrian overlords. During the time Babylon ruled, the Persians rose up on the far side of the Zagros Mountains, led by the Zoroastrian religion that fired Cyrus to greatness. They allied with the Medes to come back and conquer Babylon.

From the Biblical perspective, Babylon was the rod of God to punish His people for defying the Covenant. Having gone too far under Manasseh, even the reforms of Josiah were not enough to save Judah. The vast range of insults Manasseh heaped on Jehovah and His Temple are hard to imagine today. However, while this and the next chapter rail at length against Babylon for her own sins, the sins of Israel are not forgotten. Yet, we must keep one eye on the spiritual meaning behind the symbolism of historical facts. From God's throne, all facts in history point to higher divine principles of revelation. Jeremiah's prophetic viewpoint is the final best understanding of things long forgotten in the sands of time.

The vast and unimaginable glory of Babylon's beauty is contrasted to the very short time she ruled. As empires go, she had one grand advantage over most others in history: She could grow sufficient food to feed her armies. The rich soil, watered by the

vast network of canals, a concept that stretches back into prehistory, brought enough grain and produce to provide far more than the citizens could consume, with plenty left over to feed marching troops. Her battle tactics were the best up to that time. Her policy of deporting the cream of every nation to ghettos near the capital city as hostages against revolts helped to secure her power. You would think she could have stood for at least a thousand years like this, but God had other plans. Her royal city was taken without so much as a single siege device. The Medo-Persian troops marched into the city even as the Babylonian heir-apparent celebrated his accession to the throne.

Jeremiah offers us several noteworthy artistic touches. He mocks the chief deities of Babylon, Bel (Baal) and Marduk (Merodach). He warns the Exiles to flee the capital city itself when they see the Medo-Persian armies coming, to avoid being swept up in the fighting. To this day, Babylon is just a pile of sand, never again occupied by human life. Of course, Cyrus didn't destroy the city himself, but moved his capital east to the Zagros foothills. Babylon was destroyed later when it rose again in revolt, because in her arrogance the city never forgot her former greatness. Thus, we note in passing, for the Pro-Egypt nobles to claim that Jeremiah was a member of the opposition Pro-Babylon party was mere propaganda. Jeremiah's language is quite severe against the Babylonian arrogance.

There is a piquant play on words calling names familiar to the Babylonians but using Hebrew meanings. Merathaim ("double bitterness") is a Hebraism based on *mat marrati*, the swamp region south of Babylon. Pekod is Hebrew for punishment and sounds rather like Chaldean *Puqudu*, a major tribe in Babylonian politics residing on the east bank of the Lower Tigris.

Jeremiah ends the chapter with a dramatic image of a lion scattering a flock of sheep. The lion was a major symbol of Medo-Persian power. The gravest crimes were punished by tossing the condemned into a pit of lions. So this Medo-Persian lion would scatter the Babylonians and the civilized world of that day would be shocked.

Chapter 51

In Jeremiah's poetry, the symbol of Babylon was unbearable arrogance.

Babylon's problem was that she never quite understood her place in the order of things. While Babylon's publicists had no trouble mouthing the words that Jehovah had given them the victory over His own nation, they easily forgot the reality behind those words. We cannot forget the episode of Nebuchadnezzar's madness reported in Daniel's prophecy. That's how it is with every nation whose rulers decide their success is purely their own making, of their own greatness. A Hebrew code word for Babylon was *Leb Kamai* – "the center of those who rise up against Me" (God). She could have reigned much longer, but the arrogance was more than God could stomach.

Thus, Jeremiah refers to vengeance for the Temple. Though it still stood in his day, he knew it would be destroyed. However, the Temple would be rebuilt; Babylon never was. We note also that Jeremiah warns all of Judah to return, but they refused. So much of what God wanted to do in restoration did not happen because His people still refused to obey.

He also refers to the Medes who dominated for quite some centuries the region we think of today as Kurdistan. We believe they were actually conquered by the Persians, but there are clues indicating they fancied themselves equal partners at first. It was a Median general who served as the rescuer of God's people, leading the forces under the city walls that night while the rulers were boozing it up. Jeremiah warned that Babylon was a prissy whore whose beauty had faded. She would become inebriated on her imaginary power and stumble headlong into the street where chamber pots are emptied. She would not get back up.

His final poetic verse is the most haunting of all. Jeremiah observes how mankind ever strives for things of this world, none of which can satisfy. Unto the very end, they will claw at things so easily destroyed. Unwritten is the obvious warning of how futile it all is.

The chapter ends with Jeremiah's final written words. He gave this last prophecy of Babylon to Seriah, the brother of his secretary, Baruch. As a part of an entourage sent to Babylon, he was instructed to read it aloud in Babylon beside the River Euphrates. Then he would pronounce this as God's firm promise regarding the city and its rulers. The ritual reading would end with the scroll tied to a stone and tossed into the depths of the river. So it would symbolize how Babylon would disappear from the pages of history, sinking from sight.

Chapter 52

Everyone is quick to note that this final chapter is a verbatim copy from 2 Kings 24:18 and verses following. It is included here for the obvious reason of pointing out that Jeremiah's prophecies came true. However, Jeremiah adds a few details not found elsewhere.

In the minds of most Judeans, Jehoiachin was the legitimate king, though taken as hostage to Babylon after only a few months on the throne. Thus, his uncle Zedekiah was viewed merely as a regent, despite his biographical details being entered in the registry of Kings. We are told how the siege progressed for some eighteen months until the wall was breached. That night Zedekiah, his closest advisers and bodyguard all fled down the Kidron Valley through an inconspicuous gate near the King's Garden, situated between an old inner wall and a newer outer one. The Kidron runs down to the northwest shore of the Dead Sea, where there was space to move north and cross the Jordan. Somewhere there in the Plains of Jordan just north of the Dead Sea, the Babylonian pursuit caught up with them. Zedekiah's bodyguard fled.

He was marched north to Riblah, where Nebuchadnezzar maintained his personal field

headquarters for the pacification of this whole region. The punishment for Zedekiah's crime of insubordination was to see his retainers and children all executed. It was the last thing he saw, as his eyes were then put out. He survived the march to Babylon but died in prison. Next, a few priests who aided in leading his revolt, plus their guards, were also executed and the Temple was plundered. Finally, they set fire to it and every other building of any significance in Jerusalem. The large cut stones of the Temple were pulled down, but for the rest of the buildings, all the woodwork framing burned, allowing the stonework to collapse.

Then the scribe fills us in on the deportation statistics. It is well to remember that numerical precision is not important in Hebrew literature, as the words for numbers had other meanings. The means of accounting for dating and estimating head counts would normally vary with the perspective of the one telling the story. No one reading from a Hebrew mindset would be concerned, because context is everything. Numerical precision was simply not important, as we count such things, but the meaning of the facts is what matters. Thus, we see there were three deportations. The first was around 605 BC, and there might be any number of reasons why Jeremiah counts only about a third of those reported in 2 Kings 24:12-16, but the context and choice of words would be more obvious to someone living in those times. Perhaps Jeremiah simply reports those who survived the long trip, versus how many began it.

The second deportation was when Jerusalem was destroyed in 586 BC. The group taken to Babylon was quite small by comparison. The third deportation is not reported anywhere else in Scripture and matches well with a response to Gedaliah's assassination. Most frightening is the relatively low number exiled compared to the estimated population of the land, because it was left nearly vacant when the remnant fled to Egypt. In the end, the successor to Nebuchadnezzar rehabilitated Jehoiachin and treated him like the client king he was.

Appendix: Lamentations

If not Jeremiah, these five poems have to be the work of a friend. They are too obviously written by an eyewitness to the Siege of Jerusalem in 586 BC. This is a common form of Hebrew literature, where the chapters and verses are acrostic, each beginning with a different Hebrew character in alphabetical order (except chapter 5). The rhythm is Hebrew elegy, also called threnody in English. The title of the book comes from various translations. In Hebrew, it would be more like "Alas!"

Jerusalem was the symbol of God's revelation to mankind. After the Fall, man's only hope was to seek God's redemption. The path to redemption was bringing glory to His name, honoring Him as Creator and Lord. In typical Ancient Near Eastern fashion, this was a personal matter. Each living human is personally responsible to Him for not embarrassing but building up His reputation. While the requirements were somewhat fuzzy for most of humanity, God chose this one nation as the recipient of a more precise and accurate revelation of what He requires of everyone. He held them to a higher standard, but reaped a far greater reward. They were given His personally edited version of revelatory legends, a precise code of ritual and community standards, along

with His personal divine Presence. Jerusalem was built to accommodate the center of God's earthly manifestation; it was the home of Jehovah's glory. If there was any place in human space to get the real truth, it was Jerusalem.

Israel was more of a mission than a people; they rejected that identity. In the end, they served more to obfuscate than reveal the truth. His Chosen People had let it go to their heads, not their hearts. These five poems indicate the depth of loss and sorrow from a highly prophetic and literate soul, fully aware of what the people had thrown away.

Lament 1: The desolate city mourns, now empty and in ruins. This is no mere anthropomorphism, but a functional image of how things work. Intellectual facts won't help much if you get everything morally wrong. The Hebrew concept of Creation is a living thing. While the level of consciousness is debatable, the thread of intelligence is clearly the moral fabric by which all things in this universe operate. Modern man rejects this concept, and the universe responds appropriately with God's curses on sin. We lack the grand sense of scale of human history that the ancients took for granted; our modern sensibilities are entirely too immediate. This blinds us to the moral truth exposed in God's Word: Creation suffers when we sin, but will outlast our petty concerns as we are crushed under God's wrath.

While the poet blends here the image of the city and occupants, it is more in the sense of corporate consciousness. The mission was her reason for standing on that ancient stone ridge. Too late the people of Judah become conscious of their sin, crying out to God for a salvation no longer available to them. It was bad enough when the glory of the Lord left some time before, but with her people gone, the city has little reason left to live. Now empty, she cannot die; she is left weeping alone.

Lament 2: The imagery shifts a bit to emphasize the whole Kingdom of Judah. The futile defense of the land itself brought a massive slaughter. The long siege saw children ravaged by starvation, people eating those children and any number of horrific scenes. None of this was necessary. How often had Israel defeated her enemies, even when vastly outnumbered in the field? God destroyed everyone opposed to His revelation. Now that Judah has become the enemy of that truth, she is the one destroyed while her enemies stand by taunting without lifting a finger. It's too late to weep for sin; all that's left is sorrow for the loss of what might have been.

Lament 3: This is more like some of the better Psalms. Each letter of the alphabet gets three short verses in order. This is the complaint of a righteous individual, rare among the Judeans in that time. The man first unloads the sorrow about his dire situation. Then he notes that God is faithful and will carry through everything He promises. However, only those who live a penitent awareness can survive to see those promises come true. So, this symbolic man calls on God for a chance to repent and renew the covenant. In due time, the door of Heaven will open again. The duty of man is to wait on God in His

own time to decide what and when things shall be.

Lament 4: You can't eat gold. Precious metals and jewels aren't worth much during a siege. Instead, there is an endless feast of misery, gorging on sorrow. How silly it is for people to worry about someone ritually unclean when the whole city is damned in her sins! So, the poet describes graphically what he sees during the siege, the shocking images of starvation and disease. Worst of all is the petty competition over anything edible when there truly is nothing left to live for, but perhaps the spite of one's enemies. Thus, the last few lines note how Edom watches from the sidelines, but she is next.

Lament 5: Terse but loaded with deep imagery, this last poem is the most depressing. The poet notes that they had sold themselves into moral slavery long ago, mentioning both Assyria and Egypt. In each case, the rampaging empires could not have touched God's People had they not abandoned the mission. Now it's all over except falling into the grave; survivors are abused until they drop into the dust. The poet ends with one final call for the only possible answer: If God does not call us out of death, then we cannot hope to live.