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Jeremiah: Chapter-by-Chapter Commentary

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Transcript

Jeremiah is the largest prophetic book and one of the three major prophets. Jeremiah, as we learn from the beginning of his prophecy, prophesied from the 13th year of Jeziah, which is 627 BC. It was in this year that Asurbanipal of Assyria died.

During this period, Assyria was in decline and Babylon was the rising power. Jeremiah continued until a few years after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC, over 40 years later, when he wrote from Egypt. Jeremiah's ministry was in the final decades of the Kingdom of Judah, prior to the captivity in Babylon, and he foretold what awaited the nation.

The book shares its final chapter with the book of 2 Kings. The book of Jeremiah is a compilation of material. Jack Lumbbaum writes, Collections of oracles, confessions, dialogues, liturgical compositions, and other prophetic utterances, supplemented by a rich corpus of historical, biographical, and autobiographical material written in another

hand, combine to give us the most complete profile of a Hebrew prophet, also one of the best profiles of any figure in the ancient world.

The character of the book of Jeremiah as a compilation has led some to question its literary unity. However, closer study of the book will reveal ways in which both various parts, and perhaps even the whole, all hang together. It is entirely possible that the logic by which it hangs together may be strange to us as moderns, but we should not dismiss its coherence on that account.

The ordering is strongly influenced by chronology, but not determined by it. Material is placed out of chronological order at several points in the book. As Lumbbaum maintains, chronology is merely one of several criteria by which the compilation of such a book would proceed.

At some points material of a specific genre is clustered together. At others, thematic considerations seem to be more determinative of the order. And at yet others, material is ordered according to the audience to whom it is addressed.

The division of the material addressed to different nations in the later part of the book is an instance of this principle dominating the ordering. Lumbbaum notes the importance of catchwords, key repeated words or phrases, which can also serve as connective tissue between adjacent units of material, especially in the first twenty chapters. The material of the book is very diverse in character.

Much of the material first took an oral form, but was already written down in Jeremiah's lifetime, according to divine instruction and dictated by Jeremiah himself to Baruch the son of Nariah. This is something recorded in the book itself. The fourth year of Jehoiakim, 605 BC, is a key date in the prophecy.

In chapter 36 we learn that in that year, Jeremiah gathered together his past prophecies and dictated them to Baruch. The writing down of Jeremiah's prophecy is part of the story recorded in the book, and the book, in its various parts and in later editions as its collection grew, wasn't just a sort of cold storage to preserve the past words of the prophet, but is, as it were, an active player in the story itself, serving as a testimony. There are differences between the Masoretic text and the Septuagint, the Hebrew and the Greek versions of the text.

The Septuagint version is significantly shorter, having a greater difference in length than any other Old Testament book. The versions diverge at chapter 25 verse 13, and in the Masoretic text there is verse 14 as a bridge to the material that follows. It's followed by oracles against the foreign nations in the Septuagint, which are situated in chapters 46 to 51 in the Masoretic text.

The oracles against the nations are differently ordered in the Septuagint version as well.

The Septuagint misses various superscriptions for prophecies. The Masoretic text contains various clarifying single words or phrases.

There are some duplicated passages in the Masoretic text, which accounts for some of the discrepancy in the length of the books. The shorter Septuagint version was rejected by the rabbis in favour of the longer Masoretic text, and there are good reasons for their judgement on this point. Lumbombe suggests that chapters 1 to 20 were the initial edition of the Book of Jeremiah, from which the collection later grew.

These are followed by a collection addressed to the royal house of Judah and to the prophets. Much of the heart of the Book of Jeremiah, from chapters 24 to 45, is narrative material concerning Jeremiah. Near its heart is a body of material that has been called the Book of Restoration, or the Book of Comfort, or the Book of Consolation, from chapters 30 to 33.

From chapters 46 to 51 there are a series of oracles of judgement against foreign nations, culminating in the declaration of judgement upon Babylon in chapters 50 and 51. The book ends with a historical appendix, taken from 2 Kings. It seems likely that two versions of the book were formed, one in Egypt and the other in Babylon.

The opening three verses of the book are the superscription for the book, likely from the Hand of Baruch the scribe, although it is possible that it does not cover the entirety of the material in the book, as there is some material that was produced after the captivity. The superscription's dating, by terminating with the captivity of Jerusalem, highlights the importance of the captivity as a sort of event horizon for Jeremiah's ministry. The northern kingdom of Israel had already been removed by the Assyrians about a century earlier.

While Josiah's reforms initially held out hope for the nation of Judah, following Josiah's tragic death, Judah was under the dominance of first Egypt and then Babylon. Jerusalem surrendered to Babylon in 597 BC, with Zedekiah being installed as king by Nebuchadnezzar. After a second rebellion against Babylon, Jerusalem was destroyed and there was a mass deportation in 586 BC.

Jeremiah prophesied in dark days and his ministry was marked by personal sorrow and suffering. Jeremiah came from the village of Anathoth in the hill country of Benjamin, about 2-3 miles north of Jerusalem. He is the son of Hilkiah, one of the priests.

Although the high priest at that time was called Hilkiah, he was likely not Jeremiah's father. The fact that Jeremiah had a priestly background is not mentioned elsewhere. It may not be an especially relevant fact for the story of Jeremiah in this book, but as Lumbom notes, it serves as a corrective to flat interpretations of a life which, in reality, was dynamic and complex.

Jeremiah was a historical figure whose identity, character, story and background exceed that which is recorded in the book of his name. We have several prophetic call narratives of various kinds in scripture. The Lord appears to and commissions Moses at the burning bush at Horeb.

Isaiah chapter 6 describes a temple vision given to Isaiah where he was sent as a prophet to a nation that would not hear. Ezekiel chapters 1-3 relate Ezekiel's theophanic chariot vision of the Lord and his vocation as a watchman for the nation. Jeremiah's call is recounted in this first chapter.

This section opens the book proper and the smaller body of it from chapter 1 to chapter 20. As Lumbom observes, the material of this section is bracketed by the opening words of the Lord in verse 5 and the closing words of Jeremiah in chapter 20 verses 14-18. Verse 5 of this chapter reads, Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you, I appointed you a prophet to the nations.

Jeremiah's words in chapter 20 verses 14-18 read, Cursed be the day on which I was born, the day when my mother bore me. Let it not be blessed. Cursed be the man who brought the news to my father, A son is born to you, making him very glad.

Let that man be like the cities that the Lord overthrew without pity. Let him hear a cry in the morning and an alarm at noon, because he did not kill me in the womb. So my mother would have been my grave, and her womb forever great.

Why did I come out from the womb to see toil and sorrow, and spend my days in shame? The final verse of chapter 20 serves as an inclusio or bookend for the entire section of the book. The Lord declares to Jeremiah that he appointed him as a prophet from the very womb of his mother. The setting apart of Jeremiah for his ministry is presented in three parallel expressions in verse 5. Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you.

Before you were born, I consecrated you. I appointed you a prophet to the nations. A similar claim is made by the apostle Paul in Galatians chapter 1 verses 15 to 16.

But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone. However, such claims are not that common. Beyond Paul and Jeremiah, the setting apart of prophets from the womb is not usually mentioned.

However, we do see something similar in the story of John the Baptist, who leapt in his mother's womb when visited by Mary, who was bearing Jesus in her womb. Samuel and Moses are also both set apart from their earliest days. Isaiah talks about the servant of the Lord being formed in the womb by the Lord.

Jeremiah's election from the womb, as the Lord describes it, is an intimate matter. He

was known before he was formed and, by implication, formed accordingly, prepared for the task for which the Lord had for him. He was consecrated in the womb, set apart for the Lord's mission.

His appointment as a prophet to the nations preceded the Lord's informing him of that fact. The Lord's purpose for Jeremiah, as we can see in Jeremiah's words that end this initial part of the book, exceeds Jeremiah's own grasp. A parallel between Jeremiah and Samuel can be drawn in this chapter.

As the Lord declares to Jeremiah that he has been appointed in this manner, Jeremiah is keenly aware of his youth and he questions his call, describing himself as a boy or a lad. It is likely that we should consider Jeremiah as being in his teens, possibly his early teens, at the time of his call. Jeremiah's sense of his own inadequacy is answered by the Lord's assurance of his equipping of him.

This sense of inadequacy, specifically in the area of speech, is a common complaint of prophets at the time of their commission. Moses complains about his speech difficulties and Isaiah of his unclean lips. Jeremiah also feels in his youth his inability to stand before the authorities and rulers.

He is just a lad, not a mature man. The Lord assures him of his commission. Jeremiah will be operating under and with the authority of the Lord's message, which sets him over the nations to whom he is sent.

He has no reason to be afraid of them. The Lord has sent him to them and the Lord can deliver him from them. The Lord, to assure him of this fact, touches his mouth.

Jeremiah's mouth is directly empowered and commissioned by the Lord. We see something similar in Isaiah chapter 6 verses 6-7. Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar.

And he touched my mouth and said, Behold, this has touched your lips, your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for. The Lord's words are placed into his mouth. Jeremiah chapter 5 verse 14 also speaks of this.

Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of hosts, Because you have spoken this word, behold, I am making my words in your mouth a fire, and this people would, and the fire shall consume them. The connection between the word of the Lord and the prophet is an especially close one. The prophet does not just relate to the word of the Lord as something outside of himself.

The word of the Lord is taken inside of himself. He starts to embody the word. He is part of the message himself, as we will see in the case of Jeremiah.

We see something of this also in the book of Ezekiel chapter 2 verse 6 to 3 verse 2. The

prophet is more fully identified with the word that he bears. He is not just a messenger boy. He himself is part of the message, as we will see in the biographical and the autobiographical elements of this book, which are both very important.

James Jordan has spoken about the development from the priest to the king to the prophet. The priest is connected with the law, primarily expressed in the do this, don't do that of the commandments. The king is associated with wisdom and insight.

The king is able to look at the world and bring wisdom from the law to bear upon it. The king then has internalized elements of the law. In the character of the prophet, there is an even further development.

The prophet is a sort of embodiment of the word. Here, the authority of the word is something that Jeremiah himself is described as possessing. He is not just a messenger bearing an external word.

The word that will tear down and build up nations is a word that he is part of. The word is not just an authority over against him. The word is an authorizing power that drives him.

The first vision that Jeremiah is given is a surprising one. It's a vision of an almond branch. The reason for it is because the Lord is watching over his word.

The Lord is going to ensure that the words of Jeremiah do not fall to the ground. He will speak with authority and that word will come to pass. The meaning of this vision is difficult for us to perceive in English.

It is based upon a pun. The almond, shorchaid, is connected with the watching from the verb shorchad. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, the almond tree's significance is seen in its connection with the lampstand in the tabernacle and also with the high priest who is connected with that.

Aaron's rod budded and it budded with almond blossoms. Jeremiah is given a second vision and this time it's a boiling pot facing away from the north. The pot is on its side, its contents about to spill out, it's facing towards the south having received a blow from the north.

A boiling pot could be seen as a powerful image of a city. All the affairs of life that occur within the city are like this big boiling pot and now it's about to be tipped over. God is going to bring disaster from the north, judgment against his people.

Rulers from other lands are going to be gathered together against them, surrounding the city, besieging it. They're going to be sitting in the gate on thrones. The city gate is the place of judgment and foreign kings will sit there in that capacity.

We see that later on in the prophecy being fulfilled in chapter 39 verse 3. However, as

we see in verse 16, it will be the Lord who is declaring judgment upon the city when that happens. He will be judging them because they have forsaken him for idols. Jeremiah needs to prepare himself for action.

He must gird up his loins. He must declare what the Lord has commanded him to declare. He has an incredibly difficult task ahead of him.

Jerusalem's walls will be surrounded and ultimately captured by besieging forces. Jeremiah himself would be besieged by the people, all levels of the population and their rulers, but would be made like an effectively fortified city by the Lord. They will all fight against him, but they would ultimately be frustrated in their assaults.

We return to this theme in chapter 15 verses 20 to 21. And I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze. They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail over you.

For I am with you to save you and deliver you, declares the Lord. I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless. As Jeremiah will discover, one person with God is a majority, or as the apostle Paul puts it, if God is for us, who can be against us? A question to consider.

Can you see any parallels between Jeremiah's call and Jesus' statement to Peter in Matthew 16 verses 17 to 19? Jeremiah chapter 2 is a collection of oracles which present a comprehensive indictment of an unfaithful people. Developing various metaphors, it challenges Judah to regard its situation and its behaviour in a different light, that they might be startled into a new awareness of the severity of their apostasy. The chapter begins with one of the most common and important images for the people of God, as the bride of the Lord.

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

Such covenant love was what God desired of his people more than anything else, as we see in Hosea 6, verse 6, Israel's loving devotion, however, would turn out to be fickle and short-lasting. It is possible, however, that the image here refers less to the initial departure from Egypt, than it does to the period immediately prior to the entry into the land, a time at which Israel was much more faithful. The fathers of verse 5 don't appear to be either the patriarchs or the Israelites of the first wilderness generation, rather they are most likely the ancestors who first entered into the promised land.

The image of Israel as the young bride here recalls positive relations in the past. It also introduces a crucial image of Israel as the bride of the Lord, who owes him her devotion. This will be explored in different directions in later oracles.

We see a similar image explored in Ezekiel 16, verses 8-14, which reads, and shod you with fine leather, I wrapped you in fine linen, and covered you with silk, and I adorned you with ornaments, and put bracelets on your wrists, and a chain on your neck, and I put a ring on your nose, and earrings in your ears, and a beautiful crown on your head. Thus you were adorned with gold and silver, and your clothing was of fine linen and silk, and embroidered cloth. You ate fine flour and honey and oil.

You grew exceedingly beautiful, and advanced to royalty, and your renown went forth among the nations because of your beauty, for it was perfect through the splendor that I had bestowed on you, declares the Lord God. The image of Israel as the bride of the Lord is a powerful one. It foregrounds the deeper character of the nation's relationship with the Lord.

While the law given at Sinai was a covenant, not dissimilar to the treaties of other ancient Near Eastern nations, the effective dimension of the Lord's covenant with his people is of paramount importance. The Lord desires that his people love him with all of their heart, soul and might, reciprocating his love for them. He isn't merely looking for their obedience.

As Jacques Lumbum observes, the oracle with which the chapter begins also connects with Jeremiah's call. The youth of Jeremiah connects with the youth of Israel at her call, and his holiness with Israel's holiness to the Lord. The second part of the opening oracle introduces a different image, that of the first fruits of a harvest.

The first fruits of Israel's harvest were devoted to the Lord as an expression of the fact that the entirety was a gift gratefully received from his good hand. Israel herself was the first fruits of the Lord. We can see this in the description of Israel as the Lord's first born son, the first born son being described as the first fruits of his father's strength in Genesis chapter 49 verse 3 and Deuteronomy chapter 21 verse 17.

As Israel was brought out from Egypt, they were the first fruits of the womb, and the first born sons of Israel were set apart through the Passover. The first born sons were later replaced by the Levite males. These first born sons and later the Levite males stood for the entire nation in its status as God's first born.

Here the language of first fruits is more immediately connected with agricultural themes. Israel is the dedicated nation, the first fruits of the nations more generally. There is an implicit promise here that the Lord's purpose extended beyond Israel, comprehending the wider body of nations. Israel was to be the first fruits of the Lord's harvest, not the only fruits. In Revelation chapter 14 for instance, the 144,000 redeemed of are described as redeemed as the first fruits for God and the Lamb of mankind. As the Lord's first fruits, Israel was the Lord's treasured possession, his own allotted heritage as Deuteronomy chapter 32 verses 8 to 9 claims.

Any who threatened or sought to claim that possession for themselves were attacking what belonged to God himself and suffered great punishment as a result. Jeremiah's oracles have a poetic character to them and in verses 5 to 9 the oracle has a concentric or chiastic or there and back again structure with the Lord's bringing his people out of Egypt and into the promised land at the heart of it. The central section is flanked by statements about the failure to say where is the Lord.

The next elements concern Israel's going after unprofitable things in verses 5 and 8. The outer bookends concern the people's fathers in verse 5 and their children's children in verse 9. These verses return to the imagery and to the language of the opening oracle, picking up the central theme of Israel going out after the Lord in the wilderness which is described. The oracle is not merely addressed to Judah but also to Israelites whether in the territory of the former northern kingdom, some of which still remained or living in exile. The Lord condemns Israel and especially their leaders by Jeremiah for their failure to remember him and all that he has done for them, his deliverance of them from Egypt and his care for them in the wilderness.

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

In verse 2 the Lord remembered Israel's covenant love in the wilderness. However Israel had failed to remember their corresponding honeymoon experience of their bridegroom. Where is the Lord who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who led us in the wilderness, in the land of deserts and pits, in the land of drought and deep darkness, in a land that none passes through where no man dwells? Israel did not ask that question.

A central task of Israel was that of memory, of recalling the foundational narrative, a task that is repeatedly stressed in the book of Deuteronomy. They had failed in this most basic duty. Despite Israel's great unfaithfulness and shameful forgetfulness, the Lord does not just give up on them.

He will contend with them and with their children's children. He will not surrender them to their sin and rebellion. Israel's sin is unprecedented.

The Lord directs their attention west to Cyprus and east to Qadar, the land of northern Arabia, to see whether there is any other nation that has so abandoned their gods. And

this is even among idolaters. Israel however has exchanged the Lord, their glory, for something that does not profit.

They have swapped that which set them apart from all the other nations for something less than worthless. Psalm 106 verse 20 reads, They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass. The folly and the rebellion is compounded by the gross ingratitude.

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

They stirred him to jealousy with strange gods, with abominations they provoked him to anger. They sacrificed to demons that were no gods, to gods they had never known, to new gods that had come recently, whom your fathers had never dreaded. You were unmindful of the rock that bore you and you forgot the God who gave you birth.

Paul makes a similar claim about people exchanging the glory of God for worthless idols in Romans chapter 1 verses 22 to 23. Claiming to be wise they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. God calls the heavens to bear witness to the scandalous character of Israel's apostasy.

In Deuteronomy the heavens were appointed as one of the witnesses to the covenant. Here as the sin of Israel is laid bare before them they are expected to be appalled. This is a betrayal of the most intimate and blessed relationship.

The sin of Israel is twofold. They forsook the Lord, the fountain of living waters, the one whose grace was the source of all their life and blessing and in his place they constructed cisterns. Indeed cisterns that were broken and hence useless.

Cisterns are holes dug in the ground to collect water but if they aren't properly sealed all of the water will seep out of them. Israel's hewing of broken cisterns might be a metaphor for their construction of idols with their own hands rather than looking to the living God. Verse 14 begins with a rhetorical question to which the presumed answer is no.

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

Israel's fate is entirely and tragically self-inflicted. There was no reason why it had to be this way. The Lord describes the state of the land whether in the present or the near future laid waste by the young lions of Egypt and Babylon. Whether referring to it as a past event or something about to occur Jeremiah speaks of the Egyptians shaving the crown of Judah's head. This might be a reference to Pharaoh Necho's killing of Josiah and Megiddo taking Jehoahaz into captivity and appointing Eliakim as king in his place changing his name to Jehoiakim. This all occurred on account of their forsaking of the Lord.

Judah responded to their predicament by adopting a foreign policy of turning to Egypt and Assyria who formed an anti-Babylonian coalition for aid. However this would ultimately prove powerless to save Judah which would be overcome by the Babylonians in the drinking of the rivers of these two nations. We might recall the earlier comparison of the Lord to living waters that Judah was replacing with hewn out cisterns.

Judah is turning to the hewn out cisterns of its idols and to the rivers of these foreign nations Egypt and Assyria. But there is living water for Israel with the Lord if they would only turn to him. Walter Brueggemann writing about this passage observes that in verses 20 to 28 there are a series of false assertions of identity from Judah.

Verse 20 I will not serve. Verse 23 I am not unclean I have not gone after the bales. Verse 25 it is hopeless.

Verse 27 saying to a tree you are my father and to a stone you gave me birth. Verse 27 saying in the time of their distress arise and save us. Judah has committed itself to falsehood and is living by such lies.

Commentators differ on the translation of verse 20. Craigie, Kelly and Drinkard for instance hold that we should understand the Lord to be the one who broke the yoke, the yoke of slavery in Egypt so that Israel might serve him. Shamefully ungrateful Israel refused to serve the Lord.

Lundbaum by contrast argues that it is Israel who broke the yoke, the yoke in this case being the yoke of service to the Lord. In verses 20 to 22 there are three successive images of Israel's unfaithfulness and pollution. They are like an adulterous whore promiscuously prostituting herself at every idol shrine forsaking the Lord their divine husband for idols that are no gods.

They are like a choice vine of the Lord's own planting that has turned wild producing bitter grapes. We might think here of Isaiah's indictment of Judah in his song of the vineyard in Isaiah chapter 5 verses 1 to 4. Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard. My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill.

He dug it and cleared it of stones and planted it with choice vines. He built a watchtower in the midst of it and hewed out a wine vat in it and he looked for it to yield grapes but it yielded wild grapes and now oh inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes why did it yield wild grapes? The third image is one of stubborn and defiling blood stains on their clothes or body that cannot be expunged no matter how hard they scrub at them with lye and soap.

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

The Lord compares Judah to a young camel that won't keep a straight course or to a wild donkey in heat trying to catch and follow the scent of a male for the sake of copulation. Nothing's stopping her in her quest. Judah is like a brute beast in heat in its addiction to idolatry.

It is pointless to try to restrain her or to bring her back. Like an addict cornered in their addiction, Judah turns to excuses claiming that they are powerless to resist the law of idolatry. The Lord declares that they will be like a thief caught in the act, openly humiliated in their idolatry in which they have turned to fertility symbols of wood and stone.

The tree was typically associated with Asherah, the fertility goddess and the stone with her male counterpart although they seem to be mixed in order here. Israel has turned away from the Lord towards the idols that they are serving, showing the Lord a sign of contempt in the process. But the Lord will put them to shame as he turns his back on them.

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

Judah accuses the Lord but he challenges their supposed grounds for doing so. They have transgressed, they have not responded to correction, they have killed the prophets that the Lord has sent to them. The Lord had dealt with them time after time and they had rejected him persistently.

In response to Judah's accusation, the Lord presents Judah with his own challenge. Taking up the imagery of the opening oracles of the chapter, he asks Judah whether he, the God who led Israel through the wilderness, was himself like a wilderness and a land of darkness to Israel. The betrayal is all on Judah's side.

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

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

So practiced that they could teach the adulteresses and whores their skills. Their clothing is stained with the blood of the poor whom they have oppressed. Yet even when stained with innocent blood, Israel stubbornly asserts its guiltlessness.

They seem to have the false impression that the passage of time has absolved them of their guilt, that the stain has faded as time has passed. But there will be a reckoning. Very soon Egypt would put them to shame.

They have put their trust in human beings to come to their aid but those parties were themselves rejected and would be shamed. A question to consider. What are some other places in scripture where the imagery of Israel as the bride of the Lord is explored? Jeremiah chapter 2 introduced marital imagery.

Hearkening back to a honeymoon period where Israel followed him in the wilderness, the Lord condemns Israel for their forgetfulness and their unfaithfulness. Judah is addicted to their promiscuous pursuit of idols. The Lord sought covenant love from them but they scandalously abandoned him, the fountain of living waters, for broken cisterns that they had dug and for the waters of Egypt and Assyria from whom they hoped for security against the rising threat of Babylon in the north.

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

Deuteronomy chapter 24 verses 1-4 gives a law concerning divorce. When a man takes a wife and then she finds no favour in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house, and if she goes and becomes another man's wife, and the latter man hates her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter man dies, who took her to be his wife, then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled, for that is an abomination before the Lord, and you shall not bring sin upon the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance. Presenting such a situation, where a man had divorced his wife and become another man's wife, the Lord asks whether restoration of the original relationship would be possible, even in the unlikely scenario where a man and a woman desired to restore their relationship after extreme betrayal and infidelity, the law would have struck the way.

Israel had multiplied her lovers and betrayed the Lord time and again. Presented with the analogy, it is clear that Judah's return and the restoration of the bond would be out of the question. The union would be irrevocably severed.

The whole land has been polluted by their unfaithfulness. Like an unfaithful wife who had pursued her affairs in every room and on every piece of furniture of the family home, the entire land that the Lord had given to his people was defiled by their adultery, poisoned by their persistent idolatry. Like a stranger's underwear found under the sofa, or hidden letters detailing trysts discovered in open drawers, throughout the land there are sites where Judah has forsaken the Lord, worshipping gods of wood and stone.

Could a wife who had been as brazenly adulterous and had been rejected by her husband return to him? Emphatically not. If this is the case for such a wife, how much more for Judah? We might ask whether the Lord had in fact divorced Judah. It does not seem that he had, although commentators disagree on the question.

The analogy highlights the extreme jeopardy in which Judah stands and the immense mercy that they are presuming upon. The analogy of divorce is also present in Isaiah 50.1 which rejects the idea that the Lord had divorced his people or sold them into slavery, as if to his creditors. Thus says the Lord, Where is your mother's certificate of divorce, with which I sent her away? Or which of my creditors is it to whom I have sold you? Behold, for your iniquities you were sold, and for your transgressions your mother was sent away.

The book of Hosea notably develops the metaphor of the promiscuously adulterous wife who was taken back by her husband, symbolising the Lord's restoration of his relationship with his wayward people. The land of Israel, in contrast to Egypt, depended heavily upon the rain for its irrigation. One of the curses of the covenant was the stopping of rain, perhaps most famously experienced in the drought of Elijah.

Amos 4.7-8 speaks of such a judgement too. I also withheld the rain from you when there were yet three months to the harvest. I would send rain on one city, and send no rain on another city.

One field would have rain, and the field on which it did not rain would wither. So two or three cities would wander to another city to drink water, and would not be satisfied. Yet you did not return to me, declares the Lord.

The Lord has withheld the rain, yet Judah has not returned to him. Ironically they are worshipping fertility symbols on dry hilltops in a parched land, having rejected the fountain of living waters. They are like a stubborn whore who will refuse to acknowledge any sin, and who is beyond shame.

Now they seem presumptuously to be turning their faces to the Lord, believing that he is

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

It allegorises the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah as two sisters. Lundbom suggests that we should regard it as a pesha, an interpretative commentary upon the surrounding oracles, as it draws so heavily and extensively from the prophecies around it, from the end of chapter 2 to the beginning of chapter 4. He identifies seventeen verses from which the allegory borrows its expressions. A similar allegory of two sisters is found in Ezekiel chapter 23, introduced in verses 1-4 of that chapter.

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

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

The Lord here presents himself in anthropomorphic terms, like a husband watching his wife in her adulteries, pathetically believing that, once she had sunk to a particular point, she would return to him. But she never did. Eventually, for all of her sins, the Lord sent Israel away, finally, with the decree of divorce, into exile.

However, Judah, who had watched all of this, was brazen in her own unfaithfulness, taking her adulteries lightly. While it seemed as if Judah had returned to the Lord during the reforms of the reign of Jeziah, tragically, this return was more an appearance than in reality. Hope has not been utterly extinguished though, but Judah's feigned return, all while her heart wandered away from the Lord, made her even worse than her divorced sister Israel.

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

The broken relationship might be repaired. If Judah learned anything from Israel, it should be that, despite all that Israel had done, the mercy and the grace of the Lord was extended to them still, if they would only receive it. Judah may come off worse than Israel on account of their largely feigned return, but the Lord here may explain that an

unfeigned return would lead to their restoration.

Like the lost son of the parable, the father's love still yearns for his estranged child in the far country. Addressing his faithless children, Israel and Judah, the Lord calls for them to return, whether from the lands of their exile, or addressing unfaithful people in the land, from the waywardness of their hearts. He is their master, their true master, not the false master who assumed that name, Baal.

Any who return, the Lord will eagerly restore to Zion, the numbers of the regathered remnants steadily increasing. He will establish them in the land, making them fruitful, granting them good rulers and guides. In the days of restoration that would follow this, things would be very different.

The context of these verses need not be presumed to be after the destruction of Jerusalem, and the presumed loss of the Ark of the Covenant. The point is that the Ark is eclipsed by Jerusalem itself. However, a date later than the reign of Josiah might make more sense.

Lundbom suggests that the earliest likely date is 597 BC, when the first wave of Judahite exiles left for Babylon. The Ark and the mercy seat were temple furniture symbolising the Lord's throne in the heart of the temple in the Holy of Holies. But Jerusalem itself would become the throne of the Lord, the holy city much as we see in Revelation, where the New Jerusalem takes on the cube-like proportions of the Holy of Holies.

When the days of their restoration arrived, nations from all around would gather to the presence of the Lord in Jerusalem, as Micah and Isaiah had foretold. Micah chapter 4 verses 1-4 1. And people shall flow to it, and many nations shall come and say, Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways, and that we may walk in his paths. 2. For out of Zion shall go forth the law and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

3. He shall judge between many peoples, and shall decide disputes for strong nations far away. 4. And they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. 5. Nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

6. But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree. 7. And no one shall make them afraid, for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken. At this time Israel and Judah would both return from their exiles in northern countries, and be joined together in possession of the land that the Lord gave to their forebears as an inheritance.

This joining together of the two peoples is also spoken of in Ezekiel 37 verses 15-23. After their return the Lord would lovingly restore both of them together in his land. The word of the Lord came to me, Son of man, take a stick and write on it, for Judah, and the

people of Israel associated with him.

Then take another stick and write on it, for Joseph, the stick of Ephraim, and all the house of Israel associated with him. And join them one to another into one stick, that they may become one in your hand. And when your people say to you, Will you not tell us what you mean by these? Say to them, Thus says the Lord God, Behold, I am about to take the stick of Joseph, that is in the hand of Ephraim, and the tribes of Israel associated with him.

And I will join with it the stick of Judah, and make them one stick, that they may be one in my hand. When the sticks on which you write are in your hand before their eyes, then say to them, Thus says the Lord God, Behold, I will take the people of Israel from the nations among which they have gone, and will gather them from all around, and bring them to their own land. And I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel, and one king shall be king over them all.

And they shall be no longer two nations, and no longer divided into two kingdoms. They shall not defile themselves any more with their idols and their detestable things, or with any of their transgressions. But I will save them from all the backslidings in which they have sinned, and will cleanse them, and they shall be my people, and I will be their God.

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

In the concluding verses of the chapter, we might see what is a futile lament of Israel's children to their false gods to restore them. They have forgotten the Lord, and so call out to gods who cannot save them. Then the voice of the Lord calls to them, the father who longs for their return from their rebellion.

If they will but come back to him, he will heal their faithlessness. He will address the deep heart condition behind it all, circumcising their hearts, as Deuteronomy chapter 30 verse 6 had promised, overcoming their addiction to idolatry, and restoring their hearts to him. The verses that follow are the voice of an imagined penitent people, who respond to the invitation of the Lord, as if coming to their senses after a long period of altered consciousness or intoxication, they recognise that they have been trapped in dangerous and destructive delusions all this time.

The true source of salvation is only the Lord their God. The gods to whom they had looked, merely devoured them, and all of their labours and possessions. What do they have to show for all of their worship of the Baals, of Asherah, of Molech, and other false gods? The loss of their children to the fire, countless sacrifices devoted to a worse than

worthless object, years of their lives squandered and expended in fruitless labour, and the dishonour of exile after it all.

As the horror of what they had pointlessly wasted came upon them, and the immense value of what their rebellion had stolen from them came to their awareness, they mourned it most deeply. A question to consider, where else in scripture might we get some sense of the catastrophic toll of sinful rebellion upon the lives of the people who give themselves to it? Judah has rebelled against the Lord. Israel, their sister nation, was sent away into exile on account of their unfaithfulness.

However, the Lord offers the prospect of forgiveness and restoration together as one new people in his land, to both of them, if only they will repent. Even when things have gone so far, there remains a way back for them. The Lord, in the face of all their countless infidelities, still holds out his hands to Judah.

The offer of restoration to a penitent nation continues at the start of chapter 4, which later moves into the darker discussion of the devastation that awaits the impenitent nation that Judah actually is. Verses 1 and 2 present three conditions upon which restoration could occur. First, Judah must return to the Lord.

Second, they must remove their idols from his land and not waver in their rejection of idolatry. Judah's fickleness and their inability to commit themselves to the Lord with an undivided heart had marked their apparent, yet short-lived and shallow repentances to this time. Third, their confession of the Lord's name should be married with commitment to truth, justice and righteousness throughout their communal life.

They had come to treat worship as a sort of attractive facade, masking all the gross injustices that pervaded the edifice of their society. If only they performed the sacrifices, sang the Psalms and said the prayers, the Lord might not notice the way that they were oppressing the poor or doing injustice to their neighbours. The covenant always aimed at deep integrity of heart and action and of word and behaviour.

If Judah amended its practice in these respects, turning back to the Lord with their whole hearts, not only would they be restored, but the blessing would extend beyond them to the nations around. Israel had been established to be a light to the world, but in its unfaithfulness it performed the opposite function. It caused the name of the Lord to be blasphemed among the nations.

However, if they were to repent of their sin and change their behaviour, the surrounding nations would honour the Lord, glorifying him on account of his reflection seen in his people. The life of the covenant would flow out beyond the borders of Judah into the wider world. Verses 3 and 4 further develop the conditions of Judah's return to the Lord, using two images, an agricultural and a covenantal one.

The agricultural imagery of ploughing and sowing is also found in Hosea 10, verses 12-13. Jeremiah has also used the imagery of first fruits back in chapter 2, verse 3. Judah needs to bear fruit to the Lord, and this requires renewal, the reclaiming of land that has lain fallow. They have backslidden, and they need to return to what they formerly did.

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

It took an often wayward organ that is perhaps most powerfully symbolic of the boasting of the flesh, of man's power and virility by which he seeks to form the world in his image, and pruned it for the covenant, marking it out with a sign indicating God's power and promise. In the process, it rendered the organ functional as it ought to be functional. As an analogy, this could be extended to other organs.

Hearts and ears are also wayward organs that need to have the flesh pruned and to be devoted to their appropriate purpose in the covenant. Deuteronomy 10.16 uses this imagery. Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.

In Deuteronomy 30.6 the imagery reappears, but now in the form of promise. And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul that you may live. Deuteronomy emphasised the necessity of obedience of the law coming from the heart.

The law was to be fulfilled by loving the Lord with the entirety of heart, soul and might. Here in Jeremiah 4 the imagery is used as a charge, attached with a warning of the Lord's wrath if they do not repent. Later in the book, the Lord will declare his promise to write his law upon the hearts of his people.

In chapter 1, in the vision of the boiling pot facing away from the north given to Jeremiah, the threat that faces Judah from the north was presented. Here that threat appears again, as the passage moves from the theme of repentance and restoration with which the opening verses of the chapter had been concerned, moving on to the theme of judgment. Verses 5-10 portray a situation of emergency.

Judah is being invaded from the north and everyone must flee to the fortified cities. This invasion is arriving at the Lord's own direction, to judge his people for their gross unfaithfulness to the covenant. In 597 BC the Babylonians would come upon Judah from the north.

However, as Jack Lundbom observes, the north also had associations with powers of destruction more generally. Babylon is the lion that has emerged from its thicket. Egypt and Babylon were already depicted as roaring lions back in chapter 2 verse 15.

This lion is described as a destroyer of nations. He will lay Judah waste. Behind the lion is

the Lord himself who roars with his fierce anger against the sin of the land.

All the leaders of the people will be dismayed as the day of the Lord's judgment comes upon them. Jeremiah's own voice comes in at this point, reflecting upon the way that the Lord has blinded the people to their precarious state. The Lord had warned his people on numerous occasions.

However, as his people preferred the comforting lie over the truth, the Lord gave them over to their delusions. In chapter 6 verses 13-14 the Lord describes the behavior of those who were charged to act as the watchmen of Israel. For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain, and from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely.

They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, Peace, peace, when there is no peace. Jeremiah marvels that even when the sword is up against their throat, Judah is utterly oblivious to the severity of their situation. Verses 11-18 dramatically describe the onslaught of judgment upon Judah.

The pace is moving quickly. It will arrive like a scorching wind from the desert, not as the gentle wind that grants relief or as the wind that separates the wheat from the chaff at the time of harvest. This is a cruel wind of divine judgment.

The enemy advances on Judah like clouds and like a whirlwind, with horses who move as swiftly as eagles. They are destroying everything in their path, and as the hearer's imagination is caught up in the image of this advancing judgment, as the terrified messengers bring news, as the watchmen strain for sight of the approaching enemy, and as the fearful people prepare for the moment when the attack will hit, the Lord delivers another last-ditch call to the people to repent, so that they might be spared such an awful fate. And then they are plunged into the vision of approaching judgment once more.

Messengers race down from Dan, then from Mount Ephraim. The enemy is rapidly approaching, and will all too quickly engulf them. Soon they are surrounded on all sides.

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

He feels the approaching terror, and he knows its outcome. He has a sort of pretraumatic stress, the terrifying din of war and its devastation battering his imagination, waking him up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat or causing him to break down in anguished tears. His mind is bombarded with the sights and sounds and smells of warfare.

The earth quakes with the force of approaching horses and chariots. Weaponry and armor captures the sunlight. Swords cleave limbs from bodies.

Horrific cries of orphan children and of women robbed of their husbands rend the air. In his mind's eye he sees bloodied and torn standards flying over mangled bodies of the slain. There is the deafening crash of falling masonry as walls are breached and houses brought down.

Every breath is attended by the taste of burnt or rotting flesh. The prophet is a mouthpiece of the Lord, but also a model for the people in appropriate response to and sensitivity to the word of the Lord. Here in the prophet we see a response that sharply contrasts with the blithe insensibility of the nation that he is addressing.

Jeremiah's prophecies are filled with drama, with passion, pathos and colour as the Lord and his prophet Jeremiah try to shake a sin-drunk people to a sense of their terrible situation. The Lord's voice returns in verse 22. The people are insensible and stupid.

What wisdom they seem to possess is merely cunning in the ways of wickedness, but they are utterly incapable of doing good. Jeremiah lamented in the immediately preceding verses and now this might be regarded as the Lord's own lament over his people. In verses 23-28 we find a remarkable piece of poetry as Jeremiah describes in prophetic hyperbole the aftermath of the coming judgment in terms that unmistakably darkly echo the creation account of Genesis chapter 1. The Lord's judgment is returning the land to its primeval formless and empty state.

Jeremiah writes, I looked on the earth and behold it was without form and void and to the heavens and they had no light. Genesis chapter 1 verse 2 reads, the earth was without form and void and darkness was over the face of the deep and the spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. What introduces God's creative work in follows his destructive work in Jeremiah.

If Genesis chapter 1 is the account of how the Lord renders the world a habitable land, these verses in Jeremiah are about how he renders it desolate and beyond habitation, turning out the lights over his rebellious people. As Lumbom observes, the repeated expression, I looked and behold, is a grim echo of God's looking at his creation in Genesis chapter 1, for instance in verse 31, and God saw everything that he had made and behold it was very good. The creation here is being dismantled, fruitful fields become deserts, cities once teeming with people and the noise of their trade are silent ruins and the haunts of wild animals.

The stability of the earth itself is unsettled as the very mountains quake, the light of the sun, moon and stars disappears, the very creation mourns as it were. However, even in this powerful image of decreation, there is a glimmer of hope. The Lord will not make a final end, the possibility of some restoration is held open.

The three verses with which the chapter concludes move through three images of Judah and Jerusalem in their plight. First we hear the noise of the approaching horsemen as people desperately take flight from the doomed cities, climbing on rocks, hiding in thickets. Second there is the image of Jerusalem as a prostitute, foolishly dressing itself for seduction when her lovers are turning on her to kill her.

She is pitiable even in her perversity. Perhaps we might here recall the behaviour of Jezebel at the approach of Jehu, moments before she suffered a bloody death. The final image is that of a pregnant woman about to give birth.

Walter Brueggemann describes this powerfully. In verse 31 the metaphor is again dramatically shifted. Out of the resolve of Yahweh, the army still approaches.

But now Judah is not an alluring prostitute. Now Jerusalem is cast in a new role as a helpless exposed woman in labour. What catches the ear of the poet, and the cry sounds like a labour pain.

Only labour pains are to give birth, the work of newness. The poet listens more carefully. The cry of the city is in fact a cry for help, a death cry, for the invaders sent by Yahweh are about the predictable business of rape and murder.

The metaphor belongs in the same trajectory with the image utilised in chapter 2 verse 2 as bride, in chapter 3 verse 1 as faithless wife, in chapter 4 verse 30 as prostitute. Jerusalem is a street woman who gives birth and is overwhelmed by the army in what should have been a moment of joy. The poet presses to find a metaphor raw enough to carry the truth.

Jerusalem is under judgement, about to be done in. Jerusalem may not know it, but the city is as shameful as a prostitute, as helpless as a woman in labour, exposed and endangered now because the betrayed husband has had enough of fickleness and will tolerate no more. Death must come, no one stands with Jerusalem to grieve or to rescue.

A question to consider, what lessons might we learn from the extensive use of rhetoric in conveying the prophetic message? Jeremiah chapter 5 continues the condemnation of the nation of Judah. The chapter opens with a pervasive indictment of the society of Jerusalem. The rot extends throughout the entire social body.

The opening eight verses are structured as a five stanza piece of poetry with alternating speeches. The Lord addresses the search party sent throughout the city in verses 1 and 2. Jeremiah addresses the Lord in verse 3. Jeremiah speaks to himself in verses 4 and 5 and to the Lord from the end of verse 5 to verse 6. In the final stanza the Lord speaks to the people. The chapter opens with an imagined task given to a search party, to scour the city of Jerusalem for one faithful man on account of whom the city might be spared.

There is clearly some allusion here to Abraham's conversation with the Lord in Genesis chapter 18 concerning the fate of Sodom. Whereas Sodom might have been saved for the sake of ten righteous, Jerusalem receives far more favourable terms. One man would

be enough.

The Lord is looking for justice and fidelity. However, when the city is inspected not even one such person can be discovered. Jeremiah observes the insensibility of the people to the judgment of the Lord and their failure to respond to his correction.

Yet this insensibility, Jeremiah reasons, is among the poor of the land, people unschooled in the law and in its demands. Surely such dullness and resistance is to be expected to some extent among the uneducated of the people. Things will be much better among the cultured elite of the land.

They are not ignorant of the law, they have received instruction in it. But the condition among the great of the land was, if anything worse, the people who knew the law had willfully rejected it. When the Lord had delivered his people from slavery, he had placed them as if they were his trained and faithful oxen under the yoke of the law.

However, Israel had broken the yoke and run wild. Now the runaway ox finds itself among the wild beasts. Rejecting the guidance and oversight of the Lord, it placed itself in the reach of the predators.

A lion from the forest, a wolf from the wild lands or a crouching leopard will come upon them and tear them apart. Having undertaken this failed inspection, the Lord poses the devastating question to the city. How can I pardon you? When the city was given the opportunity to make a case for its sparing, it could not make one.

It is now struck dumb before the Lord. The rebellion of the nation is described. They have abandoned the Lord and they have sworn by idols.

Even when enjoying the Lord's bounty, they flagrantly violated the seventh commandment, trooping to whorehouses. The affinity between the seventh commandment concerning adultery and the first and second commandments concerning idolatry and rejection of the Lord should be recognised here. The jealousy of the Lord for the heart of his people is connected to his upholding of marriage more generally.

Once again, Jerusalem is compared to an animal, albeit this time to a well-endowed stallion desiring to copulate with no self-control. The question that all of this leads to in verse 9 intensifies the question of verse 7. How can I pardon you? becomes shall I not punish them? For the Lord not to punish such a city would seem to be a dereliction of his justice. It would be a winking at the gravest infidelity.

Everything about Judah's conduct calls out for judgment without sparing and in verse 10 the Lord sends out a new party, as it were, this time to search and destroy. The vine rows of a terraced vineyard correspond here to the streets of the first verse. Israel is the vineyard of the Lord's planting, but now all of its branches must be stripped away.

However, in the face of all of the reasons to place Judah under the most devastating and complete of judgments, the Lord draws back. The party must not make a full end, even in the face of Judah's utter treachery. There is no reason for the mitigation of the city's judgment here.

The earlier search party investigated closely and found no one. The only reason why the Lord would refrain from bringing a devastating and final end is his own sheer mercy. The people have scorned the prospect of the Lord's judgment.

The prophets have denied it, yet it will most certainly befall them. Because the people have spoken falsely about the Lord, prophesying the empty claims that his judgment will not be forthcoming, the Lord will place his words in the mouth of Jeremiah, his messenger, making those words like fire and the people like kindling. Here we should recall Jeremiah chapter 1 verses 9 to 10.

Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth, and the Lord said to me, Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant. The words of the false prophet who declared peace are hot air, but the word of the Lord in the mouth of Jeremiah is like fire.

A connection between fire and the mouth of the prophet can be seen on various occasions in scripture. Isaiah's lips were touched by a burning coal by the Lord. Tongues of flame rested upon the heads of the disciples on the day of Pentecost, igniting their tongues by the spirit manifested in their speaking of different languages.

In Revelation chapter 11 verse 5, fire proceeds from the mouth of the two witnesses and consumes their enemies. Jeremiah's word will not prove vain. The judgment that he declares will come to pass.

The Lord describes the enemy that he is bringing upon Judah, a powerful and ancient nation, a people with a strange language, mighty in battle. They will consume Judah's produce. They will consume Judah's young people.

They will consume their flocks and their herds. And the fortified cities in which Judah placed its confidence will be obliterated by this invading force. Yet even when this judgment falls, it will be tempered by the mercy of the Lord, which will save the people from suffering their final end.

There is a poetic justice to the Lord's judgment. His people have forsaken him and served foreign gods in their land. So he will forsake them to serve foreigners in a land not their own.

If they are so eager to serve the foreign gods, he will give them their filibut. In Psalm 115 verses 4 to 8, the psalmist declares of the pagan nations, their idols are silver and gold,

the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak, eyes, but do not see.

They have ears, but do not hear, noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel, feet, but do not walk. And they do not make a sound in their throat.

Those who make them become like them. So do all who trust in them. Judah seems to have suffered this fate.

They have become as insensible as the idols that they worship. They have eyes, but cannot see, ears, but cannot hear. This is a common description of the people of God, grown hard-hearted, stiff-necked, and dulled in their senses as a result of their sin.

The Lord is the creator of the whole earth, the master of its greatest forces. Yet they do not fear him. They are utterly dependent upon his provision for the rains and the harvest, which have been withheld from them on account of their sins.

Yet still they brazenly continue in their rebellion, acting as if they were beyond the reach of their maker. They have committed themselves to the way of practical atheism, behaving as if there were no just or powerful God to judge them. The concluding verses of the chapter present a searing indictment upon the predatory and cruel elite of the land, profiteering off their mistreatment of others, failing to bring justice to the needy and the oppressed, to the widow and the fatherless.

The society is a rotten one, one in which the evil prosper and the poor are downtrodden. The corruption is pervasive. The prophets prophesy obliging lies that serve to bolster the injustice, while the priests, who should be upholding the law of the Lord, are legitimating the oppressors instead.

And it isn't as if this stopped with the injustice of those in authority. The people themselves are utterly complacent and consenting towards such injustice, happily tolerating it. These aren't the actions of a hated tyranny, but of a nation where injustice, oppression and predation meet with widespread popular support, because life is easier that way.

A society where the poor are not protected may be a society where goods are cheaper, or where it is easier to get one's way through bribery, corruption and mistreatment of the vulnerable. A society that has little regard for, or protections for the weak, greatly advantages the strong, who don't need to provide for or intervene on behalf of others. Bringing justice to such a society would make a lot of people's lives less convenient.

It's just not expedient. However, the Lord is the one who is the protector of the poor, the widow and the fatherless, who are promised justice when they cry to him. A nation like Judah cannot hope to escape his judgment.

A question to consider. How does Jeremiah chapter 5 continue some of the underlying

metaphors of the preceding chapters? Jeremiah chapter 6 continues the preceding chapter's warning about imminent judgment. The chapter opens with a description of a rapidly approaching army from the north, similar to those of preceding chapters.

The warning trumpet must be blown, signals must be sent to the watchmen, disaster is almost upon them. A small window of opportunity remains to flee the doomed city. However, the elite of the city, who have complacently lived with its injustice, face destruction.

The prophet singles out the high class women, who most powerfully symbolize the decadent indulgence of the unfaithful bride. In their fashionable garments and in their refined manners, they are also the fullest expression of a society that through its oppression has created a mask over that oppression so that it might not be seen. They look delicate and lovely, but they are really rapacious and cruel.

Isaiah chapter 3 verses 16-24 has a similar condemnation. The Lord said, Because the daughters of Zion are haughty and walk with outstretched necks, glancing wantonly with their eyes, mincing along as they go, tinkling with their feet, therefore the Lord will strike with a scab the heads of the daughters of Zion, and the Lord will lay bare their secret parts. In that day the Lord will take away the finery of the anklets, the headbands, and the crescents, the pendants, the bracelets, and the scarves, the headdresses, the armlets, the sashes, the perfume boxes, and the amulets, the signet rings and nose rings, the festal robes, the mantles, the cloaks, and the handbags, the mirrors, the linen garments, the turbans, and the veils.

Instead of perfume there will be rottenness, and instead of a belt, a rope, and instead of well-set hair, baldness, and instead of a rich robe, a skirt of sackcloth, and branding instead of beauty. As if in stark contrast to these women, the city will be surrounded by shepherds with their flocks, the besieging armies are described as if low-class keepers of sheep who are about to displace and topple the wealthy and decadent. We hear inside their camp as they are preparing for war, they want to attack as soon as possible, to make the most of a day of battle before the night comes, and then when the night comes they also want to attack her palaces.

And verse 6 makes clear that these people are not acting upon their own initiative. The Lord is directing and encouraging them in their siege. He is urging them to set up the siege mound.

The city must be punished, and they are the instrument by which he will do so. She must be punished on account of her oppression and violence. The Lord declares of her, sickness and wounds are ever before me.

He has placed his name in the temple at the heart of the city that is rotten through and through. Indeed, the city is described not just as something fresh that became rotten,

but as something that keeps its rottenness fresh. In the most startling of images, the city is described as like a well of fresh water, but instead of fresh water, what is held inside the city is evil itself.

The Lord warns his people of the threat of approaching judgment. The Babylonians will be like gleaners who come after the harvest. The greater company of the people of Israel, having already been harvested in judgment by the Assyrians, now the Babylonians will come to glean the remnant.

These gleaners will be diligent in their task. They will pass their hand again over the branches that have been appointed to them. The Lord tries to warn his people, but no one hears.

Their ears are uncircumcised, like their hearts, they are unfit for the covenant. They have not been rendered fit for use, they are disobedient and resistant. Like their idols, they have ears but cannot hear, eyes but cannot see.

The word of the Lord itself has become an object of scorn to them. They dismiss and laugh at it. Jeremiah, as the prophet of the Lord, has been given to bear the word of the Lord, and the word of the Lord is bubbling away within him.

It is about to burst out upon the people. He feels the anger of the Lord against the unfaithfulness of the people. Although he tries to resist expressing it, he must bring it forth.

In speaking the word of the Lord, he pours out the wrath of the Lord upon all parts of the society of Jerusalem, the children in the street, the gatherings of the young men, husband and wife, elderly and aged. The people are afflicted with greed and avarice. They covet unjust gain, and they deal falsely with each other and with the word of the Lord, and they will suffer a poetic judgment as a result.

If they are greedy for the houses, fields and wives of others, then their houses, fields and wives will be given into the hand of a greedy foreign nation. The allusions to the tenth commandment should not be missed here. We should also recall the curse of the covenant in Deuteronomy chapter 28 verse 30.

You shall betroth the wife, but another man shall ravish her. You shall build a house, but you shall not dwell in it. You shall plant a vineyard, but you shall not enjoy its fruit.

The false dealing of priests and prophets is seen in the way that they handle the word of the Lord. They declare peace to the people of God. When there is no peace, perhaps desiring the praise and the reward of men, they do not speak out against the sin of the people.

They have lost the capacity to bring the law and the prophetic word of the Lord to bear

critically upon their social condition, with the result that they are inured in their sin, utterly shameless in their rebellion and iniquity. Verses 16 and 17 present us with two images of the Lord's challenge to his people. First of all, he calls them to go back to the ancient paths, the paths where the good way is.

Presumably this is a reference to the law itself. The law is that which provides structure to Israel's life. It was the foundation of their society, and in radically reconstituting the society of Judah upon it, they will find rest for their souls.

They will find restoration. But yet, when they hear the word of the Lord through the words of his prophets, they refuse it. We will not walk in it.

The second image is that of watchmen, people warning of approaching danger, most particularly the prophets. If the ancient paths are the law, the trumpet is the prophetic word. Yet as with the word of the law, they resist this.

They will not pay attention. The disaster that will come upon them will be the fruit of their own devices, the consequence, presumably the natural consequence, of their course of life. In addition to all of the other things that they have done, they have perverted the worship of the Lord, transforming it into something that anesthetizes them from the injustice of their society.

With costly sacrifices and impressive but empty rituals, they have established a form of religion that is perfectly tailored for a rich, decadent, and spiritually complacent society. Such a challenge to a cultically scrupulous, yet morally impure and socially oppressive society is common in the prophets. The Lord wants mercy, not sacrifice.

In Isaiah 1, verses 12-17, we find another example of such a challenge. When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? Bring no more vain offerings. Incense is an abomination to me.

New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations, I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me.

I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you. Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen.

Your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves. Make yourselves clean.

Remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes. Cease to do evil. Learn to do good.

Seek justice. Correct oppression. Bring justice to the fatherless.

Plead the widow's cause. The practice of proper worship, though really important, is empty if not confirmed in actual practice. Where this is forgotten, grand gestures and fine appearance in worship can become a replacement for the reality of a relationship with God.

Beautiful buildings, grand liturgies, costly vestments, all of these things become worse than worthless if they are not accompanied by holiness of life, faithfulness to the Lord, and justice to the neighbour. In the absence of these, as in the case of Jerusalem, worship is so easily perverted into a complacency-producing mask upon the reality of a sick and evil society. Once again, in verses 22 and 23, the approaching enemy is described, this people from the north country.

Their great power, an irresistible might, is like the sea that's approaching, about to sweep all before it. Hearing reports of this approaching army, Jerusalem will recognize that it is beyond hope. They will be like a woman in labour, but not about to give birth.

Indeed, they are called to mourn as for an only son. The one son that would have preserved the person's name and continued their legacy into the future has died, and the future is closed with them. The Lord put his word in the mouth of Jeremiah like fire, and now he is presented as the tester of metals among his people.

Through him the Lord will undertake a refining process, through which the precious metal of a faithful people might hopefully emerge. Yet Jeremiah's task proves to be in vain. It yields no positive fruit.

The nation is discovered to be nothing but base metal, nothing but dross to be rejected by the Lord. A question to consider, how does Jeremiah's critique of the perversion of the worship of the Lord help us to recognize how the sinful performance of worship can end up as part of the structural support for evil within a society? Jeremiah chapter 7 is one of the most famous and important chapters in the whole book. Within it, Jeremiah challenges the prevailing temple ideology which has come to legitimate the oppression and injustice of the society.

Jerusalem and its leaders believe that their possession of the temple grants them immunity from God's judgment. Jeremiah challenges this in no uncertain terms, making clear that there is no future for Jerusalem apart from obedience. The Lord's challenge to Jerusalem through Jeremiah identifies the way that the temple and its worship have been rendered integral to the injustice of the entire system.

The temple is presumed to suggest that the Lord underwrites the regime, that the boiling pot of oppression that Jerusalem has become, basks in the Lord's good favor. One could argue that the temple has started to function as a sort of idol. People look to and trust in it rather than the Lord.

The temple has become a symbol of national superiority, attachment to its cult, the safe higher ground from which all other peoples and nations and sinners can be judged. Judah believes that as it looks to the grandeur of the building and as it goes through the motions of the sacrifices, it can manipulate God, that it has some sort of claim upon God that is granted through this building. Jeremiah exposes the deceptive words of the This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, perhaps a threefold repetition as a means of parody.

The underlying question is one of trust. Where is trust being placed? Trust is here being placed in the building itself, in a way that disregards and dishonors the God who placed his name there. In the starkest of possible terms, the Lord describes the way that they have come to regard his house as a den of robbers.

The house of the Lord, the place of worship for all nations, has become a place that malefactors can flee to for refuge, a place of supposed asylum from their crimes and their sins. Jeremiah catalogues the sins of the people in a way that recalls the Ten Commandments, steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, rather than coming to the house of the Lord to have serious dealings with him. Coming to the house of the Lord has become a way to escape reckoning with him.

However, those who treat the temple in this manner are in for a nasty surprise. Jeremiah directs their attention to Shiloh, where a temple complex had previously arisen around the tabernacle. That sanctuary had been destroyed in the battle of Aphek, as the Ark of the Covenant was removed from it and the worship of Israel was torn apart.

Its priests suffered the most severe of judgments. Eli the high priest and his two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, dying on the same day. In the books of Samuel, the destruction of Shiloh for the wickedness of the people is historical background for the rise of the Davidic dynasty.

The temple was built by David's son Solomon, and it would have been very easy to take the narrative form of the books of Samuel as an invitation to contrast the unfaithfulness of that former sanctuary with the faithfulness of the new sanctuary set up by David and Solomon. Yet Jeremiah's prophecy invites comparison. The presumption that underlies the prevailing ideology of the temple is punctured.

If God judged Shiloh for its sins, why should he not judge Jerusalem? Their persistent disregard for the word of the Lord, their failure to pay attention to the many warnings that he has given them, has doomed them to a similar fate to the northern tribes, the nation of Israel. The temple will not save them from their fate. If Jeremiah hoped that he might save the people from destruction by his prayers and intercessions, that hope is dispelled in the verses that follow.

The Lord specifically forbids Jeremiah from praying for the people. Their fate is sealed. God is past hearing any prayer on their behalf. The catastrophe about before them will not be mitigated. If Jeremiah were to question the Lord's judgment on this point, the Lord directs him to the activity of the people in Judah and Jerusalem. An entire network of activity has grown up around the worship of the Queen of Heaven, children gathering wood, fathers kindling fire, women kneading dough, idolatry conscripting the united efforts of the household.

The worship in view here is likely the worship of Ishtar, an Assyrian and Babylonian idolatry that was imported into the land under the reign of Ahaz, reaching its height during the reign of Manasseh. Through this idolatrous practice the people are bringing shame upon themselves. While it might rightly seem that they are provoking the Lord to anger, they are also acting to their own dishonor and ruin.

In verses 21 to 28 we see a theme that is common throughout the prophets, the contrast between obedience and sacrifice. What was most important in the covenant was always obedience. They were to hear the word of the Lord and obey.

God wanted the ear of his people, a circumcised ear. He wanted their hearts more than he wanted any number of sacrifices. Sacrifice was not the foundational covenant reality.

This is something that we see in Amos chapter 5 verses 21 to 25. I hate, I despise your feasts and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them.

And the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. Take away from me the noise of your songs. To the melody of your harps I will not listen, but let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Did you bring to me sacrifices and offerings during the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? Hosea chapter 6 verse 6 For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings. Micah chapter 6 verses 6 to 8 With what shall I come before the Lord and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has told you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God? The same challenge is given to King Saul by Samuel.

And Samuel said, Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has also rejected you from being king.

For all of their sacrifices, Judah is failing in the most fundamental covenant task, which is

that of hearing the Lord and obeying him. They have rejected his law, they have also failed to listen to his prophets. The Lord has persistently sent messengers to them from the day that they went out from Egypt, and they have repeatedly rejected him.

And the Lord tells Jeremiah that his message will face the same deaf ears and stiffened necks. They will not accept discipline. They cannot hear, they cannot obey the word of the Lord.

And now as a result, truth has been cut off from the land. They have given themselves over purely to the lie, to the deceptive and comforting truths of the false prophets, who assure them that there is peace when there is no peace, who give them the false assurance of the temple cult, when they have been rebelling against the word of the Lord and face his catastrophic judgment. The final verses of the chapter describe massive defilement of the land.

The people of Judah have done evil before God's sight. They have polluted the land with their idolatries and with the blood of their sons and daughters, which they have offered to their false gods. In the poetic justice of the Lord's judgment, their bodies will litter the valley within which they once offered the lives of their children.

As they have dishonored the land of the Lord, their bodies will be dishonored. They will not even be buried, but will become food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth. The city of Jerusalem and the other cities of Judah will be silenced, the voices of joy and celebration being cut off from them.

The defiled land will become a wasteland. A question to consider. The word of the Lord through Jeremiah in this chapter is a direct assault to the way that the building and sacrificial worship of the temple have been perverted into props for the endemic and pervasive injustice and spiritual infidelity of the society of Judah.

The very divine appointment of the temple and the technical orthodoxy of its sacrificial worship rendered them apt for a form of idolatry. What are some of the signs by which we might recognize where something similar occurring to our religious buildings and practices? Jeremiah chapter 8 verses 1 to 3 concludes the temple sermon of chapter 7. At the end of chapter 7 the bodies of the slain littered the valley of the son of Hinnom, defiling it and being food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the field. The beginning of chapter 8 describes the extension of this judgment to include those who had formerly been buried.

The bones of rulers formerly buried with the highest of honors will be disinterred and will be scattered upon the ground, bleached white beneath the heat of the sun. Kings, officials, priests and prophets who'd formerly worshipped the sun and the moon and all the host of heaven would have their bones placed out before them, their bones scattered like dung upon the surface of the ground. They would steadily be bleached by the creations that they once served.

Disinterment of bones is a profound form of dishonoring, a taking back of honors formerly given and a refusal of the rest of the burial place. Perhaps in the most famous instance of this, Josiah of Judah disinterred the bones of false priests and prophets and burnt them on the altar of Bethel to defile it. The final state of the people is described in the grimmest of terms.

They will prefer death to life in what can be seen as a fulfillment of the curse of the covenant in Deuteronomy chapter 28 verses 64 to 68. And the Lord will scatter you among all peoples from one end of the earth to the other. And there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone, which neither you nor your fathers have known.

And among these nations you shall find no respite, and there shall be no resting place for the soul of your foot. But the Lord will give you there a trembling heart and failing eyes and a languishing soul. Your life shall hang in doubt before you.

Night and day you shall be in dread and have no assurance of your life. In the morning you shall say, If only it were evening! And at evening you shall say, If only it were morning! Because of the dread that your heart shall feel, and the sight that your eyes shall see. And the Lord will bring you back in ships to Egypt, a journey that I promised that you should never make again.

And there you shall offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but there will be no buyer. Chapter 7 and the first three verses of chapter 8 were predominantly prose. Now it returns to poetry, and the first three verses play upon the word for turn in Hebrew.

Using several related forms of the verb, it gives ironic comment upon the state of Israel. Whereas people typically pick themselves up if they fall down or turn around if they have gone in the wrong direction, Judah is incorrigible in their rebellion and backsliding. They will not return, they will not repent.

While one might accuse them of being fickle, they prove steadfast in their holding to deceit. Earlier Jeremiah accused them of being like a well that kept its evil fresh. Like a horse racing into battle, they plunge headlong into their error and will not be turned aside from it.

Compared to wild animals that faithfully keep their ways and their migratory patterns, Judah's obstinate unfaithfulness is shameful. Such an unfavourable comparison with animals can also be found in Isaiah chapter 1 verses 2-3. Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth, for the Lord has spoken.

Children have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib, but Israel does not know. My people do not

understand.

Just as the people might protest their performance of the sacrifices and their possession of the temple of the Lord, here they claim that they are wise and that they have the law of the Lord with them. Presumably referring to the leaders of the people, they pride themselves on their possession of the insight that the Torah gives them, and yet they both fail to observe it and they pervert it in their teaching. They make it into a lie.

The wisdom that the people of God were promised in Deuteronomy chapter 4 was the law, but now they have rejected the word of the Lord. They have no wisdom in them. They have become unfit for their purpose, and so they will be cast out.

Returning to the statements of chapter 6 verses 12-15, the Lord declares that they will suffer from the covetousness that they have practiced. Their wives, their fields, their possessions will be given into the hands of others who desire them. Once again, poetic justice.

As Walter Brueggemann notes, there are three indictments in verses 11-13. First, the leaders, the priests, and the prophets who should have been speaking truthfully about the sick condition of the people, have failed to do so. They have not blown the warning trumpet.

Rather, they have wrongly reassured the people that they are living in times of peace. But there is no peace. The judgment of the Lord is upon them.

Second, they have become shameless. They had lost the ability to be embarrassed at their sin. They felt no sense of the judgment of the Lord and the holiness of the Lord before which they stood.

Third, they failed to produce the fruits that the Lord wanted from his people. Israel was like a vine, the planting of the Lord that was supposed to yield its fruit in its season. And yet when the Lord came to inspect it, there were no fruits.

The moral fruits of a faithful society were not found in her. Indeed, her very leaves had withered. The imagery of the Lord judging his vine might remind us of Isaiah chapter 5 or Psalm 80.

While Israel might think of itself as having special claim upon the Lord, that the Lord is on their side, that the Lord is in their pocket even, the imagery here shifts things around. They are the vine of the Lord's planting, which he has planted in order that it might bear fruit. If they do not bear fruit, then they are fit only to be burned.

Verses 15-16 describe the approaching judgment. They had been led to expect peace. But now judgment is coming upon them, and its terror with it. The snorting of powerful military horses is heard in the northern most territory of Dan. The land itself shudders as it awaits the inevitable doom that is coming upon it. The land itself will be devoured before them, and all its inhabitants.

From the stamping and the snorting of the horses descending from Dan, we move to a different image, of serpents that the Lord has sent among his people, serpents like those sent among the people in Numbers chapter 21 as a result of their rebellion in the wilderness. These serpents, however, will not be able to be charmed. There will be no bronze serpent to look to this time.

They will be poisoned by this approaching army. In verses 13-17, the speech of the Lord flanks the speech of Jeremiah in the middle. In verses 18-21, this order is reversed.

Lamentations of Jeremiah flank his speaking on behalf of the people, and in the middle of the entire section, the Lord speaks. Jeremiah laments over the people. The imagery at this point turns more to the themes of sickness.

His heart is sick. The daughter of his people have a great wound that cannot be healed. Dismay takes hold of the wounded prophet's heart.

The people themselves lament from the city. They wonder where the Lord is. Is he not the king of the people? They have been reassured by their religious leaders that the Lord is on their side unconditionally.

They have the temple. They have the law. They have the sacrifices.

Surely God is for them, and yet God is nowhere to be found. The official theology has proven to be a dangerous lie. Besieged by their enemies, the harvest passes, the summer ends, and all the fruits that will be gathered in within it, and yet they are not delivered.

They are going to face famine for the winter and will not be able to sow for the coming year. At the center of this section, the question of the Lord rings out. Why have they provoked me to anger with their carved images and with their foreign idols? The people wonder where God has gone, but they have defiled his land and filled the very city where the Lord has placed his name with their idolatries.

Why would the Lord not judge such a people? Once again, the pathos of the prophet who laments the state of a people that he has been forbidden to pray for, and of the indignation of the Lord over their treachery, is powerfully illustrated in these verses. The people have been described as sick and wounded. The final verse of this chapter ends with a threefold rhetorical question.

Is there no balm in Gilead? Gilead was a region in the Transjordan that was famous for its balm. Balm was used as perfume, as body oil, or as medicine. Gilead also seems to have been a place where healers were to be found.

There is plenty of balm in Gilead. There are physicians there too. But the health of the people of Judah has not been restored because they have rejected their true healer, the Lord.

A question to consider. What can we learn from the way that the prophecy of Jeremiah, like so many other prophecies, intersperses the words of the prophet himself, imagined words of the people, and the word of the Lord? What purpose might this be serving? The pathos of the prophet Jeremiah's lament over his people continues in chapter 9. He begins by expressing the remarkable desire that his whole head were waters, and that his eyes were a fountain, so that he would never be lacking tears to shed for the city of Jerusalem. Jeremiah is often called the weeping prophet, famous for his lamentation over the city of Jerusalem, in which he expresses his devastation at its horrific fate.

In verses 2 and 3 we hear about the Lord's own distress. The Lord's heart is for his people, but yet they have rejected him, despised him, turned their backs on him, and provoked his indignation. In a most remarkable statement, the Lord expresses his desire that he might escape from his people.

If only he could shrug them off and move away from them, he could be relieved of the pain of seeing his people despising him day by day, their adulterous idolatries put straight in his face. The statement of the first half of verse 2 is very similar to Psalm 55 verses 6-8, I say, O that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest. Yes, I would wander far away, I would lodge in the wilderness, I would hurry to find a shelter from the raging wind and tempest.

The people have become defined by their adultery, by their treachery. They betray God, and they betray each other. They have fashioned their tongues into an instrument of warfare.

It serves only to deliver lies and slander. In place of truth, falsehood is becoming more and more entrenched in the land. They are growing in evil, their evil developing to ever more mature forms.

Underneath it all is their failure to know the Lord. Although they may take the Lord's name upon their lips, they do not seek his face. In verses 4-6, the claims of verse 3 are unpacked further.

Societies are built upon trust and upon truth. When these things fail, everything else starts to crumble. In the Jerusalem of Jeremiah's day, the social fabric is rapidly unravelling.

It is only a matter of time until such a city faces destruction. A kingdom divided against itself cannot stand. Other prophets describe a similar social condition.

In Micah chapter 7 verses 5-6 for instance, When deception and slander are the order of the day, words start to fail. No one can trust the statements of his neighbour, always considering what ulterior motives they might have in saying things. What has been called a hermeneutic of suspicion becomes the standard way by which people's statements are judged.

No truth statement can be taken at face value. Every truth statement is really a veiled attempt to gain power for the speaker. The people accumulate oppression and deceit.

Oppression upon oppression. Deceit upon deceit. Earlier in verse 3, we were told that they did not know the Lord.

Here we read that they refuse to know the Lord. Their ignorance is a willful one. In verse 7, the Lord declares that he will test his people, as a refiner tests the quality of metal.

Earlier in chapter 6 verses 27-30, he had given Jeremiah this task. I have made you a tester of metals among my people, that you may know and test their ways. They are all stubbornly rebellious, going about with slanders.

They are bronze and iron. All of them act corruptly. The bellows blow fiercely.

The lead is consumed by the fire. In vain the refining goes on, for the wicked are not removed. Rejected silver they are called, for the Lord has rejected them.

It is the speech of the people by which they are most characterized. Isaiah talks about living among a people of unclean lips. Jeremiah lives among a people of deadly lips.

Their tongues were described like bows in verse 3. And in verse 8, they are like deadly arrows. People use their speech to lie in wait for their neighbor, speaking peace while calculating their destruction. One might perhaps see something of the poetic justice in the false peace that they speak to each other, and the false peace that their prophets speak to them as a doomed nation.

Most especially in the wisdom literature, the tongue is singled out as that which reveals the character of the heart. Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. Here, the revealed character of a violent, untrustworthy, and duplicitous people sets them apart for judgment.

Shall I not punish them for these things, declares the Lord, and shall I not avenge myself on a nation such as this? Jeremiah takes up the lamentation for the mountains and the pastures of the land. Both have been laid waste, abandoned by man and beast. Even the sound of birds cannot be heard there anymore.

Formerly populated lands are now utterly desolate. The Lord responds to the prophet's lamentation in verse 11 by declaring that Jerusalem itself will face such a judgment.

Night and day it shall not be quenched, its smoke shall go up forever.

From generation to generation it shall lie waste, none shall pass through it for ever and ever. But the hawk and the porcupine shall possess it, the owl and the raven shall dwell in it, he shall stretch the line of confusion over it, and the plumb line of emptiness. Its nobles, there is no one there to call it a kingdom, and all its princes shall be nothing.

Thorns shall grow over its strongholds, nettles and thistles in its fortresses. It shall be the haunt of jackals, an abode for ostriches. And wild animals shall meet with hyenas, the wild goat shall cry to his fellow.

Indeed, there the nightbird settles and finds for herself a resting place. There the owl nests and lays and hatches and gathers her young in her shadow. Indeed, there the hawks are gathered, each one with her mate.

To those hearing this prophecy, it might sound baffling that the entire city of Jerusalem and all the surrounding cities of Judah might suffer quite such a devastating blow. Surely there are the promises of God to his people. How can anyone make sense of this? In verses 13 and 14 we are given the answer.

By foul judgment, in verses 15 and 16, the Lord declares that he will pursue them until they are completely destroyed. The city of Judah is not reach, the youngest child in the streets is not safe, the most powerful people in the palace cannot escape it. Bodies will fall on the open field with the dishonor of dung itself.

As the reaper of judgment comes upon them, their bodies will be abandoned like sheaves with no one to pick them up and give them a proper burial. What is the source of people's confidence? In verses 23 and 24 the Lord shows the true source of confidence, placed in contrast with wrongful sources of confidence. The wise man or the skillful man can boast in his skill and his wisdom.

The mighty man can boast in his might. The rich man can boast in his riches. But none of these are a true source of boasting.

None of these give a ground for confidence that is reliable. Rather, the true source of boasting should be that the person knows the Lord, the God who is defined by his practice of steadfast love, justice and righteousness in the earth. In earlier verses the Lord castigated the people for their failure to know him and also their refusal to know him.

Here boasting is found in true knowledge of God, a knowledge of God from which the true worshipper will become like the God that they worship. They too will practice steadfast love, justice and righteousness, the very practices that were most manifestly lacking in the life of the nation of Judah. The Apostle Paul references this chapter in 1 Corinthians 1 verses 28-31.

The Judah of Jeremiah's day has been putting its trust in the temple, in the sacrifices, in its possession of the law, and more generally in their privilege of being the covenant people. Much as the Apostle Paul challenges the Jews of his day for their trust in circumcision, so the Lord through Jeremiah tells his people that their circumcision will be counted as uncircumcision if they are not faithful to the law. They look to the nations round about them as uncircumcised, as outside of the covenant.

Yet they themselves, while bearing the covenant sign, are uncircumcised in their heart. In Deuteronomy chapter 10 verse 16, the people were exhorted, Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn. The reason for this is given in verse 17.

For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. Judah's possession of circumcision is not going to excuse it from the demands of the law. The Apostle Paul famously develops this point in Romans chapter 2 verses 25-29.

For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. So if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law, will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law. For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical.

But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man, but from God. A question to consider, throughout the book of Jeremiah there is a challenge to the formalism of the people.

The way that they go through the motions, the way that they trust in their possession of the law and circumcision, while not observing the law and circumcising their hearts, and the way that they put their faith in their sacrifices when they are not obedient to the Lord. Given their vulnerability to such mere formalism, what benefit if any is there to possession of circumcision, the law, the temple and the sacrifices? In Jeremiah chapter 10 the Lord declares the powerlessness of the idols in which the nations trust. Israel's God is the Lord, the creator of heaven and earth.

He is the one who has the power to direct the course of history. Idols are powerless and those who trust in them are foolish, but Israel's portion is the Lord. Verses 1-10 have a bookended or chiastic structure.

It begins with the ways of the nations and the fact that they are dismayed at the heavens. And in verse 10 we see the nations not being able to endure the Lord's indignation. The description of idols as creations of silver and gold is seen in verse 4 and then also in verse 9. After that the idols are described like scarecrows in verse 5, which

parallels in verse 8 with the description of their instruction being like wood.

At the very heart of the section in verses 6-7 is a doxology concerning the Lord, juxtaposing the incomparable king of the nations with the wise of the nations, among which none like the Lord can be found. Challenges to idolatry are found in a number of the other prophets, perhaps most famously in the book of Isaiah, in Isaiah chapter 40 verses 18-25. To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him? An idol? A craftsman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and casts for its silver chains.

He who is too impoverished for an offering chooses wood that will not rot. He seeks out a skillful craftsman to set up an idol that will not move. Do you not know? Do you not hear? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers, who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to dwell in, who brings the princes to nothing, and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness.

Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows on them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble. To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One. Another such statement against the idols of the nations is found in Isaiah 44, verses 10-17.

Who fashions a god, or casts an idol that is profitable for nothing? Behold, all his companions shall be put to shame, and the craftsmen are only human. Let them all assemble, let them stand forth. They shall be terrified, they shall be put to shame together.

The ironsmith takes a cutting tool, and works it over the coals. He fashions it with hammers, and works it with his strong arm. He becomes hungry, and his strength fails.

He drinks no water, and is faint. The carpenter stretches a line, he marks it out with a pencil. He shapes it with planes, and marks it with a compass.

He shapes it into the figure of a man, with the beauty of a man, to dwell in a house. He cuts down cedars, or he chooses a cypress tree or an oak, and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest. He plants a cedar, and the rain nourishes it.

Then it becomes fuel for a man. He takes a part of it and warms himself. He kindles a fire, and bakes bread.

Also he makes a god, and worships it. He makes it an idol, and falls down before it. Half of it he burns in the fire.

Over the half he eats meat. He roasts it, and is satisfied. Also he warms himself, and says, Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire.

And the rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, and falls down to it and worships it. He prays to it, and says, Deliver me, for you are my god. The idols are characterized in these verses as those that lack the power to move, to speak, to walk, to do good, or to do evil.

They are described as vapor, vanity, or emptiness. The lord wants his people to notice what they are made of. Getting people to reflect upon what something is constructed of is one of the best ways to overturn a fetish.

We like to think in the modern world that we are beyond idolatry. Many of us might think it ridiculous that people could look at such a physical object and see in it a god. Yet we have not moved beyond the human tendency to fetishize things.

There are times when we might need to be reminded of the way that we impute value to things. We may not be constructing idols of wood and silver and gold, but we can spend so much of our lives chasing after paper and plastic. Indeed, to heighten the sense of emptiness, we don't even need plastic or paper.

Mere pixels on a screen can become all the more determinative for some people's sense of self-worth. We invest our sense of our social status, and many men, their masculinity, in mere constructions of steel. Like the idols that Jeremiah speaks about, these are things that focus our desire.

They dominate our imaginations. They are what we begin to live for. People will surrender their dignity.

They will betray family and friends. They will abandon values they once held dear merely to pursue these empty things. If we think we have escaped the pull of idolatry that we see in the book of Jeremiah, perhaps we simply haven't looked closely enough at the largely empty things that we can devote our lives to.

The Lord is contrasted with all of these things. He is the living God. He's the creator of all.

Before him, the earth quakes. The nations devote their energies to the service of silver and gold and wood to paper to plastic to pixels. But the people of God devote themselves to his worship.

The gods represented by these idols did not make the heavens and the earth, and they shall perish before the God who made all of these things. He's the God with the power to act. Walter Brueggemann writes, The verbs used to speak of Yahweh are indicative of the power of this God.

He made. He established. He stretched out.

He utters. He sends up. He makes.

He brings out. The language is of creation, which is done by Yahweh's powerful speech and by Yahweh's forming activity. The modes of creation of both Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 are captured in these verbs.

In Genesis 1, God creates by powerful speech. In Genesis 2, Yahweh makes by acting, as a potter. Both modes are utilized in our text.

The appellations of Yahweh are stunning. True God, living God, everlasting King, portion of Jacob, Lord of hosts. Yahweh is the true and reliable God, contrasted with the idols of falseness.

This God does what has been promised and keeps commitments to the world God has made. This God is a living God. This God has the power for life, the capacity to work a real newness, to cause life where there is only death and chaos.

Besides being the creator God over all of the false idols of man's creation, he is the God of Israel, who has chosen Israel for himself as his own inheritance. They are his people. He is also Jacob's portion.

If Israel is the Lord's, the Lord is also Israel's. Verses 17 and following return to describing the judgment that is about to fall upon the people of Judah. They must prepare themselves for exile.

They must pack their bags. In Ezekiel 12, verses 3-4, we have a similar warning given in the form of the prophetic sign that is performed. As for you, son of man, prepare for yourself an exile's baggage and go into exile by day in their sight.

You shall go like an exile from your place to another place in their sight. Perhaps they will understand, though they are a rebellious house. You shall bring out your baggage by day in their sight as baggage for exile, and you shall go out yourself at evening in their sight, as those do who must go into exile.

Verses 19-20 are another lamentation of the prophet over the anticipated judgment that will come upon the people. It will involve a loss of home, the tent being destroyed, all the cords being broken, and a loss of children. The primary reason for all of this is because of the stupidity of the shepherds.

The leaders of the people have been unfaithful. They have not inquired of the Lord. They have not taught and guided the people, and the flock of the people are scattered.

And as a result, the judgment from the north country, the judgment that he has been speaking about from chapter 1 onwards, will come upon them, leaving Judah and

Jerusalem a desolate place, and a lair of wild beasts. Recognizing the sovereignty of the Lord, the fact that the Lord is the one who truly directs people's steps, Jeremiah requests the Lord's chastening, gentle correction by which he can grow and reform, rather than angry punishment by which he might be destroyed. He is acutely aware of the limitations of human knowledge and intention.

We have our purposes and intentions. We think that we understand what we are doing, but we neither understand our way nor direct our paths. The Lord is the one who is sovereign over both of these things.

For this reason, Jeremiah turns to the Lord for his direction, his discipline, his guidance and correction. The chapter concludes with his request that the Lord judge the nations that are devouring Judah. At the end of the book, we'll see this request being answered.

The nations, and especially Babylon, will be brought down by the Lord. While they trust in their might and strategy and wealth and power, the Lord is really the one who directs their steps, and he will be the one who judges them when the time comes. A question to consider, how might Jeremiah's statements of verses 23 and 24 instruct us in our search for guidance from the Lord? In Jeremiah chapter 11, the covenant comes into the foreground.

As the early chapters of Jeremiah make plain, there were prevailing notions of the covenant in his day that fueled presumption rather than faithfulness. Mere possession of circumcision, the law, the temple and sacrifices gave Judah a mistaken sense of its immunity from the Lord's judgment. The opening of this chapter is reminiscent of Jeremiah chapter 7 and Jeremiah's temple sermon.

Jeremiah chapter 7 verses 21 to 26 read, I did not speak to your fathers or command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices, but this command I gave them, obey my voice and I will be your God and you shall be my people, and walk in all the way that I command you, that it may be well with you. But they did not obey or incline their ear, but walked in their own counsels and the stubbornness of their evil hearts, and went backward and not forward. From the day that your fathers came out of the land of Egypt to this day, I have persistently sent all my servants the prophets to them day after day, yet they did not listen to me or incline their ear, but stiffened their neck.

They did worse than their fathers. In Jeremiah chapter 11, as in chapter 7, there are several recollections of the book of Deuteronomy in the language that is used and also the theological emphases. For instance, this is one of the other occasions in scripture where the language of iron furnace is used of Egypt.

The most notable occurrence of this language is found in Deuteronomy chapter 4 verse 20, but the Lord has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be a people of his own inheritance, as you are this day. Three oracles open the chapter,

in verses 1 to 5, 6 to 8, and 9 to 13. These especially look back to the Exodus and refer to the covenant.

Not that long previously, Josiah's men had discovered the book of the law in the temple, and Josiah had led the people in a covenant ceremony in 2 Kings chapter 23 verses 1 to 3. Then the king sent, and all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem were gathered to him. And the king went up to the house of the Lord, and with him all the men of Judah, and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and the priests and the prophets, all the people both small and great. And he read in their hearing all the words of the book of the covenant that had been found in the house of the Lord.

And the king stood by the pillar and made a covenant before the Lord, to walk after the Lord and to keep his commandments and his testimonies and his statutes with all his heart and all his soul, to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book. And all the people joined in the covenant. Some scholars have debated the relationship between the covenant that Jeremiah refers to here and the covenant of Josiah.

Jeremiah's covenant seems to be connected with the Exodus from Egypt, but reading the account of 2 Kings it should be clear that the covenant of Josiah was not a different covenant. It was a renewal of the covenant of the Exodus, and more particularly the covenant of the book of the law, the book of Deuteronomy, that they made as they entered into the land. Jeremiah is instructed to hear the words of the covenant and to speak them to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

The words of verses 3 to 5 are a praese of the entire covenant statement. It has the form of Deuteronomy chapter 27 verses 15 to 26 and the curses there. In verse 26 of that chapter, cursed be anyone who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them, and all the people shall say Amen.

The covenant emphasized the necessity of hearing and doing the word of the Lord over everything else. Deuteronomy chapter 6 verse 3, Hear therefore, O Israel, and be careful to do them, that it may go well with you, and that you may multiply greatly, as the Lord, the God of your fathers, has promised you, in a land flowing with milk and honey. At the heart of the statement of verses 3 to 5 is the covenant formula, So shall you be my people, and I will be your God.

The fulfillment of this promise would occur as Israel listened and obeyed. The formula is an important one. It's found at several points throughout scripture, but especially in the Exodus chapter 6 verse 7, I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.

Leviticus chapter 26 verse 12, And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you

shall be my people. Ezekiel chapter 11 verses 19 to 20, And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh, and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes, and keep my rules, and obey them.

And they shall be my people, and I will be their God. The Lord here declares the covenant curse, summing up material of the book of Deuteronomy, a curse for which Jeremiah provides the Amen. And the curse is going to come to pass upon the people, as they have rejected the covenant.

The second oracle in verses 6 to 8, commissions Jeremiah to go out again. Within it the Lord stresses the covenant call to obey his voice, and the fact that persistently the people rejected his voice and turned away in their stubbornness. Time after time he warned them, but they refused to hear.

The third oracle of the chapter describes a conspiracy of rebellion of the people of Judah. They have willfully turned away from the Lord and after other gods. This is why the Lord is bringing a disaster that they cannot escape upon them.

As the people would not listen to the voice of the Lord, in verse 14 they receive poetic justice. The Lord will not listen to the cries made on their behalf. They refused to listen to his messengers, now he will refuse to listen to theirs.

Jeremiah is once again forbidden from praying for them. Some of the fundamental images of the book of Jeremiah return at this point. Israel is the unfaithful bride of the Lord, presuming to have special rights in his house, yet having done so many vile deeds.

Arboreal imagery reappears here. Judah was once a fruitful olive tree, bearing much good fruit, however now it is worthless and fit only to be burned. On account of their service of the Baals, the Lord is bringing judgment upon them.

Walter Brueggemann writes, the entire unit of Jeremiah 11 verses 1 to 17 is a meditation on Deuteronomy chapter 6 verse 4. The people must listen. When Israel does not listen, it rejects the one who summons, it violates its identity and it must be destroyed. The covenant relation is decisive both for Israel's life with God and for Israel's life among the nations.

That decisive relation is now about to be nullified. When it goes, everything goes. Israel is bereft of its partner and so is dangerously exposed to the nations.

Only the covenant relation guarantees Israel among the nations. Without it, Israel is in acute jeopardy. The chapter ends with a prayer of Jeremiah and the Lord's response.

This is a complaint of the prophet. One of a number of such prayers in the book that have been called his confessions or his lamentations. The language he employs

throughout is very reminiscent of that which we find in the Psalms.

The image of the sacrificial lamb taken to the slaughter might remind us of Psalm 44 verses 11 and 22. You have made us like sheep for slaughter and have scattered us among the nations. Yet for your sake we are killed all the day long.

We are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered. Even more famously, that language along with the language of being cut off from the land of the living is found in Isaiah chapter 53 verses 7 to 8 in Isaiah's famous prophecy of the suffering servant. He was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth, like a lamb that is led to the slaughter and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.

By oppression and judgment he was taken away, and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people. Jeremiah is often called the weeping prophet, and his work is filled with tears, with complaints, with dirges, and with lamentations. He is a traumatized and a suffering man.

To borrow the language of Isaiah's prophecy, he is a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. Once again, we should keep in mind that Jeremiah is not just a message bearer, he is one who personifies the suffering servant of Israel. He is one who personifies the true remnant.

Here he is about to be caught in some scheme of which he is totally ignorant until the Lord brings it to his awareness. In Matthew chapter 13 verse 57, Jesus said, A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his own household. Here Jeremiah's life is sought by people of his hometown of Anathoth, possibly members of priestly families.

They wish to cut him off completely to ensure that no offspring of his remain. His name, they hope, will go unremembered. Jeremiah, like the psalmist in many places, commits justice to the Lord.

He calls for the Lord to act in vengeance upon them, and the Lord responds with the assurance that those who sought to kill him and to wipe out his name would themselves die by the sword with their children. The Lord stands by the prophet Jeremiah and does not allow his word to be silenced. A question to consider, how does the prominence of the covenant within this chapter help us better to understand the role played by the prophet? Jeremiah chapter 12 begins with a powerful question of theodicy, the question of God's justice in the face of evil.

Issues of theodicy are very much at the center of the book of Job, but the issue is also raised at several points in the Psalms and also in the prophets. Here the issue of theodicy takes the very particular form of asking why the wicked prosper. This is a question that we find raised by some of the psalmists. Psalm 37 verses 1 to 11, for instance, fret not yourself because of evildoers, be not envious of wrongdoers, for they will soon fade like the grass and wither like the green herb. Trust in the Lord and do good, dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness. Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart.

Commit your way to the Lord, trust in him and he will act. He will bring forth your righteousness as the light and your justice as the noonday. Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him.

Fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out evil devices. Refrain from anger and forsake wrath. Fret not yourself that tends only to evil, for the evildoers shall be cut off, but those who wait for the Lord shall inherit the land.

In just a little while the wicked will be no more, though you look carefully at his place, he will not be there, but the meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant peace. In this psalm, although the wicked are prospering, the message of the psalmist is fundamentally optimistic, confident that such a situation is short-lived and that the Lord will soon reverse it. The experience of the psalmist in Psalm 73 verses 1-14 is slightly more challenging.

Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

For they have no pangs until death, their bodies are fat and sleek. They are not in trouble as others are, they are not stricken like the rest of mankind. Therefore pride is their necklace, violence covers them as a garment.

Their eyes swell out through fatness, their hearts overflow with follies. They scoff and speak with malice, loftily they threaten oppression. They set their mouths against the heavens and their tongues struts through the earth.

Therefore his people turn back to them and find no fault in them, and they say, How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High? Behold, these are the wicked, always at ease, they increase in riches. All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. All the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning.

The experience of the psalmist in Psalm 73 is a lot closer to the experience of Jeremiah here. This passage follows on the heels and probably continues the complaint of Jeremiah concerning his opponents in Anathoth, his own hometown. They have engaged in a conspiracy against him.

But the point here seems to be concerned with something broader than just the conspiracy, it's the prospering of the wicked more generally. Jeremiah begins by affirming the righteousness of the Lord, that is the basic premise of everything that

follows. But yet he raises a complaint immediately following, an accusation, why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why are all who are treacherous thrive? And the point is made keener in the verse that follows.

God is the one that plants them. They do not just happen to thrive. The prophet believes that the Lord is sovereign in the events of history.

And so when they thrive and produce fruit and grow and spread out, the Lord is not just passively letting that happen. He is providing and maintaining the conditions by which that situation can be the case. They are wicked, they are treacherous, and also they are duplicitous.

God is in their mouths, they confess his name, but their hearts are far from him. By contrast, the prophet knows that his heart is set upon the Lord, and the Lord knows his heart. He calls for the Lord to act against them.

He has been brought as a sheep towards the slaughter, unknowingly being caught up by their plots before the Lord made it known to him. He calls for them to be pulled out like sheep for the slaughter, that what they sought for him, that it might come back upon their own heads. The whole land is suffering on account of these people's sin.

Jeremiah calls for the Lord to act in this situation, to vindicate his righteousness. There is, as long as this situation continues, some cognitive dissonance that the prophet feels. The Lord is righteous, as he has proclaimed at the beginning of the chapter, but yet the Lord is overseeing a situation that is clearly not just.

As long as such a situation continues, the prophet will feel the great tension. Having heard Jeremiah's complaint, what might we expect next? Maybe a comforting word from the Lord that he will bring justice to bear upon these unfaithful people, that he will vindicate his righteousness and avenge his servant. But that is not what we hear.

Rather, the prophet's discomfort will be intensified. If he feels as though he is in a wearying footrace with human beings, he must brace himself to compete with horses. If he is struggling in a safe land, how will he cope when he is placed in the jungle with the wild beasts? The men of Anathoth have conspired against him.

But it is not just the men of Anathoth. His own brothers and members of his own father's household have risen against him. They have joined the conspiracy.

He is left altogether without anyone to trust, and he must cast himself wholly upon the Lord. As in the book of Job, the questions of theodicy placed before the Lord are not actually answered. Rather, the believer needs to learn to trust God in the continuing and deepening darkness.

There is no assurance of near relief. Some response to the concerns of the prophet are

found in the next speech. In verses 7-13, the Lord announces judgment upon his people.

These verses open with a threefold statement. I have forsaken my house, I have abandoned my heritage, I have given the beloved of my soul into the hands of her enemies. There is an escalation here, a movement from forsaking the house, the temple, abandoning the heritage, the land, and the people, and then giving up the beloved of my soul into the hands of her enemies.

With that last in the sequence, we feel something of the divine pathos. The Lord has given up his very bride into the hand of those who would destroy her. Why has he done this? We are made to feel something of the pain of the Lord in the verses that follow.

His inheritance, his people, his bride, has become to him like a lion in the forest. She roars against him like a wild beast seeking to take another's life. In verse 9, Judah is compared either to a hyena's lair or to a speckled bird.

If it is a reference to a speckled bird of prey, then there is a neat reversal in the statement that follows. Are the birds of prey against her all around? The birds of prey, her natural companions, are now turning against her. And just as she was compared also to a wild beast, a lion of the forest, now the wild beasts are assembled against her, brought in to devour her.

All of this is an expression of the fact that the Lord hates his people because of their sin. They become like a predator towards him, and so his wrath turns against them, and he brings judgment upon them. Many shepherds have come to destroy his vineyard.

While this might be a reference to the kings of Judah who have been unfaithful and destroyed the vineyard of the Lord's planting, it might rather be a reference to Nebuchadnezzar and the kings and officials accompanying him in the first attack upon Jerusalem in 597 BC. The result of this attack is to render Jerusalem and the land a desolation. It's preserved in this desolate state.

But yet, even though the Lord's hand was involved in all of this, Judah has not reflected upon the lesson brought by this judgment or sought to repent. The result of the Lord's judgment is a sort of reversion to chaos. They sow wheat and they reap thorns.

The land does not yield its fruit in the way that they would hope. They have been cut off from the blessings of the Lord. This chapter ends with a remarkable oracle.

Although it seems to be placed far later in Jeremiah's ministry, it continues the theme of heritage that we've seen in the chapter to this point. It refers to the exile has been completed. At the start of Jeremiah's ministry, he was told, see, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.

That statement in Jeremiah chapter 1 verse 10 is not hard to see in the background of this great statement concerning the uprooting and replanting of nations. Those who have been involved in the uprooting of Judah will themselves be uprooted and Judah will be uprooted from among them and brought back to their own land. However, a return to the land is not for Judah alone.

Other nations will also be blessed with a return to their lands and there will be a reversal of the course that history had taken to that point. Prior to that point, Israel and Judah had learned the ways of the nations and as a result had gone into exile. Now the nations would learn the ways of the Lord's people.

They would learn to swear by the Lord's name, where once the nations had taught Israel and Judah to swear by Baal. Taught in such a way, they would be built up if they were faithful. If they were not faithful, they would be utterly and completely plucked up and destroyed.

Here we could see an analogy with the way that the Lord dealt with the nations that were planted in Israel after the destruction of the northern kingdom. Although those nations ended up adopting a form of syncretism, the Lord dealt with them in a way that in the longer term would encourage them to learn something of the way of his people, to enter into some form of relationship with him. Such grace would be shown to various other nations with the intended result that not only Israel and Judah would be restored, but many other nations around them and through their influence.

Zechariah chapter 14 verses 16 to 19 also speaks of a grander restoration. Then everyone who survives of all the nations that have come against Jerusalem shall go up year after year to worship the king, the lord of hosts, and to keep the feast of booths. And if any of the families of the earth do not go up to Jerusalem to worship the king, the lord of hosts, there will be no rain on them.

And if the family of Egypt does not go up and present themselves, then on them there shall be no rain. There shall be the plague with which the Lord afflicts the nations that do not go up to keep the feast of booths. This shall be the punishment to Egypt and the punishment to all the nations that do not go up to keep the feast of booths.

A question to consider, where in the book of Jeremiah to this point have we seen other such statements of grace towards the surrounding nations? Jeremiah chapter 13 opens with a symbolic action, likely from Jeremiah's earlier ministry. This is followed by oracle material concerning it. Symbolic action is a mode of presentation of the divine word through something akin to an enacted parable.

Jack Lumbom rightly argues for the importance of distinguishing this from a sort of sympathetic magic, some attempt at manipulation through actions performed upon representative objects. Jeremiah performs a similar symbolic action at the beginning of chapter 19 with the pottery jug. Several other such actions are found throughout the book.

Indeed, Jeremiah himself serves as something of a sign to the people. The symbolic action itself involves a loincloth, a loose fitting garment worn around the loins next to the skin. The loincloth is a more intimate garment than many others.

It would also have been worn by the priests. Jeremiah is instructed not to wash the loincloth. The wearing of the loincloth and the later bearing of the loincloth are related.

We should also bear in mind the stage by stage revelation of what Jeremiah is to do with this loincloth. When Jeremiah begins the symbolic action, he and any of the people watching him have no idea of where it is going to go. This might have invited their curiosity, which would have served the effectiveness of the sign.

Presumably a period of time elapses between the first word of the Lord given to Jeremiah and the second, and during that period of time his wearing of this loincloth, with no explanation given as to its purpose, might provoke conversation, especially as it was never washed. After having performed the first stage of the symbolic action in wearing the loincloth, Jeremiah is instructed to take the loincloth and bring it to some place where he hides it in the cleft of the rock. There is no reference to a river or to a particular place on the Euphrates here, and many have argued that it is not actually a reference to the Euphrates at all.

Rather it might be a reference to a place called Pera, which was only about five miles from Jerusalem and had the sort of rocky situation that would be suitable for performing this particular sign. The southern bank of the river Euphrates might not have had the same rocky conditions. Other commentators have suggested that Jeremiah might have gone to the Euphrates in a vision, otherwise we have to explain his taking a round trip of several hundred miles twice over.

Derek Kidner, however, argues that the laborious nature of such a journey to the Euphrates itself would have been part of what would have made it an effective sign. That said, if Jeremiah did go to the Euphrates, it is highly unlikely that anyone accompanied him. Had he merely gone to Pera, about five miles away, it is quite likely that a number of witnesses would have been there to see the action performed.

Once again, in performing this symbolic action, Jeremiah does not know what will happen next. Once again, a significant amount of time elapses, and then the Lord instructs him to return to the place where he placed the loincloth. When he takes out the loincloth, lo and behold, it's good for nothing.

At this point, the word of the Lord comes to him to explain the significance of the symbolic action. First of all, the Lord gives the primary key to the meaning of the

enacted parable. The loincloth represents his people.

Just as the loincloth has been spoiled, so his people will be spoiled. The fact that they are good for nothing is seen in the way that they refuse to listen to his words. They stubbornly follow their own hearts, and they have gone after their idols to worship them.

The purpose of the loincloth was always to cling to the body of a person. As a people of the Lord's creation, the purpose of Israel was always to cling to him. Just as the loincloth has an intimate relationship with the body of the wearer, so Judah and Israel were supposed to have an intimate relationship with the Lord, their God.

They were to be the Lord's special possession, a manifestation of the holiness of his name, his praise, and also his glory. And their clinging to the Lord was always to take the form of listening to his voice and faithfully obeying. This opening symbolic action in Oracle is followed by a second prose account.

It isn't clear whether the statement every jar shall be filled with wine is proverbial or situational. Brueggemann and Clemens, as well as Craigie, Kelly, and Drinkard all argued that Jeremiah is repeating a proverb here, whereas Lumbum suggests that the setting is that of a feast with wine. Whichever it is, the meaning is not too difficult to discern.

There is a shift from the jars that are filled with wine to the people that are filled with wine. The Lord tests people with wine, with the wine of his fury and wrath. Here the effect of the Lord's filling the people with wine is to render them intoxicated and unstable in their feet.

They totter and are dashed into each other. Perhaps the connection between the people and the jars is to be continued into verse 14, within which the unstable jars of the people smash into each other, to the destruction of all involved. The unheeding people are instructed to hear and give ear in verse 15, where a warning is delivered to them.

Before the Lord brings judgment upon them, they are called to give glory to him. If they do not, while like shepherds they look for the light of the coming morning, the Lord will bring a deeper darkness upon them. Jeremiah describes the way that he will weep for the people if they fail to respond in verse 17.

In verses 18 and 19 there is judgment proclaimed upon the leaders of the people, more particularly upon the king and the queen mother, perhaps in this case Jehoiachin and his mother Nehushter. If they are the figure's address, this would likely have been shortly before 597 BC, with the first deportation from Jerusalem. 2 Kings chapter 24 verse 12 describes this, and Jehoiachin the king of Judah gave himself up to the king of Babylon, himself and his mother, and his servants and his officials, and his palace officials.

The king of Babylon took him prisoner in the eighth year of his reign. Verse 20 seems to continue this address to the king and the queen mother. In verse 18 there is the loss of

the beautiful crown, and in verse 20 there is the loss of the beautiful flock.

The exiled king and queen mother have suffered the loss of the people that were once committed to their charge. The text of verse 21 is very difficult, and many scholars debate whether some words have been omitted, or whether the text has been distorted in some other manner in its historical transmission. The meaning of the text might be similar to Jeremiah chapter 4 verses 30 to 31.

Judah has been unwise in its choice of its friends. And you, O desolate one, what do you mean that you dress in scarlet, that you adorn yourself with ornaments of gold, that you enlarge your eyes with paint? In vain you beautify yourself. Your lovers despise you, they seek your life.

For I heard a cry as of a woman in labor, anguish as of one giving birth to her first child, the cry of the daughter of Zion, gasping for breath, stretching out her hands. Woe is me, I am fainting before murderers. Judah and Jerusalem, assured in their innocence, wonder, why have these things come upon me? To which the Lord makes clear that it is on account of their great sin.

The judgment that comes upon them is euphemistically compared to the cruel indignities suffered by women taken captive in warfare. Judah, the adulterous bride who has abandoned the Lord, and whom the Lord has now abandoned, is no longer the exalted queen, she is a common captive of war, stripped of her finery, reduced to a slave, likely to be raped by her enemies. Similar imagery is found in Ezekiel chapter 16 verse 39.

And I will give you into their hands, and they shall throw down your vaulted chamber, and break down your lofty places, they shall strip you of your clothes, and take your beautiful jewels, and leave you naked and bare. Again in Nahum chapter 3 verse 5, Behold, I am against you, declares the Lord of hosts, and will lift up your skirts over your face, and I will make nations look at your nakedness, and kingdoms at your shame. The same image is also used in Isaiah chapter 47 verses 1 to 3 of Babylon itself.

Come down and sit in the dust, O virgin daughter of Babylon, sit on the ground without a throne, O daughter of the Chaldeans, for you shall no more be called tender and delicate. Take the millstone and grind flour, put off your veil, strip off your robe, uncover your legs, pass through the rivers, your nakedness shall be uncovered, and your disgrace shall be seen. I will take vengeance, and I will spare no one.

As we see in the marital parable of Ezekiel chapter 16, the Lord had blessed and dressed his people. Israel was clothed in marital dress, with the clothing of a priestly and a royal figure. All of that will be removed from her, and she will be utterly ravaged by her enemies.

At a number of points in the prophecy of Jeremiah, he speaks of the way that Jerusalem

and Judah did not just commit evil in an accidental way, but had become committed to evil. It had become like a well designed to keep its evil fresh. Here the analogy that he turns to is the skin of an Ethiopian or the spots of a leopard.

Jerusalem and Judah's evil has become as distinctive and unchangeable as either the Ethiopian skin or the leopard's spots. Against some later racist commentators, it is important to notice that the comparison between the evil of Judah and the Ethiopian skin does not rest on any association between the skin colour and evil. Rather the point is that as an Ethiopian skin would have distinctively and unchangeably marked him out in the context of 6th century BC Judah, so Judah itself is marked out by its sin.

In consequence of Judah's iniquity, judgment will fall upon it, a judgment that is described in three images. They will be scattered like chaff driven by the wind from the desert. This takes up imagery that we see in Psalm 1 concerning the wicked on the day of judgment.

The second image is an ironic one of the parceling out of land. Judah is going to be uprooted from the land from their sin, but a new lot is being apportioned to them. The portion that the Lord is measuring out for them is a portion of shame and dishonour, an inheritance that they are receiving on account of their sin.

The final imagery is similar to the one in verse 22. Judah is the unfaithful, adulterous and prostituting bride and as a result she is going to be stripped of her finery by the Lord. As her royal skirts are removed, she is laid bare before her enemies, who will utterly humiliate her.

The horrific sexual imagery implied here should not be sugarcoated. It is of peace with the other jarring sexual imagery that is used of Judah and Jerusalem in the book of Jeremiah. Judah is the beloved bride of the Lord who has turned adulterous and then turned into a prostitute that will throw herself before any man.

Pathetically she dresses up as if to seduce former lovers who are now going to destroy her, and now she is stripped of all her finery and reduced to a war slave to be raped by her captors. The horrific ugliness and cruelty of the image may turn our stomachs, but it is well calculated to communicate the pathos, the horror and the true scandal of the story of Judah. A question to consider, what are some other examples in scripture of symbolic actions? Jeremiah chapter 14 is introduced as the word of the Lord that came to Jeremiah concerning the drought.

This introduction might refer to the entirety of chapters 14 and 15. There is no indication of the date given here, and although the drought was clearly very severe, we have no reference to it in the books of Kings or Chronicles. This is another of Jeremiah's prayers of lament. As a nation, Israel depended upon the rains for its irrigation. While the land of Egypt was primarily irrigated through the Nile, Israel depended upon the rains, and a lack of rain could be devastating for the land and its people. Prayer for rain was often associated with the Feast of Tabernacles, and one of the curses of the covenant was the cutting off of rain.

Deuteronomy chapter 11 verses 16 to 17. Take care lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them. Then the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you, and he will shut up the heavens, so that there will be no rain, and the land will yield no fruit, and you will perish quickly after the good land that the Lord is giving you.

Deuteronomy chapter 28 verses 22 to 24. The Lord will strike you with wasting disease, and with fever, inflammation, and fiery heat, and with drought, and with blight, and with mildew. They shall pursue you until you perish, and the heavens over your head shall be bronze, and the earth under you shall be iron.

The Lord will make the rain of your land powder, from heaven dust shall come down on you until you are destroyed. The most famous drought of course was the drought on Israel during the reign of King Ahab. In 1 Kings chapter 18 verses 5 to 6, Ahab and Obadiah have to go throughout the land searching for grass for the horses and the mules, who are about to die on account of the prolonged drought.

Here the experience of the drought is described as a sort of nationwide mourning. Judah is in mourning, and her personified gates are languishing. Similar imagery is also used in Isaiah chapter 3 verse 26.

And her gates shall lament and mourn, empty she shall sit on the ground. Even the nobles of the land struggle to obtain water, they send out their servants, who come back empty. The farmers of the land are also dismayed, as are the beasts.

The dove forsakes her newborn fawn as she struggles to find the food that she needs. Another description of the impact of a drought upon the animals of the land can be found in Joel chapter 1 verses 18 and 20. How the beasts groan, the herds of cattle are perplexed because there is no pasture for them, even the flocks of sheep suffer.

Even the beasts of the fields pant for you because the water brooks are dried up, and fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness. The wild donkeys are even going blind as they are malnourished without the grass that they need. The whole land is in a state of mourning.

And in verses 7 to 9 there is a confession of sin. This is presumably Jeremiah confessing on behalf of the whole people. Jeremiah acts as the prophet interceding for the people.

There are various examples of communal confessions of sin, or a prophet confessing on

behalf of the people in the scripture. Daniel chapter 9 is such an example. In 1st Samuel chapter 7 the people ask Samuel to pray for them.

Jeremiah speaking for the people acknowledges that the drought has come upon them on account of their sin. They have broken the covenant and so they are suffering the covenant curse. Nonetheless they look to the Lord.

The Lord can act to save his people for his name's sake. The people are his people, called by his name. However, appealing to the Lord as the hope of Israel, its saviour in time of trouble, Jeremiah asks why the Lord should be like a stranger in the land, someone who is just passing through and staying for the night.

His commitment to the people does not seem to be expressed in his actual deliverance of them. In an especially bold statement, Jeremiah calls upon the Lord not to act like a mighty man or a warrior who is unable to save his people. The Lord is in the midst of his people.

The people are called by his name. Jeremiah beseeches the Lord to act on behalf of them. Yet he receives a discouraging answer from the Lord.

The people have delighted to stray away from him and now the Lord will not accept them. The time has come to bring their sins upon them in judgment. The Lord forbids Jeremiah from praying for the people.

This is not the first time that this has happened. We see the same thing in Jeremiah chapter 7 verse 16 and chapter 11 verse 14. As for you, do not pray for this people or lift up a cry or prayer for them and do not intercede with me for I will not hear you.

And again, therefore do not pray for this people or lift up a cry or prayer on their behalf for I will not listen when they call to me in the time of their trouble. The Lord has doomed the people to destruction by sword, famine and pestilence. It is too late to try and escape their fate through fasts, prayers and sacrifices.

The time has passed and now their judgment is inevitable. But even though the Lord declares this judgment, Jeremiah has to contend with competing prophets who are giving a very different sort of message. Their message is one of false reassurance, telling the people that everything is going to be okay, that no judgment is going to fall upon them.

In Jeremiah chapter 6 verses 13 to 15, this struggle that Jeremiah faced with the false prophets is also described. For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain. And from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely.

They have healed the wound of my people lightly saying, peace, peace, when there is no peace. Were they ashamed when they committed abomination? No, they were not at all ashamed. They did not know how to blush.

Therefore they shall fall among those who fall at the time that I punish them. They shall be overthrown, says the Lord. In Jeremiah chapter 28, we have an example of Jeremiah's struggle with false prophets, with Hananiah who prophesies peace and deliverance from Babylon.

Jeremiah confronts Hananiah and declares to him, the prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms. As for the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of that prophet comes to pass, then it will be known that the Lord has truly sent that prophet. Another famous example of struggling with false prophets is in first Kings chapter 22, as the prophet Micaiah prophesies defeat for Ahab and Israel in the battle and struggles with Zedekiah who prophesies otherwise.

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

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

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

Once again he appeals to the covenant. He appeals to the Lord's honor, the honor of his name. He appeals to the Lord's power.

None of the false gods of the nations can bring rain. None of them have that power. In expressing the Lord's praise in this way, he's calling for the Lord to act, to display his power, mercifully to demonstrate his might over the false gods and deliver his people.

Yet, pound as he might, no answer seems to be forthcoming. A question to consider, can he think of occasions when the Lord heeded intercession for his people? Can he think of any differences between this occasion in Jeremiah and those? Chapter 15 of Jeremiah continues the material of chapter 14 concerning the drought and Jeremiah's prayers for the people which the Lord rejected. The Lord instructed Jeremiah not to pray for the people in chapter 7 verse 16, in chapter 11 verse 14 and in chapter 14 verse 11.

The Lord begins the chapter by declaring that even were Moses and Samuel to stand up

and pray for the people, he would not listen to them. Moses and Samuel were the great intercessors of Israel. Most famously, after Israel's sin with the golden calf, Moses had interceded for the people in chapter 32 to 34 of the book of Exodus.

This was one of several occasions where Moses stood between the people and the Lord, interceding for them and sparing them from the Lord's destruction. In 1st Samuel chapter 7 and 12, Samuel serves a similar purpose, interceding for the people before the Lord, that he would deliver them from their enemies. As paradigmatic prophets, Moses was the one by whom Israel had been delivered from slavery in Egypt and established for the first time as a nation.

Samuel was the prophet who stood at the foundation of the kingdom. In Hosea chapter 12 verse 13, it seems that the prophet is referring to these two characters. By a prophet, the Lord brought Israel up from Egypt and by a prophet, he was guarded.

However, on account of their sin, the people are expelled from the Lord's sight. His heart won't turn to them. The language here is similar to the language of expulsion from Pharaoh's presence in the story of the Exodus, but now they are expelled from the presence of the Lord.

Four forms of destruction are assigned to them. Pestilence, sword, famine and captivity. This is similar to the four horsemen of the apocalypse in the book of Revelation.

There seems to be a connection between the number four and such judgments. We see a similar thing in Ezekiel chapter 14 verse 21. For thus says the Lord God, how much more when I send upon Jerusalem my four disastrous acts of judgment, sword, famine, wild beasts and pestilence, to cut off from it man and beast.

After the four forms of destruction mentioned, there are four destroyers, the sword, dogs, birds and beasts, with four modes of destruction that they come with, killing, tearing, devouring and destroying. Creatures usually ruled or wielded by man are going to turn against their master and destroy. And all of this is occurring on account of the wickedness of Manasseh.

This is a common theme in the books of the kings. Second Kings chapter 23 verse 26. Still the Lord did not turn from the burning of his great wrath by which his anger was kindled against Judah because of all the provocations with which Manasseh had provoked him.

In second Kings chapter 24 verses 3 and 4, surely this came upon Judah at the command of the Lord to remove them out of his sight for the sins of Manasseh according to all that he had done and also for the innocent blood that he has shed. For he filled Jerusalem with innocent blood and the Lord would not pardon. In verse 5, the Lord takes up a lament for Jerusalem. No one now is concerned for Jerusalem's peace. But Jerusalem has rejected the Lord and so he has destroyed them. He did not initiate the break.

They did by their unfaithfulness. The Lord's hand is now stretched out, not in salvation but in judgment upon them. He relented many times to no real change on Judah's part and now he is weary of doing so.

Verses 7 to 9 present a litany of judgments that the Lord brought upon them, all to no effect. They have been winnowed, bereaved, destroyed. Their widows have been multiplied.

A destroyer has been brought against them. And the effect of this judgment is described in verse 9. The one who was born seven has grown feeble. The woman with a full household loses all her children to war.

The woman with seven children is also used as an image of prosperity in 1 Samuel 2 verse 5. Those who are full have hired themselves out for bread but those who are hungry have ceased to hunger. The baron has born seven but she who has many children is forlorn. No response of repentance has been made to the judgments of the Lord and now the complete rejection of correction has brought Judah to the point of national destruction.

Jeremiah turns to the Lord at this point. He regrets his birth. He is a cause of vexation to the land but not in a way that has provoked any repentance on their part.

Like another famous sufferer in scripture, Job, in Job chapter 3, he declares a woe upon the day of his birth and the mother who bore him. He will return to this theme in chapter 20 verses 14 to 18 in even stronger language. Cursed be the day on which I was born, the day when my mother bore me.

Let it not be blessed. Cursed be the man who brought the news to my father, a son is born to you, making him very glad. Let that man be like the cities that the Lord overthrew without pity.

Let him hear a cry in the morning and an alarm at noon because he did not kill me in the womb. So my mother would have been my grave and her womb forever great. Why did I come out from the womb to see toil and sorrow and spend my days in shame? Jeremiah declares himself innocent of any wrong towards his enemies.

He is not a usurer. He is not a debtor who fails to repay. Rather he is the bearer of a deeply unpopular message, a message that is provoking anger and opposition, but the message of the Lord that he is faithfully bearing.

The Lord had appointed him as a prophet for the people's benefit and good. The Lord had delivered him from his opponents as well. Here our minds should be drawn back to

the call of Jeremiah in chapter 1 and verses 8 and 9. Do not be afraid of them for I am with you to deliver you declares the Lord.

Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth and the Lord said to me, Behold I have put my words in your mouth. The Lord has stood by Jeremiah against his opposition as he had promised back in chapter 1 verses 17 to 19. But you dress yourself for work, arise and say to them everything that I command you.

Do not be dismayed by them lest I dismay you before them. And I behold I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar and bronze walls against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests and the people of the land. They will fight against you but they shall not prevail against you for I am with you declares the Lord to deliver you.

The people might be like iron but Jeremiah is iron from the north, the toughest iron available, iron most likely made in Pontus in northeast Asia Minor. Judah's wealth will be taken by her enemies as will her sons. This returns to the judgment being declared prior to Jeremiah's lament.

Verses 15 to 18 contain another lament of the prophet, one of the confessions of Jeremiah. Jeremiah acknowledges the Lord's knowledge of him and of his situation but he calls the Lord to take note of it and in his forbearance to spare him. He wants deliverance from the Lord but he also wants vengeance upon his enemies.

He is suffering as the Lord's faithful servant for the Lord's sake. He ate the Lord's words. The Lord had placed his words on his mouth back in chapter 1 verse 9. This is similar to the experience of Ezekiel in Ezekiel chapter 2 verse 8 to chapter 3 verse 3. But you son of man hear what I say to you be not rebellious like that rebellious house open your mouth and eat what I give you.

And when I looked behold a hand was stretched out to me and behold the scroll of the book was in it and he spread it before me and it had writing on the front and on the back and there were written on it words of lamentation and mourning and woe and he said to me son of man eat whatever you find here eat this scroll and go speak to the house of Israel. So I opened my mouth and he gave me this scroll to eat and he said to me son of man feed your belly with this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it. Then I ate it and it was in my mouth as sweet as honey.

The reference to the words of the Lord that were found might be a reference to the words of the Lord that were found in the book of Isaiah. The words of the book of the Lord discovered in the temple. Jeremiah delighted in the words of the Lord.

He was like the righteous man of Psalm 1. He did not sit with the revelers who were celebrating but he was filled with indignation on the Lord's account. On account of the

rebellious people. And now he turns to the Lord about the pain that he is feeling in his vocation.

The word of the Lord has become painful to bear and no relief seems to be offered to him. Is God's word as a deceptive stream? Has God called him just to increase his pain beyond his bearing? The Lord responds by recalling Jeremiah to his task. He must return and he will be restored in his mission.

He will stand before the Lord once again as his prophet. He will utter the words of the Lord and he will be as God's own mouthpiece. As commentators note there is a play here upon the term turn.

Walter Brueggemann translates it as follows. If you will return I will return you and then they will turn to you but you shall not turn to them. The Lord repeats the promise that he gave to Jeremiah at the beginning.

He will make Jeremiah to the people like a fortified wall of bronze. They will fight against him but they will not prevail against him. The Lord has placed his words in the mouth of Jeremiah and the Lord will stand by his words against all who oppose Jeremiah.

Jeremiah may think that he stands alone but the Lord is with him in his corner to save him and to deliver him. In some ways we could read the experience here of Jeremiah as an anticipation of the experience of a faithful remnant in exile. Jeremiah is already in exile.

He is cut off from his people. He is facing their resistance and opposition. But the Lord is with him in this condition and the Lord stands by him against all these enemies that are arrayed against him.

None of them will prevail. A question to consider. Reflecting upon the pain of the prophet Jeremiah what might we be expected to learn? He is not going to put down roots.

He is not going to have social attachments and he is not going to seek to leave a family legacy. The instruction is particularly related to in this place. It is in Jerusalem and Judah in particular that taking a wife and bearing children would doom the prophet to such misery that it would be best for him not to attempt to do so at all.

Jeremiah is already alone. He is cut off from the people of his town. He faces opposition on all sides.

Now he won't even have a wife and a family to surround him. He is utterly alone. Not taking a wife was very rare for a Jewish man of Jeremiah's day.

Intentional celibacy was even more so. To the modern mind, forgoing sexual relations and the relational intimacy with a partner might seem to be the biggest sacrifices. But to someone of Jeremiah's day, not taking a wife and having children would have entailed a far more complete social alienation and isolation.

It would also have been devastating in not having anyone to continue your name and legacy. It was a closing off of the future and its hope. This instruction was presumably given earlier in Jeremiah's ministry, even if this prophecy comes from some time later on.

Difficult though the Lord's instruction to Jeremiah might have been, it preserved him from the full force of the judgment that was about to come upon the land. Those who had children would lose them to the most gruesome and ignominious of deaths. They would experience the cruelest sorrow and be utterly bereft.

The bodies of the people of the place would be like dung on the surface of the ground. They would suffer untimely deaths and they would not be buried. In addition to preserving Jeremiah from the full force of such a judgment, the Lord is also using Jeremiah to symbolise the aloneness and the bereftness of Judah following its judgment.

The prophet must experience the place in the light of its coming destruction. He must sever emotional and relational ties in anticipation of their hastening fate. He is living, surrounded by doomed people, and he must not get too attached.

He is instructed against going to the house of mourning. He must not lament or grieve with those who have been bereaved. Not only must he not mourn for or with these doomed people, he must not celebrate with them either.

He is instructed against participating in the festivities of weddings and other such events. The time will soon come when the silence of the grave will descend upon Jerusalem. The voices of feasting and gladness, the voices of weddings, will all be silenced in an instant, and a city full of the hubbub of voices will become a desolate tomb.

In all of this, along with his message, Jeremiah serves as a sign for the people, seeing the prophet without hope of a family for the future, seeing the prophet not participating in the basic cycles of life, the weddings and the funerals of the city, should be a sign to them that all of that is about to be cut off for them. Jeremiah is, as it were, a man from a future time, a time of desolation, who has been sent back to live in this city in which the regular patterns of life continue as they have ever done. His presence in the city, along with his message, is a constant, irritating, incessant reminder of what is about to befall.

However, when Jeremiah brings his message to the people, their response will be to question what their iniquity is. They can't acknowledge that they have done anything wrong. Self-righteous, they will question why judgment will come upon them.

They still can't understand. The Lord gives Jeremiah the indictment upon them. The

people's fathers forsook him to serve other gods, and they did not just continue in the ways of their fathers.

They have acted in a manner that is worse than that of their fathers. They have forsaken the Lord for idols, and in their own stubborn will, they have refused to listen to the Lord or to obey him. As a result, he is going to give them over to their will.

As they have turned aside after other gods that they have not known, so they will go to a land that neither they nor their fathers have known, and there they will experience cruel bondage to the gods that they once went after, serving them day and night. The Lord has cut off his favour from them. Life in the land, as we see in verse 3, depends upon the peace of the Lord, his steadfast love and his mercy, and those things have been cut off.

They have been left to their own devices. They have been given up, and as a result, they are doomed to the most bitter of fates. Verses 14-15 inject a note of hope into this declaration of judgement.

The prophet declares that days are coming in which the Lord's deliverance of them from exile will be seen as an action that exceeds the action of his deliverance of them from Egypt. A similar formula is also seen in Jeremiah 7.32 Therefore behold the days are coming, declares the Lord, when it will no more be called Topheth, or the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter, for they will bury in Topheth, because there is no room elsewhere. There is hope in the Lord's statement here, but the hope is that of the light at the end of a very deep and dark tunnel.

Before the hope of that light will really begin to be felt by them, they must first enter into the darkness. The prophecy of restoration is delivered in the form of a statement concerning vows that people will take in the name of the Lord, in which the name of the Lord is attached to actions by which his character and his might have been displayed. In chapter 4 verses 1-2 we read, If you return, O Israel, declares the Lord, to me you should return.

If you remove your detestable things from my presence, and do not waver. And if you swear, as the Lord lives, in truth, in justice, and in righteousness, then nations shall bless themselves in him, and in him shall they glory. The vow form here might imply the blessings that the nations will declare in the name of the Lord when they see his deliverance of his people.

However, before deliverance can be known, the judgment must first fall. The Lord is sending fishers and hunters to catch them. No mountain, no crevice, will be sufficient to hide them from being trapped by these skilled men.

The Lord has seen everything that they have done. Their iniquity is known to him. So he has appointed people to track them down, to pursue them, to catch them, and to bring

them to judgment.

On account of their idolatries, their iniquity will be paid back double. Once again in verses 19-20, a note of hope enters in. Like the psalmist often does, Jeremiah speaks of the Lord as his strength and stronghold, his refuge in the day of trouble.

Back in chapter 3 verse 17 we read, At that time Jerusalem shall be called the throne of the Lord, and all nations shall gather to it, to the presence of the Lord in Jerusalem. And they shall no more stubbornly follow their own evil heart. Similar descriptions of the conversion and repentance of the nations can be seen in places like Isaiah chapter 2. Here the nations are going to realize the futility of their idolatry.

The Lord has delivered his people. In the Exodus he proved his might over the gods of the Egyptians. And now once again in Israel's history he has proved his power.

The nations will see it. They will repent of their idolatries and they will turn to the Lord. They turn away from the worthless things that they have inherited from their fathers, literally the vapor that they once depended upon.

The idols are emptiness. They are not able to save. They are not gods.

This is a common theme in the prophets. The incomparability and the uniqueness of God is demonstrated in his future salvation of his people. God is unique as creator.

God is unique as the one who governs history. And God will demonstrate his uniqueness in the fulfillment of his promises, the judgment of the wicked, and the deliverance of his people. A question to consider.

In 1 Corinthians chapter 7 the apostle Paul, who also did not take a wife, teaches the Corinthians that there are some situations where it is better not to marry, most particularly in the present distress of those days. In what ways is Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians chapter 7 similar in its reasoning to the Lord's instruction to Jeremiah here? In what significant ways is it different? Jeremiah chapter 17 begins with another indictment of rebellious Judah. The law of God was supposed to be placed upon the heart and later in chapter 31 verses 31 to 34 it will be written in the heart by the spirit.

The heart is supposed to be analogous to the Ark of the Covenant, the inner secret place where the Lord's throne is found and where his law is treasured. Yet on Judah's heart and on the horns of Judah's altars, its sin is written instead. It has been engraved with a diamond-tipped iron stylus.

The altar was a place where things were presented to the Lord, and the horns of the altar were places for atoning blood. The heart is the core of the human person, where their deepest commitments, loyalties, and loves can be found. Judah's heart, however, is a sort of inversion of the law. It's a deep engraving of sin. And the horns of Judah's altars, that should bear the atoning blood that leads the Lord to forgive their sin, now bear indelible testimony to their iniquity, calling not for forgiveness but for judgment. Children were a further repository of memory, as the people taught their offspring the law and God's great deeds.

But the children have been taught the ways of the idols, rather than those of the Lord. As a consequence of Judah's idolatry, their wealth and their treasures will be given to their enemies as spoil, and they will lose their possession of the land that they have defiled. The disaster that will befall them is a direct consequence of their persistence in sin.

Verse 5 takes the form of one of the curses of Deuteronomy chapter 27-28. A curse is declared upon the man who trusts in man's own strength and the strength of flesh. This might anticipate some of Paul's distinctions between flesh and spirit.

Flesh is a site of wrongful human confidence. The true confidence of the people of God must be in the Lord. In verses 6-8 we have a comparison between human beings and trees.

Human beings more generally are like trees. They draw nutrients from their surroundings. They need to be planted in good locations if they are to thrive.

However, if they are well planted, they can thrive, become strong, endure trials, and provide security and resources to others. The contrast here is between a desert shrub that lacks the conditions to thrive, and a tree that is planted beside waters. Behind this we might hear the words of Psalm 1 verses 1-3.

Psalm 1 goes on to draw a contrast between the righteous and the wicked. But the wicked there are compared not to desert shrubs, but to chaff. In the contrast here in Jeremiah, perhaps the greatest feature that stands out of the righteous person is his preparedness for the difficult times, for when the heat comes, or in the year of drought.

It is in the time of testing that the true character of a person is revealed. The hidden network of roots by which the tree drinks in water and brings up nutrients provides the strength and stability that is displayed when the tree can withstand the fastest winds or the harshest conditions. Once again in verse 9, the dysfunctional heart is seen to be the root of humanity's problems more generally, and of Judah's in particular.

The heart is ill, and it is deceitful. At the core of the human being is the sickness of sin, disease desires, cancerous attachments, core problems of which wicked deeds are the evidencing symptoms. Besides its illness, the heart is also mysterious and duplicitous.

Its ways are difficult to discern. We can't figure it out or master it. Jeremiah might also be speaking about his own heart here, along with the situation of the heart of Judah.

God, however, understands the human heart. He searches it out and tests it. He reveals

its true character.

He is also the one who will judge the hearts and minds of all according to their works. We should entrust ourselves to God, as He can understand us. He can discern who we truly are, and we should beware of resting too much upon our own judgments concerning our hearts.

Rather, we should take our bearings from God's own guidance. The psalmist presents this truth in Psalm 139 verses 23-24, without the same despairing tone of the prophet here. Also in 1 John 3 verses 19-20.

Verse 11 is a wisdom saying, perhaps a traditional proverb. A number of possible suggestions have been put forward for what is meant here. Maybe the partridge steals young from other birds, or maybe it hatches birds that it hasn't laid.

If this were the case, it might be a reference to the male partridge. Others have suggested the possibility that it fails to hatch the eggs that it has. The proverb likely draws upon ancient understandings of the behaviour of partridges, some of it possibly misguided.

The point of Jeremiah is not to comment upon the behaviour of partridges, but to use the analogy of the partridge to speak about some of the sins of Judah. Perhaps the point is that just like the bird that has chicks not its own, the man who has riches gained by dishonesty will find that those riches abandon him in time. Riches apart from wisdom and integrity are short-lasting.

The point here then might be similar to one that we encounter in the book of Proverbs, in Proverbs chapter 21 verses 5-7 for instance. The plans of the diligent lead surely to abundance, but everyone who is hasty comes only to poverty. The getting of treasures by a lying tongue is a fleeting vapour and a snare of death.

The violence of the wicked will sweep them away because they refuse to do what is just. Whether for nations or for individuals, the true character of people will ultimately be revealed. One cannot indefinitely avoid the consequences of your action and the exposure of your true character.

In verses 12-18, or perhaps only 13-18, we have another one of the confessions of Jeremiah. He addresses the throne of God, the Lord's throne in heaven. Even in Jerusalem's distress, Jeremiah can turn to this higher throne.

The Lord is the one in whom the true people of God place their hope and the one by whom their future is secured. Those who reject him will be ashamed and dismayed. Written in the earth here likely contrasts with expressions like written in the book of life.

It might also refer simply to death. The dismay that they suffer is a result of their

forsaking of the source of life. The Lord is the fountain of living water.

Jeremiah calls out to the Lord for his effective healing and salvation. He is being mocked and dismissed by the people around him, yet he has been faithful in his charge. He calls the Lord to bear witness to his integrity in performing his prophetic calling, praying that in the day of judgment he will be vindicated and that those who persecute and dismiss him will be put to shame.

The chapter ends on another surprising note, as Jeremiah is instructed to stand in the gates and speak to people as they enter the city. In particular, he is supposed to speak to them concerning their Sabbath breaking. The Sabbath was the great sign of the covenant given at Sinai.

It was a chief sign marking Israel out as a people who had been released from slavery, from the cruelty of their labors, being given rest, and who had been called to give rest and liberty to others. Carrying on business as usual on the Sabbath day in Jerusalem was a failure to honour the covenant sign that the Lord had given at Sinai. Along with the commandment to honour father and mother, the commandment to keep the Sabbath day holy was one of only two positive commandments situated at the very heart of the ten words.

Repeatedly in the book of Jeremiah, Judah's sin is identified as flowing in large part from a failure of memory. Judah's failure to remember the Sabbath, to set apart this one day as holy, led to wide arranging failures in their understanding of the covenant and of their understanding of the creator God's sovereignty over their time. The people of Judah are presented by Jeremiah with a great promise.

If they honour the Sabbath day, if they keep it holy and don't work on it, then the glory shall be returned to the kingdom of Judah. Treasures and great riches will be brought into the city from round about, but if they fail to keep it, then great judgment will come upon Jerusalem and its people. Nehemiah, in a post-exilic context, shows the same concern for the observance of the Sabbath day in Jerusalem, and the same struggle with people who are failing to do so.

This is particularly clear in Nehemiah chapter 13. We should also recall the curse of the covenant in Leviticus chapter 26, verses 33-35 here. A question to consider, where else in scripture can we find parallels to Jeremiah's discussion of the sickness and the duplicity of the heart? Jeremiah chapter 18 begins with the Lord's direction to Jeremiah to go to the house of the potter.

The theme of pottery will be important in chapter 19 as well. As a metaphor, the relationship between the potter and the clay is one that is used for God's relationship with his people on a few occasions in scripture. In Isaiah chapter 45, verses 9-11 Isaiah chapter 64, verse 8 Most famously, this imagery is taken up by the apostle Paul in

Romans chapter 9, verses 18-24.

Will what is moulded say to its moulder, Why have you made me like this? Has the potter no right over the clay to make out of the same lump one vessel for honourable use and another for dishonourable use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory? Even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only, but also from the Gentiles. Familiar as we may be with uses of the imagery of the potter and the clay, we should beware of some of the assumptions that we might bring to this text. Christian uses of this imagery have often focused on the Lord's power and determination apart from and prior to anything that the clay has a part in.

The Lord as the potter determines what the clay should be and the clay becomes that thing. The clay has no agency or determination in the matter. The clay cannot resist its maker.

The clay cannot change its maker's mind. However, while the symbol of the potter and the clay here in Jeremiah does emphasise the sovereignty of the Lord, it is the dynamic process of forming the clay, not the prior decision of what to form it into, that is focused upon here. And here comes the real surprise.

In the Lord's use of this symbolism with Jeremiah, the potter's purpose for the clay is resisted by the clay and as a result the potter's purpose for the clay changes. There is a dynamic relationship between the potter and the clay here that while representing the potter's sovereignty, simultaneously emphasises his responsiveness to the material that he is working upon. And while Jeremiah has followed the Lord's direction and has seen the potter perform these actions upon the clay, now the Lord's word comes to him and he is granted to understand the meaning of what he has seen.

The Lord presents two different scenarios. The first in which the Lord has determined some disaster upon a nation and the second in which the Lord has determined to bless a nation. In the first case, if the nation responds in a positive way to its maker, then the Lord will relent of his intention to destroy it.

In the second, contrasting scenario, if the Lord had purposed to bless a nation and it responds in a negative way, doing evil and not listening to the voice of the Lord, then the Lord can relent of the good that he intended to do to it and it can be destroyed. It is in this context that Jeremiah gives a word of warning to the people of Judah. The Lord has a purpose to destroy them.

But yet, in the analogy of the potter and the clay, there is the hope that if they truly repent, the Lord might relent and they might not suffer his judgement. But yet, in verse 12, we see that they have been stubborn in their evil way. They have not repented.

They have not turned or responded. God's warnings have gone unheeded. Verse 13 contains a homonym of the word used for stubbornness in verse 12 in the term used for horrible thing.

Israel's infidelity is unprecedented even among the pagan nations. The pagan nations don't abandon even false idols. But Israel has abandoned the living and true God.

And when Israel, the Lord's people, abandon the Lord, they become monstrous. They cease to be themselves. The Lord makes this point by contrasting their infidelity with the fidelity of the created order.

The snow of Lebanon does not leave the crags of Syrian. The mountain waters do not run dry. The created order is faithful in its paths.

But Israel has abandoned their God. The result has been disorientation and decay. Israel has wandered off on false paths and their land has become desolate, a site of death and destruction.

As they have forgotten the Lord, the Lord will scatter them before their enemies. As they have turned their backs on Him, so in the day of Judah's calamity, He will turn His back on them. As a prophet declaring the Lord's judgement upon the people, Jeremiah seems to have faced rising opposition.

And in verse 18, we have a window into conspiracies made against him. Jeremiah has become a public enemy. The leading authorities feel threatened by him and they intend to take him out.

There are three forms of public authority mentioned here, who rule by three different modes of speech. The priest rules by means of the law. The wise rule by means of wise counsel.

And the prophet rules by means of the word of the Lord. Jeremiah's bearing of the effective word of God that bears testimony against them is a threat to the authority of each of these figures. He declares the wise to be foolish, the priests to have forsaken the law, and the prophets to be speaking empty words of falsehood.

If Jeremiah is not opposed, their authority is placed in jeopardy. They seek to oppose him by striking him with their tongue. This might mean speaking against him publicly, in forms of slander and gossip, but most likely it means something even beyond that, that they will make official charges against him.

Back at the time of his call in chapter 1, the Lord had promised to be with Jeremiah against all of his enemies. In chapter 1 verse 8, Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, declares the Lord. In verses 17-19, But you, dress yourself for work, arise and say to them everything that I command you.

Do not be dismayed by them, lest I dismay you before them. And I, behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar and bronze walls, against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests, and the people of the land. They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, declares the Lord, to deliver you.

In verse 18, the authorities had said, let us not pay attention to any of his words. The same verb is used in verse 19, when Jeremiah calls to the Lord to hear him. The implied false testimony of Jeremiah's adversaries in verse 18, sets up a juridical context.

Faced with false witness, Jeremiah calls upon the Lord to judge, to give ear to his case, and to listen to the voice of his adversaries. He calls upon the Lord to minister justice in his difficult situation. He has been faithful in his calling.

He has prayed for the deliverance of the people, that God's wrath might not come upon them. And yet now they are repaying him with evil for the good that he has done. At this point, the prophet prays, not for their deliverance, but for their judgment, that God's just vengeance will come speedily upon them.

God is the faithful and just God, the God who stands by his word, and stands by his prophet. He is the God who will bring judgment to bear upon people who forsake him, and the people who oppose his word. And Jeremiah, confident in these facts, turns to the Lord in his distress.

Their sins must not be forgiven, their iniquities not blotted out. The time for their destruction has come. A question to consider, was it appropriate for the prophet Jeremiah to pray for the destruction of his enemies? Why or why not? The metaphor of the potter and the clay was introduced in chapter 18.

Now it is developed further in chapter 19. This chapter should be connected with the oracles of chapter 7 verse 30 to chapter 8 verse 3. For the sons of Judah have done evil in my sight, declares the Lord. They have set their detestable things in the house that is called by my name, to defile it.

And they have built the high places of Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I did not command, nor did it come into my mind. Therefore behold the days are coming, declares the Lord, when it will no more be called Topheth, or the valley of the son of Hinnom, but the valley of slaughter, for they will bury in Topheth, because there is no room elsewhere. And the dead bodies of this people will be food for the birds of the air, and for the beasts of the earth, and none will frighten them away.

And I will silence in the cities of Judah, and in the streets of Jerusalem, the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, for the land shall become a waste. At that time, declares the Lord, the bones of the kings of Judah, the bones of its officials, the bones of the priests, the bones of the prophets, and the bones of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, shall be brought out of their tombs, and they shall be spread before the sun and the moon, and all the host of heaven, which they have loved and served, which they have gone after, and which they have sought and worshipped. And they shall not be gathered or buried, they shall be as dung on the surface of the ground.

Death shall be preferred to life by all the remnant that remains of this evil family, in all the places where I have driven them, declares the Lord of hosts. The narrative here provides a background for earlier oracles. We should remember that the material of Jeremiah is not placed in chronological order.

A similar connection can be seen between chapter 26 and Jeremiah's temple sermon in chapter 7 verses 1 to 15. Chapter 19 expands upon the material of chapters 7 to 8. Jack Lumbum argues that verses 1 to 13 are four oracles in prose narrative form. The second half of verse 3 to verse 5, 6 to 9, the second half of verse 11, and then verses 12 to 13.

These are broken into two by directives given to Jeremiah in verses 1 to the first half of verse 3, and verse 10 to the first half of verse 11. There is a similar opening to this chapter as there is to chapter 13, where Jeremiah was instructed to buy the lawn cloth. This time he is buying a flask or decanter.

Lumbum notes that it is generally identified as an expensive ring-burnished decanter. He is witnessed by elders of the people and elders of the priests. These are leading figures and Jeremiah presumably has their attention at this point.

He has been instructed to perform this symbolic action by the Lord and he will perform it before prominent representatives of the authorities. This is performed in the valley of the son of Hinnom. In chapter 28 verses 1 to 3 of 2 Chronicles and in chapter 33 verses 1 to 6 of 2 Chronicles, Ahaz and Manasseh had both burned their sons in this valley.

In 2 Kings chapter 23 verse 10 we read of King Jeziah. He defiled Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, that no one might burn his son or his daughter as an offering to Molech. The worship of Molech and the practice of child sacrifice in the context of it was a particularly serious form of idolatry that is spoken of on several occasions in Scripture.

Topheth, in the valley of the son of Hinnom, had become synonymous with this particularly egregious form of child sacrifice. In Leviticus chapter 20 verses 2 to 5 we read, If I do at all close their eyes to that man when he gives one of his children to Molech, and do not put him to death, then I will set my face against that man and against his clan, and will cut them off from among their people, him and all who follow him in whoring after Molech. The practice of sacrificing children to Molech is condemned

on several other occasions in Scripture.

In Psalm 106 verses 36 to 39, They served their idols, which became a snare to them. They sacrificed their sons and their daughters to the demons. They poured out innocent blood, the blood of their sons and daughters, whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan.

And the land was polluted with blood. Thus they became unclean by their acts, and played the whore in their deeds. Archaeological work has confirmed claims about child sacrifice and the worship of Molech in related cults in various parts of the ancient Mediterranean world.

The practice of child sacrifice to Molech in Israel was drawn from the Canaanites, who probably took it from the Tyrians. Jeremiah goes out to the valley by way of the Potsherd Gate, presumably a place of broken pottery. This would be a very suitable location for Jeremiah's prophetic condemnation and his symbolic act.

It's also identified as the Dung Gate, which would also be symbolically fitting for his prophecy. The Lord is going to bring a signal disaster upon them on account of their idolatry and their violence. While the expression in verse 6, Behold the days are coming, often introduces positive messages of anticipated salvation, here it introduces a statement of the most severe judgment.

The valley of the son of Hinnom and Topheth will become places defiled by their slain, and a place of their destruction. This is also spoken of in Isaiah chapter 66, verse 24, the last verse of that book. And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me, for their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.

The place will be renamed. It will become a lasting place of shame and dishonor, erasing its former identity. The valley of the son of Hinnom is the New Testament Gehenna, which is a powerful image of hell in the Gospels.

It will become a site where many bodies are disposed of like rubbish, without the dignity of a proper burial, their bones picked clean by scavengers and bleached under the sun. Judah had sacrificed their children in that location, and now their own bodies will be cast there. Judah itself will become a warning sign of the Lord's judgment, a cautionary tale, a byword among passers-by, who would remark upon its grim fate.

Indeed, when the siege came upon them, the people who had offered their children to idols would eat their own children's flesh. We might here remember the story of the two women in the siege of Samaria in 2 Kings chapter 6. One of the most serious curses of the covenant was also concerning this eating of children. In Deuteronomy chapter 28 verses 53-57 He says, He has nothing else left.

Jeremiah was instructed to break the decanter as a symbolic act before the witnesses, who represented the people and their leaders. They too will be broken beyond repair, and their waste pieces will be cast in Topheth, and the rest of the city itself will become like that defiled Topheth. The chapter ends with Jeremiah returning to Jerusalem, where he declares judgment again in the court of the temple.

A question to consider. Reading chapter 18 verses 1-12 and chapter 19 verses 1-13 alongside each other, how should we relate their two sets of narratives and oracles concerning Judah and pottery? In chapter 19, Jeremiah had performed the symbolic action of smashing the earthenware decanter at the Potsherd Gate before the elders of the people and the elders of the priests. Then he returned into the city and delivered a message of judgment in the courtyard of the temple.

Jeremiah had made himself an enemy of the establishment, and the chief officer of the temple, Pasher, who seems to have been a leading administrator or superintendent, a sort of officer policing the temple precincts, punishes him by placing him in the stocks. Jack Lumbom notes the similar conflict between Amos and Amaziah the priest of Bethel in Amos chapter 7 verses 10-17. There Amaziah tried to shut up the prophet, and judgment was declared upon him and his household as a result.

There are references to Pasher's family of Emma in the book of 1 Chronicles. Pasher has Jeremiah beaten and places him in the stocks at the gate. This is likely an attempt to silence Jeremiah by intimidating him.

We don't know exactly what these stocks would have involved. They may only have constrained the legs, but perhaps also the arms and the neck. The person in the stocks would have been placed in a contorted and painful position for a long period of time, and held up for public shaming.

The next day, Jeremiah, however, is uncowed. He declares that the Lord now calls Pasher terror on every side. This isn't a play upon Pasher's name, it merely changes his name.

He himself had prophesied falsely and had tried to terrorise Jeremiah, and now he will become synonymous with the exile and the captivity that Jeremiah is declaring. He is punishing Jeremiah, but he faces a much harsher punishment himself in the future, the torture of seeing his family and his friends die around him, and knowing that he had a hand in their fate. He himself will be torn away from the land and will die in Babylon, him, his household, and his friends of the ruling class.

Here, for the first time in the book, we are told that Judah will be given into the hand of Babylon. The threat from the north is finally given a name. And Jeremiah concludes by calling Pasher a lying prophet.

In verses 7-12, we are made privy to the internal struggle of the prophet. He makes a

bitter complaint to the Lord, laden with pathos. While he is faithful in his declaration of the word of the Lord, he faces alienation, opposition, and the distress of the message that he is bearing, and all of these things are traumatising him.

He faces opponents like Pasher, and the ridicule and the reproach of the people. Worse than all of these things, he feels harassed by the Lord, forced into an intolerable situation, helpless to withstand the Lord's power or command. If he speaks, he is resisted by the people, sometimes even violently.

If he tries to keep silent, the word of the Lord is within him like a burning fire that is trapped, insisting on getting out. He cannot hold it in. He has declared that Pasher will be called terror on every side, yet he is so afflicted himself in verse 10.

Jeremiah faces conspiracies, slander, denunciation, false accusation, even from his closest friends. All are besieging him round about, waiting for their moment to pounce. His will and his resolve faltering, Jeremiah is revived, as he confidently declares that the Lord is with him.

Once again, these words look back to the beginning of the book. In chapter 1 verses 7-8, And then in verses 17-19 of that chapter, Lest I dismay you before them. And I, behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests, and the people of the land.

They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, declares the Lord, to deliver you. Jeremiah compares the Lord here to a warrior by his side. He petitions the Lord to show his vengeance upon his enemies.

And a key word in this part of the passage, as Walter Brueggemann notes, is overcome. Jeremiah recognises that one or the other must prevail. Only if the Lord is with him will he succeed against his many adversaries.

Verse 13 takes the movement from complaint, to trust in the Lord, to petition for his help, to the fitting conclusion of praise for his response. There is a jarring change of tone in verses 14-18 that end the chapter though. Some commentators suggest that what would have been the first edition of the book of Jeremiah might end in this chapter.

This section of the book of Jeremiah began with a reference to Jeremiah prior to his birth, in chapter 1 verse 5. Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you, I appointed you a prophet to the nations. As Lumbom notes, this conclusion of this chapter returns us to this theme, albeit with a bitter twist. It's similar to the complaint of Job in Job chapter 3, verses 1-12 of that chapter read, After this Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth, and Job said, Let the day perish on which I was born, and the night that said, A man is conceived.

Let that day be darkness, may God above not seek it, nor light shine upon it. Let gloom

and deep darkness claim it, let clouds dwell upon it, let the blackness of the day terrify it. That night, let thick darkness seize it, let it not rejoice among the days of the year, let it not come in to the number of the months.

Behold, let that night be barren, let no joyful cry enter it, let those curse it who curse the day, who are ready to rouse up Leviathan. Let the stars of its dawn be dark, let it hope for light but have none, nor see the eyelids of the morning, because it did not shut the doors of my mother's womb, nor hide trouble from my eyes. Why did I not die at birth, come out from the womb and expire? Why did the knees receive me, or why the breasts that I should nurse? Parallels between Jeremiah and Job should not be hard to see.

In both cases the Lord acts almost as their adversary. They are associated with weeping, suffering, calls for justice from the Lord, and deep distress. Both of them are ostracized, accused as troublers of their people, and their closest friends turn upon them.

Both of them have the difficult task of remaining faithful, even in the face of the devastating silence of the heavens. Jeremiah in chapter 15 verse 10 had already expressed woe in the context of his birth. Woe is me, my mother, that you bore me, a man of strife and contention to the whole land.

I have not lent, nor have I borrowed, yet all of them curse me. Here he goes far further. He doesn't curse the Lord or curse his father and mother, but he curses the day of his birth and the man who declared it.

The curse upon the man who declared his birth is an elaborate one. His fate should be like that of the cities of the plain, because the infant Jeremiah was not killed while he was yet in the womb. Jeremiah believes that his days are doomed to misery, sorrow and shame.

A question to consider. Why do you believe that the Lord burdens his prophet Jeremiah with so much distress, sorrow and suffering? In chapters 21 to 23 we find a collection of material that is particularly condemning the kings of Judah, concluding in chapter 23 verse 8, and followed by material addressed to its prophets, which takes up the remainder of chapter 23. King Zedekiah sends a delegation to Jeremiah to inquire of the Lord.

This might be compared to King Josiah's delegation to the prophetess Huldah in 2 Kings chapter 22. The delegation here contains Pasher, the son of Malchiah, not the same man as put Jeremiah in the stocks in chapter 20, but a different figure. He is also mentioned in chapter 38.

He was accompanied by Zephaniah the priest, the son of Maseah, who might have been Pasher, the son of Imaz, successor as the man responsible for temple order. In chapter 29 Zephaniah is presented as a more sympathetic figure to Jeremiah. We see a further instance of the king consulting Jeremiah in a similar situation in chapter 37.

While occurring around the same time however, these address different situations. Jack Lumbom notes Cornel's observation that the question in this chapter is, while the question in chapter 37 is, The first deportation from Jerusalem has already happened here. Nebuchadnezzar has exiled Jehoiachin and the Queen Mother, set up Matanah as king in his place and named him Zedekiah, while Jehoiachin is in Babylon.

At this point the year is probably 588 or maybe early 587 BC and the final end of Jerusalem and Judah is about to fall. Zedekiah however tentatively hopes for an encouraging word from the Lord. Perhaps he expects Egyptian help.

He might be hoping for something similar to the response that Hezekiah received from Isaiah when threatened by Sennacherib in Isaiah chapter 37. Walter Brueggemann argues that the question in verses 1-2 is given four answers in the chapter. The first is in verses 3-7, the second in verses 8-10, the third in verses 11-12 and the final one in verses 13-14.

Lumbom divides things differently, seeing four oracles with key word repetitions in verses 4-6, verse 7, verses 8-9 and then in verse 10. The message is driven home as we work through. Jeremiah's response is not encouraging.

The Lord is still living and active. He's still the master of human affairs. He's still the Lord of history.

But now He is fighting against Judah. The vocabulary of divine action is all present here. God acts with an outstretched hand and a strong arm.

He will turn back. He will strike down. But now however this vocabulary is aimed against Judah.

This is the language of the Exodus for instance. But now the God of the Exodus is Judah's adversary. Yes, the Lord will show His wonderful deeds to Zedekiah, but they will be His wonderful deeds against Judah.

Verse 7 makes clear that there is no avenue of escape. In verses 8-10, Jeremiah turns to address the people. There remains a chance for life for them.

The language here echoes the covenant language of Deuteronomy 30, verses 15-20. I declare to you today that I command you today, by loving the Lord your God, by walking in His ways, and by keeping His commandments and His statutes and His rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall surely perish.

You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying His voice, and holding fast to Him.

For He is your life, and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them. The choice that Jeremiah presents here, however, is between resistance and surrender. Resisting the Babylonians will lead to death.

Surrendering to them will allow people to escape with their lives. The city is doomed, but those who abandon the sinking ship need not be. Brueggemann points out the use of the typical verb that is used in connection with the Exodus here, the verb of going out.

By itself this might not mean very much, but in the context of the other allusions to Exodus language in the wider context, there may be an ironic reversal here. Deliverance comes, of an Exodus type, in leaving Jerusalem like Egypt, and turning oneself over to the exile in Babylon. One can also imagine how well such a message would go down.

Jeremiah might seem to be a traitor, undermining morale and the willingness of the men to stand and fight. Verses 11-14 address the king more generically, not necessarily Zedekiah, and likely not in the immediate historical context of the preceding section. This is probably 15-20 years earlier.

The king is primarily to act as a deliverer. A question to consider. The concluding oracles of this chapter likely date from 15-20 years prior to the earlier oracles of the chapter.

What effect does it have to place them alongside each other like this? Jeremiah chapters 21-23 are largely addressed to the kings of Judah. The specific king in view at the beginning of chapter 22 isn't stated. It is possible that this is in the early reign of Jehoiakim, around the time of the temple oracles of chapter 7. The statement at the beginning of this chapter is delivered at the house of the king of Judah, to a wider audience of those associated with the king's house.

The king's palace was one of the buildings in the wider temple complex. The king's house was associated with the lord's house, as the king was the lord's son. Perhaps Jeremiah's words were delivered in the context of a feast.

The challenge concerning justice and righteousness in verse 3 echoes verse 12 of the preceding chapter. O house of David, thus says the lord, execute justice in the morning, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed, lest my wrath go forth like fire, and burn with none to quench it, because of your evil deeds. The delivering of righteousness and justice was central to the task of the king.

The king was the shepherd of the people, and he was charged with the task of delivering

righteous judgment, and redeeming them from their enemies. We can derive some sense of the task of the king from Ezekiel's portrayal of the false shepherds in Ezekiel chapter 34 verses 1-6. The word of the Lord came to me, Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel.

Prophesy and say to them, even to the shepherds. Thus says the Lord God, Our shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves, should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them.

So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them.

The resident alien, the fatherless and the widow, and those who are innocent are particularly singled out here. The king must protect such people from predation and injustice, and he will be judged by how he performs this task. Verses 4-5 present two different possibilities.

If the king is faithful and obeys this word, then the house of David is going to be established, the house of the king of Judah is going to be occupied, it's going to be glorious, and God is going to bless them and their people. However, if they do not obey the words, then the house of the king of Judah is going to be rendered desolate. In verses 6-7 we see that this possibility has already been closed.

They have been unfaithful, and as a result, even though they might be the most verdant and elevated places, God is going to bring them down, and he's going to render them desolate. The great city, and all that they trust in, is going to be brought down. Again, there is the image here of a forest being cut down.

Solomon had built up the houses of the king with the choicest cedar from Lebanon, and now those cedars are going to be cut down like a great deforestation. Verses 8-9 present the result of this. Reading verses 3 and 5, we would get the impression that this is a consequence of their failure to do justice and righteousness, their failure to be concerned for the weak and the oppressed of the land.

Whereas in verses 8 and 9, there is a different focus. The indictment here focuses upon their forsaking of the covenant of the Lord their God, and their going after other gods. This should be instructive for us.

Ethical and theological concerns go hand in hand. The most fundamental ethical concern

must be, who do we worship? As the Psalms and the Prophets make plain on several occasions, people become like the gods that they worship. If they worship false and cruel idols, their social values and conduct will reflect that fact.

If they worship the true and living God who is concerned for the oppressed, the needy, the isolated, and the foreigner, then their social practice should exhibit a similar concern. The verses that follow in the chapter address a number of different specific kings and their situations. Verses 10-12 speak to the situation of Shalom, or Jehoahaz.

The historical background for this section is found in 2 Kings 23-29. Jehoahaz was 23 years old when he began to reign, and he reigned three months in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Hamutel, the daughter of Jeremiah of Libna, and he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, according to all that his father had done.

And Pharaoh Nico put him in bonds at Ribla, in the land of Hamath, that he might not reign in Jerusalem, and laid on the land a tribute of a hundred talents of silver, and a talent of gold. And Pharaoh Nico made Eliakim the son of Josiah, king in the place of Josiah his father, and changed his name to Jehoiakim. But he took Jehoahaz away, and he came to Egypt and died there.

The prophecy of Jeremiah here teaches that Josiah's fate is less severe than the fate of his son Jehoahaz. As we see in 2 Chronicles 35-25, Jeremiah mourned the death of Josiah, but the fate of Jehoahaz his son is far more severe. His fate is worse than his father's death.

Verses 13-19 address the situation of the successor of Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim. Jehoiakim was another son of the righteous Josiah, but he is contrasted with his father here. Josiah sought justice and righteousness, but his son Jehoiakim has a very different understanding of kingship.

For Jehoiakim kingship is self-aggrandizement. It's conspicuous wealth and luxury. To the mind of Jehoiakim, being a king is about living in a cedar-paneled palace, surrounded by the riches and the finery of his office.

Josiah, by contrast, understanding the true nature of the Davidic covenant, knew that royalty was to be expressed in the doing of justice. This finds stark expression in verse 16. He judged the cause of the poor and needy, then it was well.

Is not this to know me, declares the Lord. Judah's royalty was never to be like the royalty of the other nations, defined purely by luxury and might. Rather, the true Davidic king was marked out by the fact that he knew the Lord, and he exhibited the Lord's character and justice in his treatment of the people, taking concern for the poor and the needy.

Verses 10-12 concern the death and departure of kings. Josiah and his son Jehoahaz. Here, however, there is a prophecy of none burial and of a lack of lamentation. People will not lament the death of Jehoiakim. His body will be ignobly and unceremoniously deposited outside of Jerusalem. Determining the manner in which this was fulfilled requires a bit of coordination of different passages.

In 2 Kings 24, verse 10, it appears that Nebuchadnezzar came after the death of Jehoiakim. In 2 Chronicles 36, verses 5-6, we might get a different picture. Jehoiakim was 25 years old when he began to reign, and he reigned 11 years in Jerusalem.

He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord his God. Against him came up Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and bound him in chains to take him to Babylon. Some have suggested that this might have been an earlier attack of Nebuchadnezzar.

Others have suggested that Jehoiakim died as he was being taken away. Others have suggested that Jehoiakim was the victim of a coup. And yet others that this is not literally fulfilled, but that Jeremiah is declaring the spiritual and prophetic truth of the character of Jehoiakim's death.

Elsewhere in the book of Jeremiah we find similar pronouncements in chapter 36, verse 30. Therefore thus says the Lord concerning Jehoiakim king of Judah, he shall have none to sit on the throne of David, and his dead body shall be cast out to the heat by day and the frost by night. Whatever the actual historical events that occurred, Jehoiakim's judgment and the great dishonor of it stands in the very starkest of contrasts with the pride that characterizes his reign.

The man who seeks to build up his kingdom by injustice and oppression will end up unlamented, his body being disposed of like that of a donkey. Jerusalem is instructed to go to all the extremities of the land, to Lebanon in the north, to Bashan in the northeast, and to Abarin in the southeast. These will all be sites where she announces and laments her terrible fate.

All the land will be able to hear. And her fate is the consequence of her failure to listen to the Lord and his voice. The Lord declares, As Hetty Lallyman notes, The same fate that will befall her shepherds, her priests, her kings, will also befall her lovers.

The nations and the gods that she looked to will also be rendered desolate and taken off into captivity. And their fate would in part be a result of her own sin. Jerusalem here is described as the inhabitant of Lebanon, nested among the cedars.

The great buildings of Jerusalem, the palace, the royal houses, and also the temple, were built from cedars of Lebanon. Indeed, one of the houses was called the House of the Forest of Lebanon. By speaking of Jerusalem and her kings as dwelling in Lebanon, perhaps the Lord is expressing something of the way in which they have become foreign through their sin.

So far in this chapter concerning the kings of Judah, Jehoahaz, Jeziah his father,

Jehoiakim Jeziah's son, and now Jehoiakim are mentioned. Jehoiakim, also known as Keniah or Jeconiah, is the son of Jehoiakim and the grandson of Jeziah. He reigns for the briefest span of time before he is removed to Babylon, for only three months.

At the end of the Book of Second Kings and also the end of this Book of Jeremiah, Jehoiakim is mentioned in the house of Ebal Meredith, king of Babylon, being released from prison and raised up to sit at the king's table. Here, however, the message concerning Keniah is far less positive. Even though all of the hopes of Judah might be riding upon this man, a man who represents the continuing hope of the monarchy, the Lord will still cut him off.

Even if Keniah were the signet ring on God's right hand, expressing his authority and his identity, he would still cast him off. He is doomed to failure. The Davidic dynasty that he represents will not be re-established in his days.

None of his children will reign in his place, and he and his mother will never return to the land. The imagery of broken and discarded pottery is used again in verse 28. With this condemnation of Keniah, the series of judgments against successive kings of Judah comes to an end.

In the verses that follow in chapter 23, we'll hear about a righteous counterpart to the false kings of the land. A question to consider, how can we fill out the relationship between idolatry and oppression and injustice towards the weak? Chapters 21 and 22 are particularly addressed to the king of Judah. This body of material is concluded in verses 1 to 8 of Jeremiah chapter 23.

It presents an indictment of the shepherds of the Lord's flock, especially the kings, but also including other rulers and leaders by extension. There are several similarities between this and Ezekiel chapter 34 and its condemnation of the false shepherds. Ezekiel chapter 34 verses 1 to 6. The word of the Lord came to me, Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel.

Prophesy and say to them, even to the shepherds, thus says the Lord God. Our shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves, should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them.

So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them. In verses 10 to 16. Thus says the Lord God, behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require my sheep at their hand, and put a stop to their feeding the sheep. No longer shall the shepherds feed themselves, I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, that they may not be food for them.

For thus says the Lord God, behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land.

And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel.

I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.

The shepherds were also mentioned in the preceding chapter in verse 22. The wind shall shepherd all your shepherds, and your lovers shall go into captivity. Then you will be ashamed and confounded because of all your evil.

Verses 1-8 are a cluster of oracles. Jack Lumbom argues for the presence of three distinct oracles in verses 1-4 alone. Those verses declare woe on the destroying shepherds.

The evil of leaders gets visited upon the people that they lead. Their leadership divides and fails to protect the flock, and also destroys them with their sin and folly. Israel was a flock, and their leaders were shepherds throughout their history.

The patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob kept sheep. Joseph and his brothers kept sheep. And on account of being shepherds, they were kept apart from the Egyptians.

Moses led Israel out of Egypt like a flock with his shepherd's rod. The Lord called David from the foal to lead his flock of Israel. Having declared woe upon the shepherds, the Lord turns to address the shepherds directly.

One of their tasks, as Lumbom notes, is to call the sheep to account. They have failed in this task, and the Lord will call them to account. The Lord's hand behind this situation is seen in verses 3-4.

While the wickedness and folly of the shepherds was the proximate cause, it was the Lord who drove the flock to other countries. Now he declares his determination to bring them back, to re-establish the flock in their fold, and that they will be fruitful and multiply. We should hear the allusion back to the creation account here.

There is going to be something akin to a new creation situation. In anticipation of this, Israel is instructed to be fruitful and multiply, even in exile, in Jeremiah 29. After the indictments of the royal house to this point, there is now hope of restoration of the people and the monarchy on the other side of exile.

The oracle in verses 5-6 substantially reoccurs in chapter 33 verses 14-16. The reestablishment of David's house and reign is an important theme in a number of prophecies. The condemnation of the false shepherds in Ezekiel 34 also contains this theme in verses 23-24.

Here, the one who is going to be raised up for the house of David is called a righteous branch. The same sort of language is used in Zechariah 3.8. In Zechariah 6.12-13. And shall sit and rule on his throne. And there shall be a priest on his throne.

And the council of peace shall be between them both. Isaiah 11.1 also speaks of something similar. Here, the image is of cutting down even below David himself.

And so the branch from David is his life from the dead. David's family tree seems to have been cut off. Indeed, at the end of chapter 22, Jehoiachin seems to be doomed to die without an heir.

Matthew chapter 1 suggests that this was overcome, likely through adoption. The reference to Judah and Israel also suggests a kingdom that is no longer divided. It will be fulfilled when the Lord has gathered his people from all of the lands to which they have been scattered.

To understand the meaning of the promised king's name, the Lord is our righteousness, we need to recognize that Zedekiah was the last king of Judah. The kingdom of Judah was brought down as he was taken into exile by Nebuchadnezzar. Zedekiah's name means, my righteousness is the Lord, or the Lord is righteousness.

Zedekiah's name stands as an indictment upon him as he failed to live up to it. It promised something great, but it was hollow. However, another Davidic king would arise who would live up to that name.

Christians have generally seen this as a reference ultimately to Christ himself. The oracle of verses 7-8 is very similar to that of chapter 16 verses 14-15. The Lord's deliverance will eclipse that which he achieved in the past.

There is a greater salvation to look forward to, a greater exodus. Jeremiah bears the true

word of the Lord, but it is a painful weight to carry. His body is breaking under it, he is dismayed and shaken by the message, and also by the evil and the corruption of the people and their leaders, and the great opposition that they present to him.

He feels keenly the curses falling upon the land as a result of their sin. The land cannot sustain the people's wickedness, and is suffering terrible judgments. Both priests and prophets were both unfaithful, and their corruption was pervasive, entering even into the Lord's house, and they would face disaster as a result.

The prophets of Samaria had led to Israel's downfall. They had prophesied by Baal, and led the northern kingdom astray, until it was sent away by the Lord. People in the south and Judah might think themselves faithful by contrast, but in verse 14 the prophets of Jerusalem are also condemned for their unfaithfulness and lying ways, and their support of wicked people, presumably especially among the leadership of the land.

Jeremiah, as Walter Brueggemann observes, is accused of the opposite of what the false prophets are condemned for here. In chapter 38 verse 4, Jeremiah, it is claimed, weakens the people's hands, while the false prophets strengthen them in their evil. They support the kings and underwrite with their false prophecies the ruling ideology.

The prophets are condemned for adultery, perhaps a reference to sexual sin and infidelity, perhaps a metaphorical reference to idolatry, or perhaps a way of speaking about a more general covenant unfaithfulness, expressed in both their societal and their religious bonds. They have ended up like Sodom and Gomorrah, and they will face the same fate. The Lord declares that he will feed them bitter food and give them poisoned water to drink.

This might be, among other things, an allusion to the test of jealousy in Numbers chapter 5, applied when a woman was suspected of adultery. Rather than delivering her to human judgment, the Lord would test the woman himself with a drink of bitter water bearing a curse, a curse which he would bring upon her if she had in fact been unfaithful. The specific nature of the lying words of the false prophets was the declaration of peace.

They preached peace, peace, to a wicked people for whom there would be no peace. They were yes-men of the ruling ideology, declaring that no disaster would come upon the people. The faithful and true prophet, like Jeremiah, however, receives his message directly from the Lord, by standing in the council of the Lord.

The divine council is described in various places in scripture, perhaps most notably in 1 Kings chapter 22, when the true prophet Micaiah confronts the false prophets, testifying to what he witnessed in the divine council. The false prophets were not sent by the Lord at all, and their messages of peace were quite contrary to the actual truth. Judgment is decreed for Jerusalem. It is already in motion, and soon enough the false prophets will be exposed. The prophets have declared a domesticated God, a God who underwrites Jerusalem. They name-drop the Lord, but they don't consider that he is hearing their every word.

God isn't contained by the temple walls. He is the transcendent, sovereign, creator God, who is far away, far above the creation, but he also fills heaven and earth. He is not a tame God, but is above all earthly powers, free in his exercise of his majestic might.

He cannot be tethered to Jerusalem as if on a leash required to maintain its well-being. There is no hiding place from this God. The prophetic word of the Lord will show up all the empty words of the prophets.

It is like wheat compared to straw, like the grain that is true food to the crushed storks that are going to be blown away. It is like fire. It consumes falsehood.

It is like the hammer that breaks rock. The Lord's word, unlike those of false prophets, is powerful and effective. It will make itself known.

The false prophets use the familiar formulas, thus declares the Lord, and other things like that. They claim to have dreams when they have had no true revelation at all. They may even parrot the words of true prophets, but take them out of context and misdirect them.

The collection of prophecies relating to the kings and the prophets concludes with a condemnation of the use of the expression, the burden of the Lord. The people are forbidden from using it any longer. The expression had become so overused for falsehood that it was dangerous and needed to be taken out of circulation.

The burden is a message from the Lord, but the Lord puns upon it by telling Jeremiah to answer those who ask him what the burden of the Lord is by declaring that they are the burden. They are the heavy weight that the Lord has to labour under. They are a burden that will eventually, in the end of the chapter, be lifted up and cast away from the Lord's presence, along with their city.

Instead of the empty phrase concerning the burden of the Lord, which each prophet has been filling with his own fancies, they should genuinely seek the word of the Lord, not just their own projections. The Lord is a God who speaks and who answers. He is the God who is the living God.

He is not a projection of man, controlled by our ideologies, tethered to our projects, our causes, our countries, or contained by our temples or churches. He is the free Creator God, the Judge of all, to whom we are all accountable. A question to consider, can you think of any ways in which we face the danger of claiming that we have the words of the Lord while emptying them out and projecting into them our own sentiments? Jeremiah chapter 24 likely begins a new section of the book after the material related to the kings

and the prophets in chapters 21-23.

The historical context of this chapter is between the first deportation to Babylon in 597 BC and the second deportation in 586. King Jehoiachin, also called Keniah or Jeconiah, his officials, his craftsmen and other leading figures in the land had all been taken away and were in exile, never to see the land of Judah again. And now Zedekiah, his uncle, is on the throne of Judah.

He will be the last of the kings before the final exile. The first deportation had left Judah without many of the people who would be useful in warfare. The kingdom as it remains is very weak.

The vision that the Lord shows to Jeremiah here has two baskets of figs placed before the temple of the Lord. Perhaps these are actual figs that the Lord is directing Jeremiah's attention to, or they may just be within a vision. That they are placed before the temple of the Lord suggests that they might be offerings, perhaps the first fruits of some worshippers.

However, these figs need to be inspected as they are of clearly contrasting quality. Jeremiah notes that one of the baskets is full of very good figs, first ripe figs. The other basket, however, has extremely bad figs that are completely inedible.

Part of the background that we must consider for this prophecy is the fact that Judah is the tree of the Lord's planting and the Lord wants fruit from it. The inspection in this vision then would very naturally fit with the Lord's inspection of his people and their works. If you were to consider the two groups of Jews, those who had been deported from Judah to Babylon in 597 BC with Jehoiachin and those associated with Zedekiah who were still in the land, or those who had gone to Egypt, you would presumably think that the latter were the more fortunate ones in escaping the deportation.

The Lord had clearly shown some mercy upon them, sparing them from the fate that their fellow Jews who had been deported to Babylon had suffered. Yet the vision the Lord gives to Jeremiah here turns this picture on its head. The actual good figs are the Babylonian exiles, not those still in Judah or those who have escaped to Egypt.

In describing them as the good figs, the Lord does not seem to be making a statement about their moral character. Jehoiachin and the men with him were not righteous men. However, those who remained were worse, and a greater judgment awaited them.

In referring to Jehoiachin and those around him as the good figs, the Lord is making a statement about their fate, not so much their current moral character. He says that he will regard them as good, and this is because he has set his eyes upon them for good. He is going to restore them.

The language of Jeremiah's commission back in chapter 1 recurs here. I will build them

up and not tear them down. I will plant them and not pluck them up.

The promise given concerning the good figs here is essentially the promise of the new covenant. The Lord will give them a heart to know that he is the Lord. This had been the failure of the kings.

They had not known the Lord in the way that they had failed to exercise justice and righteousness. But when they return to the land, there will be righteousness and justice among them. This will ultimately be achieved, not by the repentance that the people themselves will initiate, but by the Lord's gracious work towards them.

Such a promise is also found in Ezekiel chapter 11, verses 17 to 21. Therefore say, Thus says the Lord God, I will gather you from the peoples and assemble you out of the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel. And when they come there, they will remove from it all its detestable things and all its abominations, and I will give them one heart and a new spirit I will put within them.

I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God. But as for those whose heart goes after their detestable things and their abominations, I will bring their deeds upon their own heads, declares the Lord God.

A few chapters later, in Jeremiah chapter 31, verses 31 to 34, Jeremiah will give his famous prophecy concerning the new covenant. Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord.

I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, Know the Lord, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

This promise goes back a long way, that the Lord would take the initiative after their exile, restore their heart, and bring them back to the land. In Deuteronomy chapter 30, verses 1 to 6, the failure of Israel to keep the covenant is foretold, but also their restoration after exile. And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the Lord your God has driven you, and return to the Lord your God, you and your children, and obey his voice in all that I command you today, with all your heart, and

with all your soul, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes, and have mercy on you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you, if your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven.

From there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there he will take you, and the Lord your God will bring you into the land that your fathers possessed, that you may possess it, and he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers, and the Lord your God will circumcise your heart, and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, that you may live. The hope of Judah lies not in the city of Jerusalem, not in those who are still the remnant within the land, but far away in the land of Babylon. As for those still in the land, they are like the bad figs that are completely inedible.

Zedekiah, his officials, and all the remnant of Jerusalem are fit only to be spat out of the land. Those who did not follow the Lord's instruction and went to take refuge in Egypt will also be lost. Israel was called to be a light to the world, and however Israel lived its life, it would serve as a spectacle to the surrounding nations.

If they were faithful, the nations would be amazed at their wisdom. If they were unfaithful, the peoples would see God's justice in judging them. Here the remnant of Jerusalem will suffer that fate with Zedekiah their leader.

Their fate will become an object of comment for all the nations of the world. There is an accumulation of terms here. There will be a horror, a reproach, a byword, a taunt, a curse.

People will comment upon the judgment that they have suffered and consider what they must have done to have suffered such a dreadful fate. The terms we read here are found elsewhere in the book of Jeremiah, along with other ones like desolation, a curse word, a ruin, an object of hissing. All of this fulfills the curse of the covenant in Deuteronomy chapter 28 verse 37.

And you shall become a horror, a proverb, and a byword among all the peoples where the Lord will lead you away. A question to consider. The people who were taken away to Babylon with Jehoiachin are described as good figs because the Lord has set his eyes upon them for good.

They were deported on account of their sins, but yet can still be described as good. The description of them as good seems to anticipate what God is going to do with them. He is going to give them the heart to know that he is the Lord and they will be his people, he will be their God, the famous covenant formula.

They will return to him with their whole heart. These are good figs, but they are figs that have been made good by the Lord. How might reflecting upon this help us better to

understand our standing before God? In Jeremiah chapters 25, 26, 35, and 36 we have material related to the reign of Jehoiachin.

All of the chapters open with a dating during his reign, both 25 and 36 to the fourth year of the reign, which was clearly an important year in the ministry of Jeremiah. It was also the year that Babylon defeated the Egyptians at Carchemesh and the first year of Nebuchadnezzar. The power dynamics of the region are changing.

A great tempest is rising in the north and Jeremiah foretells where it will lead. The chapter anticipates the latter part of the book of Jeremiah where judgment oracles concerning the foreign nations are contained. These oracles are placed after verse 13 in the ordering of the Septuagint.

The synchronization of Babylonian and Judahite chronology here anticipates the fact that Judah's life will soon be measured by the times of Babylon. Jeremiah here begins his address to the people by speaking about his 23 years as a prophet to them. The year now is about 605 BC.

He has faithfully delivered the Lord's word to them for over two decades, but without positive response. Within this testimony we can hear something of the pain and the difficulty of his vocation. He had been charging them to turn back to the Lord and praying for them to be restored, but now the dark cloud that heralded the storm of their doom was rising on the northern horizon and their judgment seemed inevitable.

And it was not just Jeremiah. The Lord had persistently sent prophets to them and they had all been rejected. He had given a consistent and a long-term witness.

The message was one of turning back from evil ways and false gods and returning to the Lord so that they would enjoy peace and security in the land as a result. However, they failed to respond. They provoked the Lord to anger and his judgment would come upon them as a result.

The result is the judgment from the north that Jeremiah foretold at the outset of his ministry. The enemy, now identified as Babylon, would be sent against them. Startlingly, Nebuchadnezzar is described as the Lord's servant.

Although he is the enemy, he is doing the Lord's work here. And the surrounding nations are also caught up in Judah's judgment. We might think of the beginning of the book of Jonah where the unfaithfulness of the Israelite prophet leads to a storm that all of the people on his ship suffer from.

In Jonah that storm is among other things a sign of the judgment that comes upon the whole region as a result of Israel's sin. It will be shaken up by the advent of the Assyrians. Here a similar thing will happen as a result of Judah's sin.

The great enemy from the north would come and all of the people in the surrounding region would suffer. The language of desolation that we find elsewhere in the book recurs here. He will devote them to destruction and make them a horror, a hissing and an everlasting desolation.

He will banish the voice of mirth, the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the grinding of the millstones and the light of the lamp. The land is going to become a ruin and a waste. We've heard all of these expressions before but every time they are repeated they sink in somewhat deeper.

Graciously with this declaration of the final judgment upon Judah there is also a hope of life beyond it. The light at the other end of the tunnel is the promise that they would serve Babylon for 70 years. After that period there will be judgment upon Babylon and release for the nations that have suffered under him.

Even though God is currently using Babylon as the rod of his judgment judgment still awaits it. In verse 13 Jeremiah presumably is given a vision in which he is to act as the Lord's cupbearer for the cup of his wrath to the nations. God is hosting as it were a banquet of the nations and he is using Jeremiah as his instrument of judgment.

The imagery of the judgment cup of the Lord is one that is found on several occasions in scripture in both the Old and the New Testament. The cup is one that produces intoxication. Scholars differ over whether we should see the intoxication as a result of the cup being poisoned or as a result of excessive drinking.

Whichever of the two it is the cup has as its intent a drunkenness that belongs to judgment. The drinking is not a test as in the test of jealousy in Numbers chapter 5. It actually ministers the judgment. Uses of this imagery can be found in places like Ezekiel chapter 23 verses 31 to 34.

Also Isaiah chapter 51 verse 17. The list of the nations to be judged begin with Jerusalem and Judah and with its kings and officials. Judgment begins with the house of God.

It begins with the chief city. It moves on to the other cities. It focuses especially upon the king, the highest authority of all and then moves on to the officials.

From Jerusalem and Judah however we move out to other nations. Pharaoh the king of Egypt. His servants, his officials, all his people and all the mixed tribes among them.

All the way down the classes of Egypt. All of them will come under the Lord's judgment. The kings of the land of Uz presumably in the area of northern Arabia.

All the kings of the land of the Philistines. The cities of Philistia mentioned here exclude Gath which had already been destroyed. Philistia was to the west of Judah on the Mediterranean coast. Edom is next. Edom was the brother nation of Israel. The descendants of Esau.

After Edom, moving from the south to the north of the Transjordan, Moab and then Ammon. The kings of Tyre and Sidon, southern Phoenician coastal cities in modern day Lebanon, are the next in the list. They are associated with the kings of the coastland across the sea.

The Mediterranean colonies of the Phoenicians in places such as Carthage. Next in line are the Arabian peoples. Dedan, Tima, Buz and the kings of Arabia.

Followed by the kings and the shapes of the various desert and nomadic peoples. Zimri is next, possibly associated with Arabia. But we don't know exactly where it was.

The kings of Elam were in the east of the Tigris. Opposite the south of Babylon. The Median kings and associated people are listed next.

Then all of the kings of the north are mentioned. The rulers of the lesser peoples. All of these people shall be made to drink the cup of the Lord's judgement.

He's shaking up the entire world. And then finally the king of Babylon shall drink. The pattern of Judah first, Babylon last, is a pattern that is borne out in the foreign oracles with which the book concludes.

The word used for the king of Babylon in verse 26 is Shishak. This is what is called an Atbash. An Atbash works by replacing the first letter of the alphabet with the last letter.

The second letter with the penultimate letter. The third letter with the antepenultimate letter. And so on.

The word Shishak corresponds with Babel. Scholars differ over whether at this point it is intended just as wordplay or whether it is intentionally cryptic. The kings have no choice.

They will suffer this judgement. Jeremiah is a minister of the word of judgement and it is effective through him. Once again we might think back to chapter 1 verses 9-10.

Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth. And the Lord said to me, Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.

The idea that the word of the Lord through the prophet is an effective means of judgement and not just a reporting on the Lord's judgement can also be seen in places like Hosea chapter 6 verse 5. Therefore I have hewn them by the prophets, I have slain them by the words of my mouth, and my judgement goes forth as the light. The conclusion of the chapter contains a number of different oracles strung together. The Lord is going to roar like a lion from the heavens.

He is going to threaten the sheep of the fold. He will shout as people treading out grapes. The imagery of treading out grapes is found on several occasions in scripture.

At many points it's an image of God's judgement. At some points it's an image, as in Revelation, of God gathering in faithful martyrs. As elsewhere in scripture, perhaps we should see some connection between the treading out of the grapes and the preparation of the wine of the Lord's wrath.

This is a judgement that's going forth on all flesh. The Lord is entering into judgement with the world. There's going to be a sort of political earthquake throughout the entire region.

When things finally settle, a very different world will exist. A great and terrible storm is rising. It will affect every one of the nations.

It is a storm brought up by the Lord, and its result will be utter devastation throughout the various lands. This section began with the Lord roaring from on high, and at the end talks about the Lord being like a lion that has left his lair, going out on the hunt. The threat of the Lord roaring against the fold is now extended to be a threat upon the shepherds.

The kings of the nations, their shepherds, are going to be left bereft of their flocks. The Lord is going to lay waste their flocks and their pastures. No place of refuge or escape exists.

A question to consider, how can the example of the vision given to Jeremiah here help us to think about the way that the messenger of the Lord's words participates in the authority of the message that he is delivering? Jeremiah chapter 26 belongs to the chapters of the book known as the Jehoiakim cluster, including chapters 25, 6, 35 and 36. These chapters are interspersed with other material known as the Zedekiah cluster. This chapter connects to the theme of conflict with false prophets in the adjacent chapters of chapter 27 to 29.

This thematic reordering might help us to explain why the material is broken up as it is. This occurred at the beginning of Jehoiakim's reign in 609 BC, and this chapter provides the background for the temple prophecies that are recorded in chapter 7 verses 1 to 15. The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.

For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly execute justice one with another, if you do not oppress the sojourner, the fatherless or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own harm, then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers forever. Behold you trust in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, We are delivered, only to go on doing all these abominations.

Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold I myself have seen it, declares the Lord. Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it because of the evil of my people Israel. And now, because you have done all these things, declares the Lord, and when I spoke to you persistently you did not listen, and when I called you you did not answer.

Therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name, and in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your fathers, as I did to Shiloh, and I will cast you out of my sight, as I cast out all your kinsmen, all the offspring of Ephraim. Jehoiakim, the son of Jeziah, came to the throne after Jehoahaz his brother's short three-month reign. Jehoahaz came to the throne after the death of Jeziah.

Jeziah was killed by Pharaoh Necho, and then his son Jehoahaz was deposed by Pharaoh Necho. Jehoiakim, who was originally called Eliakim, but was renamed by Pharaoh Necho, was set up in place of his brother. Jeziah had brought about some reformation, but it tragically seems to have been shallow and short-lasting.

Judah is rapidly returning to its old ways. Only a year or so after the death of Jeziah, it seems that Judah is once again in a position of serious covenant unfaithfulness. They are not looking to the Lord or being faithful to him.

Their confidence is rather in the religious system and the temple in their midst. They seem to see the temple as giving them immunity from the Lord's judgment, provided that they worship there and perform the proper rituals. The Lord will not call them to account.

In the process, the temple has been perverted into something that's the exact opposite of what it should be. It has become like a den of robbers, a place that scoundrels can return to to find refuge against those who would seek them out for their crimes. Jeremiah is sent to these people, and he's cautioned not to reduce or soften the message that the Lord gives to him.

He holds out the possibility of repentance, the hope is that Judah will heed and individually and collectively respond. The Lord calls for everyone to turn from his evil way. This must be a more general response on the part of the people.

It can't just be their leaders. Every single person needs to be committed to this sort of repentance. We might compare the sort of message that Jeremiah is bringing here to the messages of Jesus and John the Baptist in the Gospels.

If people respond appropriately, the Lord can relent of the disaster that he would

otherwise bring upon them. And they are charged to listen. The Lord is urgently addressing them through the prophets, hoping that they will respond.

The particular warning that provokes the ire, however, of the men of Judah is the claim that Jerusalem's temple might be made like Shiloh. Shiloh was the original sanctuary of the Lord that was destroyed at the beginning of 1 Samuel. The destruction of Shiloh and its aftermath was the historical background behind the story that led up to the building of Solomon's temple and the rise of Jerusalem as the religious centre of Israel.

The authorities and many of the people seem to think that Jerusalem, being connected with the Davidic covenant, is going to be preserved by the Lord and is not vulnerable to destruction. This belief might have been reinforced by the dramatic deliverance of the city in the days of Hezekiah and Isaiah in 701 BC from the hand of Sennacherib. Jeremiah's statement of judgement against the temple challenges the ruling dogma about the Lord's commitment to Jerusalem.

And the prophets, the priests and the people turn upon Jeremiah to try to put him to death. Jeremiah is placed on trial and he defends himself by appealing to his divine commission, declaring its purpose in the people's repentance. He warns them that if they put him to death they will have innocent blood upon their hands.

And the people, after hearing Jeremiah's testimony, change sides and with the officials they defend Jeremiah to the priests and the prophets, accepting Jeremiah's claim to be speaking in the name of the Lord. Some of the elders appeal to the memory of Micah of Moresheth, who prophesied in the 8th and early 7th centuries BC, about a hundred years previously, prophesying both the destruction of Samaria and Jerusalem. During the days of Hezekiah, Micah had prophesied, a prophecy recorded in Micah chapter 3, verses 9-12.

Hear this, you heads of the house of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel, who detest justice and make crooked all that is straight, who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with iniquity. Its heads give judgment for a bribe, its priests teach for a price, its prophets practice divination for money. Yet they lean on the Lord and say, Is not the Lord in the midst of us? No disaster shall come upon us.

Therefore because of you, Zion shall be ploughed as a field, Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height. Rather than seeking to kill the prophetic bearer of this unwelcome message, however, Hezekiah had responded faithfully to this prophecy, repented and reformed the land. We read something of Hezekiah's reformations in 2 Kings chapter 18, verses 3-6.

And he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, according to all that David his father had done. He removed the high places and broke the pillars and cut down the Asherah, and he broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it. It was called Nehushtan.

He trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel, so that there was none like him among all the kings of Judah after him, nor among those who were before him. For he held fast to the Lord, he did not depart from following him, but kept the commandments that the Lord commanded Moses. One of the things that the message of Jeremiah does is bring in the conditionality of the covenant of Sinai into a context where the unconditionality of the Davidic covenant seemed to be giving people a false sense of security.

The Lord had relented from the judgment of which he had warned the people in Hezekiah's day, and there was hope for the people of Jeremiah's day too, if they would follow the example of Hezekiah. A contemporary of Jeremiah had not been so fortunate as Jeremiah though. Uriah of Kiriath-Jerim had prophesied against the city of Jerusalem and the land.

He had fled when the king sought his life, and he was then hunted down and brought back from Egypt to be executed. So concerned was King Jehoiakim to remove this troublesome prophet. Presumably extradition of traitors was part of the treaty between Egypt and Judah during that time.

Jeremiah was delivered from death through the assistance of a hykem, the son of Shaphan. The scribal family of Shaphan was a very important one. The genealogy is laid out by Jack Lumbum.

Shaphan received the law book found by Hilkiah the priest in the temple in 2 Kings 22. His son a hykem was sent with him by Jeziah to Huldah the prophetess after the book was found, and he was also involved with protecting Jeremiah here. Gedaliah, his son, was appointed governor at Mizpah after the destruction of Jerusalem.

Gemariah, a hykem's brother, heard the reading of Jeremiah's scroll and encouraged King Jehoiakim not to burn it in Jeremiah chapter 36. Micaiah, Gemariah's son, also heard the scroll and reported it to the princes. And finally Elissa, a hykem and Gemariah's brother, carried Jeremiah's letter to the exiles in Babylon.

The role played by this faithful family is quite significant. A question to consider, what similarities can you see between Jeremiah's message concerning the temple and the message of Jesus and the early church? Jeremiah chapters 27-29 form a unit with Jeremiah in conflict with the false prophets. Like the chapter that precedes them, Jeremiah chapters 27-28 have Jeremiah and the false prophets coming into collision over the question of the threats hanging over and the duration of the Lord's judgment upon Jerusalem.

These chapters also belong to what some have called the Zedekiah cluster of narrative material, along with chapter 24, the prophecy concerning the good and the bad figs.

Chapter 27 could be divided into three separate sections. The first is Jeremiah's address to the foreign envoys, the second Jeremiah's earlier address to King Zedekiah, and the third Jeremiah's address to the priests and all of the people.

The chapter is set after 597 BC and the first deportation to Babylon. That event is described at the beginning of chapter 24. Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, had taken into exile from Jerusalem Jechoniah the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, together with the officials of Judah, the craftsmen and the metal workers, and had brought them to Babylon.

Jeremiah had been in conflict with the false prophets for quite some time. Previously, they had denied that judgment was going to come upon the land. Now their insistence seemed to be that no further threat would arise against Jerusalem and also that the former deportees would soon return.

This claim, we should note, appeals to God's power and commitment. However, it is founded upon a very mistaken understanding of the covenant and what it actually entailed. Once again, Jeremiah is instructed by the Lord to perform a symbolic action.

This time he makes himself straps and yoke bars. Such yokes would be used for working animals and here it's a sign of submission to the rule of another. On several other occasions in scripture, the yoke is a symbol of covenant.

The yoke is also a symbol that Christ takes up for his followers and disciples. My yoke is easy and my burden is light. At the start of Jeremiah's ministry, he was set apart for a ministry to the nations.

In this chapter we see the word of the Lord addressed quite directly to people beyond the land of Judah. It is likely that the envoys from the other nations were in Jerusalem in order to conspire together against the suzerainty of Babylon in the region. Jeremiah's warning to them is that this effort will not be successful.

Their choice is to submit to the king of Babylon and remain in their lands or to rebel and be destroyed. The Lord addresses them as the one who is sovereign over all human affairs, the one who rules over the world of international politics and also the one who is the creator of all things. The Lord's universal providence is understood on the basis of his being the creator of all things.

We encounter a similar statement in Isaiah chapter 45 verses 11 to 13. Not for price or reward, says the Lord of hosts. Living in Judah and the surrounding nations, it would have been easy to think of yourself as pawns on the great playing field that's dominated by Egypt in the south and by the great powers of the north, such as Assyria and Babylon.

It is their power that dominates your thought. They are the ones who shape the affairs of the region and determine how things will play out. The message of Jeremiah is that this is not the case.

The Lord is in fact the one who is sovereign over the entire region. He is the one who is sovereign over the world as the creator of all things. What happens to these nations is determined not by the king of Babylon but by the Lord himself.

He gives a strong warning that they must submit to the king of Babylon, otherwise they will suffer the effects of resistance. The threats listed are the things that would naturally come upon a nation that is resisting this great empire. Famine, pestilence and sword would be the fate of many besieged cities.

They must be particularly aware of the danger of listening to their prophets, diviners, dreamers, fortune tellers and sorcerers who are telling them not to serve the king of Babylon. That is a losing proposition and the people who are bringing this message are liars. However, driving home the point that it is not ultimately the king of Babylon who is in charge, in verse 7 we are told that Babylon's own time will come and many nations and kings will make him their slave.

The actual rebellion does not seem to have effectively materialised and a number of the kings mentioned here change sides. The king of Edom turned against Judah in the time of its crisis. Moab and Ammon seem to have been subdued in 582 BC.

Tyre and Sidon seem to have submitted as vassals to Babylon. Jeremiah enacted this message wearing the yoke and he brings the message to Zedekiah, the king of Judah too. It is utterly pointless for Zedekiah and his people to die by the sword, famine and pestilence.

If they submit to the king of Babylon, they will be spared all of these things. Indeed, in submitting to the king of Babylon, they will be submitting to the word of the Lord. Of all of the prophets, Jeremiah is peculiarly challenged by false prophets prophesying in the name of the Lord.

The Lord has not sent these false prophets, yet they continue to bring false words of comfort in his name. They appeal to the authority of the Lord and his word, but their words are ultimately empty. This warning is sent to Zedekiah and a similar one is spoken to the priests and all of the people.

The priests in particular seem to have bought into the ideology that taught that Jerusalem was ultimately invulnerable, that the Lord was committed to it in such a way that all of the judgments it had recently experienced would soon be reversed and that there was no real threat of a greater destruction. More specifically, the prophets were saying that the vessels that had been taken away from the temple would soon be returned. Jeremiah, speaking in the name of the Lord, declares this message to be vain.

Indeed, it is a very dangerous message. If it leads them not to serve the king of Babylon,

they will suffer a worse fate in the future. What they should really be worried about is not the failure of the treasures that they have lost to return, it is the loss of what still remains.

If they were true prophets, the prophets' efforts would be far better invested in interceding to the Lord that the remaining treasures of the house of the Lord not be taken away to Babylon to join the rest. However, immediately after raising this challenge, the Lord declares by Jeremiah that this too would be futile. The fate of the remaining treasures and vessels is already determined.

They will go to Babylon. All of this is confirmed in the final chapter of the book, which seems to allude back to this point here in verses 17-23, where the items that are taken from the house of the Lord are listed in detail. The chapter, however, ends on a note of hope.

The Lord will visit them, and he will bring back and restore the items to the temple that were taken away. The Lord, not the king of Babylon, is the true master of history. A question to consider.

Where else in the Old Testament can we see the word of the Lord being directly addressed to foreign nations? In chapter 27, Jeremiah had delivered a message to Zedekiah, the king of Judah, and to the kings of Edom, Moab, Ammon, and also Tyre and Sidon, warning them not to rebel against the king of Babylon. He told them to accept the yoke of the king of Babylon, that they would serve the king of Babylon, and after a time that the Lord would judge the king of Babylon, and they would be released. However, if they failed to obey the word of the Lord, they would suffer famine, sword, and pestilence.

Jeremiah's message had conflicted with that of the establishment prophets. Those prophets had told the leaders that the treasures of the temple that had been taken by Nebuchadnezzar would be brought back. Jeremiah, speaking by the word of the Lord, insisted that this was a vain hope.

Indeed, what they had left in the temple would be taken from them. The events of Jeremiah chapter 28 occur shortly afterwards. In this chapter, rather than speaking generically about the false prophets and their message, Jeremiah has a confrontation with a specific false prophet, Hananiah, the son of Azzur.

Jeremiah's message, which was accompanied by the symbolic action of wearing yoke bars and straps, concerned the yoke of the king of Babylon. Hananiah claims that he is declaring the word of the Lord, and he addresses his message quite specifically to Jeremiah, opposing him publicly in the house of the Lord. Here Hananiah is a direct adversary of Jeremiah, challenging both his legitimacy and the truth of his message. Back in Jeremiah chapter 1, when the Lord had first called Jeremiah, he had promised to be with him against all of his enemies. In verses 17-19, Hananiah, whose name means the Lord is gracious, delivers a message declaring that the Lord has broken the yoke of the king of Babylon, and within two years all of the vessels that had been taken away with Jeconah will be brought back. Along with Jeconah, he will be re-established as king of Judah, and all of the exiles will be returned.

Various commentators imagine Hananiah seeing himself as standing within the tradition of someone like Isaiah. Isaiah had prophesied the deliverance of Jerusalem from the army of Sennacherib, and it had been delivered miraculously in 701 BC. Perhaps he also sees himself as drawing upon the Davidic covenant and its unconditional promises concerning the establishment of the throne of David.

Surely the Lord could never destroy the city of David, the temple, and the kingdom of Seccur. Whatever setbacks they experience must be brief in duration. This is a direct provocation to Jeremiah.

It is a direct attempt to delegitimize his entire mission and message. The fact that he does not respond angrily in self-defense probably testifies to his confidence that the Lord is on his side. However many opponents might rise against him, however general the rejection of him might be among the people, the Lord is standing by his words that he has put in Jeremiah's mouth.

He will not allow them to fall to the ground, and he will vindicate his prophet in due time. Jeremiah's response to Hananiah is probably tinged with irony or sarcasm. Indeed, it would be marvelous if the Lord brought everything that Hananiah said to pass, but it is a false hope.

Ultimately it all rests upon hollow words, and beneath that still it rests upon a vision of God that is not in fact true. Trusting in the Lord and proclaiming grand things in his name is absolutely worthless if you are not believing in the true God, if you are not acquainted with his character and not attending to his actual words. In such a case you are just relating to a projection of man's fancies.

This is the tragic situation that the prophets of Judah now found themselves in. They were speaking about a God that was grand and gracious, but yet was not the real God at all. The real God had not spoken the words that they were speaking.

The real God was not of the character that they were suggesting. Theirs was a safe, tame God, a house-trained deity for the temple of Jerusalem. Jeremiah responds not with anger and defensiveness, but with a pointed question to Hananiah.

Jeremiah stands in the tradition of prophets who prosecuted the covenant, who proclaimed war, famine and pestilence against countries and kingdoms. Their message

was not the comforting message of peace, it was the challenging message of the covenant. If you are not faithful to the covenant, its curses will fall upon the land.

Yet in the mouths of Hananiah and the other prophets, the warnings of the covenant seem to have been utterly eclipsed by this message of constant peace and reassurance. As their God did not seem to be a God that brought judgment, their message stood in quite stark opposition to those prophets that preceded them, that were recognized as true prophets of the Lord. In the law, in Deuteronomy chapter 18, verses 21-22, the instruction was given to Israel concerning the words of prophets.

And if you say in your heart, how may we know the word that the Lord has not spoken? When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the Lord has not spoken, the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him. Jeremiah applies this principle to Hananiah.

If the word that he has pronounced indeed comes to pass, then it will be apparent that the Lord has in fact sent him. But if it does not, it will be clear that he has run without being sent. Hananiah, however, reaffirms his statement.

The prophet Jeremiah was wearing the yoke that symbolized his prophecy, and Hananiah takes the yoke and breaks it. He repeats his prophecy and goes further by declaring that all of the nations that have been under the king of Babylon will be released within two years. The basis upon which Hananiah comes up with his false prophecy, whether this is delivered to him by some false source, or whether it is something that he comes up with out of his own sense of how things are going, we don't know.

But Jeremiah responds by not responding. He walks away. When the time comes, the Lord will vindicate him.

While Jeremiah may be vindicated in the longer term future, the presence of such false prophets makes policy very difficult in the immediate term. How is Zedekiah to determine which of Jeremiah or Hananiah is speaking the truth? If he follows Jeremiah's encouragement to pay attention to the prophecies of the previous prophets and think about their underlying theology, then he will have a clue. But the presence of conflicting messengers is part of the judgment upon the people of God.

A similar situation is seen in 1 Kings chapter 22, when the Lord puts a lying spirit in the mouths of Ahab's prophets. This introduces confusion, feeds people's delusions, and also in the process reveals people's greater appetite for the lie. In our own day, when there are many competing voices claiming to be speaking the word of the Lord, we may be experiencing a similar judgment.

Sometime later, the word of the Lord comes to Jeremiah, and he is sent with a message

for Hananiah in particular. Hananiah has broken wooden bars, but in their place will be bars of iron. In resisting the yoke of Babylon, he has resisted the word of the Lord, and the yoke of Babylon would be all the harder as a result of it.

Indeed, the creator of all of the earth, the Lord God of Israel, has established Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, as if a new Adam. He has been given even the beasts of the field to rule over. Jeremiah declares decisively that Hananiah has not been sent by the Lord.

Indeed, he has made the people trust in a lie. As the Lord has not sent him, the Lord will remove him, or literally send him from the face of the earth. He will die that very year, and a few months later the word of Jeremiah is vindicated as Hananiah dies.

The people won't actually have to wait for two years to determine which is the true prophet. This is another example of the Lord fulfilling the promise that he made to Jeremiah back in chapter 1. A question to consider, what are some of the principles that we can apply to test the words that people are bringing in the name of the Lord, in a similar way as Jeremiah suggests to Hananiah? Jeremiah chapter 29 contains two letters written on two separate occasions by Jeremiah to the Babylonian exiles. The principal letter is addressed to the exiles more generally, and the second to a specific prophet among them, who opposed the word of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah's first letter was addressed to the surviving elders of the exiles, the priests, the prophets, and all of the people among them. Some of the oldest generation of the exiles may have already died, and it refers to the surviving exiles here. And with their deaths, the Jewish exile community would increasingly be wondering about how to approach their lives in exile.

Some prophets, both from Jerusalem and among their own number, have been reassuring them that their exile will be of short duration. Should they all be braced for return? Should they expect a longer exile? Is there any real hope of a return at all? These are the questions that Jeremiah addresses within his letter. Earlier, when Jeremiah had been put on trial, a hycum, the son of Shaphan, had intervened on his behalf to protect him from being put to death.

In this chapter, another son of Shaphan, Elisha, carries Jeremiah's letter to the Judahite exiles. Considering the friendship that Jeremiah seems to have had with the family of Shaphan, it's possible that this was sent informally, as something entrusted personally, rather than as part of the official business that Zedekiah has sent the men on. Gemariah, Elisha's companion, may perhaps have been the son of the high priest who found the book of the law in the temple.

The Judahite exiles in Babylon seem to have had some measure of freedom. They don't seem to be prisoners of war, and maybe not even a slave population. Jeremiah's

message is that they should settle into a longer term exile, recognising that the rest of their lives will be lived in Babylon.

The language of building and planting is used here, albeit in a very surprising context. This language should be familiar to us from chapter 1, verses 9 and 10. In this address to the Judahite exiles, the building and the planting is taking place in a foreign land.

They are building houses and living in them, planting gardens and eating their produce. The sort of activities that he recommends here are the sort of long-term life activities. Building houses, planting gardens, taking wives and starting families, taking wives for their sons and giving their daughters in marriage.

They must be prepared to settle down into life in Babylon. They are going to be there for several decades. To the extent that they expected an imminent return, they would be afraid of making these longer term decisions.

You wouldn't start a family in Babylon if you thought you were going to return within a couple of years. They are instructed to prosper there, to multiply. The calling for them to be fruitful and multiply in a foreign land should remind us of the way that the Israelites multiplied in the days before the exodus.

Even in a foreign land, they can prosper and grow as a people. And with this recognition that they will be spending many years in exile in Babylon, their posture towards the land of their exile must change. They must seek the welfare of the city.

First of all, they should not rebel against it. They should also pray for its good and seek its well-being. They should commit themselves to being peaceful and upstanding participants in its civic life.

They need to recognize that they share in common with the Babylonians a common good and they should serve that to the extent that they can. The instruction to pray for the good of the land of their exile would have been a difficult one for many of them to hear. But yet throughout the book of Jeremiah, the Lord reassures his people of his hand behind all of these events.

The Lord is the one who has raised up Babylon. The Lord is the one who in time will destroy Babylon too. By seeking the good of Babylonia during this period, the exiles of Judah are putting their fate in the hand of God, recognizing that he is the one who is sovereign over the empire that has taken them exiles.

The city that is referenced here is likely not a particular city. The exiles are probably separated in several different locations. The Lord warns the exiles against listening to the prophets and diviners among them, who are giving them a false message of hope concerning their soon return.

The Lord has not sent them and their message is not true. The reference to diviners here also suggests that pagan practices were still being practiced among the exiles, even after they had been thrown out of the land as a result of these sins. While the false hope of these prophets was appealing, it was a very dangerous thing.

Such messages could have inspired the Jews to revolt and brought destruction upon the community more generally. By contrast, the Lord's instruction to live peaceably until the time when he released them, would secure the long-term well-being of the exile community. A time is set for the return from exile.

70 years will be completed for Babylon and then the Lord will visit them. This need not necessarily be taken as a reference to the time when Jerusalem will be rebuilt and people will start to return to the land. The reference may more be to the end of the reign of Babylon, as their empire is taken over and the situation of Judah changes.

While some of the exiles might have considered their position to be hopeless, the Lord still has good intentions for his people. He has not abandoned them to their fate. If they will merely trust in the word of his prophet and follow his instruction, then a future of blessing awaits them.

God's ultimate intent has always been for their good. In time, he will reverse their fortunes. Throughout the book of Jeremiah, there are several references back to the book of Deuteronomy, and here I think we hear the language of Deuteronomy coming through again.

Deuteronomy chapter 4 verses 27-31 And the Lord will scatter you among the peoples, and you will be left few in number among the nations where the Lord will drive you. And there you will serve gods of wood and stone, the work of human hands, that neither see nor hear nor eat nor smell. But from there you will seek the Lord your God, and you will find him, if you search after him with all your heart and with all your soul.

When you are in tribulation, and all these things come upon you in the latter days, you will return to the Lord your God and obey his voice. For the Lord your God is a merciful God. He will not leave you or destroy you or forget the covenant with your fathers that he swore to them.

The statements that the Lord makes to the Judahite exiles here are not just conditional ones. The statement he makes is not, if you call upon me, but, you will call upon me. Their repentance is promised, not just restoration conditional upon their repentance.

The Lord will turn their hearts back to himself. Once again this will remind us of the words of Deuteronomy chapter 30 verses 1-6. And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the Lord your God has driven you, and return to the Lord

your God, you and your children, and obey his voice in all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you, if your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven.

From there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there he will take you, and the Lord your God will bring you into the land that your fathers possessed, that you may possess it, and he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers, and the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live. Once again the Lord cautions against false impressions for the outlook of Jerusalem and its people and rulers, false impressions that have been given through false prophets. There is an allusion back to chapter 24 here and the vision of the good and the bad figs, the people left in the city of Jerusalem are rotten figs, vile figs that cannot be eaten.

All that awaits them is sword, famine and pestilence, the consequence of being besieged by the empire of Babylon. Once again the characteristic language of desolation is used. I will pursue them with sword, famine and pestilence, and will make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth, to be a curse, a terror, a hissing and a reproach among all the nations where I have driven them.

This fate comes upon them because of their failure to heed the word of the Lord. The fundamental task of Israel was always to hear the word of the Lord. The Lord also pronounces judgment upon two particular false prophets among the people.

Ahab the son of Goliath and Zedekiah the son of Maseah are both prophesying falsely in his name. Presumably they are declaring an imminent release from exile. The Lord however will deliver these two false prophets into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and they will be executed by him, presumably for stirring up rebellion against him.

They will suffer a gruesome execution of being roasted in fire. This will come upon them not just because of their false prophecies, but also because they are both guilty of the sin of adultery. The Lord knows the secrets of men's heart.

Both false prophecy and adultery carry the death penalty and the Lord will bring this punishment upon these two false prophets by his word. Confrontations with false prophets continue in the chapter. Shimea the son of Nehilim, one of the prophets who was among the exiles, has sent messages to the people in Jerusalem and to Zephaniah the priest to treat Jeremiah like a madman and lock him up in the stocks for his raving.

Referring back to Jeremiah's prophecy in the first letter, that their exile would be long, that they should build houses and live in them and plant gardens and eat their produce,

he charges them to rebuke Jeremiah and to dismiss him as a prophet. He calls upon Zephaniah to execute his responsibility as a priest in this matter and not to let Jeremiah go. Zephaniah, however, does not carry it out but reads the letter to Jeremiah.

Jeremiah responds by declaring the Lord's judgment upon Shimea. The Lord will surely visit and bless his people, but Shimea and his offspring will be cut off. They will not see any of the good that God has planned for his people.

A question to consider. How might the Lord's instruction to the Judahite exiles instruct us in the way that we live in non-Christian societies? In what ways might our situation be similar to that of the exiles in Babylon? In what ways might it be different? In Jeremiah chapters 30 and 31 and the added material of chapters 32 and 33, we have what is variously called Jeremiah's book of restoration, his book of comfort or his book of consolation. To the announcement of judgment upon Judah, it brings accompanying promissory words of hope and restoration.

It reminds the Judahites of the faithfulness and the power of the Lord that can reverse their situation. There is hope for them yet, even in the far land of exile, if they will only turn to the Lord. Walter Brueggemann describes the primary task of the book of Jeremiah as being that of speaking Israel into exile.

But this only fulfills part of Jeremiah's vocation, as it is described in chapter 1. Beyond plucking up and tearing down, he also has the responsibility to build and to plant. These chapters, at the very heart of the book, represent that. In these chapters, Jeremiah is speaking words of promise and hope that Judah can cling on to, words that will lead them into the restoration on the other side of exile.

Both Israel and Judah have now died, yet the Lord can raise them up to life again. It's important to consider that even with mass deportations, there were still many Jews living in the land, and even in Jerusalem. Jewish identity also continued very strongly in exile.

This was one of the remarkable things that set apart the Jews from other nations. While other nations disappeared as they were subsumed into these great empires, and peoples vanished as they were deported, the Jews do not suffer that same fate. Although the northern kingdom of Israel disappears as a national body, the identity of the exiles of the southern kingdom continues, and is ultimately restored.

One of the things that so offends Haman in the book of Esther is the fact that the Jews, though scattered, without a homeland, still have their own customs and distinct identity, an identity preserved even in foreign lands. On this front, we should bear in mind just how much holding fast to the word of the Lord would have enabled the Jews to retain that distinct identity in exile. Those Jews that took on the customs of the surrounding peoples would just vanish into their multitudes.

It would be the faithful who would retain their distinctiveness. Although there were still Jews living in the land, and even in Jerusalem during the period of exile, the loss of the land, control of Jerusalem, and the temple was a crippling blow to Jewish nationhood. The identity of a people is largely found in the leadership class that brings them together into a nation, with their own clear boundaries, agency, common life, and selfhood.

The deportations to Babylon have stripped Judah of all of this. Although Jewish individuals remained in the land, and would have some level of life, they lacked a true common life as a people. These powerful chapters at the heart of the book of Jeremiah contain many great promises.

These promises should not be reduced merely to predictions. There are various examples of promises in scripture that people fail to enter into true possession of. A promise calls for an answering faith, and is not merely an announcement of something that's going to come to pass, irrespective of people's faith.

For only a very brief period of Israel's history does it enter into full possession of the land of promise. In the end, the promise of the land is a briefly attained high watermark of the extent of Israel's possession. For the vast majority of their history, they only control a smaller part of it, and even then they're divided into separate nations.

The promises of restoration here hold out hope of a future that's more glorious than that which Israel actually attains. However, one of the features that we see in the promises of scripture is the way that when the people fail to enter into full possession of them due to their lack of faith, the Lord can take upon himself the full realization of the future that he has held out to them. There are promises of new covenant in these chapters that have an initial fulfillment in the years after the return from exile, but anticipate far greater fulfillment at some point in the future.

The promises are not wasted or expended, but they look towards a greater horizon for their final realization. This chapter, and the chapters that it introduces, begin with an instruction to write things in a book. At a number of points in the book of Jeremiah, we have indications of how the book came into existence as a larger body of material, the ways that different parts of it were formed, letters written to exiles and other figures, books written for specific purposes on specific occasions.

Another example of this can be seen in chapter 36, from a much earlier period in the ministry of Jeremiah when he was instructed to write things in a book during the reign of Jehoiakim. In this book, Jeremiah records words that would orient the Judahite exiles through their experience of exile, enabling them to retain their distinct identity as the people of God in preparation for being restored to the land on the other side. Without such words of hope, it would have been so easy for them to assimilate the paganism that surrounded them.

In the book of Daniel, chapter 9, we have an example of a Judahite exile who was drawing comfort from the prophecy of Jeremiah while far away in a foreign land. Before we get to the statements of promise and hope, we have a description of panic and terror. Such distress comes upon the people of the Lord.

Their strongest men start to behave like women in labor. Those who would be looked to as the strength of the community are behaving like women during the pangs of childbirth, unable to face the terror that is befalling the nation. Yet in the context of this chapter, this arresting image sets us up for a surprising reversal.

It is a time of distress for Jacob, yet he shall be saved out of it. This distress and this panic and terror will not be the end for Judah. There is new life on the other side.

The exact shape of this new life is described in the verses that follow. The yoke of the foreign nation will be broken from them. Jeremiah had predicted the yoke of the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, would come upon the nation of Judah and the other nations.

When the false prophet Hananiah had disputed this and claimed that it would be soon broken, the Lord had judged him and declared that the yoke would now be an iron one. However, the yoke would not remain forever, and now Jeremiah announces that it will be broken. The yoke will be removed, their bonds will be burst, and they will serve foreigners no more.

The alternative to serving foreign nations is not autonomy, but serving the Lord. In the Exodus, they were delivered from the service of Pharaoh to serve the Lord, and now once more in this greater deliverance, they are going to be delivered in order to serve the Lord and David their king. The restoration of Judah is going to come with the restoration of the Davidic monarchy.

This is a promise that we encounter elsewhere in the prophets, for instance in Ezekiel chapter 34 verses 23 to 24. At this point in history, it might seem that Babylon is an unassailable power, a power that simply will not be overcome. On the other hand, the continuing life and identity of the Judahites has never seemed more precarious.

Yet, as Brueggemann observes, in the light of the Lord's purpose, the situation is reversed. It is actually Babylon's position that is precarious. Babylon will suffer a full end, but Judah will be restored.

They will be disciplined and punished for their sins, but there is return on the other side. The language of turn and returning, and other variations of that verb, are prominent at many points in the book of Jeremiah, not least in these chapters in the book of Consolation. The situation of Judah is bleak indeed.

The Lord uses medical metaphors to describe it. A wound that cannot be healed, a disease that cannot be cured. Their plight is also rendered in forensic metaphors.

There's no one to uphold their cause, no legal advocate to intercede for them. All those to which they once looked, the nations that they once looked to as their allies, the gods that they once worshipped, are unable to help them now. They don't even care for them.

Most devastating of all, the Lord has taken the position of an enemy relative to them. On account of their sin, he has turned against them. Crying out over such a situation is futile.

There's no hope. They brought this disaster upon themselves, and it comes from the hand of the Lord, and no one can stay it. Nevertheless, once again this has set things up for a great reversal.

By the lex talionis, the law of retribution, God is going to avenge those who caused them their harm. He's going to devour those who devoured them. He is going to send into captivity those who sent them into captivity.

He's going to plunder those who plundered them, and he's going to prey upon those who preyed upon them. And having done that, he's going to attend to Judah's hopeless wound, the wound that was beyond healing, he is going to heal. All the people who once ridiculed Zion and dismissed her will be amazed as they see the Lord once more take her to himself.

It is one thing to tear down and destroy a world. It is quite another, having done so, to restore it again. And the Lord promises to do just this in the case of Judah.

The destroyed city will be rebuilt. The palace and the temple shall be restored. Songs once silenced shall be heard again.

A people once devoured and scattered will multiply and thrive. Children shall play in the streets. They will have a ruler of their own.

And most of all, the Lord will take them to himself, claiming them as his own people. The covenant formula, and you shall be my people and I will be your God, is at the very heart of all of this. The fellowship with God, once broken, will be restored.

The breached covenant will be repaired. And the people will once more be blessed and enjoy the presence of the Lord in their midst. This all sets us up for the promise of the new covenant in the chapter that follows.

In almost identical words to those found at the end of this chapter, in Jeremiah chapter 23, verses 19 to 20 we read, Behold the storm of the Lord. Wrath has gone forth, a whirling tempest. It will burst upon the head of the wicked.

The anger of the Lord will not turn back until he has executed and accomplished the intents of his heart. In the latter days you will understand it clearly. In this chapter we

have some sense of what these latter days will be like.

However, in the present of Judah's history, and in the days leading up to these latter days, there will be a great tempest. The world will be thrown into commotion and disorder. Nations will be brought down.

Empires will rise and fall. Formerly great cities will disappear from the map. Some ancient peoples will vanish and new political orders will arise.

Behind all of this is the great tempest of the Lord. While in the midst of it, it may seem just chaotic and without purpose, but in the latter days, as the sky is clear, and they see the new order on the other side of it, the purpose of the Lord throughout it all will become clear. A question to consider.

What are some ways that the promises of this chapter can be related to Christ and his kingdom? Jeremiah chapter 31 is arguably the most famous part of the entire book, with its promise of the new covenant in verses 31 to 34. The words of this prophecy are taken up in the New Testament, where they are related to the new situation established through the work of Christ. However, in Christians' use of the words of this prophecy, the context in which they were originally delivered, and the initial horizon to which they look, can easily be forgotten.

The chapter opens with what is called the covenant formula, the statement that the Lord will be his people's God, and that they will be his people. In the context here, it's an assurance of restoration of the covenant bond. God will once again claim the people as his own, all of the clans of Israel, restoring them to his land and being present in their midst once more.

At a number of points in the book of Jeremiah, the deliverance expected after exile is related to the earlier deliverance of the Exodus. Here, the current situation of the people is described in language purposefully redolent of that earlier experience of deliverance from a foreign land. They had escaped the sword of Egypt and found grace in the wilderness.

We might think here of the Lord's forgiveness of the people in chapters 32 to 34 of the book of Exodus, after the sin with the golden calf, and then they were brought into rest in the promised land. A similar pattern of events will happen again. The people who have survived the sword of the Assyrians and the Babylonians find grace in the land of their exile, and they will be brought back into rest in the land.

Just as the Lord heard the cries of the children of Israel in Egypt, so he has heard the cries of his people in exile. He assures the people of his steadfast, everlasting love for them. He may have judged and punished them on account of their sin, but he will bring them back to himself, restore them in his land, and renew his fellowship with them once

more.

Once again, the programmatic language of building and planting is used. The Lord will build them, and they will assuredly be built up. They will go out with tambourines and dancing, just as Miriam and the women of Israel celebrated with tambourines and dancing after the Lord's defeat of the Egyptians at the Red Sea.

Along with the Lord's building, there will be planting. They will plant vineyards on the mountains of Samaria, the former capital of the northern kingdom of Israel. They will have the freedom and the security necessary to engage in agriculture.

Planters will plant, and they will enjoy the fruit. And the nation will be joined together, southern and northern kingdom reunited in the true worship of God. Mount Ephraim, a promontory for watchmen in the southern mountains of Ephraim, would be a place for summoning people to pilgrimage to Zion.

The words of this passage chiefly seem to be addressed to the people of the northern kingdom of Israel, who were displaced and deported by the Assyrians, while other foreign peoples were placed in their land. The reference to the Virgin Israel, to Samaria, to the hill country of Ephraim, all seem to have reference to the northern kingdom more particularly. In the context of the Babylonian captivity of the southern kingdom of Judah, the reference of these words would naturally expand to include the Judahites too, but it seems that they were first delivered to a context of Israelite captivity, rather than Judahite.

The hope that emerges is of a unified restoration to the land. Judah and Israel brought back together and made one nation under their shepherd David. In the verses that follow, the Lord who scattered Israel will gather him as a shepherd.

He will lead them back from the north country, bringing them on a straight path near water where they can drink. It won't just be the strong, it will be the blind and the lame, the pregnant woman and she who is in labour, the weak and vulnerable of the people, along with everyone else. With weeping, presumably in repentance and pleas for mercy from the Lord, the Lord will gather them back, he will establish them once more, and their mourning will be turned into rejoicing and song.

The land, which was becoming barren as a result of their sin prior to the exile, will now be restored to fruitfulness and life. There will be an abundance of grain and wine and oil. The flocks and the herds will multiply.

Ultimately, the source of all this goodness will be the Lord himself. He is the giver of all good gifts, and his loving favour is the greatest gift of all. Behind and within all of these gifts is his goodness.

In the narrative of the book of Genesis, the story of Rachel is often a tragic one. Her

sister Leah is fruitful while she is barren, while she does end up bearing two children. Later on, she is cursed by her husband unwittingly as a result of her taking the teraphim of her father Laban.

Her son Joseph is hated and betrayed by his brothers and sold into the land of Egypt. On the way to Bethlehem, she dies giving birth to his brother Benjamin. Ramah was associated by some with the place of her death, and her voice as that of the bereaved mother in the borderlands of the tribal lands of her sons Ephraim and Benjamin cries out in the desperation of another bereavement.

Her sons have now gone far from her once again into the land of exile. The tribe of Ephraim enjoyed firstborn rights within the land of Israel. Ephraim was one of the two sons of Joseph, along with Manasseh, and he was given the firstborn portion by Jacob in the book of Genesis.

Indeed, the word Ephraim is often used as a synecdoche for the whole of the northern kingdom. Ephraim is the main tribe, and so he stands for the whole, just as Judah, the main tribe of the southern kingdom, can stand for the entirety of that nation. In many ways, the end of the book of Genesis is a story of lost sons and their return.

It is the playing out of what at first seems to be the tragedy of Rachel, which is later revealed to be a tragicomedy. Sons once considered entirely lost, return with great blessing, and there is a similar hope held out here. Rachel is instructed to stop weeping.

There is a reward for her work. Her children will be restored to her, both in physical return and also in their hearts being turned back to the Lord. Ramah had taken on a further significance beyond the death place of Rachel.

In chapter 40, verse 1, we see that it was a stopping point as part of the deportation of the exiles to Babylon. From this place of national bereavement, the harrowing cries of the inconsolable, bereaved mother cry out. The deep memory of ancient loss and the recently opened wound of the deported exiles come together at this point.

The claim that Rachel will be rewarded is a strange one. As Rabbi David Foreman has observed, the word is not the one that we'd expect. We'd expect the Lord to tell her to stop weeping, assuring her that he has taken compassion upon her and that she will be comforted.

But the statement is rather that there is a reward for her work. Once again, it seems that the deep memory of the stories of Genesis is stirring here. In Genesis chapter 30, verses 14 to 18, we have an account of a strange interaction between the two sisters Leah and Rachel.

When Jacob came from the field in the evening, Leah went out to meet him and said, You must come in to me, for I have hired you with my son's mandrakes. So he lay with her

that night. And God listened to Leah, and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son.

Leah said, God has given me my wages, because I gave my servant to my husband. So she called his name Issachar. Understanding this strange episode requires that we perceive the significance of Reuben's mandrakes.

It's not the mandrakes themselves, it's the person who picks them. It's the firstborn son of Leah. As Foreman observes, the mandrakes are valuable because they are the firstborn son of Leah's gift to her, a token of his love for his mother.

Leah felt that her sister Rachel had become a rival to her and taken her husband from her, and now she felt that she was taking her son too. Jacob may not really love her as he loves Rachel, but at least her son Reuben loves her. For her part, Rachel had felt a great rivalry with her sister, because her sister bore many sons while she was barren.

The two sons that her handmaid Bilhah had borne to Jacob had been named after the rivalry that she had with her sister. Dan, because the Lord had judged her case, and Naphtali, because she had wrestled with great wrestling with her sister. In this episode, however, she's trying to heal the breach.

No longer is she presenting herself as a rival to her sister. She gives to her sister what was once taken from her, relations with the man that she loves, Jacob. And Leah, through this union, has a child called Issachar.

Issachar's name means wages or reward. Here, where the Lord says that there is a reward for what she has done, there seems to be a reference back to that old memory, the memory of the way that Rachel had tried to heal the breach in the family, a breach that ultimately led to tragic consequences. In the restoration of her children of the Northern Kingdom, and indeed all of the children of both of the kingdoms, the great matriarch Rachel would be rewarded for the reconciliation that she tried to bring to the divided family of Jacob.

Her tragic story of lost sons and dying in childbirth would reach a redemptive end, as her sons would all be returned to her. As with the story of the Exodus, the deep memory of Israel is being brought to mind here as a source of comfort, assurance and orientation as they face the future. These verses are perhaps most familiar to Christians from the context of Matthew chapter 2, where they appear in the context of the massacre of the innocents.

In that chapter there is another fainter echo of the story of Rachel, in the earlier reference back to Micah chapter 5 verse 2, in which context the shadow of Rachel hangs heavily over a text that proves to be greatly redemptive. Along with the weeping of the disconsolate mother, the pathos of the Lord himself is seen in his relationship to Ephraim. He has heard the cries of the disciplined child, a child now repenting of his

former sins, and the heart of the Lord yearns for his son in the far country.

He constantly remembers him, he will have mercy upon him, and he will be restored. Verses 21-22 address, presumably, the Judahite exiles. They are supposed to mark the path that they go into exile.

The Lord assures them that they will return by the same route. They will take up residence in their old cities once more. A woman formerly described as an adulterous bride, as a harlot, and also as a widow, is now described as a virgin daughter.

When the Lord redeems them, their youth and their purity will be restored to them. However, now they are still wavering, they are still faithless. That transformation still has to occur.

In chapter 30 verse 6 there was a reversal described, as the strong men were described, like pregnant women. Ask now and see, can a man bear a child? Why then do I see every man with his hands on his stomach like a woman in labour? Why has every face turned pale? The second half of verse 22 is difficult to interpret. Does it have a positive or a negative meaning? What does it mean for a woman to encircle a man? Is it some allusion to birth? Reading it alongside the reversal of chapter 30 verse 6 makes most sense, I think.

The image here is of the weakness of the people of Judah. As they went off into exile, the mighty men of Judah were so sapped of their strength that they needed to be protected by the women. Verses 23 to 26 seem to record a reassuring dream that Jeremiah has.

To the dispirited and disheartened exiles, who are so lacking in strength, the word of the Lord comes about the restoration of Jerusalem and all of the life of the land of Judah. The land and the city of Jerusalem will be blessed once more. Both the urban life of its cities and the rural life of its farms will prosper and thrive once more.

A people now afflicted by panic, fear, weakness and want within would find satisfaction and rest. The Lord declares his commitment to restore both the house of Israel and the house of Judah, sowing them with the seed of man and the seed of beast. The idea of sowing people can also be found in the book of Hosea chapter 2 verses 21 to 23.

And in that day I will answer, declares the Lord, I will answer the heavens and they shall answer the earth, and the earth shall answer the grain, the wine and the oil, and they shall answer Jezreel, and I will sow her for myself in the land. A similar use of imagery underlies Jesus' parable of the sower. While some in Judah and Israel might fear that the Lord was so committed to putting them into exile as a result of their sins and now has largely abandoned them and no longer considers them in their exile state, he assures them here that he is every bit as committed to restoring them to the land as he was to driving them away from it as a result of their sin. Another possible fear of the exiles is that they will never escape the dark shadow of their father's sins. The northern kingdom of Israel had been more or less doomed after the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, sins in which his successors of several different dynasties largely continued. The southern kingdom for its part seemed to be doomed as a result of the sins of Manasseh.

Many people here draw attention to the principle in Deuteronomy of sons not being put to death because of the sins of their fathers. In Deuteronomy 24, verse 16, Fathers shall not be put to death because of their children, nor shall children be put to death because of their fathers. Each one shall be put to death for his own sin.

Some scholars have suggested a move into a sort of moral individualism at this point. Each person will have to give account of himself and will only suffer the consequences of his own sins. However, in scripture there are numerous examples of sons suffering as a result of their father's sins.

And, as I have already noted, both Israel and Judah seemed to be doomed as a result of the sins of particular kings, even after some degree of subsequent reformation. A more helpful parallel passage is found in Ezekiel chapter 18, verses 1-4 and then in verse 20. The word of the Lord came to me.

What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel? The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge. As I live, declares the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. Behold, all souls are mine, the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine.

The soul whose sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.

The principle as it's developed in Ezekiel chapter 18 seems to be more specific. Blaming the sins of the fathers for the suffering that was coming upon them as their sons was an easy way of abdicating responsibility for the sins that they were committing. It was also a fatalistic statement, a statement that there was no hope of turning things around, being doomed from the start by the sins of those that preceded them.

There was no hope of a new beginning. By denying the applicability of the proverb, the Lord is making two particular points. First, that if they suffer, they will suffer on account of their own sins, sins that continue in the path set by the fathers.

Also, that they will experience a new beginning. They will no longer have to exist in the shadow of the sins of kings like Manasseh and Ahaz. Verses 31 to 34 are the most famous verses in the whole book, verses that are found in the New Testament, both alluded to and explicitly cited.

The promise of the new covenant is that the Lord will place his law in the heart of his people, so that the consistent problem of the covenant, the people themselves, would be addressed. It would be through this that the covenant formula, I will be their God and they shall be my people, would actually come to its true fruition. With the law in their hearts, the people would be marked out as the Lord's special possession, and with the law in their hearts, they would walk in his ways.

This would also lead to a movement away from the old order that was dominated by mediation, with God being at some distance from his people, with intermediaries having to be interposed between the people and the Lord, in order that the people might have some sort of knowledge of him. In this new covenant order, the knowledge of the Lord will be enjoyed more generally by the people. The Lord will be close to and knowable by them.

This will be enjoyed from the least of them to the greatest, from the youngest child to the oldest elder, from the richest to the poorest, from the king on his throne to the slave in the mine. Knowledge of the Lord would entail knowledge of the covenant, and also the knowledge that is characterized by obedience, walking in his ways, doing justice and righteousness. All of this would be possible because the Lord had forgiven the sins of Judah.

The sins for which they had been cast into exile were no longer held against them. They could now enjoy a clean slate and a new start. Now refounded on a new footing, the people were no longer fated to live out the old patterns of rebellion followed by punishment.

All of this, we should consider, is a fulfillment of prophecies like Deuteronomy 30, verses 1-6, where the Lord declared that he would circumcise the heart of his people. After all the curse and the punishment to come upon them, had they been scattered to foreign lands, he would draw them back, gather them back into the land, and he would change their heart. And so the covenant would be fulfilled, as the Lord forgave his people and dealt with their heart problem that had always been the great underlying issue.

The immediate horizon of Jeremiah's prophecy is the restoration from exile. This is what the prophecy immediately relates to. As the people are brought back to the land, their hearts will be turned back to God.

They will know the Lord in a new way, in a way that they did not know him before. It will be a period where they are no longer defined by the sins that defined them in the past. It will also be a period where there will no longer be large-scale national apostasy.

Individuals may apostatize, but the larger nation will be faithful. These are significant and decisive shifts for the people of God. This is an initial fulfillment of what has greater fulfillment in the work of Christ, and a greater fulfillment yet in the age to come. This feature of different levels of fulfillment of promissory statements in Scripture is something that we see on a number of occasions. For instance, the prophecy about David and his son that the Lord gives in 2 Samuel 7 refers to the son that David will have, and speaks of the establishment of his kingdom forever. Its initial and immediate referent is Solomon, but it looks beyond Solomon to things that will be fulfilled in a greater figure yet.

When we apply the promise of the New Covenant, as the book of Hebrews does, to the work of Christ, we should be careful not to uproot it from its original historical context, which refers to the return from exile. On the other hand, we must be careful not to see it terminating entirely upon the return from exile. The return from exile always opens out into a greater promissory reality that the Lord holds out to his people, a promissory reality that is not completely fulfilled in the first instance, but looks towards a greater resolution, and will finally be realized only through the work of Christ.

For those wondering whether the Lord still has a purpose for Israel, or whether there is hope after the Lord has cast Israel into exile, verses 35-37 give assurance. The Lord, who has created all things, has also created Israel, and just as he has committed to the patterns of the creation, the sun for light by day, and the order of the moon and the stars by night, so he has committed to Israel, he has not abandoned them. Nothing can separate Israel from the love of God.

The immeasurable character of the heavens and the foundations of the earth correspond to God's immeasurable grace to the people who have sinned against him so many times. From these assurances of the re-founding of Israel's relationship with the Lord comes another promise of the Lord's establishment of his people again in the land. The city of Jerusalem will be rebuilt and expanded, formerly defiled places will be recovered and made sacred to the Lord, and any cycle of tearing down and plucking up will be arrested, as the Lord, having built and planted his people within the land once more, will give them security and rest there.

A question to consider, how can we as Christians relate this passage concerning the new covenant to our life as the people of God in the Church, without doing violence to its original context? How might we develop the continuity between the original context and our own? Jeremiah chapters 32 and 33 were likely added to the original material of Jeremiah's book of consolation in chapters 30 to 31. They develop the theme of the Lord's restoration of his people, of his building and planting his people after the dislocation of captivity. There will be a return, life in the land will be restored, and the people will flourish, the broken covenant will be renewed, God will dwell with his people once more.

The material of the book of Jeremiah is not ordered chronologically more generally. The material of this chapter comes from the last years of Zedekiah, just before Judah fell. The

events of this chapter occurred at the same time as the events described in chapters 37 to 38, during which time Jeremiah was shut up in the court of the God.

As Jack Lumbom notes, the conclusion of this chapter neatly parallels the concluding oracles of the preceding chapter, which ended with an oracle on the new covenant in verses 31 to 34, followed by an oracle on the rebuilding of Jerusalem in verses 38 to 40. This chapter ends with an oracle on the eternal covenant in verses 36 to 41, and an oracle on the purchase of the land in Benjamin and Judah in verses 42 to 44. While chronologically divided, the material of this chapter is closely thematically united with that of the preceding chapters.

Like the rest of the book of Jeremiah, thematic ordering generally takes precedence over chronological ordering. Perhaps the detachment of the material of the book from its immediate chronological ordering and context is an indication of the power of the promises and warnings of Jeremiah to speak across various different times. The power of Jeremiah's words are not restricted to the immediate context to which they were first addressed.

The chapter begins with another symbolic action that Jeremiah is instructed to perform. At the heart of the chapter is a prayer of Jeremiah to the Lord, which is followed by the Lord's response. The context for Jeremiah's prophecies here is given at the start of the chapter.

Jerusalem is being besieged and Jeremiah himself is imprisoned. Jerusalem is surrounded and Jeremiah is surrounded, and only the latter will ultimately prevail. We should here recall the words given at Jeremiah's call in chapter 1 verses 15 to 19.

But you dress yourself for work, arise and say to them everything that I command you. Do not be dismayed by them, lest I dismay you before them. And I, behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar and bronze walls, against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests, and the people of the land.

They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, declares the Lord, to deliver you. The passage explains why he was imprisoned. It's a result of Zedekiah's objections to his prophecies.

Zedekiah here repeats all of Jeremiah's prophecies concerning him verbatim. He bears testimony against himself. Whether this is what the king actually said, or whether the prophecy is put in his mouth by the writer is not clear.

Either way, the fact that within the text it is from Zedekiah's own mouth that we hear the judgment against him, has a strong element of irony to it. Jeremiah has announced to Zedekiah that he will see the king of Babylon face to face. He will be brought before him.

This actually comes to pass in chapter 39 verse 5. But the army of the Chaldeans

pursued them and overtook Zedekiah in the plains of Jericho. And when they had taken him, they brought him up to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, at Ribla in the land of Hamath, and he passed sentence on him. According to the word of Jeremiah, Zedekiah would be taken as captive to Babylon, and he would remain there until the Lord visited him.

The meaning of this visitation from the Lord is not clear. Perhaps it's a reference to some further judgment, perhaps his death, or perhaps there's some element of grace being anticipated here. The Lord can visit both in judgment and in blessing.

Later in the book we'll have indications that Zedekiah's punishment will be mitigated by the time of his death. John Goldengay writes, and internal, moral and relational. And Yahweh's compassion will ensure both.

As a sign of this, the Lord instructs Jeremiah to buy a field from his cousin Hanumel, declaring Hanumel's offer of the sale beforehand as a confirmatory sign to Jeremiah. Jeremiah has the right of redemption of the field by custom, presumably as one of the nearest relatives, ensuring that the land would be kept within the family. This law is given in Leviticus chapter 25 verses 24-25.

Jeremiah was a member of a priestly family from Anathoth. Although the priests did not receive land with the other tribes, they were granted certain cities and their pasture lands. In Joshua chapter 21 verse 17, Anathoth in Benjamin was one of the cities given to Aaron and his descendants, with its surrounding pasture lands.

As Jerusalem is surrounded by the Babylonian army, Hanumel has presumably fled there from Anathoth. Neither he nor Jeremiah have any access to the field at this point. He is possibly desperately in search of money to buy food and other things to survive the siege, and selling the field is one of the few options left open to him.

Although Jeremiah is imprisoned, he seems to be allowed enough freedom to receive guests, to engage in business transactions and to have access to his scribe Beruk. The transaction is performed in the presence of signatories to the deed of purchase and other witnesses in the court of the guard. The deed was written in duplicate, the sealed part secured against hampering with the seal, and the open copy accessible for reference.

The deed is then committed to the charge of Beruk, who is instructed in the presence of the witnesses by the word of the Lord through Jeremiah. Beruk is to place the sealed and open deeds and put them in a protective vessel to ensure that they would be preserved for a long time. This was a common way of preserving important documents.

Most famously the Dead Sea Scrolls, from before the writing of the New Testament, were preserved to the present day in such a manner. A significant transaction for a plot of

land should remind us of the story of Abraham. Abraham bought a burial plot for Sarah in Genesis chapter 23 from the Hittites.

In that case the cave and field of Machpelah were anticipatory possessions in the promised land. They functioned as a stake in the territory that the Lord would later give into their hand. Even when they were living in Egypt, in the land of Goshen, Jacob was still buried there, waiting for the day when all of his sons would return.

Here something similar is going on. A significant sale of land occurs as a symbol of the awaited return after the captivity that will follow the siege. Jeremiah may not yet enter into possession of the land, but his near kin would be able to claim possession of it using the deed upon their return.

All of this is a sign given by the Lord that there will be a new dawn after the dark night of exile. Life will return to the now beleaguered city. Jeremiah's prayer that follows begins with a transitional statement from the purchase of the field and ends with a reference back to the Lord's instruction to perform the purchase in the presence of witnesses.

The prayer itself opens with a doxological statement concerning God as the creator of all things, and it connects God's creation with his redemption. This is something that we find elsewhere in scripture. For instance, in Isaiah chapter 45 verses 12 to 13, I made the earth and created man on it.

It was my hands that stretched out the heavens and commanded all their hosts. I have stirred him up in righteousness, and I will make all his ways level. He shall build my city and set my exiles free, not for price or reward, says the Lord of hosts.

There are similar connections of redemption and creation in places earlier in the book of Jeremiah, in chapter 27 verses 5 to 7, for instance. It is I who by my great power and my outstretched arm have made the earth, with the men and animals that are on the earth, and I give it to whomever it seems right to me. Now I have given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, my servant, and I have given him also the beasts of the field to serve him.

All the nations shall serve him and his son and his grandson, until the time of his own land comes. Their many nations and great kings shall make him their slave. The connection between redemption and creation is seen in the way that the language of Exodus is used of God's creative work.

He acts by his great power and his outstretched arm. This language, familiar from the story of the Exodus, is used again in verse 21 in that connection. The work of God in creation is evidence of his power in redemption.

He is also the God who judges. Jeremiah here alludes to the great statement of God's judgment in Exodus 20, verses 5-6. Both Israel and Judah suffer on account of sins that

can be traced down the line of their generations.

The punishment of the sins of the fathers is visited upon the children. But this is also because the children have continued in the ways of their fathers and not repented. God demonstrated his power in the past in bringing Israel out of Egypt and into the promised land.

The language that is used here is again reminiscent of the language that we find elsewhere in scripture. For instance, in Deuteronomy chapter 6, verses 22-23. He brought us out from there that he might bring us in and give us the land that he swore to give to our fathers.

Despite all of the mighty deeds that the Lord graciously performed on their behalf, and the great gift that he gave them in the land and in his presence, the people failed to heed him, they rejected him and turned away from his word. Consequently, in his righteousness, the Lord has brought disaster upon them. The surrounding armies of the Babylonians, promised beforehand back in chapter 1, are evidence that the Lord's word has taken effect.

Jeremiah ends the prayer with amazement. Something more than the Lord's might is indicated in the sign that he has given him earlier in the chapter. Despite the imminent doom of the people, the Lord has given him a sign that they will be restored, even after such a terrible defeat that is imminent.

Verse 17 read, Verse 7 frames the verses that follow as the Lord's answer to this. The language in both verses recalls the statement of the Lord back in Genesis chapter 18 verse 14. The Lord will return to you about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son.

Verse 18 read, As Walter Brueggemann notes, Third, the promise of an eternal covenant held out the hope of a new situation that would not merely introduce a new iteration of the old tragic cycle of grace immediately followed by rebellion. The Lord himself would ensure that the cycle was broken and the covenant would endure. Fourth and finally, there was the assurance that God would act in his faithfulness to re-establish his people and to do good to them.

The chapter ends with verses that reinforce the point of the entire chapter and stress the scale of the reversal that is going to occur. The disaster is juxtaposed with the restoration. The Lord's future restoration of his people is just as sure as their destruction at the hand of the Babylonians that are currently surrounding them.

The sign of all of this will be the fact that, in the very land that has been condemned to desolation, fields will be bought and sold, the normal patterns of life will return, and people will be settled once more. Individuals buying and selling parcels of land is an

expression of Israel's more general possession of the land once more. This will be the case not merely in some parts of the land, but throughout it, in the land of Benjamin, in places like Anathoth where Jeremiah is buying his field, in places about Jerusalem and in the other urban centers of Judah, in the cities of the hill country, in the places in the lowlands and the Shepheler, and in the cities in the south and the Negev.

Throughout the land, in all of its different parts, peace and security would one day be known again. A question to consider. There is a significant story of the purchase of a field in the Gospel of Matthew and the book of Acts.

What is the field? And how might reading the story of that field alongside the book of Jeremiah shed light upon what is happening there? Jeremiah chapter 33 is the last chapter of Jeremiah's book of consolation. It connects with the previous chapter in its timing. It is also in the period of Jeremiah's confinement in the court of the God, during the siege of Jerusalem by Babylon.

When human hopes fail, the Lord reminds His people and the prophet of His identity. He is the one who created and the one who upholds the world, in His creation and His providence. The name of the Lord is declared here as an assurance.

It recalls all of the things that He has done. The Lord invites Jeremiah, and perhaps by extension the people, to call to Him. He will answer them and show them great and hidden things.

Jack Lumbom notes that this is related to the phrase in Deuteronomy, Great cities fortified up to heaven. The point here is that things otherwise inaccessible, truths of the divine counsel, will be made known to the prophet if he asks. Judahites are at this time crowded in Jerusalem to fight the besieging Chaldeans.

They have torn down the houses of the city and even royal buildings to fortify the inside of the city wall against the opposing army of the Chaldeans. Their efforts, however, will be futile. All they will be doing is gathering more bodies to be struck down by the Lord in His wrath.

The Lord has hidden His face from them and He won't hear their cries or their prayers. However, the present judgment will pass and the Lord will heal and will restore the city. The futile hope expressed in places like Jeremiah 8, verse 22, Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of the daughter of my people not been restored? will finally be realized.

The city will be re-established in peace and security. The fortunes of Judah and Israel will be restored. The damning slate of their sins will be wiped clean.

Their guilt and impurity will be dealt with. The Lord will delight in the city once more and, rather than being a byword among the nations, the Lord's grace towards the city will

provoke fear and praise among the Gentiles when they see what the Lord has done for His people. Several earlier oracles spoke about the desolation of the city, describing it in terms of the silencing of voices.

Jeremiah 7, verse 34 And I will silence in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, for the land shall become a waste. In chapter 25, verse 10 Moreover, I will banish from them the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the grinding of the millstones and the light of the lamp. The situation, however, will be completely reversed.

The silent, desolate city will once more be filled with the voices of inhabitants, voices raised in song, voices of gladness and laughter, voices declaring the praise of the Lord as they make their way to the rebuilt house of the Lord. The dead city will be raised up to a new youthful life. Habitations of shepherds and their resting flocks will be restored in all of the different regions of the land.

The list here resembles the list at the end of the preceding chapter. Like the oracle of verses 10-11, verses 12-13 seem to speak from a time, whether in the present or a future projected by the prophetic message, in which Jerusalem and Judah is desolate. The statement, Behold the days are coming, is found on several occasions in Jeremiah's prophecy.

Here it introduces a promise of the restoration of Israel and Judah's political life and nationhood through the raising up of a righteous branch for David. The words of verses 14-16 are pretty much the same as those in chapter 23 verses 5-6. Behold the days are coming declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.

In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely, and this is the name by which he will be called, The Lord is our righteousness. The reestablishment of David's house and reign is an important theme in several prophecies. The condemnation of the false shepherds in Ezekiel chapter 34 also contains this theme in verses 23-24.

In Zechariah chapter 3 verse 8 Zechariah chapter 6 verses 12-13 And say to him, Thus says the Lord of hosts, Behold the man whose name is the branch, for he shall branch out from his place, and he shall build the temple of the Lord. It is he who shall build the temple of the Lord, and shall bear royal honour, and shall sit and rule on his throne, and there shall be a priest on his throne, and the council of peace shall be between them both. In Isaiah chapter 11 verse 1 There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his root shall bear fruit.

It might seem that David's family tree is about to be cut off. Indeed at the end of chapter 22 Jehoiachin seems to be doomed to die without an heir. Matthew chapter 1 suggests

that this was overcome, most likely through adoption.

The promised king would be good and wise. He would execute justice and righteousness, the fundamental duties of the king, the sign that the king knew the Lord. The reference to Judah and Israel also suggests a kingdom that is no longer divided.

This will be fulfilled when the Lord has gathered his people from all of the lands to which they have been scattered. In the earlier, almost identical prophecy in chapter 23, the expression the Lord is our righteousness was designed to play off the name of Zedekiah as the last king of Judah. His name meant, my righteousness is the Lord, and it stood as an indictment upon him as he failed to live up to it.

It promised something great, but it was hollow. Here however the expression is not used to name the descendant of David. The true Zedekiah.

Rather it is used to name the city of Jerusalem. This is similar to prophecies such as Isaiah chapter 1 verse 26. Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city.

Also the very last verse of the book of Ezekiel in chapter 48 verse 35. And the name of the city from that time on shall be the Lord is there. In verses 17 to 18 there is a promise of the restoration of both the kingly and the priestly lines.

The duties of the priest are spoken of at more length here. They offer burnt offerings, grain offerings and make sacrifices forever. Judah is either currently facing or on the brink of facing a great crisis of discontinuity, but it will pass.

The two great divinely appointed offices that secured continuity in the people's worship and political life will be established once more and they will be preserved by the Lord. The destruction of Jerusalem and Babylonian captivity raised unsettling questions about the Davidic covenant and the reliability of the Lord's word. The covenant with David and the covenant with the Levitical priests here are both guaranteed.

The covenant with the Levitical priests might be referring back to Numbers chapter 25 verses 11 to 13. Phineas the son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, has turned back my wrath from the people of Israel in that he was jealous with my jealousy among them, so that I did not consume the people of Israel in my jealousy. Therefore say, Behold, I give to him my covenant of peace, and it shall be to him and to his descendants after him the covenant of a perpetual priesthood, because he was jealous for his God and made atonement for the people of Israel.

Both the offspring of the house of David, which was in danger of being cut off, and the Levitical priests would be multiplied. The relationship between their numbers and the sand of the sea and the stars of heaven might recall the Abrahamic covenant. The chapter ends with a divine response to the claims being made by some persons that the

Lord had rejected the two clans that he chose.

Some have suggested that the two clans here are the Levites in the dynasty of David. However, it is more likely that it is a reference to Israel than Judah. The identity of the people who are making the claims is not clear either.

It may be people of the city, or it may be a reference to the surrounding nations. However, Israel's status is guaranteed by the Lord, by his power, and by his covenant faithfulness. In chapter 31, verses 35-37, we found a similar claim to this one here.

Then shall the offspring of Israel cease from being a nation before me forever. Thus says the Lord, if the heavens above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth below can be explored, then I will cast off all the offspring of Israel for all that they have done, declares the Lord. The reestablishment and continuance of the people of the Lord is as certain and sure as the Lord's upholding of the structure of the cosmos.

A question to consider, how does Jeremiah chapter 33 give us a model for finding security and certainty in a time when everything seems to be falling apart? Jeremiah chapter 34 opens with a word of judgment from the Lord through Jeremiah to Zedekiah, the king of Judah. Similar expressions of judgment to this can be found in chapter 21, verses 1-7, 37, verses 3-10, and chapter 38, verses 14-28, parallels that Walter Brueggemann observes. The prophecy dates from the period of the siege of Jerusalem before its final downfall.

Nebuchadnezzar and his armies and all of his allies surround the city. Only a few fortified cities remain alongside Jerusalem in the land. Almost all of the land has fallen into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar.

Jeremiah's message is not encouraging. The city of Jerusalem will also be given into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he will destroy it. And king Zedekiah won't escape.

He will see the king of Babylon eye to eye and speak to him face to face. Indeed, the king of Babylon will be the last thing that he sees. His eyes are put out in chapter 39, verse 7, and he is taken away captive to Babylon.

In contrast to Jehoiakim, there is some mitigation of Zedekiah's judgment. While he will die in captivity, he will die in peace, and he will be given a proper burial. People will mourn his passing.

Alongside Jerusalem, Lachish and Ezekiah are the only fortified cities that are left in the land. We have archaeological support for some of the history here. In the Lachish letters in the British Museum, which are broken pieces of pottery, have messages that were sent to the commander of the garrison at Lachish, telling him that someone is watching for the signals from Lachish, but they cannot see any from Ezekiah. Perhaps by that point, Ezekiah had already fallen. From verse 8 to the end of the chapter, we have an example of infidelity, and this contrasts with an example of fidelity in the Rechabites in the following chapter. While the chapters are chronologically divided, and chapter 35 dates from a much earlier period, they are thematically united, and there is a juxtaposition between these two accounts.

The law of the release of slaves in the seventh year does not seem to have been well observed. On the 50th year, in the year of Jubilee, there was a more general release, but this does not seem to have been widely practiced either. In verse 8, we learn that Ezekiah had made a solemn covenant with all of the people in Jerusalem, and had proclaimed a more general release.

The exact character of the release that Ezekiah proclaimed here is not entirely clear, and scholars debate it. Some think that since the release of slaves had not been more generally practiced, that this was a more general release to make up for its numb practice earlier. Others have suggested that it was only reinitiating the practice of Deuteronomy chapter 15, and that it was not a more general release at a single time.

Yet others have suggested that it was a year of Jubilee, and yet others that it was not related to the laws of the Pentateuch. Given the allusion back to Deuteronomy later on, this seems unlikely. Nor does Ezekiah's covenant seem to involve an ending of slavery altogether.

The background for this is found in places like Deuteronomy chapter 15, verses 12-15. And in the seventh year you shall let him go free from you. And when you let him go free from you, you shall not let him go empty-handed.

You shall furnish him liberally out of your flock, out of your threshing floor, and out of your winepress. As the Lord your God has blessed you, you shall give to him. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you.

Therefore I command you this today. The motivation for Ezekiah's covenant has also been debated. Perhaps during the siege, when the fields are no longer accessible, the slaves are not useful out there, and so they are needed to fight.

So setting them free makes more sense. Others have suggested a far more selfish motivation. As the slaves aren't able to work for their masters during the siege, the slaves want to give up responsibility to care for them.

Setting them free is a way of removing the safety net that they were responsible to provide. However, if this were the case, it would seem that this would be part of what the Lord would condemn them for. However, it is not mentioned in the condemnation.

Another possibility, more realistic, is that they think that this will curry favour with the

Lord. The Babylonians are surrounding the city, and they believe that if they release their slaves, the Lord may have favour upon them, and remove the Babylonians from them. When the Babylonians do lift the siege for a period of time, when the Egyptians temporarily appear to be a threat, they might feel that their move has worked out, and so they want to have their slaves back.

The Lord now condemns them for reneging on the covenant. In doing so, the Lord rehearses the commandment they were supposed to obey in releasing their slaves. And this section is introduced by a statement that the Lord himself made a covenant with their fathers.

The earlier verses spoke of Zedekiah making a covenant with the people, and here the Lord makes a covenant with the fathers. Zedekiah and his people released Hebrews from slavery, and the Lord released them from slavery, out of Egypt. The commandment that he gave the people concerning their slaves was intended to continue what he had done for them.

They had been granted a great Sabbath of release, and so on the Sabbath years and on the year of Jubilee, they were supposed to grant a Sabbath release for those working for them. When they failed to do this, they became more like Egypt than the people that they were called to be. The contrast between the action of Zedekiah and his people, and the action of the Lord, the one who set free the captives and kept his covenant, should be clearly apparent here.

Their initial action in releasing their slaves is commended. They did what was right in the eyes of the Lord. The fact that they are commended in such a fashion suggests that their action was not driven purely or primarily by cynical motives.

Rather, they were really seeking to please the Lord, perhaps to gain favour with him, but in a way that was not inappropriate. However, there is a tragic symmetry in verses 15 and 16. They recently turned and did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, and then in verse 16, they turned and profaned his name.

The Lord will deliver them to a poetic justice, just as they had disobeyed the Lord in not properly proclaiming liberty. So the Lord will proclaim to them liberty to the sword, to pestilence, and to famine. They had not truly released their servants, so they will be released to their fate.

In making the covenant, or cutting the covenant, they had enacted what seems to have been a self-maladictory oath. Walking between parts of an animal that had been cut in two, they were proclaiming upon themselves the curse that the same should happen to them if they fail to keep the covenant. This form of covenant ceremony might remind us of the covenant the Lord made with Abraham back in Genesis chapter 15. As a result of their sin, they will be given into the hand of their enemies, and their dead bodies, like the dead body of the calf, will be left as food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth. At this point, the king of Babylon seems to have withdrawn. He's gone off to fight the Egyptians.

This seems to have been what spurred the people to take their slaves back again. However, the king of Babylon is going to come back. He will take the city of Jerusalem and burn it with fire, and all the cities of Judah will be made a desolation.

In failing to grant liberty to their slaves, Israel was negating the reality of the Lord's liberation of them that should have been the foundation of their national life. As they failed to live as an Exodus-given and Exodus-giving people, they will be sent away into exile. A question to consider, where else in scripture do we find significant references to the Sabbath year or the year of Jubilee in the connection with the release of slaves? Although it dates from a period much earlier in the ministry of Jeremiah, from the period of the reign of King Jehoiakim, chapter 35 of Jeremiah should be juxtaposed with the chapter that precedes it.

The people's breaking of the covenant of emancipation under Zedekiah should be contrasted with the way that the Rechabites kept the command of their father. The events of the chapter occur during the days of King Jehoiakim, the son of Jeziah. More specifically, in verse 11, we find that it was during a period when King Nebuchadnezzar came up against the land.

Dating this can be a challenge, as Jeremiah was barred from the temple courts for a period of time. Yet we also have to relate it to a period in which Nebuchadnezzar was threatening the land and also was accompanied by the Syrians. We have some reference to this back in 2 Kings chapter 24 verses 1-2.

In his days, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, came up, and Jehoiakim became his servant for three years. Then he turned and rebelled against him. And the Lord sent against him bands of the Chaldeans and bands of the Syrians and bands of the Moabites and bands of the Ammonites, and sent them against Judah to destroy it, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by his servants the prophets.

Although there seem to have been raids back in 599-598 BC, Nebuchadnezzar does not seem to have come up against Jerusalem himself until the following year. It seems that either these events date from that later period or from the earlier period around 604 BC, a period when Jeremiah would still have had access to the temple courts. Jeremiah is instructed by the Lord to go to the house of the Rechabites and speak to them, bring them to the house of the Lord, and offer them wine to drink.

The house of the Rechabites is not a building, it's the family of the Rechabites. From 1 Chronicles chapter 2 verse 55, we learn that the Rechabites were descendants of the Kenites. The Kenites were a people associated with Jethro, Moses' father-in-law.

The Kenites, at least for some period of time, seem to have continued a nomadic existence in the south of Judah in the Negev. The family of the Rechabites, however, seem to have been in a different location. Jonadab, who is mentioned here, was a subject of the northern kingdom of Israel in the 9th century BC.

Our encounter with him is in 2 Kings chapter 10 verse 15. And when he departed from there, he met Jehonadab the son of Rechab coming to meet him. And he greeted him and said to him, Is your heart true to my heart, as mine is to yours? And Jehonadab answered, It is.

Jehu said, If it is, give me your hand. So he gave him his hand and Jehu took him up with him into the chariot. Jehonadab, or Jonadab, accompanies Jehu as he strikes down the remainder of the house of Ahab in the city of Samaria.

Jeremiah is instructed by the Lord to present a test to the people of the house of the Rechabites. He gathers the whole of the household together in a side chamber of the house of the Lord, the chamber of the sons of Hanan, perhaps a place where they stored wine. Around the main temple structure there was a large series of side chambers that would have been used for storage, for various events and feasts, as places for royal use, and for a number of other purposes.

These side chambers were part of a structure with three stories that is described back in 1 Kings chapter 6 verses 5-6. He also built a structure against the wall of the house running around the walls of the house, both the nave and the inner sanctuary, and he made side chambers all around. The lowest story was five cubits broad, the middle one was six cubits broad, and the third was seven cubits broad.

For around the outside of the house he made offsets on the wall in order that the supporting beams should not be inserted into the walls of the house. Jeremiah sets before the Rechabites pictures of wine and cups and tells them to drink wine. The response of the Rechabites is to refuse.

Their ancestor, Jehonadab, had committed them to a particular form of life. They would not drink wine, they would not build a house, they would not sow seed, they would not plant or have a vineyard, and they would live in tents all of their days. They had been committed to a semi-nomadic existence.

Their presence in Jerusalem at this time is explained in verse 11 by the fact that Nebuchadnezzar has come up against the land. There is no reason to believe that while they are within Jerusalem they are doing anything other than continuing the way that their father committed them to. If they had not been doing so, it would be strange indeed for Jeremiah and the Lord to single them out as an example to Judah. Perhaps it is their noteworthy presence in the city and the comments and discussions that they naturally would have provoked among the inhabitants that makes them such fitting examples for Jeremiah's message. The Rechabites, as one, respond to Jeremiah. They recount the commandment of their ancestor Jehonadab, and then they make a corresponding statement that expresses their observance of each one of his stipulations.

The command-observance pattern is encountered on a number of occasions in Scripture, perhaps most notably in the description of the construction of the tabernacle at the end of the book of Exodus. The Lord gives the instructions of how everything needs to be made, and then in great detail we hear how each one of those instructions was obeyed. The significance of the Rechabites' obedience to their father Jehonadab is not to be found in any of the specific stipulations.

It is not the case that people need to be abstinent from wine, even though this might remind us of the vow of the Nazarites, nor was there anything necessarily more holy in their observance of a semi-nomadic lifestyle. The importance is to contrast their filial piety and obedience of their father Jehonadab with Israel's failure to obey the word of the Lord. Nevertheless, this passage does raise some interesting questions about the place that we should give to extra-biblical customs that families and peoples and groups can adopt, customs that may be connected with their expression of their faith in some way.

We might think here of monastic communities, or perhaps a more fitting comparison would be with a group like the Amish. Participants in such communities of discipline may find that they are strengthened in their own expression of faith within that structure. We might also find in such communities exemplars and models to which the Church more broadly can look.

This is certainly part of the role that the Rechabites seem to be playing here. While such observances should not be presumed to have some supererogatory value, as if they earned people a special favour before God, or to bind the conscience in a way that usurps the prerogative that belongs to the word of God alone, it does not mean that they are without great value. After having presented this test to the Rechabites, Jeremiah is instructed to bring the word of the Lord to the people.

Israel's whole identity as a people was supposed to be premised upon their commitment to hear the word of the Lord and to obey it, and they had failed in their most basic vocation as a people. The Rechabites, by contrast, in their filial piety, presented a far greater commitment to obedience than Israel did in their relationship to their God. Jonadab had delivered this instruction to his family many years ago, and they seem to have kept it for almost two centuries.

By contrast, Israel is failing to obey the word that the Lord has delivered to them, not just at Sinai, but repeatedly through the prophets. Time after time, he sends the prophets to them. Persistently, he warns them of the consequences of not hearing, and

holds out the promise of continued life in the land.

The Rechabites obey the words of their father, but Israel, the firstborn son of the Lord, has disobeyed his word. The fifth commandment concerns such obedience. Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God has given you.

In Exodus 20, verse 12. The failure of Judah and the people of Jerusalem to obey the word of the Lord meant that disaster would come upon them. They would be cut off from the land.

Their fate, however, is contrasted with that of the Rechabites. The house of the Rechabites is blessed on account of their obedience to the command of their father. Their scrupulous obedience of his commandments and honoring of his words means that they will live long in the land.

Jonadab will never lack a man to stand before him. They have received the promised blessing of the fifth commandment. A question to consider.

What are some of the benefits and the potential dangers of communities such as the Rechabites? What modern day examples can we think of that might be comparable to them? And what lessons could we learn from them? Chapter 36 of Jeremiah begins with a reference to the fourth year of King Jehoiakim. This is a key date in the book of Jeremiah and also for the Near Eastern region's history. It was the year in which Jeremiah delivered the prophecy of chapter 25.

And in chapter 45 we have a reference to Baruch's writing of Jeremiah's prophecies in a book in that year. Beyond Jeremiah's ministry, however, the fourth year of Jehoiakim was Nebuchadnezzar's first year as king of Babylon. It was the year in which he defeated the Egyptians at Carchemish and changed the regional political situation.

From this point onwards, Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon would start to dominate over Syria and later Judah. The presence of Baruch and the writing of a scroll in this chapter and then again in chapter 45 has led many to regard the section of Jeremiah that they bracket as the Baruch document. By this point, Jeremiah was already facing increasing opposition.

He doesn't seem to have had the freedom to pronounce his message in the temple himself and so he is instructed to write a scroll for Baruch which he can read in the temple. From the Lord's first instruction to Jeremiah, to Jeremiah's dictation, to the movement of the scroll by stages into the very presence of the king himself, this chapter recounts the effectiveness of the written word of scripture. The scroll was likely written on papyrus.

Baruch may have been a scribe of note and he becomes very strongly associated with

the character of Jeremiah from this point. The written scroll or book provides a way in which the words of Jeremiah can be uttered in the precincts of the temple itself. Although Jeremiah himself is not permitted access, the scroll can represent Jeremiah's message and Baruch can be his mouthpiece.

The contents of this initial scroll have been debated. Some have suggested that it contained the material of chapters 1-6, which seems unlikely. Others that it contained the material from the beginning of chapter 1 to the first half of verse 13 of chapter 25.

Jack Lumbum disputes this and suggests that it was most likely chapters 1-20, at least in some initial form. The scroll is an important actor within this chapter. Walter Brueggemann writes, The scroll is so much more difficult to resist because it cannot, like a person, be intimidated, banished or destroyed.

It keeps reappearing. John Goldingame makes a similar point. It's a naive gesture, but it's a meaningful one.

It fits that Jeremiah then simply redictates the scroll and adds lots more words to it. That closing note makes one shiver, not least for Jehoiachin. The written word will find fulfillment.

This book will later be part of a larger gathering of the scriptures themselves. Like this scroll of Jeremiah, it matters that the scriptures are written down. Their being in writing, scriptures, gives them a character more independent from the prophets and others who first delivered their words.

The scroll is delivered in the hope that people will be receptive to the word, that they will repent and as a result be spared the disaster that the Lord would otherwise bring upon them. The day chosen for its reading seems to have been chosen for this end. This was not one of the regular feasts, but was an occasional day of fasting, presumably because the nation was facing some peculiar peril.

In this context, where a large number of the people had gathered together and they were in a penitential state of mind, they might be in the best state of mind to hear such a challenging prophecy. As large numbers of the people of Judah are gathered together for this particular fast, Baruch reads out the scroll in their hearing, in the chamber of Gemariah the son of Shaphan the secretary. Shaphan the secretary was an important figure during the reign of Jeziah, and various members of his family appear on several occasions during the story of the book of Jeremiah.

Often helping Jeremiah at key points. Back at the end of chapter 26, a hycum one of Shaphan's sons helped to deliver Jeremiah from death. We don't know the exact manner of this reading, whether Baruch just stood up and read the scroll, or whether there was a scheduled, officially authorised reading at a particular point. Gemariah himself wasn't present to hear the reading of the scroll, but his son, Micaiah, was. Hearing the words of the scroll, he knew that it was important for the leaders of the people to hear, so he brought word of it to the king's house, to the high officials in the secretary's chamber. Gemariah the son of Shaphan is a person for whom we have independent archaeological evidence, in the form of an inscription on a seal impression.

Micaiah reported the words of Jeremiah's scroll to them, the words that he had heard Baruch reading. Having heard about the contents of the scroll, the officials then send Jehudai to summon Baruch to their company. Surprisingly, we are given three generations of Jehudai's ancestry.

This reveals that he is a descendant of an Ethiopian. Having summoned Baruch to them, they instruct him to sit down and read the scroll. And when he reads the scroll, their response is one of fear.

They take the words seriously and believe that it should be reported to the king. However, before they do so, they want to be clear about the origin of the scroll, that it is not a hoax or otherwise some document purporting to be something more than it actually is. Baruch confirms that he received the word from Jeremiah, that the words were directly dictated to him, and he wrote them down with ink on the scroll.

The officials, presumably knowing that Jehoiachin will not hear the words favourably, instruct Baruch and Jeremiah to hide themselves and not tell anyone where they are. The fact that the officials themselves do not know where Baruch and Jeremiah will hide, will also help to protect them from the king. To understand their concern to hide Baruch and Jeremiah, we might think back to chapter 26, where Uriah, the prophet from Kiriath-Jerim, had to flee from Jehoiachin into Egypt, and then Jehoiachin sent men to kill him there.

In that account, we are told that the words of Uriah were very much like those of Jeremiah. The officials know how dangerous it is to be a faithful prophet in this sort of situation. All the evidence, however, suggests that they are on the side of Jeremiah and Baruch.

They might also be thankful for the presence of this scroll. The scroll has an independent character to it. It is not a prophet that can be killed in the same way, and it declares warnings and judgements that perhaps even they as high officials have tried to bring to the king in their own capacity.

Now they have a further testimony that they can draw upon. They don't bring the scroll to the king, but leave it in the chamber of Elishema, the secretary, and then report the words upon it to the king. Much as the officials had done with the message of Micaiah, however, the king sends Jehudi to bring the scroll to him. Perhaps the officials intentionally preferred a situation where the king had to summon the scroll to himself, rather than their bringing it to him. As Jehudi reads the scroll to the king, however, the king cuts off bits that he has finished reading and throws them into the fire. After Jehudi has finished reading, the entirety of Jeremiah's scroll has been committed to the flames.

Gemariah and a number of the other leading officials try to urge the king not to destroy the scroll, but he doesn't listen to them. The king's response contrasts with that of his officials. He's not fearful, as they were, and he does not tear his clothes.

Rather, he tears the document. The king then sends men to seize Beruk and Jeremiah, but the Lord protects them. Jehoiakim's attempt to silence the word of the Lord is entirely in vain.

After the first scroll has been burnt, the word of the Lord comes to Jeremiah again, and he is instructed to take another scroll and write all the words upon it again. Perhaps here we might recall another significant document that we read of in Scripture, the tablets of stone. The first tablets of stone were broken by Moses as a result of the people's sin with the golden calf, and then another set were given.

Here, once again, the rejected covenant word leads to judgment. The initial document had been given with the hope that there would be repentance, and that the Lord would relent from the judgment that he was going to bring. Now, however, the declaration of judgment is strengthened.

Jeremiah takes the other scroll, and at his dictation, Beruk writes down all of the words of the previous scroll, and many more like them. The initial judgment is not only made more sure, it is intensified. A question to consider.

Where else in the Scriptures do we read of very specific documents containing part of the biblical text? What are some of the various ways in which these specific copies of parts of the Scripture function? Jeremiah chapters 37-44, especially chapters 37-38, have been referred to as Jeremiah's Passion Narrative. The prophet suffers in the final days of Jerusalem and in the time that follows. The narrative of these chapters is a largely sequential account of the siege and fall of Jerusalem, and the subsequent events.

These events occur towards the end of the reign of Zedekiah. Jehoiachin had been taken into Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar in 597 BC. Jehoiachin, otherwise known as Jeconiah or Caniah, was replaced on the throne by his uncle, a puppet king set up by Babylon, in 2 Kings 24, verse 17.

And the king of Babylon made Mataniah, Jehoiachin's uncle, king in his place, and changed his name to Zedekiah. However, Zedekiah, his officials, and the people of the land still failed to listen to the words of the Lord through Jeremiah. However, despite the

rejection of his words, Zedekiah sends men to Jeremiah to ask him to pray for the nation.

At this point, Jeremiah is still active in public life. He's not yet been imprisoned, which he will be by the end of the chapter. Nebuchadnezzar and his army had been besieging Jerusalem.

Judah, it seems, had sought help from Egypt. After the pharaoh came up out of Egypt, the Chaldeans withdrew from Jerusalem and prepared to face them. Hophra was the king of Egypt at this point, from 589 BC.

Compared to the great powers in the north, first Assyria and now Babylon, and the great power in the south of Egypt, Judah was the smallest minnow. The little power it once possessed had largely been stripped in 597 BC, when Nebuchadnezzar had first defeated the city. Now it depends upon appealing to aid from elsewhere.

It has been caught in the tempest of these unsettled relations between the northern and the southern powers for quite some time. Josiah had been killed by Pharaoh Necho, Jehoiachin had been deported to Babylon, and now Zedekiah was facing a renewed assault from this northern power. To face the threat of Babylon, Judah had appealed to help for Egypt.

Ezekiel also talks about this appeal for help and warns against it, in chapter 17, verses 15-17. But he rebelled against him by sending his ambassadors to Egypt, that they might give him horses and a large army. Will he thrive? Can one escape who does such things? Can he break the covenant and yet escape? As I live, declares the Lord God, surely in the place where the king dwells, who made him king, whose oath he despised, and whose covenant with him he broke, in Babylon he shall die.

Pharaoh with his mighty army and great company will not help him in war, when mounds are cast up and siege walls built to cut off many lives. In the covenant, Israel had been explicitly told not to go back to Egypt for horses and chariots. Zedekiah was also subject to the king of Babylon, so at this point he was rebelling against his master.

Jeremiah tells Zedekiah that though he might put faith in the Egyptians, whatever hope the offer is short-lived, there will be no real reprieve. The Chaldeans under Nebuchadnezzar will return, and they will take the city and burn it with fire. Although it may appear that they have gone, they will be back shortly.

Indeed, even if Judah were to win the most remarkable victory over them, they would still ultimately fall to their might. In a hyperbolic statement, the Lord says that even if only wounded men were left, and only one man per tent, they would still rise up and defeat the city. There is no way for it to escape.

Back in chapter 32, Jeremiah had bought a field from Hanumel, the son of Shalem, his uncle. Now as the siege is lifted, Jeremiah intends to go up to Anathoth to take

possession of the land that he has bought. However, as he is leaving the city, he is stopped there by a sentry, Eirijah.

He is accused of deserting to the Chaldeans. Even had Jeremiah explained his real errand, it might not have actually helped. One doesn't usually worry that much about taking possession of land when the land is being overrun by a hostile enemy force.

Unless, perhaps, you are in league with that hostile enemy force, and assured that you will be allowed to keep possession of it. Of course, the reader of Jeremiah knows that the Lord has revealed to him that fields will be bought and sold in the land once more. However, Eirijah seizes Jeremiah and brings him to the officials.

The officials are angry at Jeremiah, beat him and imprison him in the house of Jonathan the Secretary, a private residence that had been made into a prison. Though a grim place, the prison was most likely primarily used for detention rather than punishment. After being in the prison for some time, King Zedekiah sent to Jeremiah and wanted to have a private audience with him.

Reading between the lines here, it shouldn't be hard to see some tensions between King Zedekiah and his officials. Earlier, in the reading of Baruch's scroll back in chapter 36, we saw tensions between King Jehoiakim and his officials. In that case, the officials seemed to be far more favourable to Jeremiah and the king seemed to be quite hostile.

Here, the officials are probably different people. The officials during the reign of Jehoiakim had presumably largely been deported with Jehoiakim to Babylon. Now there's a new bunch of officials, the bad figs that are described in the vision of chapter 24.

Zedekiah asks for a word from the Lord and Jeremiah says there is a word, the same word that he has received earlier, that he will be delivered into the hand of the king of Babylon. Back in chapter 21 verse 7, Afterward declares the Lord, I will give Zedekiah, king of Judah, and his servants, and the people in the city who survived the pestilence, sword, and famine, into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and into the hand of their enemies, into the hand of those who seek their lives. He shall strike them down with the edge of the sword.

He shall not pity them, or spare them, or have compassion. Despite this harsh word, Zedekiah still seems receptive enough to Jeremiah for Jeremiah to petition him for release from the house of Jonathan the secretary. Should he remain there longer, it would seem likely that he would die in its conditions.

Jeremiah points out that he's done no wrong to the king. He's merely told the truth. He has never told anything but the truth, delivering the word of the Lord faithfully, and yet he's been rewarded with the cruelest treatment.

Where are all the flattering false prophets now? The ones who said that the king of

Babylon would not come up against them? They were loved for their flattering words, but when those words proved hollow, they're nowhere to be found. They seem to have fled the scene. Meanwhile, the faithful and courageous prophet who delivered the word of the Lord and warned of the disaster that has befallen them is wasting away in a dank prison.

King Zedekiah is receptive to Jeremiah's plea, and he removes Jeremiah from the house of Jonathan the secretary and delivers him to the court of the guard, where he'll still be in detention, but in much safer and better conditions. He is also given a flatbread daily to sustain him from the bakers. As long as there is bread in the city, he will be fed.

A question to consider, contrasting the behavior of true and false prophets and the way that they are treated by others, what are some of the lessons that we can learn that apply to our own situations? In Jeremiah chapter 38, the story of the suffering prophet continues. Although Jeremiah has been persecuted and put in prison by the officials in the preceding chapter, he still seems to be able to deliver his message to people. He was released from the prison house of Jonathan the secretary, and he was imprisoned in the court of the guard instead.

And now, imprisoned in the court of the guard, he is delivering a message that is threatening their cause. Back in chapter 21, verses 8 to 10 we read, The officials here repeat in summarized form the message that Jeremiah has been delivering. One can imagine, in a war, it is all or nothing.

A character like Jeremiah to the officials would be regarded like Lord Hoho during the Second World War, broadcasting Nazi propaganda to demoralize and discourage the Allies from the city. Jeremiah's message that they should surrender to Nebuchadnezzar and the Chaldeans was the very last thing that they wanted to get around. His message was demoralizing, that the city would fall, that their efforts were in vain, and also seemingly treacherous.

Nebuchadnezzar being described as the servant of the Lord, the one to whom they should surrender. Indeed, had not Jeremiah himself been caught on the way out of the city, presumably to defect to the Babylonians? In the light of such fears and suspicions, you can understand the perspective of the officials. It is not going to be easy for them to admit that they are fighting against the word of the Lord.

When they bring their word to the king, it becomes apparent that the king is not really the one in charge anymore. They are the ones that really hold the power. King Zedekiah seems to be fearful of his own officials and gives in to them, because he cannot withstand them.

In a kingdom that had witnessed several coups over its history, the king's fears were quite understandable. He offers no resistance to them. Behold, he is in your hands, for the king can do nothing against you. The officials then take Jeremiah and cast him into what was probably a bottle dungeon, a bottle-shaped hole from which someone could not climb out. Here, in the suffering of Jeremiah, we might hear some resemblances with the suffering of Joseph and the way that he was cruelly mistreated by his brothers. Back in Genesis chapter 37, verses 20 to 24, Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits.

Then we will say that a fierce animal has devoured him, and we will see what will become of his dreams. But when Reuben heard it, he rescued him out of their hands, saying, Let us not take his life. And Reuben said to them, Shed no blood, throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but do not lay a hand on him, that he might rescue him out of their hand to restore him to his father.

So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the robe of many colours that he wore, and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty. There was no water in it.

Jeremiah's pit is described in a similar way to that of Joseph. It is the same word that is used, and once again we are told that there is no water in the pit. In the case of Joseph and his brothers, they wanted to shut up his prophetic dreams.

Something similar is going on in the case of Jeremiah. The princes and the officials are concerned to shut up the word of Jeremiah from the Lord, the word that is discouraging the city. Their hope, like that of the brothers minus Reuben, is that the unwelcome prophet will waste away in the pit, dying without water to drink or food to eat.

The word of what has happened to Jeremiah comes to the ears of Ebed-Melek, an Ethiopian eunuch within the king's house. There is more than one significant Ethiopian eunuch in scripture. Ebed-Melek was probably a foreigner close to the king.

As a foreigner who had no family of his own, he could be more protective of the king's interests than some of the officials, and the king might trust him a lot more. The Judahite officials would all have their own clan interests and their desires to get their families ahead, whereas an Ethiopian eunuch would represent no faction within the nation itself, and would have no descendants that he was trying to advance. As a result, his interests were entirely thrown in with the interests of the king and his dynasty.

Ebed-Melek seems to have more regard for the prophet than any of the officials of Judah. In speaking of Jeremiah's plight to the king, he underlines the fact that Jeremiah is the prophet in his description of him. The king is here described as sitting in the Benjamin Gate.

Perhaps we are supposed to see some association between the king and the character of Benjamin, the brother of Joseph, who was not present as Joseph was sold into Egypt. Later on in the chapter, in Jeremiah's word to Zedekiah, Jeremiah will describe the fate

that awaits King Zedekiah, in language that recalls his own plight in the Bottle Dungeon. During the reign of Jehoiakim, the opponents of Jeremiah were primarily priests and prophets, and the officials of the land were on his side.

And now it seems to be a reverse situation. The powerful officials of the land are against him. The weak king, however, seems to be more favorably inclined towards him at this point.

As Joseph's life was saved by Ishmaelites, Jeremiah is delivered by the Ethiopian Ebed-Melek. On the king's instruction, Ebed-Melek takes 30 men with him to bring Jeremiah up out of the pit. Perhaps the number of men are needed as a guard to protect Jeremiah from the officials that might try and capture him again.

Having been brought up, Jeremiah is placed in the court of the god again. After he's been moved to the court of the god, King Zedekiah summons Jeremiah, desiring a private conversation with him. Understandably, Jeremiah is wary.

If he declares the word of the Lord honestly to King Zedekiah, Zedekiah might put him to death. King Zedekiah, however, gives Jeremiah assurances, swearing in the name of the Lord that he will not put him to death, nor will he deliver him into the hands of those who seek his life. The message that Jeremiah brings is the same as before.

He must surrender to the officials of the king of Babylon. If he does this, the way of life is open to him. If he fails to do so, he will not escape them, and the city will be destroyed.

Zedekiah, however, is fearful. A number of the Judeans have deserted to King Nebuchadnezzar. If he surrenders to the Chaldeans, will he just fall into their hands? King Zedekiah seems to have enemies and opponents on all sides.

It seems that he is king in little more than name. He is besieged inside the walls of his city by the men of his own court. The officers who are more powerful than him, and from whom he wants to keep his conversation with Jeremiah secret.

He instructs Jeremiah not to reveal anything of the conversation that they have shared. Their suspicions must be allayed. Outside the walls of the city, there are defectors who hate him, and there is the king of Babylon who is over all of them, his former suzerain that he rebelled against.

However, if he listens to the word of the Lord delivered through his prophet Jeremiah, he could be protected from all of these enemies. Handing himself over to the king of Babylon, he would be delivered from those who seek his life. Jeremiah declares a vision that he has received.

The women of the house of the king of Judah going out to the king of Babylon and his officials, all describing the way that King Zedekiah's trusted friends have turned against

him. The people that he once trusted have proved untrustworthy. This would be the final indignity for the king, as his wives and his children are brought out to the Chaldeans.

The very people that he would most want to protect are now taken outside of his protection, falling captive into the hand of his great enemies. As Zedekiah expected, the officials ask Jeremiah about the conversation that he had with the king. By answering as the king instructed, Jeremiah manages to put them off the scent.

He is sent back to the court of the God, and he remains there until the time that Jerusalem falls. A question to consider. As they go out to the king of Babylon in the vision of Jeremiah, the women of the house of the king of Judah speak of Zedekiah in this way.

Your trusted friends have deceived you and prevailed against you. Now that your feet are sunk in the mud, they turn away from you. The description of the king's plight, betrayed by people and placed in a pit where he is sinking in the mud, is very much like Jeremiah's earlier in the chapter.

What might we learn in comparing and contrasting the figures of Jeremiah and King Zedekiah? Chapters 37 and 38 of Jeremiah concern Jeremiah's personal trials. In chapter 39 there is a break in the prophet's personal narrative to give an account of the fall of the city. The account here is similar to that in chapter 52.

Jack Lumbombe suggests that chapter 39 verse 1 to 40 verse 6 might have initially served to close off an earlier version of the book. He notes the parallels between the account of this and the final chapter in chapter 52, Jerusalem's fall, Zedekiah's capture, the death of key citizens, exile for others, and the parallel between the release of Jeremiah and the release of Jehoiachin. The account also completes the period of time that is mentioned in chapter 1 verses 1 to 3. The words of Jeremiah the son of Hilkiah, one of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, to whom the word of the Lord came in the days of Jeziah the son of Ammon, king of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign.

It came also in the days of Jehoiachin the son of Jeziah, king of Judah, and until the end of the eleventh year of Zedekiah, the son of Jeziah, king of Judah, until the captivity of Jerusalem in the fifth month. The siege of Jerusalem began in 588 BC. Nebuchadnezzar's army came up against the city.

It seems that Nebuchadnezzar was headquartered at Ribla in the north in the land of Hamath, in the region of Syria, as he was fighting against Judah. Just over twenty years previously, Jehoiachin had been brought before Pharaoh Necho there in 609 BC. Ribla then seems to have been a significant location both for Egyptian and Babylonian campaigns.

During this period, Nebuchadnezzar was dealing with Egypt and western Syria at the

same time as Judah, so Judah wasn't the only thing on his mind. The fall of Jerusalem has been anticipated for a long time in the book of Jeremiah, and now it's finally taking place. Determining the exact year of its fall depends upon questions concerning the chronology that one follows.

It seems most likely that it was in 586 BC. As the city falls, chief officials of Babylon take up their place and sit in the middle gate, a place of judgment. All of this goes to fulfil the word of the Lord given at the beginning of the book.

In the call of Jeremiah, at the beginning of the book, in chapter 1 verses 13-15 we read, The word of the Lord came to me a second time, saying, What do you see? And I said, I see a boiling pot facing away from the north. Then the Lord said to me, Out of the north disaster shall be let loose upon all the inhabitants of the land. For behold, I am calling all the tribes of the kingdoms of the north, declares the Lord, and they shall come, and everyone shall set his throne at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem, against all its walls all around, and against all the cities of Judah.

It also fulfilled the prophecy of chapter 21, verse 4. Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, Behold, I will turn back the weapons of war that are in your hands, and with which you are fighting against the king of Babylon, and against the Chaldeans who are besieging you outside the walls, and I will bring them together into the midst of this city. As King Zedekiah and his soldiers see the enemy coming into the city, they flee. Likely after hiding for some time, they go out of the city at night by way of the king's garden, probably using some posturn that was hidden from the enemy.

Fleeing from the south of the city, they head towards the Arabah. While the Arabah can be used to refer to the whole Rift Valley going from the Sea of Galilee to the Gulf of Aqaba, here it likely refers more specifically to the arid region south of Jericho. King Zedekiah's likely intent is to cross the Jordan and take refuge with the Ammonites, or perhaps to take refuge in caves on the west bank of the Dead Sea.

As Lumbum observes, David had taken a similar escape route during the coup of Absalom. This fulfills in part the symbolic action that was performed by Ezekiel in Ezekiel 12, verses 3-12. As for you, son of man, prepare for yourself an exile's baggage and go into exile by day in their sight.

You shall go like an exile from your place to another place in their sight. Perhaps they will understand, though they are a rebellious house. You shall bring out your baggage by day in their sight, as baggage for exile, and you shall go out yourself at evening in their sight, as those do who must go into exile.

In their sight, dig through the wall and bring your baggage out through it. In their sight, you shall lift the baggage upon your shoulder and carry it out at dusk. You shall cover your face that you may not see the land, for I have made you a sign for the house of

Israel.

And I did as I was commanded. I brought out my baggage by day, as baggage for exile, and in the evening I dug through the wall with my own hands. I brought out my baggage at dusk, carrying it on my shoulder in their sight.

In the morning the word of the Lord came to me. Son of man, has not the house of Israel, the rebellious house, said to you, What are you doing? Say to them, Thus says the Lord God. This oracle concerns the prince in Jerusalem and all the house of Israel who are in it.

Say, I am a sign for you, as I have done, so shall it be done to them. They shall go into exile, into captivity. And the prince who is among them shall lift his baggage upon his shoulder at dusk, and shall go out.

They shall dig through the wall to bring him out through it. He shall cover his face, that he may not see the land with his eyes. King Zedekiah, having rejected the word of the Lord through Jeremiah, the instruction to surrender himself to the king of Babylon, now falls into the king of Babylon's hands and faces a far more devastating fate.

His sons are killed before his eyes, cutting off his line. The nobles of his court are killed, and then his own eyes are removed, and he is taken in chains to Babylon. As his eyes are removed, the last sight that he has seen is the devastating sight of the death of all of his sons.

As his eyes are removed and he is taken to Babylon, we might see some fulfillment of Ezekiel chapter 12 verse 13, which speaks cryptically of what is about to take place. And I will spread my net over him, and he shall be taken in my snare, and I will bring him to Babylon, the land of the Chaldeans. Yet he shall not see it, and he shall die there.

After Jerusalem falls to the Babylonians, the king's house and the house of the people are burned with fire, and the walls of the city are broken down. Jerusalem has ceased to be a city. Over the last 120 years, Judah has gradually been whittled down.

46 cities had fallen in Sennacherib's campaign back in 701 BC. Many of those cities would not have been built up again. Then there had been another devastating defeat in 597 BC, and now in this final great blow, Jerusalem falls, its walls are broken down, and it ceases to be a city.

The remainder of the people in the city, the deserters and those who are taken as prisoners of war, and other remaining people are taken as prisoners to Babylon. The remainder of the people here are probably artisans, metal workers, stone workers, and any remaining military men. Chapter 52 refers to a number of different stages of deportation.

The first wave of the deportations comes in 597 BC, the second wave in 586, and the third wave in 582, likely after the killing of Gedaliah. We have different numbers for the people taken in the deportation in different parts of scripture. The differences between them probably depend upon who's being counted.

The ruling classes, the skilled craftsmen, and the men of war are included in some, whereas others might only include the ruling classes. Judah is stripped of its might, it's stripped of its leaders, it's stripped of its military, it's stripped of its skilled craftsmen, the metal workers, the stone masons, and others who might build up its strength once more. However, much of the land is given to the poor and the destitute within it, having received their land from the king of Babylon, they were likely to be more loyal to him.

One of the reasons why Judah was judged and put into exile was their failure to give the land its Sabbaths. Here we might have an indication of another reason, their failure to perform the year of Jubilee, during which ancestral land was returned to those who had lost it. Earlier in the reign of Zedekiah, there had been a short-lived covenant in which rich Judahites released their Hebrew slaves.

Here, in the Lord's providence, through the king of Babylon, the land is being returned to poor people who had been denied it. As they submitted themselves to the king of Babylon, they would have peace and enjoy the fruit of the land. In this, the Lord was making them the beneficiaries of a great Sabbath.

They were also enjoying the benefit promised in Jeremiah chapter 27 verse 11. But any nation that will bring its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon and serve him, I will leave on its own land, to work it and dwell there, declares the Lord. Nebuchadnezzar gives explicit command concerning Jeremiah through Nebuchadnezzar, the captain of his guard.

How Nebuchadnezzar has heard about Jeremiah we can only speculate, perhaps through messages that Jeremiah sent to the exiles in Babylon. Perhaps it was from defectors who reported the message of Jeremiah, what he had declared concerning submission to the king of Babylon. By treating people like Jeremiah and the poor of the land well, King Nebuchadnezzar would reduce the amount of force that he would have to use against the people of the land.

As he treated people like Jeremiah well, there would be a lot more support for him and a much lower likelihood of rebellion. Jeremiah is entrusted to Gedaliah the son of Ahicham the son of Shaphan. Shaphan was the father of a scribal family of great significance in the book of Jeremiah.

He was present for the discovery of the book of the law under the reign of Josiah. His son Ahicham, mentioned here, interceded on behalf of Jeremiah in his trial in chapter 26. As the fate of Jerusalem is described, we might wonder what became of Ebed-Melek, the Ethiopian who delivered Jeremiah from the pit.

At the end of this chapter, going back a little while, we learn that the word of the Lord had come to Jeremiah while he was in the court of the God. Through Jeremiah, the Lord assured Ebed-Melek that he would not fall into the hand of the Babylonians. Even as the city fell, he would be delivered.

On account of his faithfulness and his trust, he would escape the great downfall with his life. A question to consider, in 2 Chronicles 36, verses 20-21 we read, He took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its Sabbaths, all the days that it lay desolate it kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years. And then in Leviticus chapter 26, verses 33-35 and verse 43, But the land shall be abandoned by them, and enjoy its Sabbaths while it lies desolate without them, and they shall make amends for their iniquity, because they spurned my rules, and their soul abhorred my statutes.

How might the giving over of the land of Judah to the poor in this chapter, and the judgment concerning their failure to keep Sabbath, help us to understand the purpose of the Lord in giving the land to them in the first place, and how they had failed in the way that they had acted within it. In chapter 40 of Jeremiah, The disaster that has long been anticipated has fallen upon Jerusalem. It has been captured by the Babylonians, its walls have been destroyed, its rulers, its aristocracy, its craftsmen, its mighty men have all been deported to Babylon, and the small remnant of leaders that are left have to form a new government, a new order submitted to the king of Babylon with those that remain.

The few remaining rulers and members of the aristocracy have to establish a new life in the land, and much of the land is now given into the hands of those who were formerly dispossessed of the Judahites. In such figures we see something of the obverse of the bringing down of the mighty that the captivity in Babylon represents. As the mighty are brought down, the poor are raised up.

The defeat and the exile of Judah is not bad news for everyone in the land. There are not a few for whom it will represent an improvement in their material conditions. Jeremiah being one of them.

Jack Lumbum has suggested the possibility that chapter 39 verse 1 to 40 verse 6 closed off an earlier edition of the book of Jeremiah. He notes the parallels between these passages in chapter 52, which also recounts the fall of Babylon, followed by a more positive reversal of fates for another character at the end. In chapter 40 verses 1 to 6, Jeremiah is released and he is given an allowance of food.

A similar thing happens to King Jehoiachin in chapter 52 verses 31 to 34. Nebuchadnezzar, the captain of the guard, had been instructed to show special favour to

Jeremiah and to release him. Surprisingly here in verses 2 and 3, he repeats Jeremiah's own theology to him.

We need not assume that Nebuchadnezzar was a believer in the Lord or that he held an accurate theology. This statement may have been a shrewd statement within Jeremiah's own theological framework to keep him and the Judahites in their place. Whatever his intention, it serves to confirm the word of the Lord that he had delivered through Jeremiah.

In the events of the preceding chapter, it has all come to pass. The word of the Lord and also his prophet have been vindicated. Being released, Jeremiah is given the freedom to go wherever he would like.

He can go with Nebuchadnezzar and the rest of the captives to Babylon, where he will be treated well, or he can stay in the land under the governorship of Gedaliah. As the rest of the nation is experiencing extreme captivity, Jeremiah is now set at liberty, given the choice of his preferred course. At this point, there are three paths open to many of the Judahites and to Jeremiah.

Either they can be radically subservient to the king of Babylon, to throw in their lot with Babylon completely and take on their ways, or they can take the path of rebellion, or in obedient submission to the king of Babylon, they can seek to establish their own faithful life within the land. Jeremiah, while advocating for submission to the king of Babylon, had always been concerned that Judah would pursue faithfulness, retaining its distinct identity. Rejecting the way of rebellion while remaining in the land under the governorship of Gedaliah seems to be the most promising course at this point.

The task facing Gedaliah is a challenging one. He represents some continuity. He is from a prominent Jerusalem family of scribes, the grandson of Shaphan, one of Josiah's chief men.

Throughout the book of Jeremiah, his family has been very supportive of Jeremiah. As a moderate figure of the Jerusalem establishment, he would be among those best placed to retain some continuity with the past regime, but would also be well situated to deal with the Babylonians. His problems, of course, are many.

To many in the land, he would be seen as a traitor, someone leading a sort of Vichy government. To a number of those nearest to him, he would be seen as a threat. They had been stripped of much of their power, privilege and possessions, while he had been advanced ahead of them.

And then, on his borders, he is facing people like the Ammonites, who are deeply concerned that a functioning satellite government of Babylon is not established near to their own borders. In chapter 27, Ammonite princes had been among the delegations in

Jerusalem plotting rebellion against the king of Babylon. King Zedekiah had likely also been intending to flee to Ammon in the preceding chapter.

These threats, coupled together, would ultimately prove to be Gedaliah's downfall. Baalist, the king of the Ammonites, sent Ishmael, a deposed member of the Judahite royal family, to kill Gedaliah. At this point, however, Gedaliah is trying to get a functioning governorship off the ground.

He gathers the people to him at Mizpah. Mizpah, the place where Samuel had ruled from, and the place where Saul was anointed king, is now the capital instead of Jerusalem. Gathering leading men to him, Gedaliah instructs them to focus upon the economy of the land, to ensure that the people, in submission to the king of Babylon, are re-establishing the agriculture of the land, and also resettling its cities.

If they peacefully submit to the yoke of the king of Babylon in this manner, they can prosper, and they can also enjoy peace. The important thing that he instructs them to do is to leave the politics to him. He will act as their political advocate to the Babylonians, speaking on their behalf.

Gedaliah seems to be concerned to present his rule as speaking on behalf of the Judahite people to the Babylonians, rather than being an expression of the Babylonians' power over them. If they submit to the king of Babylon's rule, there really need be no trouble for them. They can return to regular life, they can gather in their harvests, they can dwell securely in their settlements, and there will be no need for them to fear another great disruption.

Accustomed as we are to seeing the exile purely in terms of being uprooted from the land, being sent into captivity, and the land being laid waste, it can be surprising for us to recognize that for many, the exile was a chance at a homecoming. The poor and the dispossessed of the land could finally own property and be settled, and many former refugees, seeing that peace and security had been established under the Babylonians, returned to the land and settled there once more. Furthermore, after a long period of divine judgment upon the fruitfulness of the land and the experience of famine and pestilence during the siege, now the people are gathering the fruit of the land in great abundance.

However, Gedaliah's governorship was not to last. The first warning comes in the form of an intelligence from Johanan and other leaders of the forces in the country. Johanan informs Gedaliah that Baalist, the king of the Ammonites, has conspired against him and sent Ishmael, the son of Nethanar, to kill him.

Ishmael, as a member of the deposed royal family, presumably has a personal grudge, and Ishmael's personal ambitions and interests obviously align with the concerns of Baalist, who is worried about the encroachment of Babylonian power upon his region. Johanan pleads with Gedaliah to allow him to kill Ishmael. He is greatly concerned that if Ishmael's plot should succeed, that the fall of the governorship of Gedaliah would bring devastating consequences for all of the people in the land.

If a pre-emptive strike against Ishmael would prevent this great disaster, why not attempt it? No one need know. Gedaliah, however, does not believe the word of Johanan or accept his counsel. A question to consider.

In our own day and age, Christians who once enjoyed considerable cultural power find themselves increasingly marginalised. In such a situation, we may find ourselves facing comparable choices to the people of Jeremiah's day. Do we submit to non-Christian governments and seek to be faithful under them? Or do we seek to take back control for ourselves? Or do we seek to accommodate ourselves to the new powers as much as possible, adopting their ways and their values? How might the book of Jeremiah assist us in our thinking about these questions? Jerusalem has fallen to the Babylonians.

Judahite rulers, mighty men and craftsmen have been deported to Babylon. In the wake of the disaster, Gedaliah, the new governor under the rule of the Babylonians, is trying to establish a new order within the land. The situation is fraught, however.

On the one hand, he has to keep on the right side of his new overlords, the Babylonians. On the other side, he's going to be dealing with a fractious and restive people that will always be tempted towards some sort of rebellion. There are also people among the ruling classes who will resent the fact that he's been advanced ahead of them.

There are nearby kingdoms like that of Baalist that will resent the power of the Babylonians coming to be established in their region. At the end of the preceding chapter, the new governor Gedaliah had been warned about a plot hatched between Baalist, the king of the Ammonites, and Ishmael, the son of Nethaniah. Johanan had asked for permission preemptively to strike Ishmael in order to ensure that the plot didn't come to pass.

If it did come to pass, it would threaten the fragile order in Judah and bring devastating consequences for everyone involved. Gedaliah, however, does not seem to have believed the warning given by Johanan and did not give him permission to strike Ishmael. Tragically, the intelligence that Johanan had brought to Gedaliah was accurate.

Ishmael was plotting against his life, and in the seventh month, he strikes Gedaliah down. The exact chronology at this point is uncertain. It happens in the seventh month.

This is the Feast of Tabernacles. However, Jack Lumbum raises the possibility of a telescoping of Gedaliah's governorship. The city falls back in July, in chapter 39 verse 2. In August and September, the summer fruits are gathered, in chapter 40 verse 12, that's mentioned.

And now in verses 4 to 5 of chapter 41, pilgrims are arriving into Jerusalem for tabernacles. It is possible that the assassination of Gedaliah happened a few years later, provoking Nebuchadnezzar's return and the further deportation of 582 BC, mentioned in chapter 52 verse 30. If such a chronological telescoping has taken place, perhaps the Book of Jeremiah is encouraging us to consider the death of Gedaliah against the backdrop of the festal calendar.

It's underlining the fact that although it has first fruits, it does not arrive at the Feast of Ingathering. At this point, we discover that Ishmael was a member of the deposed royal family, although probably not in the direct line of descent. This would have made him one of the potential rivals to Gedaliah, who represents not the house of David, but the scribal family of Shaphan, which had tensions with the Davidic king at various points, especially under Jehoiakim.

It was understandable that Baalist, the king of the Ammonites, would use such a man to get to Gedaliah, possibly with promises to support him as a prospective king of Judah in Gedaliah the governor's place. The assassination of Gedaliah is also recorded in the Book of Second Kings, in chapter 25 verse 25. But in the seventh month, Ishmael, the son of Nethaniah, son of Elishema, of the royal family, came with ten men and struck down Gedaliah and put him to death along with the Jews and the Chaldeans who were with him at Mizpah.

Ishmael carries out the assassination to feast. As a ruler, Gedaliah would be trying to forge alliances, in part through showing great hospitality to other people whose support he needed. At this time, Johanan and a number of the other leaders of the people seem to have been elsewhere, so it's a promising situation for Ishmael's insurrection.

Not only will Gedaliah be off his guard at a banquet, he also won't have the same number of people around him to retaliate if his life is taken. The men who are around him are killed too, along with the Chaldeans, and naturally the killing of the Chaldeans would have provoked a serious response from Babylon. The fact that people do not seem to have been prepared provided the conditions for Ishmael and just ten men to achieve this insurrection.

The next day, people still do not realise what has happened, and eighty men are coming down from the north. In other situations, this might be seen as a promising sign that the north and the south, under the governorship of Gedaliah, might be joined in a new unity. One people beyond the division of the kingdoms might be re-established, and when the repopulation of the land with the former exiles and the re-establishment of the Davidic king occurs, they might be one people, whereas formerly they had been divided.

The influence of the faithful worship of the Lord had already been expanding north under the reign of Josiah. In 2 Kings 23, verses 19-20, we discover that many of Josiah's reforms occurred north of the borders of Judah. And Josiah removed all the shrines also of the high places that were in the cities of Samaria, which kings of Israel had made, provoking the Lord to anger.

He did to them according to all that he had done at Bethel. And he sacrificed all the priests of the high places who were there, on the altars, and burned human bones on them. Then he returned to Jerusalem.

The men are coming in a state of mourning. The temple has been destroyed, the true worship of God is not occurring as it had formerly done, but it is still possible to present grain offerings and incense, even in the sight of the destroyed temple. However, the fact that they have their beards shaved and their bodies gashed, suggests that they have adopted some of the mourning customs of the nations, things that they had been forbidden to do in Deuteronomy and Leviticus.

In Deuteronomy 14, verse 1, for instance, Ishmael feigns that he is mourning too and goes out to meet them. He summons them in to meet Gedaliah the son of Ahicham, but Gedaliah, of course, has been killed. The violence of Ishmael is going to spread even further in the land.

The northern pilgrims, who seem to have good intentions, are killed by Ishmael, perhaps because they are inconveniencing him, perhaps because they have witnessed something that they should not have, perhaps because he fears they might inform the Babylonians about him. Ishmael and his men take them by surprise and kill them, save for ten men who are spared because they have supplies hidden. Seventy are killed, ten are spared.

Ishmael throws the bodies of all of his victims into the great cistern that Asa had dug, as a defence against the northern king of Beasha. Perhaps this underlines the way that violence between the north and the south has erupted again, even when there was a possibility that the people could be brought together as one. Ishmael gathers the rest of the people, along with the daughters of the royal house, and then goes to flee to the Ammonites.

Baalist will give him protection until the time has come for the next stage of the insurrection. Johanan and the forces who are with him discover what Ishmael has done. They've been away from the scene of Mizpah and now they are returning.

They come upon Ishmael at the great pool at Gibeon. This pool was formerly famous during the conflict between David and Ish-bashath, the son of Saul. The men of Joab and Abner had fought at the pool.

All of the captives that were taken are recovered, while Ishmael and eight men with him manage to escape. Presumably two of the men that he had at first had either deserted or been killed. However, although Ishmael has been defeated and the people recovered, the political situation in Judah is now so unstable, and the killing of the Chaldeans such a provocation to the Babylonian overlords, that Johanan and the other men with him seem to think that there is no chance of a peaceful situation now.

The Babylonians are going to come and bring their reprisals, and they do not want to be around for that. They gather the people together at Giruth-Kim-ham and prepare for the flight into Egypt. A question to consider.

How many other examples of coups and insurrections can you think of in the history of Judah and Israel? In what ways can the insurrection of Ishmael be compared and contrasted with them? After the fall of Jerusalem and the deportation of the captives to Babylon, the Babylonians established a new government in Judah, with Gedaliah as the governor. However, after he failed to take action after he was warned by Johanan back in chapter 40, in chapter 41, working with the support of Baalist, the king of the Ammonites, Ishmael, the son of Nethaniah, killed Gedaliah. While Johanan and the other leaders managed to recover the captives that he had taken, the damage seemed to be done.

Ruled by a Judahite governor has failed. A number of Chaldeans who had been with him were killed, and now the remaining leaders of the Judahites expect the Babylonians to come with reprisals. They do not intend to wait until this happens, and so their plan is to go down to Egypt, as we see in Jeremiah chapter 41, verse 17.

And they went and stayed at Geruth-Kimham, near Bethlehem, intending to go to Egypt. It is quite possible that many of the Judahite refugees to Egypt would have understood the move as being akin to the patriarchs going down to Egypt to take refuge after the famine. They had remained there for many years in the land of Goshen, and had prospered and expanded as a people, until they were delivered from the oppression of Pharaoh in the Exodus and brought back to the land of Canaan.

However, the Lord had subsequently warned the people not to return to Egypt. In Deuteronomy chapter 17, verse 16, only he must not acquire many horses for himself, or cause the people to return to Egypt in order to acquire many horses, since the Lord has said to you, you shall never return that way again. And then in Deuteronomy chapter 28, verse 68, the return to Egypt is seen as an act of judgment, and the Lord will bring you back in ships to Egypt, a journey that I promised that you should never make again, and there you shall offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but there will be no buyer.

Johanan seems to be the leader of the remnant company in the absence of Gedaliah. Jezaniah, who here accompanies him, is probably a different Jezaniah from Jezaniah the Maakathite mentioned previously. They and the people with them approach Jeremiah, asking for word from the Lord, acknowledging their vulnerability, they are asking the Lord for direction. It is interesting to pay attention to the pronouns of their appeal to Jeremiah. Let our plea for mercy come before you, and pray to the Lord your God for us. In 1 Samuel chapter 12, verse 19, there is a similar expression used as the people asked Samuel to pray for them.

And all the people said to Samuel, Pray for your servants to the Lord your God, that we may not die, for we have added to all our sins this evil, to ask for ourselves a king. Perhaps the fact that they speak of the Lord as Jeremiah's guard, rather than as their own guard, reveals something about the way that they are distanced from him. Jeremiah's response speaks of the Lord as their guard.

I will pray to the Lord your God, according to your request. He promises to reveal the full word of the Lord to them, to hold nothing back from them. Jeremiah's faithful reporting of the word of the Lord to the rulers of Judah had been a consistent characteristic of his ministry, and one that had provoked considerable opposition and persecution.

The people follow up their request with a declaration of their commitment to follow the word of the Lord that Jeremiah delivers to them. They bind themselves with an oath in the name of the Lord that they will follow through with the instruction that he gives them. Whatever he says, they will obey.

This all sounds very promising, but we should consider the fact that they had already expressed their desire to go towards Egypt. The answer to their query does not come immediately. Jeremiah waits for ten days before he hears word from the Lord.

When it comes, it is a good word, a promise to build them up and to prosper them. But it is not what they had originally planned. They should not go to Egypt.

Jeremiah summons the whole company of the people to deliver the word of the Lord to them. If they remain in the land, they will be built up. We already saw an indication of what this might have looked like under the governorship of Gedaliah.

Former refugees were returning to the land. Pilgrims were coming down from the north to worship in Jerusalem. The people were gathering abundantly in the harvests.

Just as the Lord has brought disaster upon them, so he can relent of that disaster and give them protection. The king of Babylon that he brought against them now no longer needs to be feared. The Lord will deliver them from any threat that he poses.

The language used here, the four key verbs, are once again the typical ones that we find throughout the book of Jeremiah. They come from the programmatic statement of the Lord to Jeremiah at his installation as a prophet in chapter 1, verse 10. However, remaining in the land would take considerable courage.

The Babylonians will surely come down upon them and they fear what will happen when

they do. Surely it is far better for them to take refuge in Egypt. It seems to be the most sensible course of action.

The Lord presents the choice that they face. If they go back to Egypt, they will face destruction there. The very judgment they seek to escape will come upon them.

It will pursue them to the land that they are taking refuge in. The very same sword, famine and pestilence will afflict them there as would have afflicted them in Judah. And no remnant or survivor will be left to them.

In the Lord's warning, we might hear something of the words of the wilderness generation again. Like the wilderness generation that sought safety and wanted to return to Egypt rather than courageously following the word of the Lord and entering into possession of the promised land, so in their human wisdom against the instruction of the Lord they would be tempted to return to a position of perceived safety. In Exodus chapter 16, verses 2 to 3 for instance.

And the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. And the people of Israel said to them, Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt when we sat by the meat parts and ate bread to the full. For you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.

The people had bound themselves with an oath to obey the word of the Lord. The prophet Jeremiah was not just delivering this word unbidden. He was responding, giving a word that had been requested by them and indeed a word of blessing if they would only receive it as such.

The grace and mercy of the Lord shone in protecting them from the destruction of the king of Babylon is something that will only be received through obedience. If they reject it, it will be at the cost of their lives. In running from the Lord's wrath in the ways of disobedience they will merely find themselves facing a more devastating and final wrath.

If they take that route, and it seems at this point that they have reneged upon their oath and are determined to go to Egypt despite the words of the prophet, hope will be cut off from them. In deciding upon this course, they are following in the ways of their fathers, and in the ways that they have practiced to this point. They have not obeyed the voice of the Lord in the past, and they are not obeying his voice now.

Back in chapter 29, verses 17-19, the Lord had declared concerning the bad figs. Thus says the Lord of hosts, Behold, I am sending on them sword, famine, and pestilence, and I will make them like vile figs that are so rotten they cannot be eaten. I will pursue them with sword, famine, and pestilence, and will make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth, to be a curse, a terror, a hissing, and a reproach among all the nations where I

have driven them, because they did not pay attention to my words, declares the Lord, that I persistently sent to you by my servants the prophets, but you would not listen, declares the Lord.

Even when offered mercy, even when offered a chance to re-establish life within the land, even when experiencing initial signs of the Lord's goodness, and his holding out the possibility of the forming of new life under his blessing and protection, they reject it and continue in the way of disobedience. For such an ungrateful and unheeding people, only death remains. A question to consider, what are some of the ways in which we, in presenting our petitions to the Lord, can, like the Judahites in this chapter, close ourselves off to unwelcome responses of the Lord to our requests in disobedience? In Jeremiah chapter 42, after the killing of Gedaliah by Ishmael the son of Nethaniah, with the support of Baalist the king of the Ammonites, Johanan and the remaining Judahite community planned to go into Egypt to escape the reprisals of the king of Babylon.

They had come to Jeremiah seeking an oracle from the Lord. They presumably were hoping for a favorable word of the Lord that encouraged their journey into Egypt, assuring them that the Lord would bless them in this. However, Jeremiah's word was not encouraging.

He told them to remain in the land and submit themselves to the king of Babylon, even though they feared what he would do in response to the killing of Gedaliah. They should remain in the land and they would be blessed if they did so. The Lord himself would protect them from harm.

However, by the end of chapter 42 it became clear that they were not going to heed the word of Jeremiah, and in chapter 43 they come out directly and call him a liar. The question behind all of this is, who is the bearer of Israel's destiny? Walter Brueggemann discusses the way that the relationship between the Babylonian exile community and the Egyptian exile community can be seen behind much of this text. Israel is living in an ongoing story and acting in terms of different understandings of the shape and the direction that it is taking.

The prophecy of Jeremiah is a politically polarizing word. It weighs in on some of the most divisive questions of the time, how people see the story playing out, how they understand its shape. Earlier on it was about foreign policy, it was about the way that Jerusalem and the temple played into the story.

For the early Jeremiah he was attacking a particular ideology that suggested that, on account of the Lord's commitment to his temple and the house of David, there would be no ultimate threat to Jerusalem. Jerusalem was not vulnerable to complete destruction, nor the people to deportation like the Northern Kingdom. Later on he is polarizing in regard to the war effort, as he tells the people to submit to the king of Babylon rather than fighting against him.

And now his polarizing word is about the direction that the fugitive community must take. Theology, the reading of history, the understanding of the future, and a determination of the direction that a community must take in its politics are all bound up in the story of the prophet. One cannot address one element without implicating the others.

There can be a cynical reading of Jeremiah's word, merely presenting it as masking vested interests in a pretense of divine authority. And this is clearly the way that the refugee community speak of it. They believe that Berug is behind the word of Jeremiah.

They've been hoping for a favorable word upon their venture, and when they received a negative one, they think that maybe there must be some vested interest, leading the prophet to speak expedient falsehoods for his particular cause. We should always keep in mind how much the authoritative scripture speaks into and arises out of contested contexts, out of conflicts concerning the direction that the people of God must take, out of theological divergences that have to do with the reading of Israel's history, its destiny, and the way that God and the people play into that. So much of the New Testament needs to be read in a similar way.

The New Testament presents us with a particular understanding of how God has acted in history that has, beyond its obvious theological ramifications, deep political and sociological implications for its understanding of who the people of God really are, and what direction they must take. The political import of such a word will always lend itself to cynical readings, to the suspicion that people are ventriloquizing their political agenda into the mouth of God. However, the Lord had demonstrated the truth of the word of the prophet Jeremiah on so many occasions to this point, the fact that they would reject it now is a sign not of an appropriate wariness, but of outright unbelief.

As verse 4 puts it, they did not obey the voice of the Lord. And Johanan and the leaders take Jeremiah, Beirut, and all the other people who were left in the charge of Gedoliah, and go down towards Egypt. Jeremiah and Beirut, presumably both being taken down unwillingly, are now suffering further on account of the people's unbelief.

The group arrive at the city of Tappanese, which is a border town about 12 miles west of what is now the Suez Canal. It is not the capital of Egypt, but is an important location. And Jeremiah is given the instruction by the Lord to perform a symbolic action once again.

We should recall the symbolic actions that he has performed to this point. In chapter 19 verses 1 to 13, he was instructed to do a symbolic action with a broken pot, in chapter 27 verse 2 to perform a symbolic action with a yoke, and perhaps most notably in chapter 13 verses 1 to 7, to hide a loincloth. That symbolic action is the most similar to this one, where Jeremiah is instructed to hide some large stones in the brick pavement that is at the entrance to the palace or the government building of Pharaoh in

Tappanese.

As in the case of other symbolic actions, he must do this in the sight of witnesses, here in the sight of the men of the refugee community of Judah. With this, he is given a word to them. The stones that Jeremiah is laying are hidden stones that provide the foundation for a later laying out of the royal splendor of the king of Babylon when he arrives to enact the law's vengeance upon the land of Egypt.

The disaster that the refugees had sought to escape is going to pursue them and it's going to catch them up. The familiar triad of judgment is heard once more. He will give over to the pestilence those who are doomed to the pestilence, to captivity those who are doomed to captivity, and to the sword those who are doomed to the sword.

The great symbols of Egypt's power and authority will be brought down. The gods will have their temples burned, and their idols will be carried away from the land. The king of Babylon will shake out the land of Egypt, like a shepherd delousing his garment.

The obelisks of Heliopolis will also be broken down. Egypt will be humiliated. This does not seem to involve a full invasion, but it will be a great humiliation of Egypt, with many of the effects that a full invasion would have.

A further symbolic action will be performed at the end of the book, in chapter 51, verses 61 to 64. And Jeremiah said to Sariah, When you come to Babylon, see that you read all these words, and say, O LORD, you have said concerning this place that you will cut it off, so that nothing shall dwell in it, neither man nor beast, and it shall be desolate for ever. When you finish reading this book, tie a stone to it, and cast it into the midst of the Euphrates, and say, Thus shall Babylon sink, to rise no more, because of the disaster that I am bringing upon her, and they shall become exhausted.

The book of Ezekiel also speaks of the coming judgment upon Egypt. Ezekiel chapter 29, verses 2 to 3. Son of man, set your face against Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and prophesy against him and against all Egypt. Speak and say, Thus says the Lord God.

Behold, I am against you, Pharaoh, king of Egypt, the great dragon that lies in the midst of his streams, that says, My Nile is my own, I made it for myself. This speaks of the sense of security that Egypt had. It was invulnerable to invasion.

However, the Lord would bring his servant, the king of Babylon, upon it, and he would judge the Judahite community there. Once again, in chapter 29, verses 19 to 20. Therefore, thus says the Lord God.

Behold, I will give the land of Egypt to Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and he shall carry off its wealth and despoil it and plunder it, and it shall be the wages for his army. I have given him the land of Egypt as his payment for which he laboured, because they worked for me, declares the Lord God. Babylonian text fragments suggest that in 568,

Nebuchadnezzar came up against Egypt.

While he did not take over the land, he did despoil it. The community that had rejected the word of the Lord, that had thought to continue the story in this way that the Lord had forbidden, ended up writing itself out. In chapter 28, verse 68 of the book of Deuteronomy, this was the final of the curses of the covenant.

And the Lord will bring you back in ships to Egypt, a journey that I promised that you should never make again, and there you shall offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but there will be no buyer. A question to consider, reflecting upon the details of the symbolic action performed by Jeremiah, how might we discern some of its deeper significance? In Jeremiah chapter 43, against the word of the Lord through the prophet, Johanan and the rest of the Judahite company that survived the destruction of Jerusalem and the insurrection of Ishmael, the son of Nethanar, against Gedoliah, had travelled down to the land of Egypt and had settled at Tapanes. Jeremiah and Baruch were brought down with them.

And now in chapter 44, Jeremiah in Egypt, in his last known words, addresses the company of the people. Prior to the arrival of Johanan and his company in Egypt, there already seemed to have been Jews who had taken refuge in the land. In Jeremiah chapter 24, verse 8, we read of some of these.

But thus says the Lord, like the bad figs that are so bad they cannot be eaten, so will I treat Zedekiah the king of Judah, his officials, the remnant of Jerusalem who remain in this land, and those who dwell in the land of Egypt. Beyond Tapanes, which is near the modern day Suez Canal, Migdal is north and east of Tapanes. It was another town on the frontier of Egypt.

Another of the contingent of the Jews to which Jeremiah's prophecy is addressed are found in the land of Pathros. The people of Pathros are mentioned in Genesis chapter 10, verse 14, in the Table of Nations. They live in Upper Egypt, which is the south of the country.

Lower Egypt is in the north, and Memphis is the capital of that part of the land. The Lord tells them to recall the disaster that came upon Jerusalem and the cities of Judah. The destruction of Judah and Jerusalem was on account of the evil that they performed, most particularly the idolatry that they gave themselves over to.

Time and again the Lord sent his prophets to them, challenging them and calling them to change their ways, but they stubbornly refused to do so. Their persistence in idolatry and their other practices led to the destruction of Jerusalem. The Lord had warned them of such a fate back in Jeremiah chapter 7, verses 17 to 20.

Do you not see what they are doing in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem?

The children gather wood, the fathers kindle fire, and the women knead dough to make cakes for the Queen of Heaven. And they pour out drink offerings to other gods to provoke me to anger. Is it I whom they provoke? declares the Lord.

Is it not themselves to their own shame? Therefore thus says the Lord God, Behold, my anger and my wrath will be poured out on this place, upon man and beast, upon the trees of the field and the fruit of the ground. It will burn and not be quenched. If they looked at Jerusalem now, they would only find a waste and a desolation.

The Lord's word had been fulfilled, and yet they had not learned the lesson. All that they are doing now is provoking the Lord even further to anger, bringing down even worse judgment upon themselves. They had already rejected the word of the Lord in going down to Egypt.

They had already brought themselves to a position of even more devastating judgment. And now they are going to pile on top of this further abominations of idolatry. As they behave in such a manner, they are inviting the Lord's judgment.

And the result of this will be that they will become a curse and a taunt among all the nations. They have failed to learn from the destruction of Jerusalem. And they failed to learn from the evils of their fathers and what came upon them.

The Lord here mentions their fathers, the kings of Judah, the wives of the kings, the current people themselves, and then their wives also. The distinction of men and their wives is probably noteworthy in this particular context, as the worship being performed is for the Queen of Heaven. The sort of worship in question is gendered.

There is a family dynamic involved, as we saw in Jeremiah 7, verse 18. The children gather wood, the fathers kindle fire, and the women knead dough to make cakes for the Queen of Heaven. The interplay of men and women in such idolatrous worship is also seen in the example of Solomon.

In 1 Kings 11, verses 4-8, For when Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods, and his heart was not wholly true to the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father. For Solomon went after Ashtoreth, the god of the Sidonians, and after Milcom, the abomination of the Ammonites. So Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and did not wholly follow the Lord, as David his father had done.

Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh, the abomination of Moab, and for Molech, the abomination of the Ammonites, on the mountain east of Jerusalem. And so he did for all his foreign wives, who made offerings and sacrificed to their gods. The importance of kings' wives as an impetus towards idolatry is also seen in the character of Jezebel, who very much plays a role in sponsoring the worship of Baal and Ashtoreth.

The negative influence of the wives of the kings can be seen in the fact that they often

come from surrounding nations. The kings of Judah and Israel would marry foreign women as a way of forming treaties with the surrounding nations, to oblige their new wives and to strengthen the relationship between nations. They would have adopted and supported and established the cults of foreign gods in the land of Israel.

The Lord had explicitly warned about the dangers of intermarriage in the covenant, a danger that was particularly keen for the kings. Beyond the kings, however, this seemed to be a dynamic that afflicted all of the people. In this chapter, it is particularly the women who seem to be instigating the worship, and the men who are supporting them.

The people had consistently failed to humble themselves, to obey the word of the Lord and to walk in his law. As a result, the Lord would set his face against them. He would cut off the entirety of Judah.

The land of Egypt would become the grave of the exiled company. The familiar triad returns here. They will die by the sword, by famine and by pestilence.

The punishment that fell upon the land would also come upon Egypt. No one who fled to Egypt would escape it, and only the smallest remnant would be left. The judgment that came upon them would be such a signal one, that they would become an oath, a horror, a curse and a taunt.

This same judgment had been spoken of earlier in Jeremiah chapter 42 verse 17. All the men who set their faces to go to Egypt to live there shall die by the sword, by famine and by pestilence. They shall have no remnant or survivor from the disaster that I will bring upon them.

Here, however, the possibility of a few escaping is raised. The people refuse to listen to Jeremiah. They stubbornly persist in their ways.

Indeed, they double down on their position. They have made vows to the Queen of Heaven, and they have every intention to carry through with them. It might come as a shock to the hearer of the book of Jeremiah that a strikingly different interpretation of the story of Judah is possible.

And yet, even after all of their recent history, the people here have a very different understanding of how things came about. They look back to the good old days under Manasseh, before the reforms of Josiah. In those good old days, everything was going well for them, until Josiah came along and his reforms led to one disaster after another.

As soon as they gave up their idolatrous worship, they became the prey of all of their enemies. Josiah was killed by Pharaoh Necho. Pharaoh Necho then removed Jehoahaz.

Jehoiachin was taken by Nebuchadnezzar, and then Zedekiah was taken by him too. All after they had abandoned the proper worship of the Queen of Heaven. The Queen of

Heaven is Ashtoreth, also associated with Ishtar of the Babylonians.

The worship of the Queen of Heaven described here seems to be similar in character to that that is mentioned back in chapter 7 of the book. The women are the primary worshippers, but they have the complete support and approval of their husbands. The prophet responds by presenting what the book of Jeremiah throughout has given as the orthodox reading of Judah's history.

The Lord has seen their evil deeds, he has seen their false worship, he has seen their idolatrous practice. It is on account of this that judgment has come upon them. Far from being the good old days, the days of Manasseh were the days that sealed the fate of Jerusalem and the Southern Kingdom.

Jeremiah declares the word of the Lord to them. They have made their vows, and now they have expressed their commitment to carrying them through, in which case they should go right ahead. If they have so stubbornly chosen the course of death, let them stick to it.

But the Lord has a word for them. The land of their chosen exile is going to be a land devoid of true worship. The name of the Lord will be silenced in the land.

As they have stuck to their idolatrous vows, so he is going to make this vow. They will be utterly consumed and will come to an end. In that day, the two vows that have been made will be tested, which will stand, the word that they have made to commit themselves to the Queen of Heaven, or the word that the Lord has made to blot them out.

The Lord declares that he is watching over his word. He is watching over them for disaster and not for good. We have similar language to this in Jeremiah 31, 28.

And it shall come to pass that as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy and bring harm, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, declares the Lord. All of this draws our mind back to Jeremiah 1, 11-12, in the call of Jeremiah, where the Lord grants Jeremiah his first vision. And the word of the Lord came to me, saying, Jeremiah, what do you see? And I said, I see an almond branch.

Then the Lord said to me, You have seen well, for I am watching over my word to perform it. In the final years of the kingdom, King Zedekiah had made an ill-advised treaty with Pharaoh Hophra of Egypt. The chapter ends by comparing the fate that awaits Pharaoh Hophra with the fate that befell Zedekiah.

There, Pharaoh Hophra too will be given into the hand of his enemies. A question to consider. The fate of the community of exiles in Egypt is that of being finally erased from the story of God's people.

There is no root of redemption left for them, only the certain awaiting of judgment. What lessons might we learn from their cautionary example? Jeremiah chapter 45, a very short chapter, is a colophon. It is appended to the part of the book from chapter 36 to 44, known by some as the Beruk document.

The colophon form gives us, as Jack Lumbom notes, the name of the scribe with his patronym, he is the son of Nehriah. It gives us the source of the copy, that was dictated by Jeremiah. It gives us the date, the fourth year of Jehoiakim, the reason for producing the copy, a curse and a blessing, and the catchword of sorrow that connects it with other parts of the book.

We find a further colophon in chapter 51 verses 59 to 64. The word that Jeremiah the prophet commanded Saraiah, the son of Nehriah, son of Messiah, when he went with Zedekiah, king of Judah, to Babylon, in the fourth year of his reign. Saraiah was the quartermaster.

Jeremiah wrote in a book all the disaster that should come upon Babylon, all these words that are written concerning Babylon. And Jeremiah said to Saraiah, When you come to Babylon, see that you read all these words, and say, O Lord, you have said concerning this place that you will cut it off, so that nothing shall dwell in it, neither man nor beast, and it shall be desolate forever. When you finish reading this book, tie a stone to it, and cast it into the midst of the Euphrates, and say, Thus shall Babylon sink, to rise no more, because of the disaster that I am bringing upon her, and they shall become exhausted.

Thus far are the words of Jeremiah. The book of Jeremiah passed through a number of different stages before coming to us in its present form. The Septuagint is evidence of rather different forms that the book of Jeremiah circulated in.

Even within Jeremiah's own lifetime, when his ministry was still ongoing, there were initial editions of the book being produced, as we see in chapter 36, verses 1-8. In the fourth year of Jehoiakim, the son of Jeziah, king of Judah, this word came to Jeremiah from the Lord. Take a scroll and write on it all the words that I have spoken to you against Israel and Judah and all the nations, from the day I spoke to you, from the days of Jeziah until today.

It may be that the house of Judah will hear all the disaster that I intend to do to them, so that everyone may turn from his evil way, and that I may forgive their iniquity and their sin. Then Jeremiah called Beirut the son of Noriah, and Beirut wrote on a scroll at the dictation of Jeremiah all the words of the Lord that he had spoken to him. And Jeremiah ordered Beirut, saying, I am banned from going to the house of the Lord, so you are to go, and on a day of fasting and the hearing of all the people in the Lord's house, you shall read the words of the Lord from the scroll that you have written at my dictation.

You shall read them also in the hearing of all the men of Judah who come out of their

cities. It may be that their plea for mercy will come before the Lord, and that everyone will turn from his evil way, for great is the anger and wrath that the Lord has pronounced against this people. And Beirut the son of Noriah did all that Jeremiah the prophet ordered him about reading from the scroll the words of the Lord in the Lord's house.

Beruk is associated with Jeremiah back in the time of Jehoiakim. As the preceding chapters show, his association continued down into the exile in Egypt, as Beruk was taken with Jeremiah to that exile. Beruk was also the brother of Saraiah, who is mentioned later on.

Like the family of Shafan, the sons of Noriah are important allies to Jeremiah. This chapter is dated back to 605 BC, to the fourth year of Jehoiakim, long before the post-586 BC period that the previous chapters recount. Lumbum argues that it had originally functioned to end the earlier form of the book, the production of which was described back in chapter 36.

This earlier edition would have been chapters 1 to 20. In support of this position, Lumbum argues that the catch word of sorrow connects these verses with the final verse of chapters 1 to 20, verse 18 of chapter 20. Jeremiah ends chapters 1 to 20 with a lament that harkens back to his call in chapter 1, and Beruk's colophon records a very similar lament and connects his suffering with that of the prophets that he is working for.

Beruk is a servant of this prophecy, and his personal destiny is entangled with it in complicated ways. Verse 4 also recalls the opening of the book. The familiar set of terms here, build, break down, plant, pluck up, were introduced to us back in chapter 1, verses 9 to 10.

Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth, and the Lord said to me, Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up, and to break down, to destroy, and to overthrow, to build, and to plant. In its present situation, this brackets chapters 36 to 45 with references to Beruk and his writing in the fourth year of Jehoiakim.

A number of scholars refer to the bracketed material as the Beruk scroll or document on this account. It also connects by catchwords to the preceding chapter in verses 27 and 30, they connect with verse 5, and to the chapter that follows, which also mentions the fourth year of Jehoiakim. That year, as we have seen, was a year of critical importance for the region.

It was that year that Nebuchadnezzar came on the scene as the king of Babylon and defeated the Egyptians at Carchemish. As Beruk records the prophecies of Jeremiah in his scroll, we can imagine that he would have felt some sense of despair. His own life is entangled with that of his nation.

He seems to be doomed to be engulfed by its terrible fate. All the personal ambitions that he might have held will come to naught. Will his children or his family survive the coming disaster? Will he leave anything behind? Or will he merely be scoured from the face of history, like the doomed people of Jerusalem? When a nation is shattered, what becomes of the shards? We had another oracle given to a person in a similar situation in the case of Ibn Malik.

The Ethiopian eunuch who had protected and delivered Jeremiah had a personal oracle given to him in chapter 39, verses 15-18. But I will deliver you on that day, declares the Lord, and you shall not be given into the hand of the men of whom you are afraid. For I will surely save you, and you shall not fall by the sword, but you shall have your life as a prize of war, because you have put your trust in me, declares the Lord.

Beruk seems to have expressed his complaint to Jeremiah, who then reported it to the Lord, and the Lord sent him with a word to Beruk. Like Jeremiah was, Beruk was troubled by the word that was delivered to the prophet. He feels keenly about the coming disaster upon the city, but also about his own place within it.

The words of Beruk's lament are similar to the words of Psalm 6, verse 7. My eye wastes away because of grief, it grows weak because of all my foes. In responding to Beruk, the Lord tells him once more that he is bringing this great upheaval upon the whole land. The whole land is going to be unsettled.

In the midst of the disaster that is going to befall the nation, Beruk needs to leave his personal ambitions to one side. He may have ambitions to rise to high status. As a member of the scribal caste, he might fancy that he could become an important figure within the regime.

But the regime is going to be destroyed, and Jerusalem and Judah with it. Jerusalem and Judah are going to be totaled. The coming disaster is a general one, coming upon all flesh.

What the Lord will give him is similar to what he promises to Jeremiah and Ebed-Melech. While warriors might want to get great spoils from a victory, Beruk, like Jeremiah, is going to be part of a great defeat. And the only spoil that he can hope for is the spoil of his life.

Under the circumstances, that will be reward enough. A question to consider. In times of judgment and disaster, how can we learn from the Lord's words to Beruk in this chapter how best to handle our personal ambitions? The prophecies of Jeremiah were not just delivered to Judah.

In Jeremiah, chapters 46-51, we read Jeremiah's prophecies to the nations, beginning in chapter 46 with the prophecy to Egypt. In his original call, back in Jeremiah chapter 1,

Jeremiah had been set apart as a prophet to the nations. Verse 5 And in verses 9-10 See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.

Jeremiah isn't unique in prophesying concerning many nations. As Robert Carroll, for instance, notes, such collections of prophecies are common to all of the major prophetic anthologies and can also be found in several of the minor prophets. They are also found in pagan works of the ancient Near East.

So as a genre of prophecy, it wasn't limited to prophets of the Lord. Such prophecies, for instance, could bring comfort in wartime. They might offer the reassurance that some enemy is about to be brought down.

Of course, the case of Egypt, with which chapter 46 is concerned, was more complicated in the days of Jehoiakim. Although the foreign policy of Judah fluctuated, it seems as though the pro-Egypt camp would have been more dominant at the time of this prophecy. So the word that Jeremiah brings is not an encouraging one to the leaders of Judah.

It would serve as a judgment and a rebuke upon their misguided hopes. At the beginning of Jeremiah chapter 27, we also see Jeremiah speaking to foreign kings through their delegates. So we should not assume that the words of these prophecies were not heard by the leaders of the countries concerning whom they are spoken.

Further collections of prophecies concerning foreign kingdoms can be found in places like Isaiah chapters 13-23 and Ezekiel chapters 25-32. The first couple of chapters of Amos are another good example of this in the Minor Prophets. When the whole region is in upheaval, and we've been told that Jerusalem and Judah are going to be brought down, these prophecies evidence the fact that the Lord is still in charge.

God is sovereign over all of the nations. There are two main editions of the book of Jeremiah. One is from Egypt, which is preserved in the Septuagint, and the other is from Babylon.

It's the version in our Bibles. In the Septuagint version of Jeremiah, the oracles against the nations are situated earlier in the book, positioned after the first half of chapter 25 verse 13. In that edition, verses 15-38 of chapter 25 of our edition function as the conclusion of the oracles against the nations.

The composition of the book of Jeremiah seemingly occurred through several stages. We have very good reason to believe that material has been shifted from one point to another, at various points in the book and in various stages of its composition. In the Septuagint, the prophecies also occur in a different order.

Elam, Egypt, Babylon, Philistia, Edom, Ammon, Cedar, Hazor, Damascus and Moab. The

likely later order in the text of our Bibles makes more sense. It largely follows the order of chapter 25 verses 15-26, the text that follows the oracles against the nations in the Septuagint.

Pharaoh, king of Egypt, his servants, his officials, all his people, and all the mixed tribes among them, all the kings of the land of Uz, and all the kings of the land of the Philistines, Ashkelon, Gaza, Ekron, and the remnant of Ashdod, Edom, Moab, and the sons of Ammon, all the kings of Tyre, all the kings of Sidon, and the kings of the coastland across the sea, Dedan, Tima, Buz, and all who cut the corners of their hair, all the kings of Arabia, and all the kings of the mixed tribes who dwell in the desert, all the kings of Zimri, all the kings of Elam, and all the kings of Media, all the kings of the north far and near one after another, and all the kingdoms of the world that are on the face of the earth, and after them the king of Babylon shall drink. In chapters 46-51, Egypt begins the collection and Babylon ends it. These are the two great powers in the region, Egypt in the south and Babylon in the north.

Egypt's position also creates continuity with the chapters that proceed, which concern the descent of the unfaithful Judahite refugees into Egypt. This oracle comes from a much earlier time than chapters 42-44, but we should consider the importance of Egypt in the later events. Egypt is the main alternative to Babylon, and during the final years of the northern kingdom of Judah, Egypt and Babylon are engaged in a regional struggle for supremacy.

Judah is caught between these two powers. King Jeziah was killed by Pharaoh Necho, his replacement Jehoahaz was deported to Egypt where he died. The Egyptians established Jehoiakim in the place of Jehoahaz.

After Jehoiakim, Jehoiakin was deported to Babylon. Zedekiah replaced Jehoiakin, and then Zedekiah was later taken to Babylon. The final pages of Judah's history then, is in the shadow of these two great powers, the one in the north and the one in the south.

The context of the prophecy is the fourth year of Jehoiakim. Nebuchadnezzar will become king of Babylon in this year, and before then he will defeat the Egyptians at Carchemish. This is 605 BC.

Nineveh had fallen to the Babylonians and the Medes in 612 BC, and Haran had fallen in 610 BC. Pharaoh Necho came north to assist the Assyrians in 609 BC, and killed Jeziah on the way. The Egyptians took Carchemish that year, but were later crushed at Carchemish and Hamath by the Babylonians in 605 BC, led by Nebuchadnezzar, who was at that time the crown prince.

He became the king of Babylon later that same year. Only a few years later, Babylon was so dominant that they were fighting with Egypt on their own borders in 601 to 600 BC. Nevertheless, that particular battle was not as successful as the Babylonians had hoped, and they had to go back to lick their wounds.

The fourth year of Jehoiakim is mentioned on several occasions in the prophecy of Jeremiah. It's a pivotal year in the history. It's the year that the tide begins to turn and the whole politics of the region shift.

The Babylonians ascend and the Egyptians recede. The oracle against Egypt begins with an ironic summons to battle. A great army is called to dress itself for battle.

They must array themselves in all of their armour and bring all of their weaponry. The buckler, which was a smaller shield, mostly used to protect the face, and then the larger shield to protect the whole body. They must prepare their chariots and horses.

They must put on their helmets. They must polish their lances and put on their chain mail. But this great summons to battle is ironic because they are being summoned to their doom.

All of this great preparation of armour and weaponry makes them seem like an indomitable force. They cannot be resisted and yet they are summoned to a battle where they will be utterly routed. Right after the summons we see them dismayed and running away.

They are afflicted by terror on every side and they don't look back as they flee and retreat. There are two rivers in conflict, the Euphrates and the Nile. The river of the Nile seeks to rise but the forces of the Nile stumble and fall at the Euphrates.

The great imperial ambitions of Egypt, seeking to rise like a great river and engulf all of the nations of the region, will not succeed. Verse 9 contains another ironic summons to battle. Egypt and its mercenaries are called upon.

Kush is modern day Ethiopia, Put would be Libya, and Lod is probably the Ludin, which is the region of Lydia. These three groups are all mentioned back in Genesis chapter 10 in the Table of the Nations. It is the Lord behind the routing of the army of the Egyptians and their mercenaries.

He is having a day of vengeance. Maybe we should see here the Lord avenging the death of Josiah upon the Egyptians. The battle is described like a great sacrifice that is being held and the sword as something that is drinking up blood.

We find similar imagery in Isaiah chapter 34 verses 5-7. In another ironic taunt, Egypt is called upon to go up to Gilead and take Baal. And yet there is no healing for the nation of Egypt.

Its wound is too great and it has been ashamed in the presence of all of the nations. The verses that follow speak of a later period in the conflict between Babylon and Egypt. The

battle of Carchemish has already occurred and now Egypt is warned that war is going to come to its own borders.

Frontier towns of Egypt like Migdal and Tapanes must take up the warning. And Memphis, the capital of Lower Egypt, must also take up the warning. While this is not yet an invasion, they are going to face significant losses and some humiliation.

Verse 15 describes the mighty ones face down. Or more likely, the mighty bull face down. Likely a reference to the Egyptian bull guard Apis.

A case that Jack Lumber makes in his commentary. The Lord has pushed over the Egyptian guard and he is powerless to resist the humiliation of his army. Egypt's mercenaries decide to return to their own lands and Pharaoh himself is humiliated.

With a name that contrasts his bold and brave speech with his utter failure to take effective action in time. Noisy one who lets the hour go by. We see a similar humiliating name in Isaiah chapter 30 verse 7. Egypt's help is worthless and empty.

Therefore I have called her Rahab who sits still. Jerusalem herself had a humiliating name back in chapter 30 verse 17. For I will restore health to you and your wounds I will heal declares the Lord.

Because they have called you an outcast. It is Zion for whom no one cares. A greater humiliation yet awaits Egypt.

Inhabitants of Memphis are warned to prepare themselves for exile. They should pack their bags because the Babylonians are going to come upon the city and carry many of them in captivity to Babylon. It is not clear when this prophecy was fulfilled.

Josephus talks of the Babylonians invading Egypt in 582 BC. That was the year of the final deportation of Judahite exiles to Babylon. The book of Ezekiel speaks of another attack upon Egypt in 571 to 570 BC.

Babylonian records speak of a further attack in 568 BC. Egypt wasn't occupied by the Babylonians but we do know that a great number of Egyptians were taken as captives to Babylon. And there are records of communities of Egyptian exiles in Babylon in the 6th century BC.

In his coming upon them the Lord compares himself to two prominent mountains within Israel. Tabor in the north eastern Jezreel valley and Carmel by the sea. His glory is comparable to their prominence.

Earlier the Lord spoke of the humiliation of Apis, the bull god of the Egyptians. And now Egypt is compared to a beautiful heifer. A heifer that is pursued by a biting fly from the north, the Babylonians.

Similar language is found in Isaiah chapter 7 verse 18. Ironically concerning the fly of Egypt. In that day the Lord will whistle for the fly that is at the end of the streams of Egypt and for the bee that is in the land of Assyria.

Perhaps readers are also supposed to think of the myth of the god lo who was transformed into a bull and pursued by a gadfly to Egypt. Egypt is going to suffer a similar fate. If Egypt is like a heifer, Hahad soldiers are like fattened calves prepared for a day of slaughter.

From being compared to a bull, Egypt is now compared to a serpent that is slithering away trying to escape. After her come men with axes ready to chop down her trees, her forests but also her great cities. Much as Jerusalem is described at points like a forest that is going to be felled by an opposing army.

So cities of Egypt will suffer a similar fate. The imagery continues to accumulate. The axe men that are coming down to cut the forests of Egypt are more numerous than locusts.

They are like a great devouring force, like a new plague that has come upon the land of the south. The judgment that is coming upon Egypt is a judgment that is brought by the Lord. It is a punishment that he is inflicting upon them.

He is going to deliver them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians who seek their life. However, Egypt will not be utterly destroyed. After the assaults of the Babylonians, life in Egypt will be restored to what it was beforehand.

Jeremiah's oracle concerning Egypt ends with an encouraging word to Judah. Although exiles from Judah will be taken to Babylon and also to Egypt and others will flee to other lands, Judah as a people will not be wiped out. The time will come when the Lord will save them from far away and bring them back to the land from the lands of their captivity.

The Lord will deal decisively with all of the enemies raised up against them. But although he will punish Judah for all of its sins, he will not finally destroy them. A question to consider, where else in scripture do we have the language of rising waters, of rivers or of seas as imagery of an opposing Gentile force? Jeremiah's oracles against the nations continue in chapter 47 with a prophecy against the Philistines.

The Philistines, particularly in the years of the early kingdom, had been a powerful force within the land, representing an important enemy in the time of Saul and David. Before that time, they had struck a terrible blow against the Israelites in defeating them at the battle of Aphek. That had led to the breakdown of the Old Tabernacle Order.

The Judge Samson had also fought against them on several occasions. References to the Philistines go all the way back to the book of Genesis. Both Abraham and Isaac sojourned

with the Philistines for a period of time.

And then even before that we have a reference to the Philistines in Genesis chapter 10 verses 13-14 in the Table of Nations. By this point in history, the Philistines were not big players in the region. They came under the power of the Egyptians and Babylonians.

Like the Judahites during this period, they were caught in the middle of these great powers and their fate was largely determined by the rising and falling of those great powers' prospects. They had formerly been important as an Egyptian satellite and one of the powers through which the Egyptians maintained their dominance within the land. The location of this oracle immediately after that concerning the Egyptians in chapter 46 is probably for this reason.

The prophecies of this chapter concern the judgement and the destruction that is going to be brought upon Philistia from the north, from Babylon. However, the prophecy is dated from before Pharaoh struck down Gaza. Philistia is going to experience an attack from the north, from the Babylonians, and then an attack from the south, from the Egyptians.

After this, there will come a further attack and a more decisive attack from the north. The series of events referred to in this prophecy likely start with the attack of Nebuchadnezzar upon Ashkelon and Ekron in 604 BC. We might reasonably presume that Gaza was attacked at the same time.

It seems most probable that the Egyptian attack that is mentioned in verse 1 occurred around 600 BC as the Egyptians sought to gain back control of this strategic coastal area. However, a few years later, in 598-597 BC, the Babylonians attacked again and this time the Egyptians did not strike back. While the Egyptians had won a limited victory around 600 BC, it was not to last.

In 2 Kings 24, verse 7 we read, And the king of Egypt did not come again out of his land, for the king of Babylon had taken all that belonged to the king of Egypt, from the brook of Egypt to the river Euphrates. The prophecy compares the rise of Babylon to the rising of waters in the north that are going to come down and inundate the whole land of the Philistines. Like a flash flood, it's rapidly rising, it's going to come down quickly, it's going to overflow the whole land and wash them all away.

The disaster coming from the north should remind us of the opening chapter. Then the Lord said to me, Out of the north disaster shall be let loose upon all the inhabitants of the land. Neither the cities nor the countryside of the land are going to escape this judgement.

The prophet paints a vivid picture of rapidly approaching chariots, stamping horses, dust rising behind them and the thundering of wheels as the great army of the Babylonians

approaches. Faced with this immense force, the Philistines prove powerless, their hands droop down, they do not even have the strength to go back and rescue their own children. The Babylonians coming upon them will be the end of Philistia as a nation.

With the fall of Philistia, Tyre and Sidon will be left without supporters also. In verse 4, the Philistines are described as the remnant of the coastland of Kaphtor. In the prophecy of Amos, chapter 9, verse 7, the Philistines are described as having been brought from the land of Kaphtor.

Are you not like the Kushites to me, O people of Israel, declares the Lord. Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Kaphtor, and the Syrians from Ker? The exact location of Kaphtor is debated. It might be a reference to Crete.

Verse 5 describes the situation of death. Baldness has come upon Gaza. Shaving the head was a pagan way of mourning the dead, as was the gashing of oneself described at the end of the verse.

Ashkelon has also been destroyed. Historically, there were five important cities in the Philistine pentapolis. Gaza, Ashkelon, Ekron, Gath and Ashdod.

Gath was destroyed by the Assyrian Sargon II in 711 BC. Gaza wasn't completely destroyed by the Babylonians in 604 BC, as it was retaken by the Egyptians in 600 BC. However, we have references to the kings of Gaza and Ashkelon as captives in Babylon.

The prophecy against the Philistines ends with an image of the sword of the Lord. The Lord is behind all of this judgement. The symbolism of the devouring sword is also found elsewhere in scripture.

Within Jeremiah itself, we see such imagery again in chapter 50 verses 35-37. A sword against the Chaldeans, declares the Lord, and against the inhabitants of Babylon, and against her officials and her wise men. A sword against the diviners, that they may become fools.

A sword against her warriors, that they may be destroyed. A sword against her horses and against her chariots, and against all the foreign troops in her midst, that they may become women. A sword against all her treasures, that they may be plundered.

The prophet personifies and speaks to the sword. How long until it will be quiet and return to its sheath? And then he answers his question in verse 7. It cannot be quiet, because the Lord has sent it out on its mission. The Lord has commissioned the sword against the land of the Philistines, and it will not be at rest until it has finished its task.

A question to consider. The prophecy against the Philistines in this chapter is distinguished in part by the fact that there is no reason given for the judgement upon the Philistines. How might the people first hearing this prophecy have interpreted the

sort of judgement that it involved? From the Philistines to the west of Judah, Jeremiah chapter 48 moves to the Moabites to the east of Judah.

Moab was on a plateau east of the Dead Sea, about 3,000 feet in elevation. The precise boundaries of the land have been much debated. Many have seen the main body of the territory of Moab lying between the rivers Zered and Anon.

However, many of the Moabite cities mentioned are north of the Anon. The people of Moab descended from Lot, from his incestuous relationship with one of his daughters. Balak, the king of Moab, had earlier summoned Balaam to curse the Israelites.

The Israelites had taken some of the former territory of Moab from Sihon king of the Amorites, with Reuben and Gad settling in that part of the Transjordan. These tribes, along with the half-tribe of Manasseh, were taken captive by the Assyrians, of whom the Moabites were vassals from the first half of the 8th century BC. The greatest source of information about Moab is the biblical text itself, although the Moabite stone, or the Mesha Stele of around 840 BC, found at the site of Dibon, tells of the Moabites' escape from the yoke of Israel.

Ruth, famously, was a Moabites. Moab was present at the conference of 594 BC, so Jeremiah might have delivered some of the prophecies directly to the Moabite ambassador in Jerusalem. The subjugation of Moab occurred in 582 BC, but Nebuchadnezzar had used Moab to harass Judah back in 599-598 BC.

This is recorded in 2 Kings 24 verses 1-2. In his days, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came up, and Jehoiachin became his servant for three years. Then he turned and rebelled against him.

And the Lord sent against him bands of the Chaldeans, and bands of the Syrians, and bands of the Moabites, and bands of the Ammonites, and sent them against Judah to destroy it, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by his servants the prophets. The material from verse 29 of this chapter has very close parallels in places like Isaiah 15-16 and chapter 24. Jeremiah, or possibly the editors of the book of Jeremiah, are using and developing traditional material concerning the nation of Moab.

The chapter begins with woes upon a number of different places, describing the desolation that's going to come upon them. Nebo, most famously, was the site from which Moses had seen the land from the far side of the Jordan. However now, Nebo, along with a number of the other of the major cities of Moab, are being brought down.

They're going to be silenced, they're going to experience disaster, they're going to be cut off, they're going to be put to shame and broken down. The series of place names and the list of the disasters that are going to befall them gives us a sense of the comprehensive judgement that is going to fall upon the Moabites. The pride of the land is going to be humbled, and here, as elsewhere in the chapter, is going to provoke great mourning.

While the city of Madmen will be put to silence, in verse 3-5 there is a series of cries. The cry of desolation and great destruction from Horeneim. Elsewhere it will be the sound of the crying of orphaned children.

At Luhith, people will go up weeping. The Moabites are counselled to flee to save their lives. The judgement that's about to befall them is coming upon them because of their pride and their arrogant self-confidence.

They trusted in their works and in their treasures, and they and their god, his priests and his officials, are all going to go into captivity. This likely refers to events of 582 BC. The god Chemosh was worshipped under various names.

He seems to be the same deity as Nergal of the Babylonians. Carchemish is also named after Chemosh. Solomon most famously built a high place for Chemosh in 1 Kings 11, verses 7 and 33.

Verse 10 expresses a curse upon the one who does the work of the Lord with slackness. What is this work? It's the judgement upon Moab. The bearer of the sword has been given his task, and he must do it with diligence and speed.

This underlines the fact that the Lord is the one that is bringing this judgement upon Moab and its god. Moab and its table land were important wine-growing regions, and so the prophecy against Moab uses a number of different illustrations from winemaking. Moab is described as a settled place, and the prophecy compares it to wine that has settled on its dregs, or its sediment.

Leaving the wine with the dregs was part of the necessary process of fermentation. Left for longer, it would produce highly refined wine. But here one gets the sense that Moab is wine that has been left too long on its lees.

It should have been removed. However, since Moab has remained on its sediment for so long, it has not been moved around or uprooted and sent into exile, it has a very distinct flavour of its own, undiluted by other peoples. However, the Lord is about to perform the task that is overdue.

He is going to send porers, and he is going to take the wine of Moab and move it into different jars, breaking the old vessels of Moab, presumably the cities in which Moab has long felt secure. This will be a humiliation not just for Moab, but for Chemosh, their god. The northern kingdom of Israel had been made ashamed of Bethel, their cultic site that was set up by Jeroboam I. When the Assyrians came upon them in the first half of the 8th century, their worship proved powerless to protect them.

One can imagine this being a cautionary example to Judah in the south, which had put a vain faith for so long in its mere possession of the temple. In verse 14, the boast of the Moabite men is recorded. They think themselves great heroes and valorous men of war, but the emptiness of their boast is about to be exposed.

The destroyer appointed for Moab has come upon them, and Moab's proud young men have perished. The following verses describe the outcome of the calamity and the lamentation that follows. Peoples once enthroned in powerful cities must come down and sit on the parched earth.

People by the wayside will see people fleeing from the destruction, and will hear the tidings of the downfall of Moab and its power. Verses 21-24 give a litany of the cities that have suffered this destruction. Moab's horn is cut off, and his arm is broken.

These are both symbols of strength and might. Moab is also made drunk so it will suffer a downfall. The once haughty Moab, that mocked at Israel, will suffer the indignity of wallowing in its own vomit.

We might here recall the imagery of Jeremiah 25, verses 15-17. Thus the Lord, the God of Israel, said to me, Take from my hand this cup of the wine of wrath, and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it. They shall drink and stagger and be crazed because of the sword that I am sending among them.

So I took the cup from the Lord's hand, and made all the nations to whom the Lord sent me drink it. Verse 27 is difficult to read. Jack Lumbombe suggests that we could read it as follows, Then surely the joke is for you, Israel, if among thieves he has been found.

For more than all your words against him you will shake your head. Moab had once treated Israel as an object of derision. But now the Lord invites his own people to mock Moab, as they have been utterly humiliated.

Verse 29 to the end of the chapter seems to reuse and develop traditional material, particularly that found in the book of Isaiah. Isaiah chapter 16, verse 6-12. We have heard of the pride of Moab, how proud he is, of his arrogance, his pride, and his insolence.

In his idle boasting he is not right. Therefore let Moab wail for Moab, let everyone wail. Mourn utterly stricken for the raisin cakes of Ker-Haraseth, for the fields of Heshbon languish, and the vine of Sibmeh.

The lords of the nations have struck down its branches, which reach to Jezer, and strayed to the desert. Its shoots spread abroad and passed over the sea. Therefore I weep with the weeping of Jezer for the vine of Sibmeh.

I drench you with my tears, O Heshbon and Eliela, for over your summer fruit and your

harvest the shout has ceased, and joy and gladness are taken away from the fruitful field, and in the vineyards no songs are sung, no cheers are raised, no treader treads out wine in the presses. I have put an end to the shouting. Therefore my inner parts moan like a lyre for Moab, and my inmost self for Ker-Haraseth.

And when Moab presents himself, when he wearies himself on the high place, when he comes to his sanctuary to pray, he will not prevail. Then again in Isaiah chapter 15 verses 2-7, He has gone up to the temple and to Dibon, to the high places to weep, over Nebo and over Medeba, Moab wails. On every head is baldness, every beard is shorn, in the streets they wear sackcloth, on the housetops and in the squares, everyone wails and melts in tears.

Heshbon and Eliela cry out, their voice is heard as far as Jehaz, therefore the armed men of Moab cry aloud, his soul trembles. My heart cries out for Moab, her fugitives flee to Zoar, to Eglash-Shilishia. For at the ascent of Lutheth they go up weeping, on the road to Horonaim they raise a cry of destruction.

The waters of Nimrim are a desolation, the grass is withered, the vegetation fails, the greenery is no more, therefore the abundance they have gained, and what they have laid up they carry away over the brook of the willows. Moab, in verse 29, is distinguished by its pride, its haughtiness. The Lord brings low the proud, and Moab is no exception.

Moab's great boasts will ring hollow and be proved empty. The Lord takes up a lament for Moab, likely a mocking lament. Once again the prophecy focuses upon Moab as a wine-producing region.

Its vineyards are going to be destroyed. Places that once rang with the sound of people treading the wine are now either silenced or ringing out with shouts of destruction. Verses 34-39 once again describe a situation of lamentation.

The Lord describes his heart as moaning for Moab like a flute. Once again this is likely a mocking description. All the people of Moab are taking up a great lamentation.

They are practicing the rites and the customs associated with funerals. The Lord is playing the funeral flutes, they are shaving their head, cutting off their beards, they are cutting themselves for the dead, and they are wearing sackcloth. The judgment coming upon them is coming upon them speedily, swooping down upon them like an eagle flying from the north.

In the face of this destruction they will be like a woman, crying out and lacking in strength in the midst of her birth pangs. Once again we are told that the judgment is coming upon Moab because of its pride, precisely because Moab magnified itself against the Lord. The language of Isaiah chapter 24 verses 17-18 is taken up here.

Moab is doomed, even if they think that they have escaped, they have escaped only to

fall into a greater trap. Back in the book of Numbers, Balak the king of Moab had summoned the prophet Balaam to curse Israel. In response Balaam had not cursed Israel but had blessed her.

Some of Balaam's words are taken up here, Numbers chapter 21 verses 28-29. And then in chapter 24 verse 17. Verses 45-46 take up this imagery.

The fire that was mentioned coming out from Heshbon back in Numbers is going to come out again and it's going to destroy the forehead of Moab, as described in Numbers chapter 24. However the prophecy ends on a promising note, even after all of these things that befall them, Moab will be restored. A question to consider, what might the prophet mean by speaking of Moab magnifying himself against the Lord? What sort of actions and attitudes might this have involved? After declaring the Lord's judgement upon the Egyptians, the Philistines and Moab, in Jeremiah chapter 49 we move to Ammon, Edom, Damascus, Kedar and Elam.

Ammon's position after Moab is a natural one, as the two nations were related through Lot. Both of the nations arose from incestuous relations between Lot and his daughters. Ammon was a Transjordanian tribe living to the north of Moab, in land that was disputed at various points in Israel's history.

Much of their region was under the control of Israel's Transjordanian tribes at key points in their history. Disputes over the ownership of the land can be seen in the story of Jephthah, in Judges chapter 11. King David had also famously besieged Rabbah in 2 Samuel and subjugated the Ammonites.

During the reign of Jehoiakim, the Ammonites would assist the Babylonians in harassing Judah. 2 Kings chapter 24 verse 2 And the Lord sent against him bands of the Chaldeans and bands of the Syrians and bands of the Moabites and bands of the Ammonites and sent them against Judah to destroy it, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by his servants the prophets. In Jeremiah chapter 27 verse 3 we see that the Ammonites were one of the nations plotting rebellion against Babylon in 594 BC.

Baalist, king of the Ammonites, had also supported Ishmael, the son of Nethaniah, against Gedaliah, the governor of Judah. The prophecy concerning the Ammonites begins by speaking about this disputed territory. They had dispossessed, in the name of their god Milcom, land that formerly belonged to the tribe of Gad.

In a rhetorical question, the Lord asked whether Israel has no sons or no heirs that this land should be given into the hand of Milcom and his people. Although they had dispossessed Gad, the time would come when they would be dispossessed. Rabbah, their capital, would become a desolate mound.

Its associated villages would be burned down, and later in time Israel would dispossess

the Ammonites. We see this fulfilled, I believe, in 1 Maccabees chapter 5 verses 6-8. Then he marched against the land of Ammon, where he met a large and powerful army under the command of a man named Timothy.

Judas won many battles against them and finally defeated them. He captured Jazar and its surrounding villages and then returned to Judea. A similar judgment upon Ammon can be read in Ezekiel chapter 25 verses 1-7.

And they shall set their encampments against you, and make their dwellings in your midst. They shall eat your fruit, and they shall drink your milk. I will make Rabbah a pasture for camels, and Ammon a fold for flocks.

Then you will know that I am the Lord. For thus says the Lord God, Because you have clapped your hands and stamped your feet and rejoiced with all the malice within your soul against the land of Israel, therefore behold, I have stretched out my hand against you, and will hand you over as plunder to the nations. And I will cut you off from the peoples, and will make you perish out of all the countries.

I will destroy you. Then you will know that I am the Lord. In Ezekiel, Ammon is being judged for their response to the destruction of Judah and the way that at that point they treated Judah as an object of derision and as prey.

The prophecy here in Jeremiah likely dates from before the fall of Jerusalem, but it speaks of a coming judgment upon the land of Ammon, a judgment upon their people, but also upon their priests, the officials, and the God who is over them all, Milcom. Like its brother Moab, Ammon is judged in part on account of its pride, its self-confidence, its boasting in its valleys and its security, not believing that anyone could come against it and truly threaten it. Yet the Lord will bring them to account.

This likely came to pass in 582 BC. However, the time would come when Ammon would be restored. Edom comes next.

The land of Edom went from the river Zered in the north to the Gulf of Aqaba in the south, but it also included the land of Seir. It was below Judah and Moab. It had the Arabah Valley on the west and the Syrian Arabian Desert on the east.

However, by this point it seemed to have extended to the southeast, down into what is now Saudi Arabia, in Dedan. Later, the Edomites would become known as Idumaeans, and after the Nabataeans took over their original territory, they largely lived in the southern region of Judah. Edom was associated with Esau, who took over the region from the Horides.

As Edom is associated with Esau, Jacob's brother, there are twin dynamics between Israel and Edom, something that we see particularly in Genesis 36. Edom had been involved in the plot against Babylon in 594 BC. Edom was associated with wisdom, and it's quite likely that a lot of the wisdom literature had some connections with the land of Edom.

Many have suggested that the Book of Job has an Edomite provenance, and various passages in the Book of Proverbs too. Teman, which is mentioned at the beginning of the oracle against Edom here, was a northeastern region of Edom, whose capital was Basra. Teman was the firstborn son of Esau's firstborn son.

In the Book of Job, we have Eliphaz the Temanite. After the downfall of Jerusalem, the Edomites prayed upon Judah, rejoicing in Judah's demise. We have reference to this in Lamentations 4.21 Rejoice and be glad, O daughter of Edom, you who dwell in the land of Uz.

But to you also the cup shall pass, you shall become drunk and strip yourself bare. An extended judgment upon Edom is found in the Book of Obadiah, in verses 5-16. It uses very similar imagery to the Book of Jeremiah, but it seems to be addressed to a slightly later period.

You have no understanding. Will I not on that day, declares the Lord, destroy the wise men out of Edom, and understanding out of Mount Esau? And your mighty men shall be dismayed, O Teman, so that every man from Mount Esau will be cut off by slaughter. Because of the violence done to your brother Jacob, shame shall cover you, and you shall be cut off forever.

On the day that you stood aloof, on the day that strangers carried off his wealth, and foreigners entered his gates and cast lots for Jerusalem, you were like one of them. But do not gloat over the day of your brother, in the day of his misfortune. Do not rejoice over the people of Judah, in the day of their ruin.

Do not boast in the day of distress. Do not enter the gate of my people, in the day of their calamity. Do not gloat over his disaster, in the day of his calamity.

Do not loot his wealth, in the day of his calamity. Do not stand at the crossroads to cut off his fugitives. Do not hand over his survivors, in the day of distress.

For the day of the Lord is near upon all the nations. As you have done, it shall be done to you. Your deeds shall return on your own head.

For as you have drunk on my holy mountain, so all the nations shall drink continually. They shall drink and swallow, and shall be as though they had never been. Obadiah verses 1-4 are also largely similar to verses 14-16 of this chapter in Jeremiah.

Edom later seems to have been dispossessed by Nabonidus, the king of Babylon, in the mid 6th century. We can read a description of the aftermath of this destruction in Malachi chapter 1 verses 2-5. I have loved you, says the Lord.

But you say, How have you loved us? Is not Esau Jacob's brother? declares the Lord. Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated. I have laid waste his hill country, and left his heritage to jackals of the desert.

If Edom says, We are shattered, but we will rebuild the ruins. The Lord of hosts says, They may build, but I will tear down. And they will be called the wicked country, and the people with whom the Lord is angry forever.

Your own eyes shall see this, and you shall say, Great is the Lord beyond the border of Israel. Edom is going to be stripped clean and laid bare. It will have no hiding place from the Lord's judgment.

There will be nothing left behind. However, as the Edomites are killed, the Lord tells them in a very arresting statement to leave their fatherless children to him. He will preserve them, and that their widows should trust in him.

The Edomite men will perish for their sins, but he will preserve their women and children. Edom must not think it unjust that it is suffering such judgment. Nations that have not sinned in the way that Edom has are having to drink the cup of the Lord's judgment, and so Edom has no grounds for any complaint.

Once again, Edom is a proud nation that is going to be brought low. It thinks itself great and secure, but it will be made a wasteland. The Lord compares himself to a lion coming out of a thick forest to prey upon the animals of the pastureland.

The shepherds, the kings of Edom, will be powerless to protect their flock, the people committed to their charge. The judgment declared here over Edom is declared in pretty much the same form over Babylon in chapter 50, verses 44-46, details being changed to make it appropriate to the object of the oracle. Behold, like a lion coming up from the thicket of the Jordan against a perennial pasture, I will suddenly make them run away from her, and I will appoint over her whomever I choose.

For who is like me? Who will summon me? What shepherd can stand before me? Therefore hear the plan that the Lord has made against Babylon, and the purposes that he has formed against the land of the Chaldeans. Surely the little ones of their flock shall be dragged away. Surely their foes shall be appalled at their fate.

At the sound of the capture of Babylon, the earth shall tremble, and her cry shall be heard among the nations. The next judgment is upon Damascus, the chief city of the Syrians. The Syrians, or the Arameans, were the main threat to the northern kingdom of Israel until the rise of the Assyrians.

They were an Assyrian province then, before being taken over by the Babylonians. Carthage and Hammath were both important territories during this period, strategic for the Assyrians, the Egyptians and the Babylonians, the three major powers that were competing for dominance of that region from the 8th to the 6th century BC. This prophecy might be dated from around 605 BC, when Babylon defeated the Egyptians at Carthage.

Next there are judgments upon Khidar and Hazor, northern Arabian people, here called people of the east. The fulfillment of these prophecies likely occurred around 599 BC, when Nebuchadnezzar attacked the Arabs in the desert. These peoples controlled large numbers of cattle, many of them gained from plundering other peoples, but now they, who have ravaged many other peoples over their history, will be preyed upon themselves.

Their camels will become plunder, and their herds of livestock a spoil. They are advised to flee and to find some place to hide themselves. The final word of this chapter is addressed to the Elamites.

The Elamites were one of the descendants of Shem in the Table of Nations in Genesis chapter 10, that also mentioned in chapter 14, as King Chedulaioma of Elam and the kings who were with him fought against Abraham and his allies. Elam was situated to the east of the Tigris in modern day Iran. The Elamites and the Medes lived in what would later become Persia.

The attack upon the Elamites that's being prophesied here probably occurred in 596 to 595 BC. Later on, in Acts chapter 2, in the list of the peoples present on the day of Pentecost, we have another reference to Elamites. Walter Brueggemann draws attention to the series of verbs that express the Lord's purpose here.

I will break, I will bring, I will scatter, I will terrify, I will bring evil, I will send, I will set. Elam will be scattered, refugees from the nation being dispersed to all different parts of the world. Throughout, the Lord underlines the fact that He is the one that is bringing this judgment upon them, and when He has consumed them, He will set His throne in Elam.

The destruction of Elam will be a demonstration of His sovereignty. However, as in the case of Egypt, Moab and Ammon, there will be a mitigation of Elam's judgment. The time will come in the latter days when Elam's fortunes will be restored.

A question to consider, the prophecies of these chapters would mostly be delivered to a Judahite audience. Beyond mere prediction, what lessons could the people in Judah gain from the judgments declared upon their neighbours? Throughout, the book of Jeremiah has told of the coming disaster from the north, a disaster that, after 605 BC and the victory of Nebuchadnezzar over the Egyptians at Carchemish, comes into clearer focus as that of Babylon. Now, finally, in chapters 50 and 51, in a lengthy series of prophecies, Babylon's own coming doom is announced.

These chapters are a gathering of many different words delivered against Babylon, which serve as the climax of the Lord's judgment upon the world. This judgment had been anticipated back at another hinge of the book, in Jeremiah 25, verses 11-12. This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years.

Then, after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, declares the Lord, making the land an everlasting waste. In chapter 25, this is followed by an account of the nations to whom Jeremiah must give the cup of the wrath of the Lord. Babylon is the last to drink.

In the book of Jeremiah, Jeremiah often seems to be in a position of treachery. In his instruction to people to submit to the yoke of the king of Babylon, the rule of Babylon seems to be identified with the rule of the Lord. Submitting to the Lord requires submitting to the king of Babylon.

This raises theological tensions that pervade the book, and at this point we see something of a resolution of them. Babylon is not finally identified with the Lord's purpose, when the Lord has finished using Babylon as his means of judging the people of the region, he will then judge Babylon itself. The Lord judging the instruments of his judgment can be seen in places like Isaiah chapter 10, verses 5-15, in that case concerning Assyria.

But he does not so intend, and his heart does not so think, but it is in his heart to destroy, and to cut off nations, not a few. For he says, When the Lord has finished all his work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, he will punish the speech of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria, and the boastful look in his eyes. For he says, While Jeremiah's stance may have seemed to have been simplistically pro-Babylonian, seeming to mark him out as a traitor at certain points, at this point everything comes into a clearer focus.

Jack Lumbum remarks that the judgments here are far more general in contrast to the prophecies against Moab, for instance. Babylon was the greatest city of Chaldea in southern Mesopotamia, situated on the river Euphrates, not too far from modern day Baghdad. Babylonia named the region around the Tigris and Euphrates, from Babylon in the north down to the Persian Gulf in the south.

Babylon first makes its appearance in the scriptures back in the book of Genesis, as Babel is introduced as the beginning of the kingdom of Nimrod in the land of Shinar, where the tower and the city of Babel are later built. In Genesis, Babel is a backdrop for the calling of Abram, who, we ought to recall, is called from the general region of Babel, from Ur of the Chaldees. The city of Babylon looms larger than life in the scriptural imagination.

Like many of the other nations mentioned in the list of nations to be judged, Babylon was

a foil against which Israel's own identity had been formed. The Neo-Babylonian Empire was closely associated with the Chaldeans, and the Babylonians had routinely called Chaldeans in Jeremiah. However, Nabonidus, the next great king of Babylon, after the brief reigns of a few successors to Nebuchadnezzar, was Aramean from Haran, rather than Chaldean.

Babylon was invaded by Cyrus the Great in 539 BC, who ruled over the Persian Achaemenid Empire. This would lead to the end of exile for Jerusalem. Jeremiah is charged in anticipation to announce the downfall of Babylon, and the defeat of its god.

Just as the defeat of Ammon was the defeat of Milcom, or the defeat of Moab was the defeat of Chemosh, so the defeat of Babylon is the defeat of Bel or Merodach. Bel and Merodach are the same god. Bel was the chief of the Babylonian pantheon, another form of the name Baal, and a way of referring to the god Enlil.

Merodach is a form of the term Marjuk, a deity famous for his victory over Tiamat in Babylonian creation mythology. In the Enuma Elish, Marjuk kills Tiamat, a symbol of the primeval chaos waters, and forms the heaven and the earth from her divided body. However, now the great god Marjuk is put to shame.

His land is being despoiled and made desolate. To this point in the book of Jeremiah we have been told again and again of an enemy coming from the north. And now the enemy that comes from the north, Babylon, faces its own enemy from the north.

A nation will come upon her from her north. What it has done to others, others will do to it. And as Babylon is brought down, the flock of Judah and Israel will be restored.

The Lord describes the condition of his people. Their shepherds had failed them. The kings and the priests had not led them as they ought to have done.

And as a result, the people had been scattered. Their fold had been destroyed, and they had been sent abroad to all different mountains and hills. They had been devoured by wild beasts and enemies.

However, the Lord, as the true shepherd of his people, is going to gather them again. Here we should recall the prophecy of Jeremiah chapter 23, verses 1 to 4. Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture, declares the Lord. Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who care for my people, You have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them.

Behold, I will attend to you for your evil deeds, declares the Lord. Then I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall

any be missing, declares the Lord.

As the Babylonians and others have despoiled and destroyed and devoured the flock of the Lord, they have thought themselves innocent on account of the people's sin. The Babylonians seem to have some sense of the theology of Judah and the way in which they are being judged for their sin. We see this in Jeremiah chapter 40, verses 2 to 3. The captain of the guard took Jeremiah and said to him, The Lord your God pronounced this disaster against this place.

The Lord has brought it about, and has done as he said. Because you sinned against the Lord, and did not obey his voice, this thing has come upon you. However, these devourers of the flock will be held accountable.

The Lord instructs the remnant of his flock to flee from the midst of Babylon and out of the land of the Chaldeans. For a scattered flock, they will need new leaders. The Lord here speaks of male goats before the flock, new leaders who will arise from the midst of the Jewish community in exile and lead them back to the land.

For Babylon and the Chaldeans, however, their future involves becoming a prey of other nations. Just as they have preyed upon Judah, so they will be made the prey of other peoples. The plundering nation of Babylon is compared to a frolicking heifer or a lusty stallion.

These are animals defined by their power and their desire. In the same way, Babylon has been defined by its might and its proud sense of a lack of any limitations upon its desires. However, this fertile and prosperous and powerful land will soon be put to shame and made desolate and waste.

The Lord will strip her of her inhabitants and make her an object of scorn among the nations. Once again, we have a passage in which the Lord summons people to battle. This time, though, it's not the Babylonians.

It's the enemies of the Babylonians who are called to come upon her and utterly destroy her. Whereas earlier, Judah was described as a flock that had been failed by its shepherds and led astray and scattered and then devoured by wild beasts, in verses 17-20, the imagery changes somewhat. Israel is a hunted sheep, and rather than focus upon the failure of the shepherds, the focus is upon the external threat of the lions.

These lions are the great imperial powers that have dominated the region over the last 200 years, the Neo-Assyrian Empire and then the Neo-Babylonian Empire. The Neo-Assyrian Empire under Tiglath-Pileser III had removed much of the northern kingdom of Israel, especially the two and a half tribes in the region of the Transjordan, after they were appealed to by Ahaz of Judah against Pekah the son of Ramaliah. Around 720 BC, Sargon II finished the job, destroying Samaria and wiping out the northern kingdom,

deporting much of its population.

Sennacherib had also threatened Jerusalem in 701 BC, although Jerusalem had been spared at that point under Hezekiah. Although Judah had escaped the Assyrians, they had not escaped the Babylonians. Nebuchadnezzar had come upon them in 597 BC, in 586 BC, and then had deported even further remnants in 582 BC.

The Lord is going to bring judgment upon this Lion of Babylon, just as he brought judgment upon Assyria. The Babylonians and the Medes had defeated the Assyrians in 609 BC, spelling the end of their empire and the rise of Babylon in their place. But now Babylon's turn has come, and the Lord is going to regather his people.

He will restore Israel and Judah to their pasture. They will be brought back to the land, and not just to the place of Judah, but also to Ephraim and Gilead in the Transjordan. Beyond this restoration to the land, the Lord will deal with the deeper problem, the problem of their sin.

The people to be restored to the land will be a faithful people in a way that they were not before. They will also be a forgiven people. Their old sins will not be brought to mind again.

After the return from the exile, for instance, we should note the way that idolatry seems to be largely wiped out. There is not a general practice of idolatry after the return from exile. That sin, the sin that had heralded Israel being brought into exile, and then Judah, was largely eradicated.

Verses 21 following are largely a series of taunts against the land of Babylon. We've encountered several similar passages to this in the other oracles against the nations. It focuses upon the humiliation of this once proud nation, and the way that the Lord is the one who is bringing her downfall.

The Lord is opening up his armory and equipping her enemies. The Lord is spurring them on to fight against her, and to destroy and eradicate her. The defeat of Babylon will be a demonstration of the vengeance of the Lord, a vengeance that will be declared in Jerusalem.

The Lord is, among other things, avenging the destruction of his temple. The enemies are summoned against Babylon, and told to use their full force. We should bear in mind this prophecy against this cruel and violent people when we read the startling verses of Psalm 137, verses 8 to 9. Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock.

As in the case of other nations, the judgment upon Babylon is specifically associated with their pride. It is also a demonstration of the Lord's power against the predatory nations, the nations who think that they have Israel and Judah in their clutches, and that they cannot get free. But the Lord is their Redeemer, and he will deliver them.

The presentation of the power of the Lord as the Redeemer of Israel, and also his judgment against the proud nations that oppose him, can be seen in Isaiah 47, verses 4 to 11 too. Our Redeemer, the Lord of hosts, is his name, is the Holy One of Israel. Sit in silence and go into darkness, O daughter of the Chaldeans, for you shall no more be called the mistress of kingdoms.

I was angry with my people, I profaned my heritage, I gave them into your hand, you showed them no mercy. On the age you made your yoke exceedingly heavy, you said, I shall be mistress forever, so that you did not lay these things to heart or remember their end. Now therefore hear this, you lover of pleasures, who sits securely, who say in your heart, I am, and there is no one besides me, I shall not sit as a widow or know the loss of children.

These two things shall come to you in a moment. In one day the loss of children and widowhood shall come upon you in full measure, in spite of your many sorceries and the great power of your enchantments. You felt secure in your wickedness, you said, no one sees me.

Your wisdom and knowledge led you astray, and you said in your heart, I am, and there is no one besides me. But evil shall come upon you, which you will not know how to charm away. Disaster shall fall upon you, for which you will not be able to atone, and ruin shall come upon you suddenly, of which you know nothing.

The proud will not survive long before the power of the Lord. The Lord delights to bring down the haughty. The Lord summons disaster upon the Babylonians, a personified sword that is directed to every single part of Babylonian society, their inhabitants, the officials, the wise men, the Chaldeans, the diviners, the warriors, the horses and chariots, the foreign troops and mercenaries, and then against all her treasures.

Alongside the sword, the Lord summons a drought against her waters. She will be dried up, her fertility will wither away. All of this ultimately comes upon Babylon, an account of its pride and its idolatry.

It's a land of images, and they are mad over idols. What will be left? A desolate wasteland populated by scavenging beasts. A place that will no more be populated, a place that like Sodom and Gomorrah will stand as a signal of the Lord's judgment and his vengeance upon those who oppose him in pride.

Verses 41-46, with which the chapter concludes, are surprising because they repeat verses that we found elsewhere in the book. In Jeremiah chapter 6, verses 22-24, thus says the Lord, Behold, a people is coming from the north country. A great nation is stirring from the farthest parts of the earth.

They lay hold on bow and javelin. They are cruel and have no mercy. The sound of them is like the roaring sea.

They ride on horses, set in array as a man for battle. Against you, O daughter of Zion. We have heard the report of it.

Our hands fall helpless. Anguish has taken hold of us. Pain as of a woman in labor.

That oracle was declared against Zion. But now, the same words are being used against Babylon, the one who was acting out that judgment back in Jeremiah chapter 6. This reuse of form and material is not accidental. It is in its remixing of a former prophecy, underlining the theological point.

What Babylon has brought upon others, the Lord is bringing upon Babylon. We see the same thing in the prophecy that follows. This is again a reworking of a former oracle that we find in chapter 49, verses 19-21.

Behold, like a lion coming up from the jungle of the Jordan against a perennial pasture, I will suddenly make him run away from her, and I will appoint over her whomever I choose. For who is like me? Who will summon me? What shepherd can stand before me? Therefore hear the plan that the Lord has made against Edom, and the purposes that he has formed against the inhabitants of Timan. Even the little ones of the flock shall be dragged away.

Surely their foes shall be appalled at their fate. At the sound of their fall the earth shall tremble. The sound of their cry shall be heard at the Red Sea.

What Babylon brought upon Edom, Babylon herself will suffer at the hand of another nation. Babylon does not get the final word. The Lord will avenge himself upon her.

A question to consider, how does the delay of almost all the material declared against Babylon to this point in the book change the way that we read the preceding prophecies and understand the place of Babylon within the theology of Jeremiah more generally? The prophecy of Jeremiah ends with an extended series of prophecies against the nation of Babylon. Throughout the book, Babylon has been the great threat from the north that is going to come upon Judah and the rest of the nations of the region. And now at the very end, Babylon is going to be made to drink the cup of the Lord's judgment too.

The Lord will be behind the judgment upon Babylon just as he will be behind the judgment upon Judah. The prophecies here might largely date from before 594 BC just before Saria is sent to Babylon by Zedekiah. The Lord will raise up an enemy, a destroyer against Babylon.

Lebkemi, mentioned in verse 1, is an atbash of Chaldea. An atbash is a sort of code by which the first letter of the alphabet is replaced by the last, the second letter of the alphabet by the penultimate letter of the alphabet, the third letter of the alphabet by the antepenultimate, and so forth. There is another instance of this in verse 41, where Babylon is spoken of as Shishak.

It does not seem likely that this is being used as a way of disguising the identity of this place. More likely it's being used as a form of wordplay. The new term that stands in for Chaldea could be translated heart of my adversaries.

The prophecy describes the routing of the army of Babylon and of its population. This judgment occurs on two accounts. The Lord has not rejected his people and he's going to act on their behalf, on the behalf of Israel and Judah.

In addition to this, the sin of Babylon, the proud city, has grown great and the Lord is going to bring judgment upon them on account of their guilt. Seeing the judgment that's about to come upon this city, the people are warned to flee from her, presumably the exiles in her midst. Earlier Babylon was the means of the Lord's judgment.

Babylon was the golden cup of the Lord's judgment that he made the nations drink. But now Babylon is going to have to drink the cup of the Lord's judgment. The language here might remind us of chapter 25, verses 15-17.

And then again in verses 27-29 of that chapter. The God of Israel. Babylon is a nation searching for healing, for balm, and yet there is none to be found.

The nations exiled within her cannot heal her and they must all flee to their own country. Her judgment is about to fall upon her and they should not be around when that occurs. The great announcement of the fall of Babylon is also found in Isaiah chapter 21, verse 9. And behold, here come riders, horsemen in pairs.

And he answered, Fallen, fallen is Babylon. And all the carved images of her gods he has shattered to the ground. More famously, this imagery is developed in the book of Revelation, referring to the city of Jerusalem and a symbol of the great city that stands against the Lord.

In chapter 18, verses 1-8. After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth was made bright with his glory. And he called out with a mighty voice, Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great.

She has become a dwelling place for demons, a haunt for every unclean spirit, a haunt for every unclean bird, a haunt for every unclean and detestable beast. For all nations have drunk the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality, and the kings of the earth have committed immorality with her, and the merchants of the earth have grown rich from the power of her luxurious living. Then I heard another voice from heaven saying, Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues. For her sins are heaped high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities. Pay her back as she herself has paid back others, and repay her double for her deeds. Mix a double portion for her in the cup she mixed.

As she glorified herself and lived in luxury, so give her a like measure of torment and mourning. Since in her heart she says, I sit as a queen, I am no widow, and mourning I shall never see. For this reason her plagues will come in a single day, death and mourning and famine, and she will be burned up with fire, for mighty is the Lord God who has judged her.

The destruction of Babylon is also the vindication of the people of the Lord. It is the deliverance by which they are declared to be His people. As they return to Zion, they will declare the great deliverance that He has wrought.

The Lord summons an army against Babylon, more particularly the army of the Medes. A number of scholars see this as anachronistic. Babylon was not actually taken over by the Medes, so much as by the Achaemenid Empire.

This was a Persian Empire led by Cyrus the Great, who had already taken over the Median Empire, an empire to Babylon's north, that enjoyed power concurrently. In later parts of scripture, however, in the Book of Daniel and also in the Book of Esther, the Medes and the Persians come as a pairing. In the Book of Daniel, it's Darius the Mede that takes over Babylon.

If we identify Darius the Mede with Cyrus the Great, as many commentators have done, then we might consider the way that Cyrus himself is connected to the Median royal family. That connection might explain why he's called Darius the Mede, but might also further explain why referring to the Medes here may not be entirely inaccurate. This destruction will be the very end of Babylon.

Babylon is described as the one that dwells by many waters, the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates, the many canals and lakes and other things in the region. Later, in the Book of Revelation, Babylon the Great is described as sitting upon many waters. The Lord, not being able to swear by anything greater, swears by himself.

The army that he will bring against Babylon will be like a swarm of locusts that will utterly cover their land and declare victory over them. Verses 15 to 19 are largely a repetition of verses that we find in chapter 10, verses 12 to 16. In that chapter, they are a declaration of the power of the creator God against the false and weak idols who cannot act to save their people.

The Lord is the one who created all things, controls all natural forces. He is also the covenant God of Jacob, the one whose inheritance is Israel. He will demonstrate his power over his creation as he delivers Israel, which will also prove his faithfulness.

Polemics against idols are an important trope within the prophets in the context of such promises of redemption. Such deliverances, which fulfil the promises and the predictions of the Lord, are a means by which he demonstrates his character, his power and his providence and proves that he is unique as the creator God. We see things like this in Isaiah chapter 40, verses 18 to 25.

To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness compare with him? An idol? A craftsman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and casts for it silver chains. He who is too impoverished for an offering chooses wood that will not rot. He seeks out a skillful craftsman to set up an idol that will not move.

Do you not know? Do you not hear? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is he who sits above the circle of the earth and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers, who stretches out the heavens like a curtain and spreads them out like a tent to dwell in, who brings princes to nothing and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness. Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows on them and they wither and the tempest carries them off like stubble. To whom then will you liken me? That I should be like him, says the Holy One.

And then also in places like Isaiah chapter 44, verses 10 to 17, Who fashions a god or casts an idol that is profitable for nothing? Behold, all his companions shall be put to shame, and the craftsmen are only human. Let them all assemble, let them stand forth. They shall be terrified, they shall be put to shame together.

The ironsmith takes a cutting tool and works it over the coals. He fashions it with hammers and works it with his strong arm. He becomes hungry and his strength fails.

He drinks no water and is faint. The carpenter stretches a line. He marks it out with a pencil.

He shapes it with planes and marks it with a compass. He shapes it into the figure of a man, with the beauty of a man, to dwell in a house. He cuts down cedars, or he chooses a cypress tree or an oak, and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest.

He plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. Then it becomes fuel for a man. He takes a part of it and warms himself.

He kindles a fire and bakes bread. Also he makes a god and worships it. He makes it an idol and falls down before it.

Half of it he burns in the fire. Over half he eats meat. He roasts it and is satisfied.

Also he warms himself and says, Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire. And the rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, and falls down to it and worships it. He prays to it and

says, Deliver me, for you are my god.

The futility of idolatry will be proved in the day that the Lord brings down the great power of Babylon. Just as he has proved his power over Chemosh and Milcom, he will also prove his power over Bel or Marjuk. Babylon was the means of the Lord's judgement, earlier described as the cup that the Lord used.

In verse 20, Babylon is described as the Lord's hammer and weapon of war, much as the Lord used Assyria as his axe in the Book of Isaiah, so the Lord used Babylon as his hammer. The Lord lists a number of the things that he will achieve with Babylon, breaking nations in pieces, destroying kingdoms, horses and riders, chariots and charioteers, men and women, the old man and the youth, the young man and the young woman, shepherd and his flock, farmer and his team, governors and commanders. I think Jack Lumbom is right in seeing a chiastic structure here, or a book-ended pattern.

Once the Lord has finished using this hammer, however, Babylon and the inhabitants of Chaldea will be repaid for what they have done. Babylon is described like a mountain destroying the whole earth, but its own mountain will be destroyed in the years to come. It will be utterly torn down beyond rebuilding, not a stone left upon another.

Once again, the Lord summons the army against her. Northern kingdoms that are part of the Median Empire, that will later become part of the Achaemenid Empire, are going to be assembled as part of this great attacking host. They will desolate the land of Babylon, which will be powerless to resist them.

Their boundaries will be breached, their defences overcome. They themselves will be made like a threshing floor, trodden underfoot in judgement, trampled beneath the boots of an invading army. Babylon is described like a great monster that has swallowed up Judah.

The Lord is going to avenge the blood of his people upon this great beast. They are destined for a destruction, like lambs being brought to the slaughter. Their judgement will be such a signal one, that they will become a byword and a horror among the nations.

The other nations will see what has befallen them, and they will become an object of hissing and derision. Just as Lebkaemai was used for the Chaldeans in verse 1, in verse 41 Babylon is referred to as Shishak, which is another Akbash code word. This city was once the praise of the whole earth.

All were in awe of her. Vast territories were under her thrall. In verse 36 the Lord described making her sea dry.

In verse 42 sea imagery is used in a different way. The sea has come up and is going to overwhelm Babylon. She is going to be swamped by other nations.

As we've seen before the punishment here is not just upon a people, it's upon their false god. Their god Bel, otherwise called Enlil or Marjuk, is going to be punished and humiliated. He's going to have to disgorge the nations that he has swallowed.

From the belly of this slain monster the Lord summons forth his people. The downfall of Babylon at the hand of this army from the north will be heralded by a united chorus of celebratory voices from heaven and earth, all joined in rejoicing over the downfall of this city. This judgment occurs because the Lord is avenging his people.

Babylon must fall for the slain of Israel. As the exiled Judahites see this disaster fall upon Babylon, thoughts of Jerusalem should come to their mind. They should remember the way that they were dishonored and ashamed.

They should remember the way that Babylon had come into the holy places of the Lord's house. And should recognize that what is befalling Babylon at this point is the fulfillment of the Lord's judgment upon her, the Lord bringing upon this great city what is due to her. Her deeds are returning upon her own head.

The city gives up the greatest of cries as she's been destroyed and then all is silent. She's laid waste, made desolate, and no one will dwell in her again. This is all declared by the king, the Lord of hosts, the one who has the power to bring this judgment upon Babylon and can predict it all in advance.

The chapter and the body of the book ends with a colophon. The details contained in the colophon are listed by Lumbum. The name of the scribe, Sariah the son of Nariah, son of Masih.

The date, the fourth year of Zedekiah. The source, the words that were written by Jeremiah toward Babylon. The reason for making the copy, for a public reading in Babylon, the place where the text should be deposited in the middle of the Euphrates.

The curse that will come with it. Thus shall Babylon sink to rise no more because of the disaster that I am bringing upon her and they shall become exhausted. Lumbum further observes a number of very striking parallels between this and the scroll that was written by Beruk, the son of Nariah, back in 605 BC.

That was written in the fourth year of Jehoiakim. This is written in the fourth year of Zedekiah. There is political unrest on the international scene.

There has just been the battle at Carchemish. In 594 there has been rebellion in Babylon. There is a decision made to prepare a scroll of Jeremiah's Judah prophecies and then there is a decision made to prepare a scroll of Jeremiah's Babylon prophecies.

There is a member of a scribal family who writes the scroll from the prophet's dictation and both of them come from the same family. They are both sons of Nariah. The scribe later makes a public reading of the scroll and after the reading the scroll suffers a sort of destruction.

It is burned in the fire by Jehoiakim in the Winter Palace in chapter 36 and after Sariah reads the scroll in Babylon it is sunk in the Euphrates. Both might be symbols of the destruction they speak of. And then finally in both cases after delivering these prophecies Jeremiah steps back from public life for a period of time.

In the final edition of this book this colophon becomes the end of the entire book save for the historical epilogue of the final chapter. But this is the ending of the prophecies of Jeremiah. A question to consider.

The prophecies concerning the fall of Babylon in this and the preceding chapter become paradigmatic in scripture. Particularly in the book of Revelation this image of Babylon the Great fallen is taken up and applied to another city. Why might the fall of Babylon be so paradigmatic? Why might the prophecies concerning its judgment be taken up and applied to different situations in the future? How does the judgment upon Babylon spoken of in these chapters anticipate a much greater and more final awaited judgment? The book of Jeremiah concludes not with Jeremiah's final words nor with the great prophecies against Babylon in chapters 50 to 51 but with the historical epilogue of chapter 52.

The book of Jeremiah's prophecies conclude in chapter 51 verse 64 and what follows here is largely the text of 2 Kings chapter 24 verse 18 to chapter 25 verse 30 with a few variations and additions. A similar inclusion of material from the historical books into one of the prophetic books can be seen in chapters 36 to 39 of the book of Isaiah. Those chapters contain much of the material of 2 Kings chapters 18 to 20.

The most major change from 2 Kings chapter 25 is the exclusion of its account of Gedaliah. Given the treatment of the history of the Judahites after the fall of the kingdom in chapters 40 to 43 it should not surprise us that it was excluded at this point. It might seem as if this is a case of a lazy cut and paste from another book but even material that seems to be repeated in scripture as several parts of Jeremiah are even within the book itself are not detached from their new locations or straightforward repetitions.

In some cases, as in the verses at the end of chapter 50, the repeating of verses from another context is far from lazy cutting and pasting functioning as a sort of subtle theological commentary which attentive hearers should be able to pick up upon. Jeremiah chapter 52 needs to be read in the wider context of the book of Jeremiah where it has been thoughtfully placed. As we have noted at several points in studying the book of Jeremiah, in light both of internal features of the book and the evidence of the Septuagint version of the book, the book of Jeremiah underwent a series of additions and several reorderings of its material before coming down to us in the form that we now have it in our Bibles. We might note the similarity between this chapter and the earlier account of chapter 39 to 40 verse 6 where the fall of Jerusalem is followed by the release of Jeremiah much as the fall of Jerusalem is followed here by the release of Jehoiachin. In its current position, the material of chapter 52 highlights the way that Jeremiah's ministry was vindicated in his lifetime the event with which it was largely concerned coming to pass as the enemy from the north came upon Jerusalem and destroyed it. This chapter also contains some unique material in the numbers of the exiles in verses 28 to 30.

The material of this chapter likely dates from sometime after 560 BC over 25 years after the downfall of Jerusalem. Zedekiah, like Jehoiachin, reigned for 11 years before rebelling against Nebuchadnezzar. He repeats the error of his predecessor and suffers the same consequences.

All of this was discussed in places like Ezekiel chapter 17 verses 11 to 21 which warned against looking to the Egyptians for an alliance against the Babylonians. Then the word of the Lord came to me, Say now to the rebellious house, Do you not know what these things mean? Tell them, Behold, the king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and took her king and her princes and brought them to him, to Babylon. And he took one of the royal offspring and made a covenant with him, putting him under oath, the chief men of the land he had taken away, that the kingdom might be humble and not lift itself up and keep his covenant that it might stand.

But he rebelled against him by sending his ambassadors to Egypt, that they might give him horses and a large army. Will he thrive? Can one escape who does such things? Can he break the covenant and yet escape? As I live, declares the Lord God, surely in the place where the king dwells, who made him king, whose oath he despised and whose covenant with him he broke, in Babylon he shall die. Pharaoh with his mighty army and great company will not help him in war.

When mounds are cast up and siege walls built to cut off many lives, he despised the oath in breaking the covenant, and, behold, he gave his hand and did all these things, he shall not escape. Therefore thus says the Lord God, As I live, surely it is my oath that he despised and my covenant that he broke. I will return it upon his head.

I will spread my net over him, and he shall be taken in my snare, and I will bring him to Babylon and enter into judgment with him there for the treachery he has committed against me. And all the pick of his troops shall fall by the sword, and the survivors shall be scattered to every wind, and you shall know that I am the Lord. I have spoken.

One of the strongest themes of Jeremiah's ministry was that the people of Judah ought to submit to the king of Babylon, that as they submitted to the Lord's hand in the king of Babylon, they would be preserved through judgment, and the time would come when they would be restored again. However, Zedekiah and the Judahites broke this word. In the ninth year of Zedekiah's reign, Nebuchadnezzar came up against Jerusalem in response to Zedekiah's rebellion against him.

There is a sense of inevitability to the events that follow. After all of the forewarning, the actual judgment comes upon Judah as a sort of formality. Its fight is futile.

The fate is already appointed for the nation. There is an inexorable movement from Nebuchadnezzar's setting up of the siege works to the final fall of the city of Jerusalem. Nothing can save Judah now.

The disaster is in the process of unfolding, and nothing can arrest it. The siege begins in January of 588 BC, and it ends in July 586 BC. Over the 18 months of the siege, famine conditions become severe in the city.

We should imagine a situation similar to that described in 2 Kings 6, where people were buying donkey's heads and dove's dung to eat, and even eating their own children. The city is finally breached, at which point Zedekiah and his warriors try to flee by night at a place where the besieging army would be the thinnest. They flee east, but are pursued by the Chaldean army, which overtakes them in the plains of Jericho.

Zedekiah's escape is short-lived. His army is scattered, and he is captured. He is brought north to Aribla, where Nebuchadnezzar is now based.

And there his sons are killed before his eyes, and to ensure that this is the last thing that he will ever see, they put out his eyes. He is brought in chains to Babylon. With his sons killed, there is seemingly no hope of his restoration of his dynasty.

He ends up in prison in Babylon, or, in the Septuagint, the millhouse, subject to hard labour. We might here think about the story of Samson, who also loses his eyes and is subject to hard labour. In the verses that follow, we are told the year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, in which Jerusalem fell.

Now that Judah is being removed from the map, the marking of time moves from the regnal years of Judah's kings to the year of the reign of the kings of Babylon. The entire temple complex, the house of the Lord and the king's palace, is burned down, along with all of the other great buildings of the city. Solomon's temple, which had been at the heart of the life of the nation of Judah, is no more.

As Jeremiah had taught the people so forcefully, they had wrongly trusted in the temple, treating it as if it were a sort of idol or talisman. But now it is removed from them. The walls of Jerusalem are broken down.

The city is utterly humbled. Any remnant of its former grandeur is reduced to smouldering rubble. The smaller remnant of the elite and the artisans that had been left after the former deportation are removed.

Only some of the poorest are left to work the land. At the start of the books of the kings, there was the assembling of the furniture of the temple, and in this chapter it is stripped from the house, item by item. It is a tragic mirroring of 1 Kings 7, verses 15-45.

The temple is divested of its treasures. The captain of the guard, Nebuchadnezzar, assembles a representative group of men and various high officers. They are then taken north, up to Nebuchadnezzar at Ribla, where they are put to death.

Although many of the poorer people remain, Judah is now in exile and has ceased to exist as a nation in its own right. There is no lengthy discussion of the reasons for Jerusalem's destruction here. As the final chapter of the book of Jeremiah, it is already entirely evident to the hearer.

There are some added details within this list of the temple furnishings, some surprising variations from the account in 2 Kings 25, but also in 1 Kings 7, where the items are first described. Most particularly, in verse 23 we read, There were 96 pomegranates on the sides. All the pomegranates were a hundred upon the net work all around.

This is not a detail that we have elsewhere. Where we read of the pomegranates in 1 Kings 7, verses 20-42, we are not given the number 96. Rather, we read, There were 200 pomegranates in two rows all around, and so were the other capital, and also, It is quite possible that this seemingly extraneous detail is significant and that the hearer is supposed to recognise some importance in this number 96.

Further numbers follow this section, numbers that are not found in the account of 2 Kings. These are the deportation summaries from 597 BC, 586 BC and 582 BC, from the first attack upon Jerusalem, from the downfall of Jerusalem, and then presumably a third time after the killing of Gedaliah. The numbers for the deportation here differ from those that we find in 2 Kings.

2 Kings 24, verses 14-16 gives the numbers for the first deportation. And the king of Babylon brought captive to Babylon all the men of valour, 7,000, and the craftsmen and the metal workers, 1,000, all of them strong and fit for war. None remained except the poorest people of the land.

And he carried away Jehoiachin to Babylon, the king's mother, the king's wives, his officials and the chief men of the land he took into captivity from Jerusalem to Babylon. And the king of Babylon brought captive to Babylon all the men of valour, 7,000, and the craftsmen and the metal workers, 1,000, all of them strong and fit for war. The discrepancies between the figures in these two accounts could be accounted for in various ways.

Who exactly is being numbered? Is it including just the adult males in the account here? Are there certain classes of persons that are not being included? Where are the people being numbered? As they are being brought away from Jerusalem or as they are arriving in Babylon? Or as they are settled in Babylon? It's not entirely clear. I would not be surprised if there is some significance to be seen in these numbers again. The book ends on a surprising note.

There is a brief flicker of hope in the gloom of exile. 37 years into his exile, Jehoiachin, Zedekiah's nephew and predecessor on the throne of Judah, is released from prison. He is treated kindly by evil Merodach and made to sit regularly at the king's table above the other captive kings in Babylon.

He is also granted a regular allowance for his needs. Judah had been told that if they submitted to Babylon, they would enjoy peace. In his book of comfort or consolation, Jeremiah had also told them that the time would come when the Lord would visit them, he would restore them to the land and they would prosper there once more.

Here, in the darkness of the grave of exile, there is the slightest stirring of the bones. A question to consider. What similarities might we see between the story of the elevation of Jehoiachin from prison to the story of Joseph in Genesis? What might we make of the resemblances between these two stories?