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TOTAL BIBLE LEARNING

Disciples'

Bible Study Series





STUDIES IN

Jeremiah & Lamentations

Jeremiah and Lamentations

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The Book of Jeremiah

Author

Jeremiah is known as the "weeping prophet" because of his deep sadness and grief over Israel's refusal to repent, even in the face of certain and imminent destruction. Though Baruch [BEAR-uck], the prophet's companion and scribe, penned this longest book of the Bible, the words of the prophecies belong to Jeremiah.

Jeremiah was a member of the priestly family, of Hilkiah. His hometown was Anathoth, a city set aside by Joshua for those of Levitical descent. Jeremiah may have been a descendant of Abiathar, a priest of Anathoth banished by Solomon for his lack of loyalty. In that case, the prophet did not have a sterling heritage which may have had a negative effect on the way he was received.

No biblical writer revealed more of his soul than Jeremiah. Through his often brash and pointed complaints to God we see the exasperation of his heart. He was commanded by God to never marry and have children. He preached for years, only to be rebuked, insulted, and banished by leaders who hated him.

Unlike other Old Testament prophets, Jeremiah did not have the benefit of miracles to validate his message. For Elijah, God called down fire from heaven. Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Daniel had great visions. God gave Jeremiah object lessons. A ruined belt. Shattered pottery. A wooden yoke. Ordinary objects to communicate an extraordinary message of impending judgment.

Historical Setting

Jeremiah served the Lord in Jerusalem during the reigns of the last five kings of Judah. He was a confidant of Josiah (639–609 B.C.), Jehoiakim (609–597 B.C.), and Zedekiah (597–586 B.C.). These three relationships, however, were remarkably different. Josiah was a godly king who initiated broad spiritual reforms in Judah. Of course, Jeremiah supported the king with great enthusiasm. Josiah's son Jehoiakim toppled his father's reforms and led Judah headlong into idolatry. He despised Jeremiah and did everything he could to squelch the prophet's message. Zedekiah proved a weak king. At times he seemed to favor Jeremiah, but was afraid to oppose his counselors who wanted to silence the prophet.

Jeremiah lived through the capture and destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army under the command of Nebuchadnezzar (586 B.C.). The Babylonian conquest of Judah and

of Jerusalem came in three waves. In 605 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar conquered King Jehoiakim and carried part of the temple treasures, along with Daniel, to Babylon. Then in 597 B.C., Jehoiachin, (son of Jehoiakim) the remainder of the temple's treasures, and ten thousand of Judah's leaders were taken to Babylon. Ezekiel was in this group. In 588 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar came a third and final time. For one and a half years, the Babylonian army whittled away at Jerusalem's defenses. Though confident at first, the Judahites began to lose courage when Egypt's rescue attempt was crushed and other fortified cities of Judah began to fall like dominoes. The end came in 586 B.C. when the Babylonians breached the walls of Jerusalem and burned the city. Nebuchadnezzer blinded King Zedekiah and carried him and more than eight hundred captives to Babylon in chains. Only a remnant of the poorest people were left to inhabit the rubble that was Jerusalem. Against his will, Jeremiah was forced to accompany armed refugees who fled from Judah to Egypt to escape Babylonian retaliation.

Structure and Theme

One of the most obvious features of the Book of Jeremiah is that its messages aren't arranged chronologically. With the exception of chapter 13, the first twenty chapters of Jeremiah probably come from the period between the prophet's call by God (626 B.C.) and a critical battle between Egypt and Babylon (605 B.C.). Most of the material in chapters 21—39 appear to date from the reigns of kings Jehoiakim and Zedekiah. Within those broad boundaries, the prophetic messages cluster by topic or theme.

Like Ezekiel, Jeremiah placed a strong emphasis on individual responsibility. Judah fell as a nation because it was made up of individuals who chose not to obey God in their daily lives.

The mystery of the new covenant is introduced in Jeremiah 31, where God would relate to His people directly and personally rather than through the rituals and sacrifices of the Mosaic law. Jeremiah made it clear that the temple, the ark of the covenant, and the abundance of sacrifices paled in significance when placed next to the attitude of a person's heart.

Through the words of Jeremiah, God calls the hearts of all people to repentance, reconciliation, and restoration.

How to Use the *Study Book*

The Study Book is meant to be used with a Bible opened beside it. Before studying one of the lettered sections within a lesson, read the corresponding Bible passage. Then refer back and forth between your

Bible and the Study Book until you get the meaning of the passage.

Also think about your personal answer to each of the "Ask Yourself" questions. Finally, come to class prepared to discuss the Bible passage and raise any questions that have occurred to you.

Note: Just because some passages are treated "in brief" does not mean that they are unimportant or that you don't need to read those passages in your Bible as part of your study of Jeremiah.

1 Dark Prophecies

Jeremiah 1—6

a Prophet to the Nations (1:1-10)

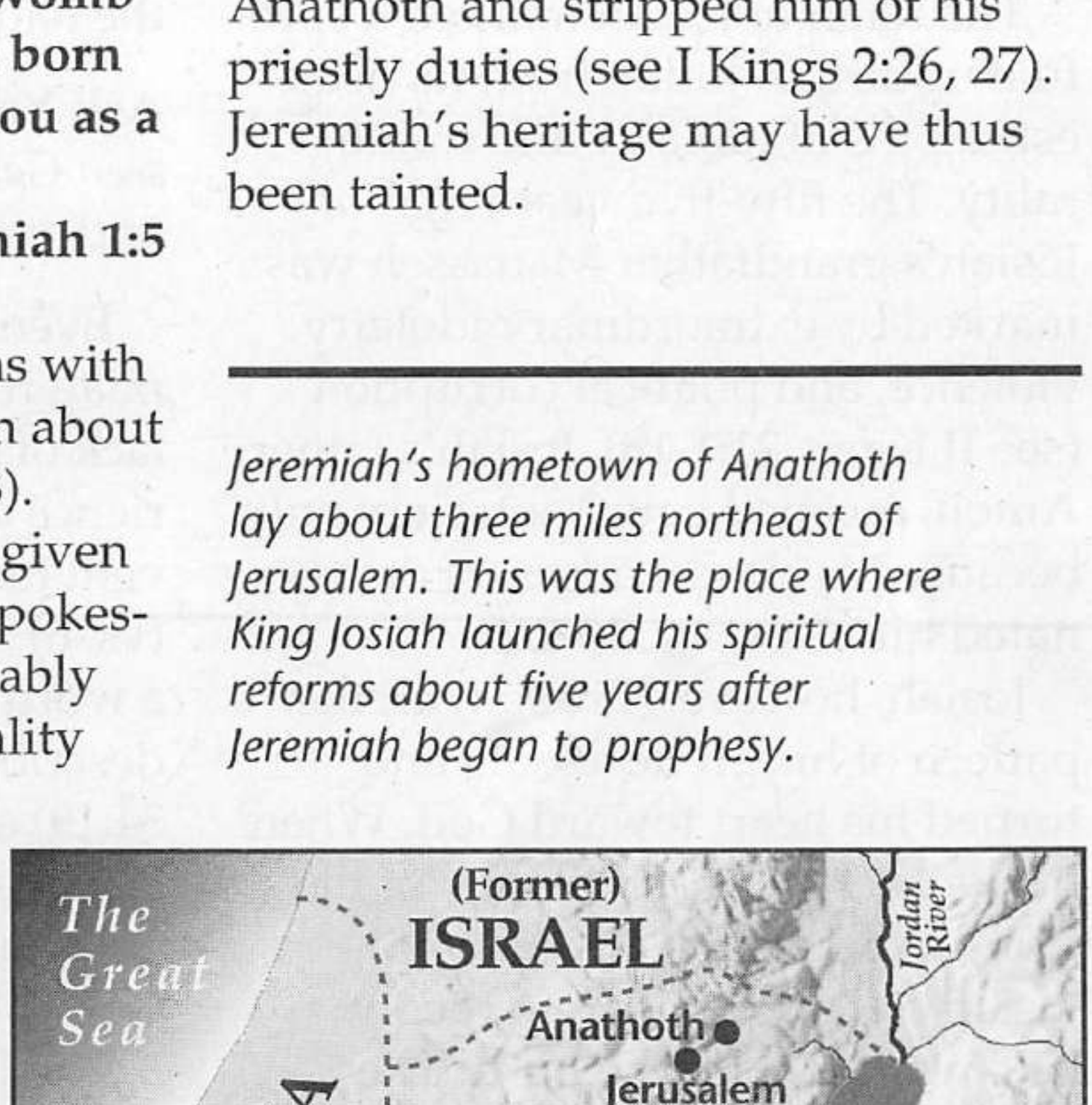
"Before I formed you in the womb
I knew you, before you were born
I set you apart; I appointed you as a
prophet to the nations."

—Jeremiah 1:5

The Book of Jeremiah begins with some background information about Jeremiah the prophet (vss. 1-3). Throughout the book, we are given glimpses of this melancholy spokesman for God. In fact, we probably know more about the personality of Jeremiah than that of any other Old Testament prophet.

Jeremiah's father, Hilkiah, was a priest who lived in Anathoth, near the southern border of Benjamin (vs. 1). Anathoth was one of the towns given to the Levites for the priests to live in (see Josh. 21:18, 19). Some speculate that Jeremiah may have descended from Abiathar, a priest who lived in Anathoth some three hundred years before. Because Abiathar had supported Adonijah instead of Solomon to succeed David as king, Solomon exiled Abiathar from Jerusalem to his home in Anathoth and stripped him of his priestly duties (see I Kings 2:26, 27). Jeremiah's heritage may have thus been tainted.

Jeremiah's hometown of Anathoth lay about three miles northeast of Jerusalem. This was the place where King Josiah launched his spiritual reforms about five years after Jeremiah began to prophesy.



God's call of Jeremiah to be a prophet occurred during the thirteenth year of King Josiah's reign in Judah (Jer. 1: 2). From that time in 626 B.C. until after the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.—for more than forty years—Jeremiah served the Lord as prophet.

Verses 2 and 3 list three kings of Judah, but there were actually five during this period—Josiah, Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah. Jehoahaz and Jehoiachin, omitted from the list, reigned for only three months each.

The reign of Josiah marked a spiritual upturn in Judah from its deepest depths of idolatry and immorality. The fifty-five-year reign of Josiah's grandfather Manasseh was marked by extraordinary idolatry, violence, and political corruption (see II Kings 21:1-18). Josiah's father, Amon, escaped equal notoriety only because his closest advisers assassinated him (see vss. 19-24).

Josiah, however, broke with the pattern of his predecessors and turned his heart toward God. When his workers found the Book of the Law in the temple (see 22:3-13), Josiah called on Judah to renew its covenant with the Lord. The discovery of Moses' neglected writings sparked a sweeping revival that led to major reform throughout the land.

Five years before the law surfaced in the temple, the word of the Lord had come to Jeremiah, calling him to a prophetic ministry. Jeremiah must have been thrilled to hear God's written Word—and grieved at the reminder of how far Judah had wandered from God.

When God first called him, Jeremiah felt uncertain of himself. Like Moses, the prophet initially struggled with many insecurities. God had to reassure him, telling him that He was born to be a prophet (Jer. 1:4, 5). Everything about him—his abilities, his talents, his personality—prepared him for his work. But his call was not just to the nation of Judah, but to a worldwide audience. The events of Jeremiah's life would have spiritual ramifications for all the nations.

Ask Yourself . . . *In what ways have I seen God shaping my life and character so that I would be ready to serve Him?*

Even with God's assurances, Jeremiah remained skeptical. He saw his lack of speaking ability and inexperience as liabilities that would prevent him from fulfilling God's plan (vs. 6). The term translated "child" is a word used in the Old Testament to describe young men (see Gen. 14:24; 34:19) as well as infants (see Exod. 2:6; I Sam. 4:21). Jeremiah was probably about twenty years old when God called him.

The Lord told Jeremiah that it was His command—not Jeremiah's age—that really mattered (Jer. 1: 7). He was to concentrate on obeying God, not on his limited skills as an orator. The Lord calmed even Jeremiah's unspoken fears, promising to be with him in every difficulty, no matter who might be against him (vs. 8). This was Jeremiah's first hint that he might not enjoy his difficult

mission, even during the days of Josiah's revival.

Ask Yourself . . . *What fears do I have that might keep me from serving the Lord?*

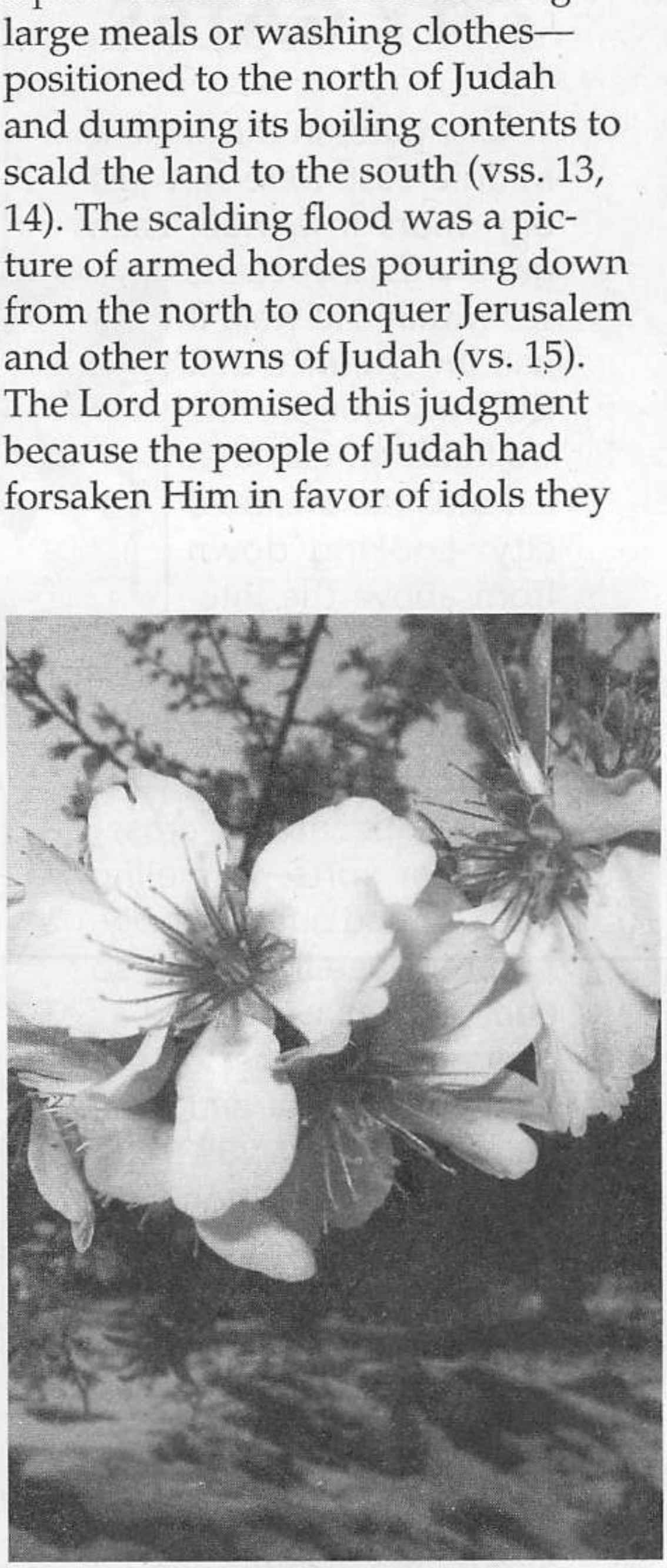
The final part of Jeremiah's commission as a prophet involved God's touch on his mouth (vs. 9), which symbolically placed God's words within him. When the Lord called Isaiah more than a century earlier, a seraph touched that prophet's mouth with a live coal to purify him for ministry (see Isa. 6:7). Both incidents stressed the divine source of the prophets' words. The words placed in Jeremiah's mouth would have the power to destroy nations and build them back up (Jer. 1:10).

b Prophet of Destruction (1:11-19)

The LORD said to me, "From the north disaster will be poured out on all who live in the land. I am about to summon all the peoples of the northern kingdoms," declares the LORD. —Jeremiah 1:14, 15a

Jeremiah's first prophetic insights came as visions from God. "What do you see, Jeremiah?" the Lord asked (vs. 11). God showed Jeremiah an almond tree branch, which in the Middle East can blossom as early as January while other trees remain dormant. The almond branch signified the Lord's determination to fulfill His Word as quickly as the almond tree blooms (vs. 12).

In the second vision Jeremiah saw a pot—the kind used for cooking large meals or washing clothes—positioned to the north of Judah and dumping its boiling contents to scald the land to the south (vss. 13, 14). The scalding flood was a picture of armed hordes pouring down from the north to conquer Jerusalem and other towns of Judah (vs. 15). The Lord promised this judgment because the people of Judah had forsaken Him in favor of idols they

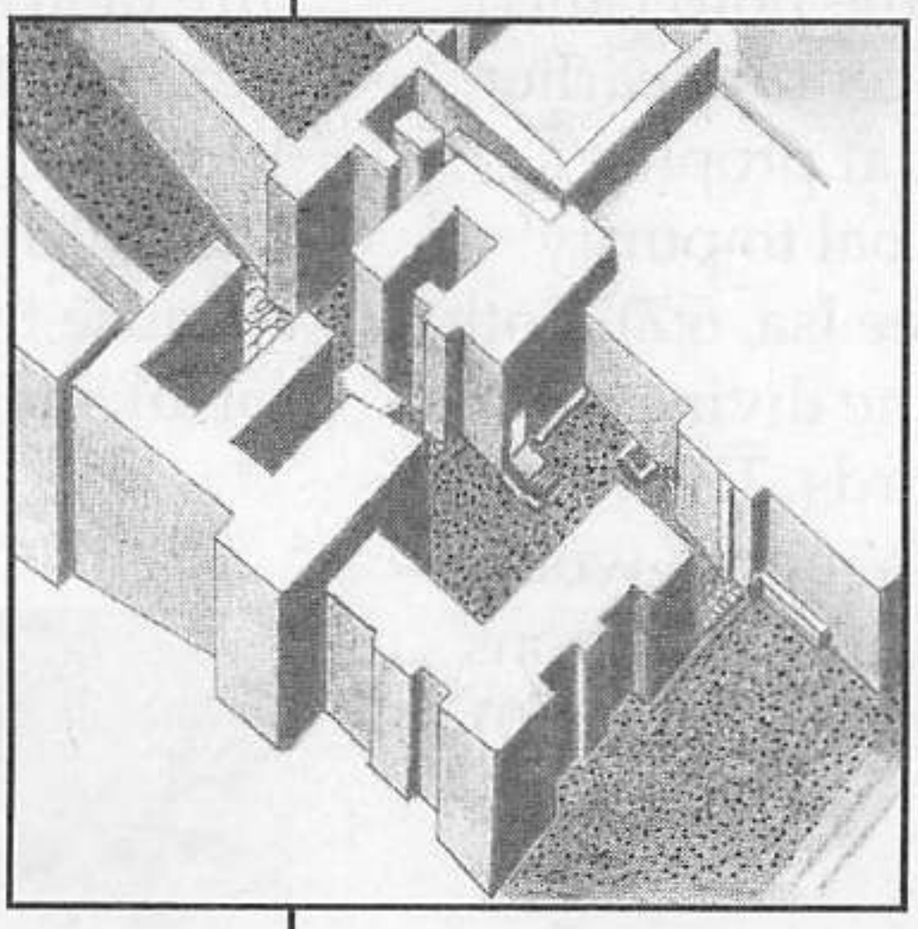


A blooming almond tree in Israel. Jeremiah saw a vision of an almond branch that bloomed before all others—a symbol of God's watchfulness over Judah.

Photo: Ester Inbar

THRONES IN THE CITY GATES

City gates in the ancient Middle East were not just big doors in a wall. Each gate was a fortress set within the wall. It had an entrance that led from outside the wall and an exit that led into the enclosed city. Looking down from above the interior walls, guards kept an eye on travelers, especially during times of hostility.



A city gate

Gates became a crossroads of sorts, funneling traffic in and out of the city. And because they were so public, gates were used as convenient places to conduct commercial and legal activities (Gen. 23:10-20; Ruth 4:1-12). When Jeremiah predicted that kings would "set up their thrones in the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem" (Jer. 1:15), he was indicating their complete and total conquest of Jerusalem. The occupying armies would take control of the local government and probably begin war trials from the city gates.

had made with their own hands (vs. 16). They had violated their covenant with the Lord (see Exod. 20:2-4; Deut. 5:6-8).

At the time of Jeremiah's call to be a prophet, Ashurbanipal, the last great Assyrian emperor, had just died (626 B.C.). His empire, which had been the dominant power of the Middle East, had begun to crumble. In the vacuum left by the Assyrian decline, God's backslidden people faced unknown dangers.

Jeremiah's two visions convinced him that coming international struggles would bring judgment to Judah. He could not escape the message nor his responsibility to proclaim it. God challenged Jeremiah to prepare himself for the resistance he would encounter when he began to preach. He would have to stand against the tide of public opinion and resist every tendency to be afraid (Jer. 1:17).

The Lord promised to make Jeremiah an impregnable fortress in the face of attacks by kings, government leaders, priests, and ordinary people (vss. 17, 18). He promised the prophet that no matter how frequently or viciously his opponents attacked him, they would not overcome him. The Lord would always be with

Jeremiah to deliver him (vs. 19).

When the Lord wanted to proclaim judgment and doom on His people, He took Jeremiah from his mother's womb and shaped him into an instrument He could use. What kind of man was Jeremiah? Was he as tough as nails, impervious to criticism, and eager to blast away at sin? No. He had none of the credentials we might associate with a prophet pronouncing imminent destruction. Instead, Jeremiah possessed a sensitive soul. He anguished—just as the Lord did—over the devastation coming to his people. All the same, Jeremiah stood firm—just as the Lord did—for the truth.

Ask Yourself . . . *What personality traits do I have that I might regard as liabilities? How might those traits be part of God's plan to make me more effective in His work?*

Jeremiah 2:1—3:5 in Brief

Jeremiah used imagery of marriage, adultery, and divorce similar to that used by the prophet Hosea a century or more before. Israel had once been like a bride happily accompanying her husband through the wilderness, but she left Him for the idols of Egypt and Assyria. Though other nations sometimes added gods to their religious mix, Jeremiah's message was that no other nations switched gods quite like Israel and Judah. And though Israel's unfaithfulness led to punishment at the hands of the Assyrians, Judah failed to learn the lesson. Judah continued to behave like a wandering prostitute who could never satisfy her promiscuity. How could she ever be pure again? Only by God's consistent, loving discipline upon her.

C Prodigal Wives (3:6-13)

"I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries. Yet I saw that her unfaithful sister Judah had no fear; she also went out and committed adultery."
—Jeremiah 3:8

God spoke through Jeremiah to picture Israel (the northern kingdom) and Judah (the southern kingdom) as young wives given to sexual immorality. Israel had run to every high place and grove of trees to imitate the pagan worship of its idolatrous neighbors (vs. 6). The nations of the Middle East regarded elevated places, whether man-made structures or hilltops, as ideal places to contact the gods. Stands of trees were favored sites for the immoral rituals of fertility cults.

To shelter Judah from the bad influence of Israel, the Lord "divorced" Israel by means of the Assyrian conquest and deportation (vss. 7, 8). But Judah didn't get the message. Thinking they would never be conquered, the people of

Judah went headlong into the worship of false gods, defiling the land (vs. 9).

Despite the best efforts of the king and the priests, Judah did not truly repent of her adulterous idolatry during King Josiah's reforms. " '[Israel's] unfaithful sister Judah did not return to me with all her heart, but only in pretense,' declares the Lord" (vs. 10). "Faithless Israel is more righteous than unfaithful Judah," the Lord concluded (vs. 11). To highlight the seriousness of Judah's sin, the Lord instructed Jeremiah to shout into the unpopulated northland and call divorced Israel to repent, return, and receive God's mercy (vs. 12).

Ask Yourself . . . *Has my culture desensitized me to wrongdoing? If so, how?*

The Lord wanted to make Judah jealous by promising to restore Israel to His favor if she would confess and repent of her sin of worshiping every god under heaven. The "spreading tree" indicated Judah's fascination with the goddess Asherah [uh-SHEER-uh], Baal's consort, whose symbol was a sacred pole or tree (vs. 13). God grieved because His people had rejected Him, but He reaffirmed His unending love and faithfulness. Even while warning of judgment as sin's consequence, He offered hope to those who would repent—He would not be angry forever. Israel and Judah may have been like wandering wives, but their Husband remained loyal to them. The Lord would allow them to suffer for their infidelity to purge them of their promiscuity. After the exile, recorded history does not indicate they returned to idolatry.

d A Forgiving Husband (3:14-25)

"Return, faithless people," declares the LORD, "for I am your husband. I will choose you. . . . Then I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will lead you with knowledge and understanding."
—Jeremiah 3:14a, 15

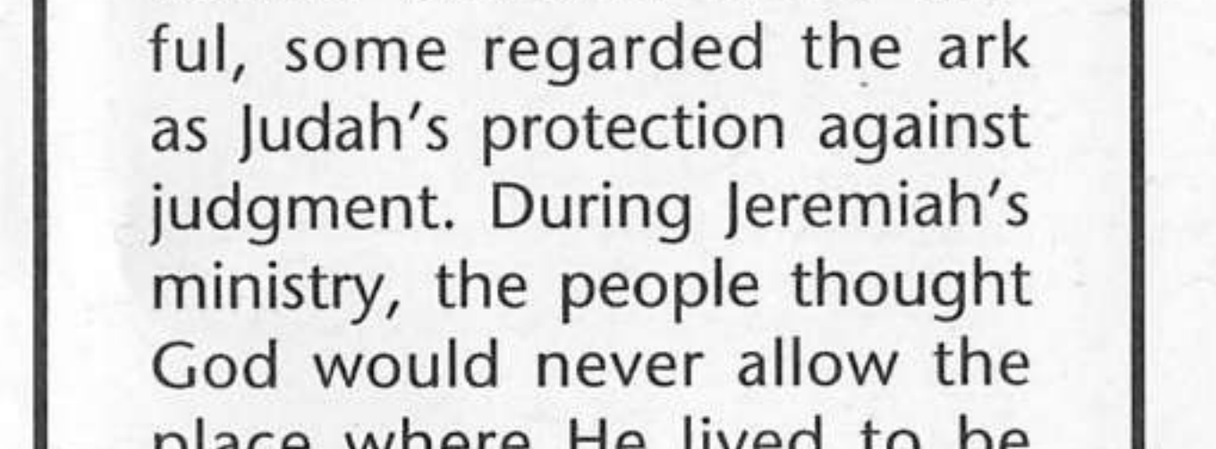
Here is one of the few times in the Book of Jeremiah that the prophet looked to the future and saw restoration. The Lord revealed a coming time when, as their husband, He would call out the people. Some would respond—"one from a town and two from a clan" (vs. 14). The Lord would bring this remnant back and give them "shepherds after [his] own heart, who [would] lead [them] with knowledge and understanding" (vs. 15).

In verse 16, Jeremiah introduced a theme that set his prophecy apart from all others. The Lord helped Jeremiah understand that the time was coming when the outward symbols of the old covenant would give way to an inward, spiritual worship. When Israel was restored and grew under the gracious rule of God, the people would no longer need or

The Ark of the Covenant

The ark of the covenant was built under Moses' supervision at Mount Sinai, shortly after God made His covenant with His people and gave instructions for building the tabernacle. The ark contained the stone tablets with the Ten Commandments, a golden pot with manna in it, and Aaron's rod that had miraculously blossomed and budded (Heb. 9:4). The lid of the ark, called the "mercy seat" (Exod. 25:17, KJV) or "atonement cover," represented the place where the presence of the Lord dwelt among His covenant people.

During the period of the judges, the Israelites regarded the ark almost like a good-luck charm, even taking it into battle to guarantee victory (I Sam. 4:3). As the nation became more sinful, some regarded the ark as Judah's protection against judgment. During Jeremiah's ministry, the people thought God would never allow the place where He lived to be destroyed.



desire the ark of the covenant of the Lord as evidence of His presence. The ark, presumed to have been destroyed by the conquering Babylonians, would never have to be replaced by another sacred object to symbolize God's presence.

Jeremiah foresaw a time when Jerusalem would become known as "the Throne of the LORD" and when all nations would gather to praise the Lord together with a reunited Israel and Judah (vss. 17, 18). In this union, the promises made to the ancestors would be fulfilled.

With that future glory in mind, the Lord reflected on the current sad condition of Israel and Judah. He wanted to treat His people as sons so He could lavish rich inheritances upon them (vs. 19). He wanted them to call Him "Father." They were unfaithful, however, like women cheating on their husbands (vs. 20). Jeremiah may have mixed his metaphors when he described God's people as sons, daughters, and wives, but his message was not intended to be a precise analogy. God wanted to communicate His intense emotional distress over the loss of those who were closest to Him.

In the days of Jeremiah, those in the northern kingdom, having already been judged and conquered for their unfaithfulness, could only weep bitterly (vs. 21). But the southern kingdom of Judah still had a chance to respond to the Lord's pleading. They could listen to His prophets, repent, and be rescued from their backsliding (vs. 22).

The final verses of Jeremiah 3

picture what the repentance of Judah could be like. Judah needed to recognize the Lord alone as her God. She needed to see that the "idolatrous commotion" on every hill was nothing but presumption; only God could really save her (vs. 23). She needed to realize how much her idolatry had robbed her of spiritual fruit and that she needed to humbly repent (vss. 24, 25).

Ask Yourself . . . *What sins should I acknowledge before the Lord today?*

4–6 in Brief

Jeremiah called the inhabitants of Judah to circumcise their hearts—that is, to cut off their sin and consecrate themselves to God. If they refused, they could expect a terrible invasion from the north that would devastate their nation.

Jeremiah lamented that none of the people of Judah—from peasant to priest to king—were able to receive his message. They were skilled at evil, but incompetent at righteousness. False prophets had lulled the nation into a false sense of security. Jeremiah, however, foresaw a terrible siege followed by death, destruction, and captivity.

Though King Josiah called for spiritual renewal, Jeremiah's early prophecies were a dark lining in the silver cloud of those reforms.



False Worship, Divine Wrath

Jeremiah 7—10

a False Securities (7:1-11)

" 'Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, "We are safe"—safe to do all these detestable things?' "

—Jeremiah 7:9, 10

The collection of messages in Jeremiah 7:1—8:3 is commonly called "The Temple Address," since the messages were delivered at the temple. Jeremiah 26 describes the probable historical events surrounding these prophecies. King Josiah's reforms died when he did, and the idolatry of the Canaanites rapidly reemerged in Judah during the early reign of Josiah's son Jehoiakim.

Both Jeremiah 7 and 26 warn that the temple in Jerusalem might come to the same end as the tabernacle at Shiloh centuries before (7:12-15; 26:4-6).

Late in 609 or early in 608 B.C., the Lord instructed Jeremiah to deliver a warning to the worshipers at the temple. Following God's directions, Jeremiah positioned himself at a temple gate—perhaps the New Gate (see 26:10)—where he could address the "people of Judah who come through these gates to worship the Lord" (7:2, 3).

Though they attended temple activities, their religion was nothing but insincere ritual. Jeremiah challenged them to live lives consistent with their apparent worship. "Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place" (vs. 3). He warned them that trusting in the temple would not keep them safe and that those who said it would were false prophets (vs. 4). Simply chanting the phrase "the temple of the LORD" was believed to ward off destruction. Surely God would not allow His own home to be destroyed—or so they believed.

A century earlier (701 B.C.), the Lord had delivered Jerusalem from the invading armies of Assyria,commanded by Sennacherib (see Isa. 37:36, 37). Later, King Josiah refurbished the rundown temple as a major part of his reform (see II Chron. 34:8-13). In Jeremiah's time

the "temple theology" of the false prophets concluded that none of Judah's enemies could touch the temple—or, for that matter, the people who worshiped there.

The Lord said such talk was "deceptive words" (Jer. 7:4, 8). The only thing that would protect Jerusalem was obedience to its covenant with God. The people were to honor the Lord with righteousness and justice, and end all bloodshed, idolatry, and oppression of the powerless. Honoring God with their actions would be the only security they needed to continue living in their land (vss. 5-7). Anything less was worthless (vs. 8).

Instead of pursuing justice, the inhabitants of Judah brazenly violated one command after another. They were guilty of theft, murder, adultery, lying, and idolatry (vs. 9). But after wantonly disregarding the covenant, the people of Judah trotted off to the temple, offered their sacrifices, and breathed a sigh of relief as they said, "We are safe" (vs. 10). The Lord asked incredulously, "Safe for what? Safe to do all these detestable things?"

The Lord asked a question Jesus would pick up centuries later when He cleansed the temple: "Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you?"

BAAL AN ABUSIVE HUSBAND BAAL

Baal was an ordinary Hebrew word for "owner," and therefore "lord" or "master." It was a common word for husband (Deut. 21:13; II Sam. 11:26; Prov. 31:11, 23, 28) and was sometimes applied that way to the Lord Himself (Isa. 54:5; Jer. 3:14).

However, the most frequent use of Baal in the Old Testament is as the name of the chief deity of the Canaanites. Baal was considered the owner of those who followed him.

Instead of being a loving husband, however, Baal was more like an abusive spouse. To appease him, the prophets of Baal had a practice of cutting themselves to draw blood (I Kings 18:28). The distinction between the Lord and Baal is made clear in Hosea 2:16, where the Lord predicted that a time would come when idolatrous Israel would repent: "In that day," declares the LORD, "you will call me 'my husband'; you will no longer call me 'my master' [baal]."

Baal worship promised to reward anyone who pleased Baal with sacrifices and gifts. Meanwhile, Baal made no ethical claims on anyone. He didn't care how cruel, greedy, or immoral a person was as long as regular sacrifices were given to him. By contrast, the Lord—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—demanded mercy and justice even more than sacrifice.

(vs. 11; see Mark 11:17). Like robbers who lie, cheat, and steal before running back to their hideout, the people of Judah committed acts of injustice, only to return to the temple. And though they came to the Lord's house, their worship never affected their day-to-day behavior.

The externals of worship can never make up for the lack of integrity and a growing relationship with God. Jeremiah's contemporaries needed to practice the quality of justice before the temple and the worship conducted there would mean anything.

Ask Yourself . . . *Have I ever been tempted to rely upon church attendance to protect me from trouble?*

b Prohibited Prayer (7:12-20)

"Do not pray for this people nor offer any plea or petition for them; do not plead with me, for I will not listen to you." **—Jeremiah 7:16**

To compel the people of Judah to consider that judgment could fall on Jerusalem and its temple, the Lord asked them to remember what had happened at Shiloh. When Joshua had led Israel and conquered the promised land, the tabernacle was pitched at Shiloh. It remained there for at least three hundred years through the period of the judges until the time of Samuel, the last judge, when Eli was the priest (see I Sam. 1:9). Archaeological evidence reveals that the Philistines destroyed Shiloh around 1050 B.C., when Saul became the first king of Israel.

"Go now to the place in Shiloh where I first made a dwelling for my Name, and see what I did to it because of the wickedness of my people Israel," said the Lord (Jer. 7:12). The Israelites had believed that the physical sign of God's presence in Shiloh made them invincible. Once, facing a formidable Philistine army, they determined to take God with them into battle by carrying the ark of the covenant for protection (see I Sam. 4:3). But God would not be manipulated in such ways. He had promised to keep His covenant for those who remained faithful to Him, not those who rebelled by disobeying Him.

When Jeremiah stood at the temple gate and warned the people that the temple would not magically save them from judgment, Solomon's temple had been standing in Jerusalem for about 350 years. During those centuries, the Lord had repeatedly called to His people through the law and the prophets (Jer. 7:13). Their persistent refusal to listen to God's warnings finally left Jerusalem vulnerable to the same kind of destruction Shiloh had experienced more than four hundred years earlier (vs. 14). Their sin also made the people of Judah and Jerusalem vulnerable to the same awful end that came to the northern kingdom of Israel (which Jeremiah called "Ephraim" [EE-fray-im] after

the dominant tribe of Israel). More than a century before Jeremiah delivered his prophecy in the temple, the Assyrians had destroyed the northern kingdom and removed the people from the land (vs. 15).

The Lord paused in His instructions to Jeremiah and turned from the words He had for the people of Judah to give a word directly to Jeremiah. "Do not pray for this people nor offer any plea or petition for them," He told the prophet, "do not plead with me, for I will not listen to you" (vs. 16). Jeremiah found it difficult to not talk to God about his fellow Judahites (for example, 14:7-9; 18:20). And the Lord repeated His injunction not to pray for them (see 11:14; 14:11, 12).

Why wouldn't God want Jeremiah to pray for the people? Probably because they had persisted in their sin for so long and refused to repent. Now it was time for the long-delayed consequences of sin to come (7:19). God wanted Jeremiah to honor Him by letting the people know that what was about to happen was from the Lord.

The Lord pointed out the extent of Judah's idolatry. In every village and in Jerusalem, men, women, and children participated in idolatry, worshiping the Queen of Heaven (vss. 17, 18). The Queen of Heaven was a title of the Babylonian goddess Ishtar. In Canaanite circles Ishtar was called Asherah. She was the mythical sexual companion of Baal. The cakes of bread that the Lord mentioned may have been shaped like the full moon, Asherah's symbol, or they may have been in her shape—little cookie idols.

Their devotion to a fertility goddess—along with other pagan practices—had provoked the Lord to the point that He held out no hope for Judah's repentance. The people would have to face the consequences of their sins.

It might be worthwhile to note that God knew exactly the condition of their hearts. Even after Judah and Jerusalem were destroyed by the Babylonians, the survivors who escaped to Egypt reinstituted the worship of the Queen of Heaven.

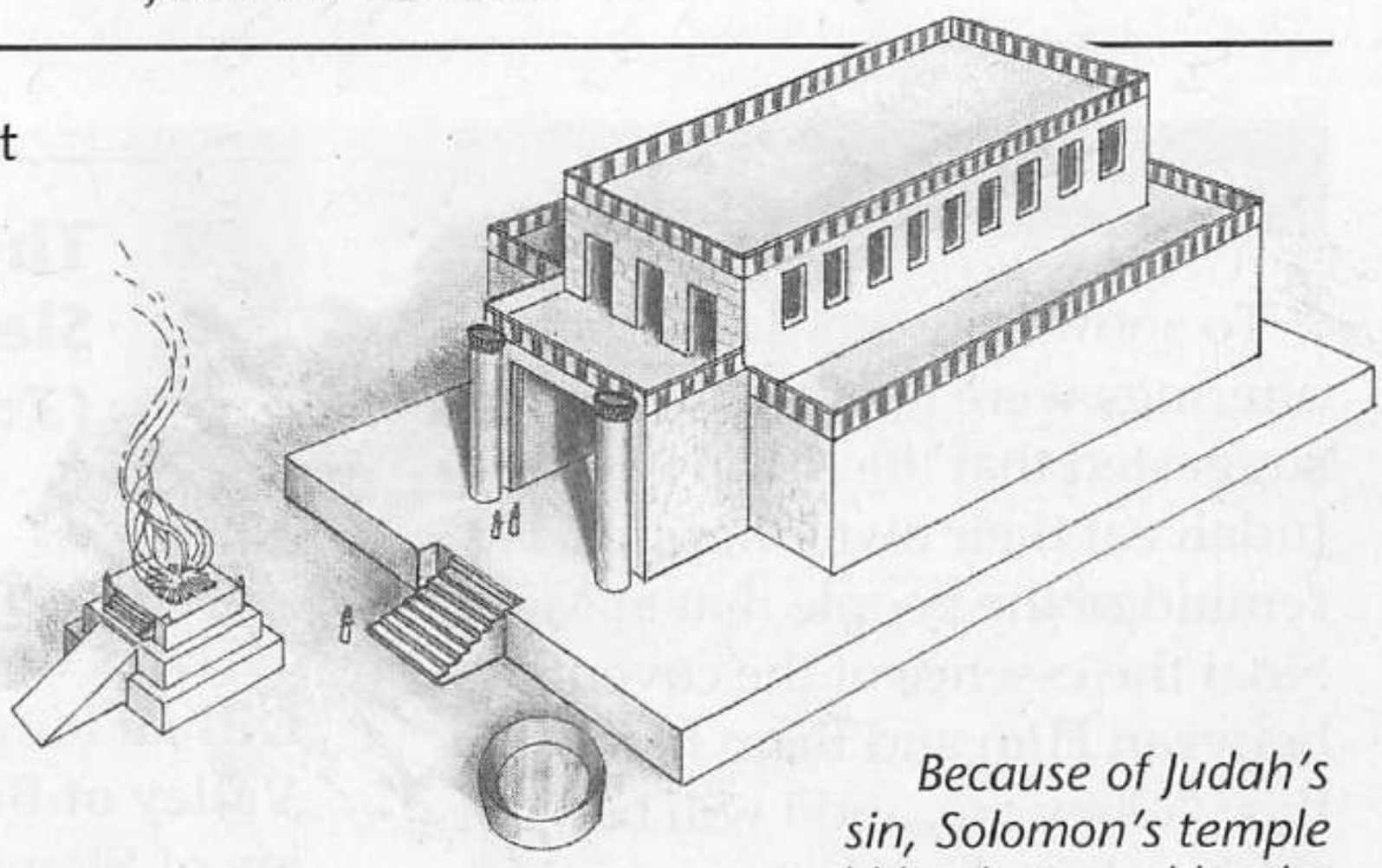
In fact, they blamed the fall of Jerusalem on the dissatisfaction of the Queen of Heaven, caused by King Josiah's brief interruption of her worship (see 44:15-18).

Ask Yourself . . . *Have I recently blamed someone else to avoid personal responsibility? If so, how can I make up for that now?*

Finally, God made a solemn declaration, demonstrated in the shift from "Lord" to "Sovereign LORD" as the title for God in this passage (7:20). The name "Lord" indicates the personal name of God and stresses His covenantal relationship to Judah. The adjective "Sovereign" highlights God's control over history and international events. As Sovereign Ruler, He would accomplish His will, regardless of Judah's lack of cooperation.

Divine judgment, identified as the anger and wrath of God, would fall on Judah. This anger was provoked by Judah's idolatry, injustice, and

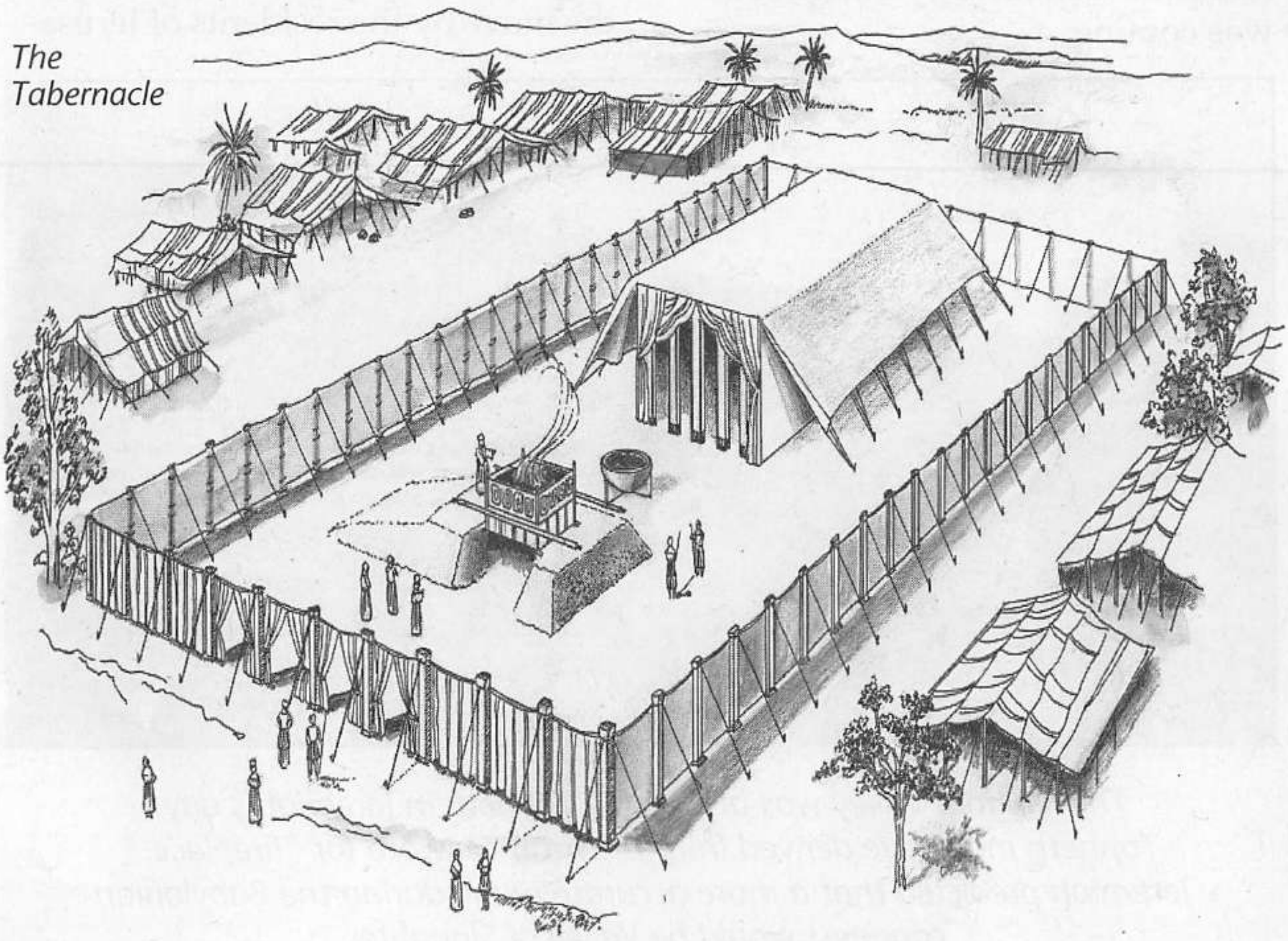
violence. God's judgment would come like an unquenchable fire against the land, the people, the livestock, the trees, and the crops of Judah. When the Babylonians, God's instruments of judgment, finally arrived, even the temple in Jerusalem became part of the devastation that swept through Judah. God would withdraw His presence. There would be no magical protection found in the temple for stubborn sinners. God is not mocked. The foreign army raided the temple



Because of Judah's sin, Solomon's temple would be destroyed by the Babylonians just as the tabernacle in Shiloh was destroyed by the Philistines.

treasures, packed up all of its gold and silver utensils, cut up the larger bronze ones, and then set the entire temple on fire (see II Kings 25:8-17).

The Tabernacle



Jeremiah 7:21-29 in Brief

To show how worthless their offerings were to Him, the Lord suggested that the sinful people of Judah eat their own offerings. He reminded the people that at Mount Sinai the essence of the covenant between Him and them had been this: "Obey me, and I will be your God and you will be my people." The rituals of sacrifice had always been secondary to sincere devotion and obedient behavior. Every generation, however, had disregarded God's messengers, leaving the current generation of sinners with only one option: to cut their hair in the fashion of mourners and prepare to wail on the high places where they had practiced idolatry. Judgment was coming.

C The Valley of Slaughter (7:30—8:3)

" 'Beware, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when people will no longer call it Topheth or the Valley of Ben Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter, for they will bury the dead in Topheth until there is no more room.' " **—Jeremiah 7:32**

Pagan worshipers preferred to set up their idols and altars on high places. In Jerusalem, the temple occupied the highest point of land. When Jehoahaz and Jehoiakim became kings in place of their father, Josiah, however, they did not resist the move by the residents of Jerusa-



The Hinnom Valley was also called Topheth in Jeremiah's day. Topheth may have derived from the Aramaic word for "fireplace." Jeremiah predicted that a more accurate name during the Babylonian conquest would be Valley of Slaughter.

Photo: Dror Feitelson

lem to set up idols in the temple area (7:30). The practice, first instituted by Josiah's grandfather Manasseh (see II Kings 21:5-7), was halted by King Josiah, but only for a time (see 23:4-7). Under King Jehoiakim all the "detestable idols" were brought back into "the house that bears [the LORD's] Name" (Jer. 7:30). In addition to defiling the temple, the people of Jerusalem designated Topheth in the Valley of Ben Hinnom as the place for human sacrifices (vs. 31). There they burned children in honor of Molech, the fire god of the Ammonites, who lived east of the Jordan River.

The Valley of Ben Hinnom also served Jerusalem as its garbage dump. Jeremiah foresaw a time when so many corpses would choke the ravine that it would receive a new name—the Valley of Slaughter (vs. 32). Many people would starve during the Babylonian siege. More would be slaughtered when the fierce foreign troops finally broke through the walls and massacred the weakened survivors. The birds and scavenging animals would gorge themselves on decaying human flesh from corpses thrown in the Valley of Slaughter when proper burial was no longer possible (vs. 33).

When judgment would at last come to Judah, the stench of death would replace the sounds of joyful celebration throughout the land (vs. 34). The invaders would even desecrate the graves of former kings, priests, prophets, and common people, scattering their bones (8:1). Those who had loved to worship the sun, moon, and stars were assigned by the Lord to lie exposed on the ground beneath these hosts of heaven (vs. 2).

The ancient world regarded the desecration of graves as a horrible humiliation against a people—an offense against the memory of their dead. The Lord promised unrepentant Judah terrible disgrace—its dead would be left unburied to be devoured by scavengers. Those already buried would even be dug up. But even worse off would be those who didn't die: " 'Wherever I banish them, all the survivors of this evil nation will prefer death to life,' declares the LORD Almighty" (vs. 3).

The priests and prophets who heard Jeremiah's "Temple Address" wanted to have him executed for speaking against the temple (see 26:7-9). He was spared only when some of the elders of Jerusalem recalled that Micah also had predicted, " 'Zion will be plowed like a field, Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble, the temple hill a mound overgrown with thickets' " (vs. 18; Mic. 3:12).

Though Jeremiah was spared for the moment, another prophet with a similar message, Uriah, fled in fear to Egypt, where he was hunted down by King Jehoiakim's agents. He was brought back to Jehoiakim, who had him executed (Jer. 26:20-23). Clearly, God had given Jeremiah an unpopular message.

Ask Yourself . . . *Am I willing to suffer loss for speaking God's truth?*

Jeremiah 8:4—10:25 in Brief

Jeremiah 8 explores the spiritual blindness of the people, leaders, and prophets of Judah. Despite repeated warnings and lessons from the Lord, they never learned and never turned from sin to righteousness. Finally it was too late. Jeremiah mourned, "The harvest is past, the summer has ended, and we are not saved" (8:20).

As seen in Jeremiah 9, the prophet wept and wailed because of the wickedness of his fellow Judahites. The Lord called also for professional mourners to get ready to weep because of the horrors that awaited Judah.

Chapter 10 describes one more appeal by the Lord for Judah to recognize that idols were nothing but the creation of artisans, while the whole universe is the work of His hands. It concludes with a final warning that, because the people had not repented, they faced inevitable destruction from the north.

3 Broken Promises, Shattered Pride

Jeremiah 11—15

a Warning to the Covenant Breakers (11:1-8)

"Tell them that this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'Cursed is the one who does not obey the terms of this covenant.' "
—Jeremiah 11:3

These verses of prophecy probably came to Jeremiah when he had been preaching only five years. God instructed him to support King Josiah, who was only twenty-six years old himself, in his efforts to reform the spiritual life of Judah.

King Josiah had just heard the law of Moses for the first time, following its discovery during temple renovation (see II Chron. 34:14). Repenting for his own neglect of the Law, the king attempted to reinstate the covenant that had once existed between the people and the Lord. He summoned the population of Judah and Benjamin to the temple and read the Law to them. He renewed the covenant and "had everyone in Jerusalem and Benjamin pledge themselves to it" (vs. 32).

Though they did as the king told them to, most of the common people had little interest in Josiah's reform movement. So God prompted Jeremiah to support the covenant renewal movement and tell about the curse that awaited those who broke the covenant (Jer. 11:1-3). God had promised blessings to those who obeyed the covenant, but He had also promised curses to those who disobeyed (see Deut. 27—28).

Ask Yourself . . . *How quick am I to respond to the Lord? Am I sensitive to those things that please or displease Him?*

King Josiah did not propose a new covenant. He was simply renewing the same covenant Moses and the people had made with God when they came out of Egyptian slavery (Jer. 11:4). God remained faithful to His part of the covenant. If the people chose to obey the Lord, He would fulfill the promises He gave at Mount Sinai. The land would become once more "a land flowing with milk and honey" (vs. 5a; see also Deut. 27:3).

Jeremiah showed his enthusiasm for the covenant renewal by exclaiming, "Amen, LORD" (Jer.

HOW COVENANTS WORK

The covenant the Lord made with Israel at Mount Sinai followed a form common throughout the ancient Middle East for agreements made between high kings and peoples who swore allegiance to them. A formal covenant contained ❶ a preamble identifying the king, ❷ a historical prologue about the king's past relations with the people, ❸ a catalog of the demands placed on the people and the obligations of the king, ❹ a covenant ratification ceremony detailing blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience, and ❺ a list of witnesses and directions for carrying out the covenant.

The covenant, as it appears in Deuteronomy, parallels this form: ❶ preamble (1:1-4), ❷ historical prologue (1:5—4:43), ❸ demands of the covenant (4:44—26:19), ❹ blessings and curses (27:1—28:29), and ❺ witnesses to testify to the covenant (4:26; 31:26). Note that the Lord did not call on humans as witnesses.

King Josiah and Jeremiah were both concerned that Judah had ignored the demands of the covenant so long that the covenant curses were inevitable.

11:5b). He recounted the failure of their ancestors to keep the covenant and the consequences they suffered as a result (vss. 6-8), likely pointing to past oppressions and military defeats (including the Assyrian conquest of Israel) as examples. There is no record of Jeremiah's traveling through the towns of Judah to preach as he was instructed (vs. 6). Some think he may have fulfilled his commission by speaking to the people from all the towns as they traveled through the capital.

Ask Yourself . . . *Have I ever been tempted to rely upon church attendance to protect me from trouble?*

b Threat to the Covenant Breakers (11:9-17)

"Both Israel and Judah have broken the covenant I made with their ancestors. Therefore this is what the LORD says: 'I will bring on them a disaster they cannot escape.' "
—Jeremiah 11:10b, 11a

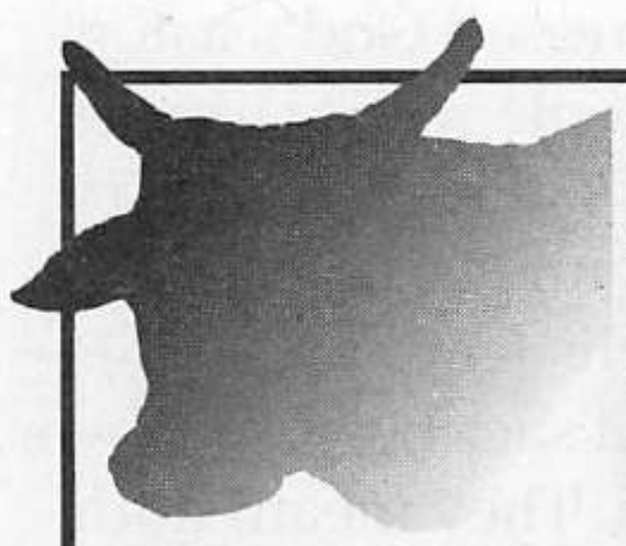
Even while Jeremiah appealed to the citizens of Judah and Jerusalem to respond wholeheartedly to the covenant renewal movement initiated by King Josiah, the Lord revealed a troubling truth to him: the people were hiding their true commitment to idolatry. In fact, their actions were like "a conspiracy" (vs. 9). They would interrupt their idolatry only

while Josiah's soldiers were watching; then, behind the scenes, they would rebuild the altars and high places the king had destroyed.

Knowing that Judah, like Israel, had broken the covenant (vs. 10), Jeremiah knew that Judah deserved the same punishment that had come to Israel. But once disaster struck Judah, it would be too late for the people to cry out to the Lord for help (vs. 11). He would not save those who had ignored Him for so long. They could cry out to their idols, of course, but that would be futile. Though there were as many gods as there were towns in Judah, their sheer numbers could not offset their impotence. False gods could not save them; the true God would not save them (vss. 12, 13).

Knowing what was in store for rebellious Judah, Jeremiah must have been overcome by grief. He may have wanted to pray for the people and the land he loved. However, for the second time in the Book of Jeremiah, the Lord commanded the prophet not to pray for the people of Judah (vs. 14; see 7:16). Earlier, Hosea had spoken of people who "consecrated themselves to that shameful idol and became as vile as the thing they loved" (Hos. 9:10). By Jeremiah's time the shame of their idolatry was so great and their refusal to repent was so strong that prayer for them was improper.

Ask Yourself . . . *What kinds of things does my culture worship instead of God?*



Big Bad Baal

Baal appeared in Canaanite idolatry either directly as a male figure or symbolically as a bull. The Canaanites considered him to be the god of storms who controlled the weather. Thinking it would produce rain and good crops, Baal worshipers engaged in sexual rituals to encourage Baal to mate with the goddess Asherah. The bull image reinforced Baal's reputation as a sexually aggressive god.

When King Ahab married Jezebel, the daughter of the king of Sidon, the royal couple promoted Baal worship in Israel (I Kings 16:29-33). Their daughter married Jehoram, king of Judah, and she played a major role in planting the seeds of Baal worship in the southern kingdom. King Manasseh, Josiah's grandfather, made idolatry his state policy (II Kings 21:1-9). Soon Baal worship, appealing to their sensual appetites, dominated the religious life of Judah and Jerusalem. It had completely corrupted their faith and perverted their culture.

Jeremiah expressed God's astonishment that people whose hearts belonged to wickedness would try to gain points with the Lord by worshiping in His temple (vs. 15). Their rituals and sacrifices, however, were superficial. They meant nothing to the people of Judah. Though they had once been fruitful, like a flourishing olive tree (vs. 16), their spiritual lives had become empty and barren. The Lord had every reason to expect His chosen people to be like a productive olive tree—a source of oil basic for food and ointments. But since they had rebelled and devoted their fruitfulness to shameful idols, the Lord proposed to destroy Judah as a bolt of lightning would demolish an olive tree.

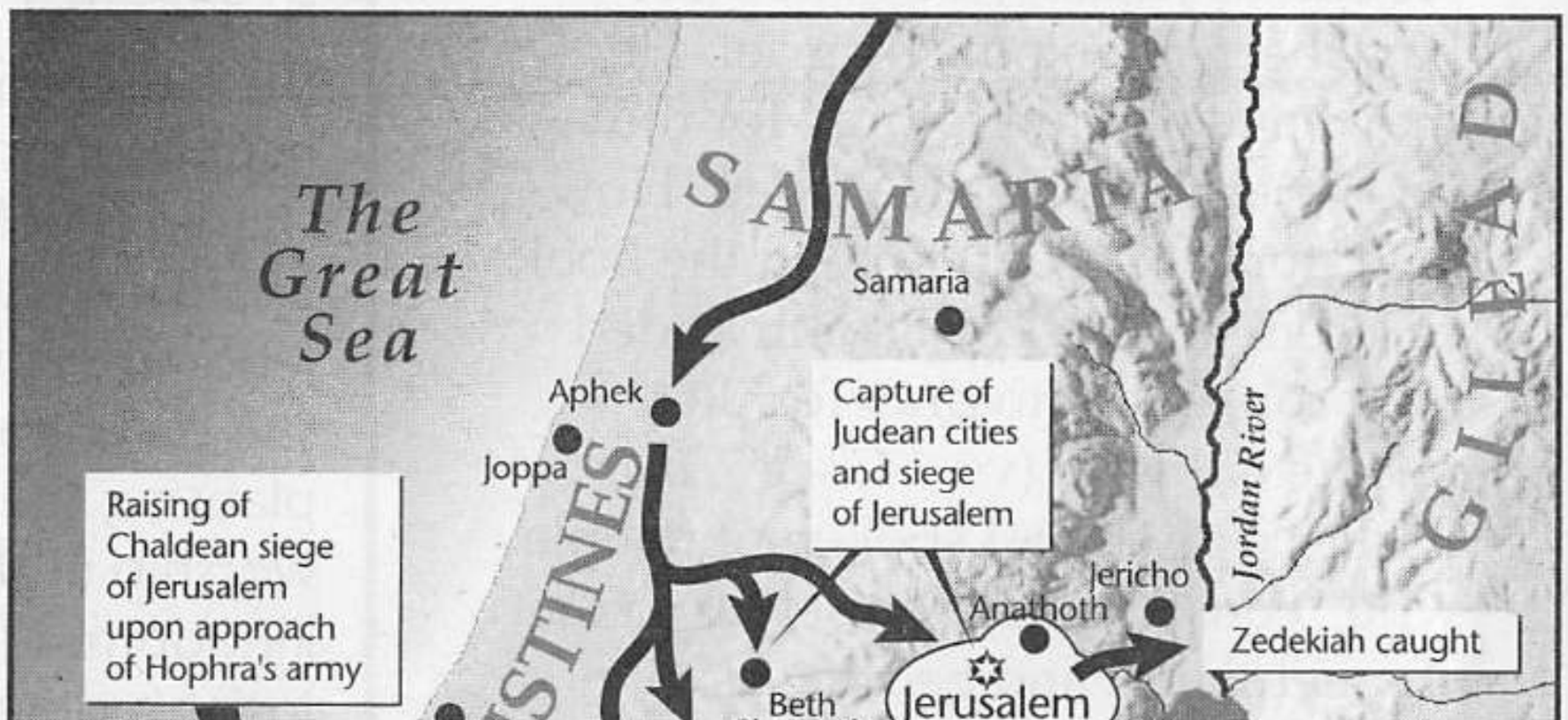
Jeremiah referred twice to the people of Judah burning incense to Baal (vss. 13, 17). Because incense often symbolized prayer, some think Jeremiah was forbidden to pray for the people of Judah because they devoted their prayers to Baal. Prayer is essential to spiritual growth, like water for the body. If we neglect prayer, our growth will be hindered.

Nebuchadnezzar's attacks

C Danger to the Prophet (11:18-23)

"This is what the LORD says about the people of Anathoth who are threatening to kill you, saying, 'Do not prophesy in the name of the LORD or you will die by our hands' —therefore this is what the LORD Almighty says: 'I will punish them.' " **—Jeremiah 11:21, 22a**

The Lord had promised to protect Jeremiah from all those who harshly opposed him (see 1:8, 19). Five years into his ministry, Jeremiah received a revelation from God about a plot to murder him (11:18). In words that echo Isaiah's description of Jesus,



Jeremiah said he felt like a lamb unknowingly (that is, innocently) facing slaughter (vs. 19, see also Isa. 53:7).

Because Judah had as many idols as villages (see Jer. 11:13), Josiah's move to destroy the idols and high places must have displaced a lot of priests from their positions. It may be that some of the priests from Anathoth (perhaps some of Jeremiah's relatives) who had officiated at pagan altars now faced unemployment because of the reforms Jeremiah supported so strongly. At any rate, some men of Anathoth formed a plot to murder the prophet (vs. 21).

The Lord revealed the murder plot to Jeremiah, including details as precise as the conspirators' words (vs. 19). They figured that because Jeremiah was unmarried and had no heirs, killing him would end his family line and blot out all memory of the message he stood for.

Jeremiah directed his prayer about the plot to the "LORD Almighty" (vs. 20), traditionally the "LORD of hosts" (KJV). It's a military designation, one of Jeremiah's favorite names for God. God commanded not only the heavenly hosts, but the armies of the nations as well—including the Babylonians, whom He would soon bring against Judah. God was certainly able to handle the plotters in Anathoth.

Jeremiah's prayer may appear vindictive, but there is more to it. First, he was following the Lord's directions to trust his cause to God. The prophet took comfort by giving God the responsibility of dealing with his enemies. In turn, the Lord promised that their families would be the ones cut off without a trace (vss. 22, 23). Second, Jeremiah was not looking for revenge but for justice. By opposing God, the plotters, like the nation of Judah, were inviting God's judgment as a consequence of their deeds.

Ask Yourself . . . *How should I pray for those who oppose me?*

The plotters showed how arrogant they were by challenging Jeremiah, "Do not prophesy in the name of the LORD or you will die by our hands" (vs. 21). They thought the power of their hands could frustrate the name of the Lord. Yet the Lord would soon bring the full force of the Babylonian army right through Anathoth on its way to Jerusalem. Anathoth would be one of the towns obliterated by the enemy in their march to the capital. Not all of the residents plotted against Jeremiah, however, and 128 descendants from Anathoth later came from Babylon in the initial return from captivity (see Ezra 2:23).

Jeremiah 12 in Brief

Though Jeremiah knew that judgment was coming against Judah, the details of the Babylonian conquest were still quite vague to him and lay in the distant future. His more immediate complaint was that the wicked people who resisted the reforms of Josiah prospered. It seemed to Jeremiah as though the Lord Himself had blessed their

wicked enterprises. The Lord chided Jeremiah for losing sight of ultimate justice. He assured the prophet that nations would gather around Judah like scavengers around a corpse. Judah's judgment would then be complete.



The "linen belt" (Jer. 13:1) that Jeremiah was to leave in a crevice was perhaps a sash for tying around one's outer garment.

d Worthless Pride (13:1-11)

"This is what the LORD says: 'In the same way I will ruin the pride of Judah and the great pride of Jerusalem.' "
—Jeremiah 13:9

On several occasions, the Lord directed Jeremiah to act out his prophecies and then explain his actions. The episode with the linen belt is his first dramatized message recorded in Scripture.

The events of Jeremiah 13 probably took place after Jehoiakim became king, shortly after the battle of Carchemish in 605 B.C. when Nebuchadnezzar defeated the Egyptian armies at the headwaters of the Euphrates River. The Lord directed Jeremiah to buy a linen belt. This was either a sash for tying around a cloak or a sort of skirt that extended from the waist to the thigh beneath the outer garment. He told Jeremiah to wear the linen belt without letting it touch the water (vs. 1, 2).

Later the Lord told him to hide the belt in a rocky crevice at "Perath," which is likely a Hebrew term for the Euphrates River (vss. 3-5).

Some have observed that rocky formations are not common along the Euphrates except at Carchemish near the river's source. Carchemish, however, was five hundred miles from Jerusalem. This leads some to suggest that Jeremiah probably hid the linen belt in a river near Jerusalem at a place with a name similar

to Perath—perhaps Parah—so his audience could connect his message with the Babylonian victory over the Egyptians at Carchemish.

The Lord later sent Jeremiah back to Perath to retrieve the linen belt from its hiding spot (vs. 6). When the prophet went to the river and dug up the belt, he found it ruined and useless (vs. 7). Just as Jeremiah's belt was ruined, Judah—though one time tied closely to the Lord (vs. 11)—would be buried in Babylon for a long time. Because the people had rejected the Lord to chase after other gods (vs. 10), Judah's pride would be ruined (vss. 8, 9).

This parable focuses on the theme of rejected intimacy. God seeks intimacy with us, but if we allow other things to distract us, that closeness will be squelched.

Ask Yourself . . . *How intimate is my relationship with the Lord? How could I draw closer to Him?*

e Helpless Confusion (13:12-14)

"Tell them, 'This is what the LORD says: I am going to fill with drunkenness all who live in this land, including the kings who sit on David's throne, the priests, the prophets and all those living in Jerusalem.' " **—Jeremiah 13:13**

The second dramatic parable of Jeremiah 13 may have taken place at a festival where there was a lot of drinking. The noun translated "wineskin" in verse 12a is a Hebrew word that may refer to a large, earthenware jug. Archaeologists have found vessels of this type large enough to hold ten gallons of liquid. "Every wineskin should be filled with wine" may have been a common proverb among drinkers. If so, the saying meant there could never be enough wine for those addicted to alcohol.

If Jeremiah had gone to a festival where wine flowed freely and there announced an old adage as though it were news, the revelers would have mocked him (vs. 12b). But Jeremiah delivered the punch line: He wasn't talking about wineskins and wine. He was talking about the people of Judah and their coming helpless confusion. The Lord would fill every person—king, priests, prophets, and ordinary citizens—with senselessness (vs. 13).

The Lord pictured the coming judgment as big clay jugs of wine jostling together, smashing one another, and spilling all the wine (vs. 14a). The Judahites were rushing toward judgment with no more concern than a nation of drunken fools. They wouldn't know they were finally doomed until the destruction began and it was too late for escape.

The thought of helpless alcoholics destroying themselves stirs compassion in the heart of some. The Lord, however, refused to pity the confused idolaters in Judah and Jerusalem (vs. 14b). They had rejected His

Wineskin or Clay Pot?



The Hebrew word *nebel*, translated by the NIV as "wineskin" (Jer. 13:12), could refer to a clay pot. Given the fact that Jeremiah spoke about the smashing of *nebels* (vs. 14), it seems that he did indeed have clay pots in mind.

Nebels came in various sizes. In King Ahab's palace, the *nebels* held about six gallons. By using the *nebel* to illustrate his message, Jeremiah implied a great outpouring of confusion. Like staggering drunks, the people of Judah would reel in anguish and confusion, smashing into one another when attacked by the Babylonians.

mercy and compassion for centuries. Now it was time for them to face the consequences of their addiction to idolatry.

Ask Yourself . . . *How should I respond to those who are helplessly confused about the Gospel of Christ?*

Jeremiah 13:15—15:21 in Brief

The balance of Jeremiah 13 contains three more warnings about the consequences of persistent idolatry. First, the prophet warned of a deepening spiritual gloom that would certainly lead to stumbling in the coming days of danger. Second, Jeremiah warned young King Jehoiachin and his mother that they would be carried away. Third, he warned the nation that a time of trouble would throw them into painful spasms like the labor pangs of a woman giving birth.

Jeremiah 14 and 15 together relate the awful prospects of famine and invasion coming to the land of Judah at the same time. There would come times of intense suffering. Verses 7 to 9 may mean that some people would repent, but it would be too little, too late. Or they may represent Jeremiah's personal sentiments, prompting God to remind him not to pray for the people. Jeremiah tried to shift more of the blame to the false prophets, but the Lord said the people also deserved calamity.

Not even the prayers of Moses and Samuel—heroic intercessors for sinful Israel in the past—could have rescued Judah from the destruction to come. The devastation awaiting Judah was certain—as well as hideous and brutal. Jeremiah lamented his role in having to deliver such unpleasant news and asked for vindication, but the Lord insisted that Jeremiah must stand firm as a warning to Judah.

Photo: Hanay

4 Sin Carved on the Heart

Jeremiah 16—17

a The Stubborn Heart (16:1-13)

" 'You have behaved more wickedly than your ancestors. See how all of you are following the stubbornness of your evil hearts instead of obeying me.' " —Jeremiah 16:12

Jeremiah paid a high price to minister as a prophet for the Lord. Over the years, he became more and more isolated from society. He complained that he never was able to attend parties: "I sat alone," he told God, "because your hand was on me" (15:17).

Jeremiah's social isolation grew even greater as a result of God's unique instructions. The Lord prohibited Jeremiah from marrying and fathering children (16:1, 2). To be unmarried in the biblical world marked a man as a failure. A single man could not pass on his name or property. He was a broken branch on the family tree, a blot on his father's name and reputation.

Voluntary celibacy and childlessness on Jeremiah's part brought reproach on him, but it also called attention to the Lord's warning. People would have noted that Jeremiah's antisocial behavior was rooted in his firm belief that perilous times were coming. At great personal expense, Jeremiah illustrated that it was no longer loving or wise to marry and bear children. Disease and death awaited women and children—as well as the men (vss. 3, 4). The carnage would become so great that mourning and burial would be impossible. Corpses of loved ones would lie exposed to the elements and to scavenging birds and animals.

Ancient societies treated the bodies of their family members with great respect. Desecrating a corpse was a terrible social offense. Leaving a body exposed instead of burying it defiled the land as well (see Deut. 21:22, 23).

Jeremiah became even more of a misfit in society with God's further instructions. He was not to participate in ceremonies either of mourning or joy. He could not attend funerals to grieve or express sympathy (Jer. 16:5). As representative for the Lord, he was to demonstrate that the Lord had withdrawn all compassion from His sinful people.

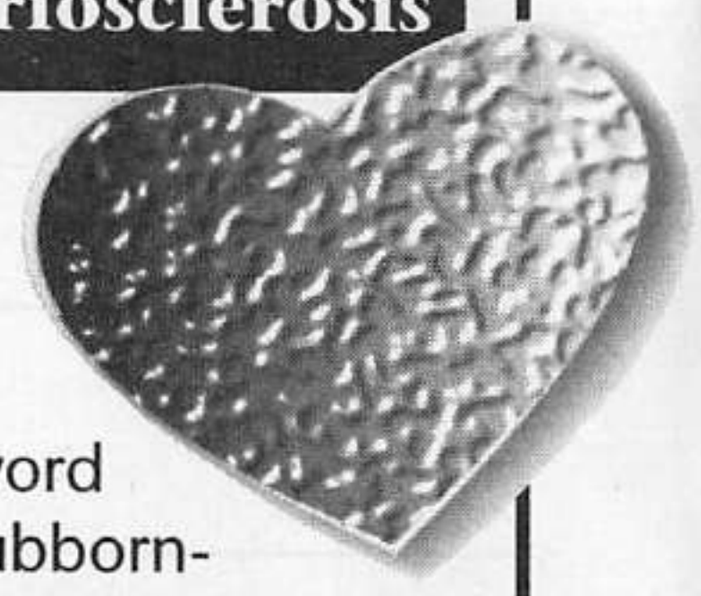
His actions also pointed to a coming time when death would attack all social classes and no one would cut themselves or shave their heads in mourning. During the atrocities of the coming invasion, people would not be able to grieve or follow social custom. In the midst of this barbaric cleansing, no one could bring food and drink to comfort survivors (vss. 6, 7). Notice that God referred to customs that were forbidden pagan rituals (see Lev. 19:27, 28; Deut. 14:1). These practices had infiltrated Judah's daily life, demonstrating again how far the people had fallen into sin.

Not only was Jeremiah prevented from attending funerals, but the Lord also denied Jeremiah permission to attend feasts (Jer. 16:8). This was God's way of showing Judah that all joy and celebration in the land would come to an end within the life span of that generation. By not attending wedding feasts, the celibate prophet reminded all newlyweds and their wedding parties that the Lord was predicting an end to the joys of new marriages (vs. 9).

The Lord told Jeremiah that many would question him about the reason for all of his gloomy predictions and antisocial behaviors. The people would reveal their spiritual darkness by the naive questions they asked: "What wrong have we done? What sin have we committed against the LORD our God?" (vs. 10).

Whenever he was asked such questions, Jeremiah had the opportunity to describe once again the idolatry of the people of Judah

Spiritual Arteriosclerosis



Jeremiah described the sinful human heart with a word translated "stubbornness" (Jer. 16:12). The Hebrew noun occurs ten times in the Old Testament, including eight times in the first half of Jeremiah—each applying to the condition of the heart (3:17; 7:24; 9:14; 11:8; 13:10; 16:12; 18:12; 23:17). Five of them involve the entire expression "stubbornness of their (your/our) evil hearts."

Some have seen the idea of twistedness in the original Hebrew word. Others, comparing related languages of the ancient Middle East, see the idea of hardness instead. The more the people of Judah resisted the word of the Lord, the harder it became for them to hear His prophets.

Just as arteries can harden with plaque deposits, so the spiritual heart can become encrusted with habitual sin. Hardened sinners thus choke out the possibility of a healthy spiritual life.

(vs. 11). Their sinful behavior had become progressively worse generation by generation (vs. 12). And at the root of all of this idolatry was "the stubbornness of [each person's] evil heart." The Lord was holding each resident of Judah responsible for his or her role in worshiping idols.

When Jeremiah indicted the people of Judah for their stubborn and evil hearts, he put his finger on the root of their idolatry. Stubbornness points to a hardness or obstinacy. The Hebrew word for "evil" primarily means a deficiency or distortion and only secondarily indicates a moral character offensive to God. Stubbornness insists on getting one's own way—an attitude that, unless changed, inevitably leads to departing from God's way.

Ask Yourself . . . *How big a problem is stubbornness in my life?*

Chapters 16 and 17 contain prophecies that came at a time when "a great disaster" had begun (16:10). Jeremiah promised that still more turmoil by "many fishermen" and "many hunters" was on the way (vs. 16). Many think these prophecies were given when Jehoiakim rebelled against Babylon (602 B.C.) after first submitting to Nebuchadnezzar for three years. In response to Judah's rebellion, the Babylonian king initiated a series of punishing raids against the nation. The armies of Babylonia, Aram, Moab, and Ammon swept across the land (see II Kings 24:1, 2), providing a foretaste of devastation that would come later in 597 and 586 B.C.

Because of their idolatry, the people of Judah would be expelled from the land the Lord had given them and exiled to a place totally foreign to them (Jer. 16:13). There they would be immersed in an idolatrous culture and could "serve other gods day and night" if they wanted to. Ironically, it would be in the bitter days of the Babylonian exile (while they were surrounded by idols) that the remnants of Judah would abandon idolatry and commit themselves to God and His law.

Ask Yourself . . . *What have I learned the hard way—by having to live with the consequences of my foolish choices?*



The Purified Heart (16:14-21)

"I will teach them—this time I will teach them my power and might. Then they will know that my name is the LORD." **—Jeremiah 16:21**

In the midst of sober prophecies exposing the Judahites' wicked hearts and the awful judgment to come, Jeremiah received words of hope. The greatest passage of hope in all of his prophecies is found in the description of a new covenant to be written on the renewed hearts of God's people (see 31:31-34). But hints of future hope and glory can be seen even in the last part of chapter 16.

The exile of the people to a land of idolatry would lead eventually to a second exodus that would overshadow the exodus from Egypt as the anchor event of history. In time, legal agreements would be sealed with the formula. " 'As surely as the LORD lives, who brought the Israelites up out of the land of the north and out of all the countries where he had banished them' " (vs. 15).

In the face of inevitable conquest and devastation, the promise that the people would one day be restored to the land offered a ray of hope to Jeremiah and other faithful believers. The Lord vividly pictured Babylon's initial forays into Judah as fishermen scooping up the fish caught in their nets and hunters tracking down those who tried to hide (vs. 16). No one could expect to hide from the all-seeing eye of God (vs. 17). As mentioned earlier, the fishermen and hunters probably were the Babylonian, Aramean, Moabite, and Ammonite raiders who plagued Judah after Jehoiakim's rebellion against Nebuchadnezzar in 602 B.C.

Ask Yourself . . . *What promises from God sustain me during difficult times?*

The hope-filled promises, however, could not diminish the fact that for the moment idolatry had filled and defiled the land. Because of the people's sin, the Lord would "repay them double for their wickedness" (vs. 18). Studies of languages related to Hebrew suggest that references to double payment meant full or ample payment. In other words, the extraordinary punishment would be proportional to the Judahites' extraordinary idolatry.

Chapter 16 ends with Jeremiah affirming his hope and trust in the promises of God. His words sound like one of the psalms as he called

NEBUCHADNEZZAR'S ATTACKS ON JERUSALEM

DATE	EXTENT	RESULT
605 B.C.	Quick Strike	Sons of noble families deported for civil service (Daniel included)
597 B.C.	Major Attack	King Jehoiachin deposed; leading families and skilled workers deported (Ezekiel included)
588–586 B.C.	Total Destruction	City and temple destroyed; King Zedekiah blinded; all but the poor deported

the Lord his strength, fortress, and refuge in a time of intense trouble (vss. 19, 20).

Jeremiah also encouraged himself with what he "heard" about the future: nations confessing their false and worthless gods. Jeremiah saw this confession and the teaching from the Lord as a critical part of the transformation of their stubborn, evil hearts. Just as exciting, though, is his glimpse of the future new covenant encompassing believers from the Gentile nations—not just Hebrews.

When the nations would confess their false gods, the Lord Himself would teach them to know His power and might (vs. 21). God promised that all who seek Him "will know that my name is the Lord." The tragedy of Judah's punishment and exile would ultimately lead to spiritual benefits for all the world so that all may have a personal relationship with the Lord.

C The Cursed Heart (17:1-8)

This is what the LORD says: "Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who draws strength from mere flesh and whose heart turns away from the LORD." **—Jeremiah 17:5**

Leaving the future and returning to the present, Jeremiah 17 examined the current condition of the hearts of Judah. The sins of the nation were permanently engraved on the people's hearts as though carved in stone. Even the four corners of the altar—where sins were supposed to be cleansed—were engraved with sin (vs. 1). Instead of teaching the law of the Lord to their children and celebrating the sacred festivals as families, the people of Judah had trained their offspring in the pagan rituals of idolatry (vs. 2).

"My mountain in the land" (vs. 3) refers to Zion and the city of Jerusalem built on it. The Lord planned to subject His mountain, all of Judah's possessions, and all its pagan shrines to desecration and plunder in order to purge the land of sin. The residents of Judah faced God's wrath and slavery in a strange land because they would not turn from their sins (vs. 4).

The Lord contrasted the curse that comes to those who trust in human resources with the blessing that comes to those who trust in the Lord (vss. 5-8). Anyone looking for strength within himself or herself would find nothing of substance (vs. 5)—like a "bush in the wastelands" (vs. 6). The picture is of a puny tamarisk bush, a dwarf juniper with a scraggly, bare appearance. Like a desert shrub, anyone turning from the Lord to other gods would be shriveled and insignificant.

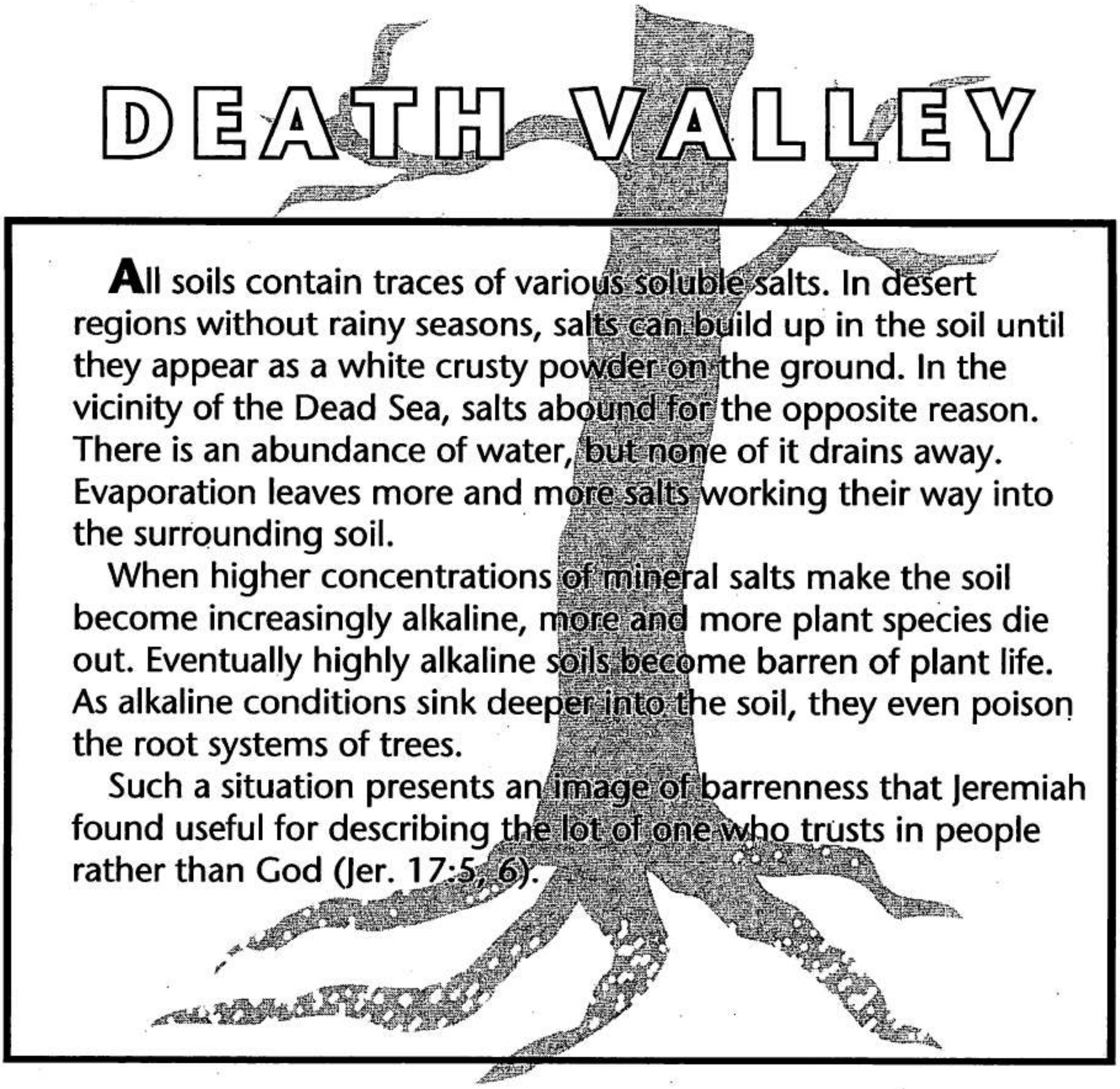
The pathetic desert shrub described Judah as a nation because the people regularly looked to Egypt or other political allies for deliverance rather than trusting in the Lord (see II Kings 24:1; Isa. 31:1-3). The

bush clinging to alkali-encrusted desert soil also illustrated the hearts of individual men and women of Judah who were dying in the barren soil of idolatry.

By contrast, the nation of the individual who trusts in the Lord would be like a tree growing in a fertile valley alongside a stream that never runs dry (Jer. 17: 7, 8). These verses read like Psalm 1:1-3 with their promises of uninterrupted prosperity and fruitfulness. The image of the green tree did not promise that Judah would never have drought; it promised sustenance and life during even the worst conditions.

Ask Yourself . . . *How has the Lord sustained me during a difficult period?*

The hearts of the people of Judah had been cursed. Their stubborn, hard hearts had been engraved by centuries-old habits of sin. Their sinful lifestyle could not be erased by King Josiah's reforms nor the prophecies of even a godly messenger like Jeremiah.



All soils contain traces of various soluble salts. In desert regions without rainy seasons, salts can build up in the soil until they appear as a white crusty powder on the ground. In the vicinity of the Dead Sea, salts abound for the opposite reason. There is an abundance of water, but none of it drains away. Evaporation leaves more and more salts working their way into the surrounding soil.

When higher concentrations of mineral salts make the soil become increasingly alkaline, more and more plant species die out. Eventually highly alkaline soils become barren of plant life. As alkaline conditions sink deeper into the soil, they even poison the root systems of trees.

Such a situation presents an image of barrenness that Jeremiah found useful for describing the lot of one who trusts in people rather than God (Jer. 17:5, 6).

d The Deceitful Heart (17:9-18)

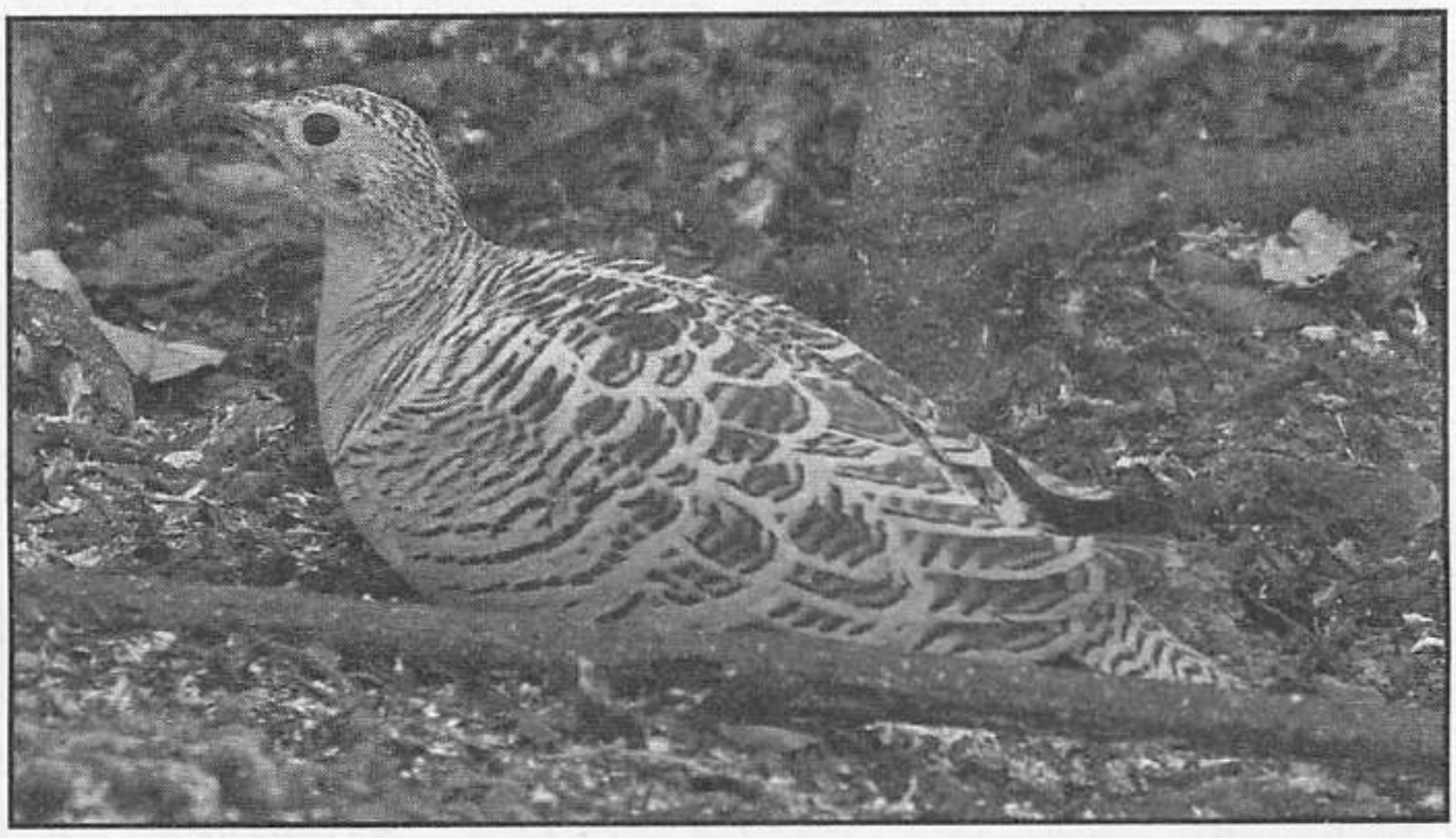
The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? —Jeremiah 17:9

Why would the heart of a nation or a person turn away from prosperity to barrenness? "The heart is deceitful above all things," Jeremiah insisted (vs. 9). The heart represents the inner source of our choices and actions. The human heart is twisted and devious. It cannot be trusted. The New Testament attributes this deceitfulness to the corrupting influences of sin—it is a showcase for the depravity of humankind (see Rom. 3:9-20).

Not only did Jeremiah call the heart deceitful, but also he said its deceit is, humanly speaking, incurable and incomprehensible. The solution God was bringing upon Judah was brutal but necessary. Only He could "search the heart and examine the mind" to prescribe the appropriate remedy for the nation and for the individuals in it (Jer. 17:10). Many would die in well-deserved punishment for their sins so that the next generation might start afresh with the Lord.

Ask Yourself . . . *Have I faced the fact that my heart is deceitful?*

Jeremiah sometimes spoke proverbs to give insight into God's justice and the judgment Judah would face. For instance, he said that people who connive to gain wealth and then trust in their riches are like a bird that hatches eggs it didn't lay (vs. 11). The brood soon deserts its



Sand grouses. This may be the type of bird Jeremiah had in mind when he compared a person who has gained riches unjustly to a bird that hatches eggs it did not lay.

false parents. Since the partridge of ancient Judah did not adopt the eggs of other birds, the name (which occurs only twice in the Bible) probably refers to another species, such as the sand grouse, which is thought to hatch orphaned eggs.

In a parallel proverb, Jeremiah compared Mount Zion, the site of Solomon's temple, to "a glorious throne, exalted from the beginning"

Photo: Sharp Photography

(vs. 12). All who reject the Lord's exalted throne in favor of shrines to false deities risk having their names "written in the dust" (vs. 13). Moses had warned the people that disobedience would bring curses upon them, causing the Lord to blot their names out of the records of time (see Deut. 29:20; compare Rev. 3:5). Judah deserved judgment for foolishly choosing to live like someone who recorded legal documents in the dust.

The prophet turned from his prophetic labors and asked the Lord for healing and salvation on the basis of his praise of God (Jer. 17:14). He did not want to be characterized by an incurable heart (see vs. 9) or a cursed heart (see vss. 5, 6). Jeremiah's praise indicated that he trusted the Lord (see vss. 7, 8).

Ask Yourself . . . *What are some of the benefits I've seen as I've learned to praise God?*

Jeremiah evidently faced mocking audiences who challenged his legitimacy as a prophet. "If you're speaking for God," they said in effect, "let's see God do what you said He would" (vs. 15). Jeremiah had no desire to see the day of destruction by Babylon arrive, but he continued to faithfully proclaim the message of impending doom (vs. 16).

Jeremiah found himself praying that the Lord would give him refuge when the coming invasion arrived (vs. 17). He asked to escape the terror the Lord was sending on the land. Jeremiah's prayer against his persecutors was a request that God would prove Himself right against the mockery of those who belittled the prophet and message of the Lord (vs. 18). The persecutors revealed how deceitful their hearts had become by challenging God to try to harm them. Their "double destruction"—that is, destruction proportionate to their sin—would be very harsh. Their hearts seemed beyond cure.

Jeremiah 17:19-27 in Brief

Jeremiah's appeal for strict Sabbath observance surprises some because he previously had played down other external features of the old covenant, such as the ark of the covenant, the temple, sacrifices, and fasting. But what the prophet criticized was insincere religious observance.

The Lord instructed Jeremiah to visit each of the city gates of Jerusalem and call upon people to honor the Sabbath. The breaking of the Sabbath revealed how the people had attached themselves to other gods with worship that didn't involve the Sabbath. Greed may also have played a part in the tendency to ignore the Sabbath, providing one more day in the week for conducting business and making money.

5 The Potter, the Pot, and the Fire

Jeremiah 18—20

a The Shaped Clay (18:1-12)

He said, "Can I not do with you, Israel, as this potter does?" declares the LORD. "Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, Israel."

—Jeremiah 18:6

After Nebuchadnezzar led the Babylonians to victory over Egypt in 605 B.C. (see II Kings 24:7; II Chron. 36:20), Judah faced perilous times. Because King Jehoiakim had rebelled against Babylon and allied Judah with Egypt, the Babylonian army invaded Judah (see II Kings 24:1, 2). It was in this campaign that Daniel and his friends were taken captive and transported to Babylon.

Jeremiah continued his forceful prophetic ministry during this time, warning the people about the consequences of ignoring God. His confrontation with the priests (see Jer. 20:1-3) caused him to be banned from the temple (see 36:1, 5). The king also became extremely angry with Jeremiah. He burned a scroll of Jeremiah's prophecies and tried to have the prophet arrested (see 36:22-26). The scroll Jehoiakim destroyed probably recorded the messages contained in chapters 18—20.

This section begins with the account of God directing Jeremiah to "go down to the potter's house" to receive a message from Him there (18:1, 2). The pottery district of Jerusalem was likely in the southern part of the city, if the Potsherd Gate is any indication (see 19:2). God sent Jeremiah from the northern, elevated part of Jerusalem, perhaps in the vicinity of the temple, down to the southern edge of the city. The sites in chapters 18 and 19 tend to alternate between the holy precincts of the temple and the blue-collar pottery district next to the city's southern limits, neighboring the town dump.

At the potter's house, Jeremiah watched the craftsman work at his wheel. In the late seventh century B.C., a pottery wheel consisted of a vertical axle with a stone or wooden disk on each end. The potter used his feet on the larger, bottom disk to keep the wheel turning rapidly and smoothly. With his hands he shaped the lump of wet clay centered on the upper wheel.

I Am the Clay

Clay for pottery is refined from fine, dense soil deposited by water long ago. The soil particles in clay adhere to one another, allowing clay to be formed and hold its shape as it dries.

The best clay deposits near Jerusalem were south of the city. Straight from the ground, however, Jerusalem's clay wasn't ready to be made into pottery. It had to be mixed with water to form a soupy mixture that was poured into containers with latticed bottoms. Potters strained the clay slurry through progressively finer screens until they got the clay to the desired purity. Sand, shell, straw, or ground potsherds were then added to the clay to prevent shrinkage during firing. The potter kneaded the clay with his or her hands to work out all air bubbles. Finally, the potter could shape a piece of pottery that was free from flaws.

God used this process of purification, fortification, and concentration as an object lesson for Jeremiah. The process parallels the experiences God brings us through as He prepares our lives to be fit for His service.

As Jeremiah watched the pot take shape under the hands of the potter, something went wrong. The clay might have been too wet or too dry. Maybe there was a pebble in the clay. Or perhaps the potter decided the sides of the pot had become too thin. At any rate, he squeezed the clay back into a shapeless lump and began the crafting process again (18:3, 4).

The Lord applied the scene to His covenantal relationship with Judah. Just as the potter could do as he wished with the clay, God could do as He wished with His people (vss. 5, 6). He held the future of the nation in His hands. What the sovereign God would choose to do, however, was not independent of the choices made by His people. Judah could submit to Him (as pure clay responded to the hands that shaped it) or it could resist His will (like clay that refused to bend to the potter's wishes). God could do as He pleased with Judah, but His blessing or judgment would come depending on the nation's deeds (vss. 7-10).

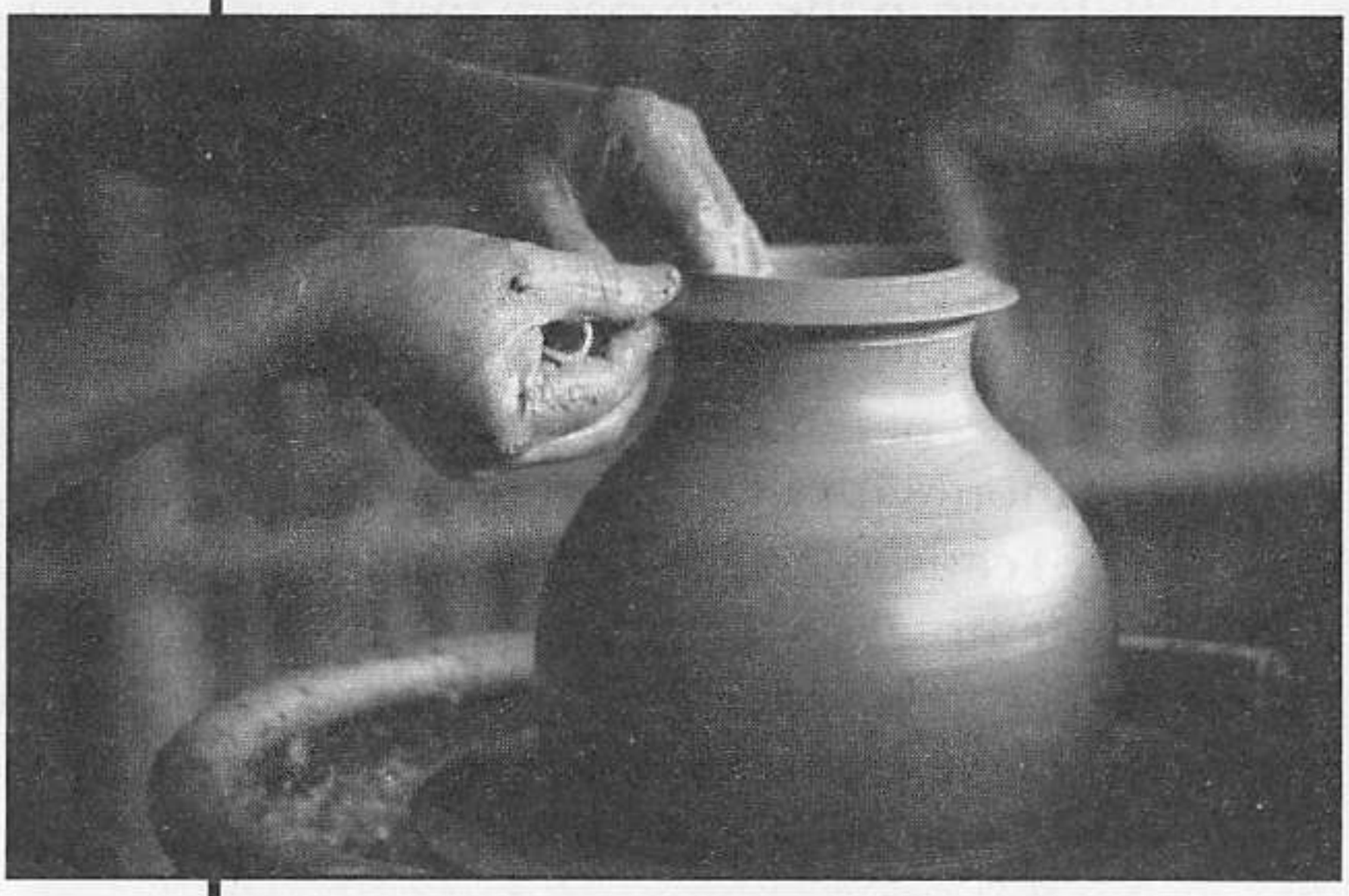


Photo: © Kamrul Hasan /Getty Images

Ask Yourself . . . *How has the Lord worked to shape and change my life according to His wishes? How have I responded?*

Jeremiah applied the object lesson of the potter and the clay to "the people of Judah and those living in Jerusalem" (vs. 11). Disaster loomed in the form of the Babylonians and their allies, poised to raid Jerusalem and carry off the prime young men of the land to serve the Babylonians. Judah—like clay spinning on the Lord's wheel—needed to repent. The people needed to reform their worship and their lives. If they did not, they would face judgment.

The Lord imagined a heartbreaking response from His people. "It's no use . . . " they would say "We will all follow the stubbornness of our evil hearts" (vs. 12). In the last lesson, we saw that the essence of stubbornness is hardness. Like clay that was too stiff for the potter to work with, Judah was unpliable in the hands of God. It was a nation self-appointed for judgment. Earlier in Jeremiah, the Lord had urged Judah to stop running shamelessly to the point of exhaustion after idols. Judah had replied, "It's no use! I love foreign gods, and I must go after them" (2:25). The people had developed hardened habits—sinful addictions they could not break.

Elsewhere in the Bible, Job used the imagery of the potter and the clay to appeal to God for mercy (see Job 10:8, 9). An anonymous psalmist foresaw the Messiah smashing rebellious nations like pottery (see Ps. 2:9). The apostle John heard the Lord quote Psalm 2:9 to refer to the authority He would give to His faithful followers (see Rev. 2:27). Isaiah saw idolatrous Judah as clay refusing to acknowledge the potter's control (see Isa. 29:16; 45:9), but predicted a time when the clay would gladly submit to God's control and shaping (64:8). The apostle Paul combined elements of Isaiah's and Jeremiah's usage of the Potter and clay imagery (see Rom. 9:20-22). Like Isaiah, Paul warned against talking back to the Potter; like Jeremiah, he imagined the Lord shaping some vessels for glorious purposes and others that would meet destruction.

Jeremiah 18:13-23 in Brief

Three brief sections complete Jeremiah 18. The first is a poetic indictment of Israel's behavior (vss. 13-17). Jeremiah contrasted the predictability of certain facts of nature with Israel's undependability.

The second passage is a single verse in prose (vs. 18). Rather than listen to Jeremiah's warnings, the people preferred the false but comforting words of their ungodly priests, counselors, and false prophets.

The third passage, poetry again, is Jeremiah's prayer for vindication (vss. 19-23). He wanted to see justice served upon those who opposed both the message of the Lord and himself, God's messenger.

b The Smashed Pot (19:1-15)

"Break the jar while those who go with you are watching, and say to them, 'This is what the LORD Almighty says: I will smash this nation and this city just as this potter's jar is smashed and cannot be repaired.' " —Jeremiah 19:10, 11a

Jeremiah 19 contains an incident closely related to the one in chapter 18. The Lord sent Jeremiah once more to the potter's. Along with him, he took a delegation of elders and priests, the civic and spiritual leaders of Judah. The procession probably started near the temple and wound downhill to the southern part of Jerusalem. There Jeremiah bought a "clay jar," a particular kind of water bottle with a narrow neck. Once they had the bottle, Jeremiah led the group out through the Potsherd Gate into the Valley of Ben Hinnom (vss. 1, 2a).

Close at hand were piles of rejected pottery, the fires of the city dump, and the sinister site known as Topheth, where human sacrifices



Large jars in this photo called BaqBuqs were common in Judah during the reigns of the later kings in Jerusalem.

BAQBUQS

The original language of the Bible uses a lot of different words to distinguish the various types of pottery. Different pottery objects were commonly used at home, in business, and in worship.

In Jeremiah 13:12 the prophet referred to a *nebel*, a large, open mouthed clay jar that held several gallons. In 19:1, the "clay jar" is probably a *baqbuq*, a container that had a narrow neck and mouth and was generally used to carry water. It's possible the name was meant to reproduce the gurgling sound of water as it splashed out. We might say, "Glug, glug"; the Hebrews said, "Baqbuq."

Photo: © Dave Porter Peterborough Uk/ Getty Images

had been made since the days of King Manasseh (see 7:31). In this depressing setting, Jeremiah delivered the message God had directed him to give to the "kings of Judah and people of Jerusalem" (19:2b, 3). From the highest leaders to the lowliest peasants, everyone needed to heed this warning of disaster. The plural reference to "kings," rather than "the king," suggests that the Lord would hold future rulers responsible for their responses to Jeremiah's warning.

Jeremiah warned that the message he was about to give would be so awful that it would make the ears of its listeners tingle. This figure of speech was sometimes used to announce a terrible event (see I Sam. 3:11; II Kings 21:12). It was something like the disclaimer on certain television programs today: "The following program contains scenes of graphic violence. Viewer discretion is advised."

The prophet repeated the same material he had covered earlier (Jer. 19:4-6; compare 7:30-34): accusations of widespread idolatry and child sacrifice and the impending name change from Topheth to the Valley of Slaughter. But Jeremiah added new horrors to the description of that holocaust (19:7-10). These were scenes that would give the valley its new name. Not only would the carcasses of their family members and friends feed the scavengers, but the siege conditions would become so desperate that the people of Judah would resort to cannibalism and devour their own children. Sadly, those predictions were later fulfilled (see Lam. 4:10).

The Hebrew verb translated "ruin" (Jer. 19:7) sounds like *baqbuq*, the word for a clay water bottle. Using drama to underscore his message, Jeremiah may have poured water from the flask as he predicted the ruin of Judah and Jerusalem's idolatrous plans. Then, in plain view of the elders and priests, he broke the jar and threw the pieces on a trash heap. In the same way, he said, the nation and city would be broken beyond repair (vss. 10, 11). Jerusalem would become like the garbage dump (vss. 12, 13). The proud people of Judah and Jerusalem were destined to shame and scorn, becoming God's rubbish.

To strengthen the impact of his prophecy, Jeremiah went immediately to the temple courtyards and repeated it there (vs. 14). His actions seemed to imply that the temple of God would not prevent Jerusalem and the surrounding villages from destruction (vs. 15). In fact, the temple itself was included in the object lesson; it, too, would be part of the broken water bottle tossed in the dump.

Ask Yourself . . . *How can I keep my worship and service to God fresh?*

Jeremiah 20:1-6 in Brief

Only fifteen years after King Josiah had the temple repaired and rededicated to the worship of the Lord, his son Jehoiakim had undone

the reforms of his father.

One of King Jehoiakim's allies, a priest in charge of the temple security force, arrested Jeremiah, beat him, and put him in stocks. After twenty-one years of ministry, this was the first experience Jeremiah had with physical persecution. It was not the last. He could expect nearly twenty more years of abuse before Jerusalem would fall and the prophet would be vindicated.

C The Suffering Prophet (20:7-18)

If I say, "I will not mention his word or speak any more in his name," his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot.

—Jeremiah 20:9

Jeremiah's flogging (see vs. 2) may have been as severe as forty lashes (see Deut. 25:1-3)—if we can assume that those who had rejected the Lord and His law still abided by such limitations set by the law. Now that opposition to his ministry had escalated to include violence, Jeremiah poured out his heart to God in shockingly honest terms. He felt he had been deceived about the consequences of being a prophet (Jer. 20:7). He claimed that God had, against his objections, forced him to accept the task of being His spokesman. Actually the Lord had been straightforward about the opposition Jeremiah would face (see 1:17-19). With the pain of the lash and the humiliation of the stocks, however, the prophet realized matters were getting worse than he had ever imagined they might become.

Ask Yourself . . . *How can I best express my discouragements and fears to the Lord?*

In addition to the physical pain, the shame and ridicule bothered Jeremiah a great deal (20:7, 8). He was the member of a priestly family. He had undoubtedly enjoyed the support of King Josiah during most of the first fifteen years of his prophetic ministry. After encountering opposition and disfavor from Jehoahaz and Jehoiakim, however, Jeremiah evidently tried to avoid further disgrace by stopping his prophetic activity. He found that he could not help himself; he could not hold God's word in (vs. 9).

The Lord shapes lives as a potter shapes clay. He destroys a rebellious nation as a potter smashes a clay pot. He also puts His servants through the fire of trials just as a potter fires ceramics in the kiln. The Lord does this because the heat of fiery trials can strengthen us and make us durable.

Jeremiah's resolve was strengthened. He determined that he could trust God and do what was right. Even if everyone, including his so-called friends (vs. 10; see 9:4-6),

plotted against him, the Lord would protect him and cause the ruin of his enemies (20:11). Remembering that God had promised to protect him, Jeremiah prayed for justice (vs. 12).

The prophet's troubled emotions seesaw through verses 13-18 of chapter 20. First, he burst into a song of praise to the Lord who rescues the weak from the wicked (vs. 13). Then he cursed the day he was born with a gloom seldom matched in the Bible (vss. 14-18). Jeremiah wished he had never been born so he could have been spared the anguish of prophesying. It is ironic that Jeremiah, depressed and discouraged, viewed his time in the womb as a missed opportunity to escape life. Yet the Lord had His hand upon the unborn prophet even in his mother's womb (see 1:5).

Though he trusted God and believed God's promise for protection (20:11-13), Jeremiah also struggled with doubts and frustrations. For the moment, he could see only the shame of the stocks. He suspected that this was only the beginning and that the remainder of his days

MAGOR-MISSABIB

Jeremiah gave this new name to one of his antagonists, Pashhur, the security officer in the temple (Jer. 20:3). It means "Terror on every side" and likely played off the meaning of Pashhur: "Prosperity everywhere."

The false prophets spoke of prosperity, safety, and peace, lulling the people into spiritual complacency. Jeremiah, however, spoke of danger and imminent judgment—of "terror on every side" (6:25; 20:4,10; 46:5; 49:29; Lam. 2:22). The clash between these two messages was highlighted in the confrontation in the temple when Pashhur attempted to silence Jeremiah by beating him and putting him in stocks.

Jeremiah's opponents may have whispered his own stock phrase, "Terror on every side," in order to mock him. This shows how little Jeremiah's listeners heeded his messages. It is no wonder the prophet wanted to stop warning them. Yet God, in His grace, allowed them nearly twenty more years to come to their senses.

would be filled with sorrow.

The people of Judah and Jerusalem never knew about Jeremiah's inner anguish. Boldly and faithfully, he spoke the word of the Lord to them. Yet inwardly the prophet struggled for more than forty years with the difficult role God required him to play. This personal glimpse at the humanity of Jeremiah gives us much with which we can identify.

There are times when faithfulness to the Lord costs us a great deal. Personal sacrifice, however, can pave the way to an ultimate sense of spiritual peace. The peace of God is often complex. Though it starts with obedience to God's will and results in inner harmony, it may often be wrapped in difficult trials and hardships.

Ask Yourself . . . *How have I sensed the peace of God even in the middle of disturbing situations?*

6 A Scattered Flock

Jeremiah 21—24

Jeremiah 21—22 in Brief

The chronological setting of Jeremiah's prophecies in chapters 1—20 is not crystal clear. In chapters 21—45, however, the prophecies tend to link themselves to their historical context.

Jeremiah 21 leaps ahead to 588 B.C. during the reign of King Zedekiah. Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian army had prepared to lay siege to Jerusalem. It's likely that Jeremiah delivered this prophecy at about the time of the events described in chapters 37 and 38. He advised the populace to surrender to the Babylonians and instructed the nobility of Judah to adopt justice as their operating principles of government. Nothing else could protect them from Babylon.

Chapter 22 probably jumps back to the time of King Jehoiakim. Its theme is similar, however, to the previous chapter's call for righteousness and justice. Jeremiah recalled the four kings preceding Zedekiah. Josiah, who sought to reform the faith and morals of the nation, was held up as the standard. His son Shallum (who ruled briefly as Jehoahaz) was deported by the Egyptians. Jehoiakim, another son of Josiah, was installed in Shallum's place. Jehoiakim was addicted to luxury and was indifferent to the poverty of the people. His son Jehoiachin reaped the consequences of his father's unrighteousness when Nebuchadnezzar dragged him to Babylon.

a True Shepherds (23:1-8)

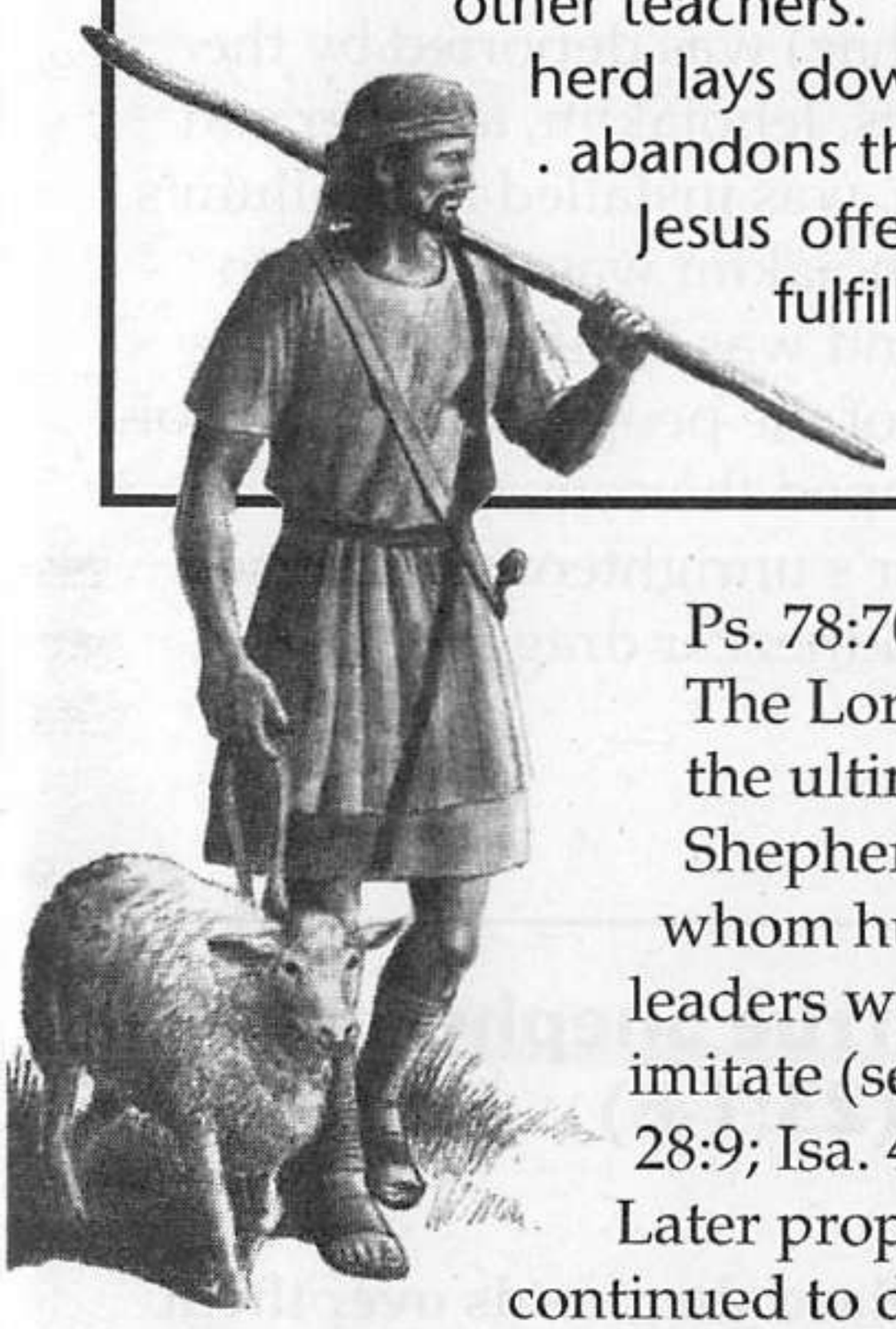
"I will place shepherds over them who will tend them, and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing," declares the LORD. **—Jeremiah 23:4**

As the unrighteous leaders of Judah steered the nation toward certain destruction at the hand of the Babylonians, Jeremiah continued his call for righteous leaders. To describe leadership, the prophet borrowed an image from the agricultural community that was often used by other biblical writers —the shepherd (see, for example,

Jeremiah's Shepherd—Jesus

On two occasions recorded in the Gospels, Jesus was moved to compare the multitudes who flocked to Him in words reminiscent of Jeremiah 23. Early in Jesus' teaching ministry, He looked out over the crowd and "had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matt. 9:36). Before Jesus fed the five thousand, He consented to teach the multitude because "he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd" (Mark 6:34).

Later Jesus compared His concern for His people with that of other teachers. "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand . . . abandons the sheep and runs away" (John 10:11, 12). Jesus offered Himself as the Good Shepherd who fulfilled Jeremiah's prophecies.



Ps. 78:70-72). The Lord was the ultimate Shepherd whom human leaders were to imitate (see Ps. 28:9; Isa. 40:11). Later prophets continued to develop the metaphor (see Ezek. 34; Zech. 10:2; 11:15-17). Today, we often regard church leaders as shepherds.

The shepherds the prophet condemned seem to have been the kings of Judah (see chaps. 21—22), false prophets (see 23:9, 10), and priests (vs. 11). Shepherds were supposed to protect the flock, but Judah's shepherds destroyed it (see vs. 1). Instead of keeping the sheep together, Judah's shepherds scattered them.

As a consequence, the Lord promised to punish these evil shepherds. Jeremiah used a Hebrew verb meaning "attend to" or "inspect." Because the kings of Judah had not attended to their sheep to care for them, the Lord would attend to the kings to punish them (vs. 2).

Verse 3 leads into a prophecy of the coming Messiah. Jeremiah 3:14-18 offers a glimpse of the messianic age, but did not focus on the Messiah Himself. Here the Lord promises to gather His flock from all the countries where He would drive them in punishment (23:3). Once back in their home pasture, His sheep would then thrive and multiply.

Though it included the Babylonian exile, this vision went beyond this to the regathering of Jewish exiles from there during the time of Zerubbabel and Ezra. Jeremiah hinted at yet another time that would see a worldwide scattering and return of God's people.

Furthermore, the Lord promised to give caring shepherds to His regathered flock—shepherds who would provide for them so they could be free of fear and harm (vs. 4). Jeremiah declared that this future peace would come when the Lord raises up David's "righteous Branch" (vs. 5)—the King and Messiah from David's family tree (compare Isa. 11:1).

This King would be the opposite of the ungodly rulers of Jeremiah's days. David's righteous Branch would "reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land." His name would be known as "The LORD Our Righteous Savior" (Jer. 23:6), a name He would impart by association to a new Jerusalem (see 33:16).

To show its splendor, Jeremiah said coming events would alter the Israelites' view of history. In Jeremiah's day the watershed event of Israel and Judah's history was considered to be the exodus from Egypt. It formed the basis for an expression used to stress a point. But the future would change their figure of speech. No longer would they guarantee their words by the certain memory of the exodus from Egypt. Rather, they would refer to another gathering out of worldwide dispersion (23:7, 8; see also 16:14, 15).

Ask Yourself . . . *How can I be certain that the shepherds I follow are godly leaders?*

b False Shepherds (23:9-22)

This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Do not listen to what the prophets are prophesying to you; they fill you with false hopes. They speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD." **—Jeremiah 23:16**

During the reign of King Zedekiah, Jeremiah found himself in constant conflict with the second group of unrighteous shepherds who were destroying and scattering the sheep. These were the false prophets who exercised a great deal of influence over Zedekiah, who seems to have been characterized by weakness more than wickedness (see, for example, Jer. 37:18-21 and 38:4, 5).

Jeremiah faced a strange paradox. Whenever God revealed something to him about the coming destruction of Judah, he felt overwhelmed, crushed by the weight of knowing what could save the land but being powerless to change the situation (23:9). On the other hand, the false prophets felt a sense of power as they led the people into spiritual adultery (vs. 10). But their pleasant-sounding message was leading to devastation. There are many similar messages in today's media that sound attractive, but only lead to crisis and personal destruction.

The Lord included both prophets and priests among the false shepherds who were scattering His flock.

Their wickedness was evident even in the temple (vss. 11, 12). A century and a half earlier, the prophets of Baal had led astray the people of the northern kingdom (vs. 13). By Jeremiah's time, these false prophets preached in the name of the Lord. This made Jerusalem as offensive to the Lord as Sodom and Gomorrah had been. The judgment that awaited Jerusalem was due in large part to the influence of the false prophets (vss. 14, 15).

The Lord instructed the people not to listen to the lying prophets (vs. 16). Their hope of deliverance was not based on repentance and covenant faithfulness. They offered false hope—so-called visions from their own imaginations.

Ask Yourself . . . *How should I respond to those who insist they have the mind of God on a matter when they're only expressing their opinion?*

The false prophets promised salvation to those who would not repent and peace to those who fought against God. They never had encountered the Lord or taken counsel from Him. As Christians, we must acknowledge God in all we do. Though the false prophets did not understand God's words, they would one day understand His wrath (vss. 17-19). Until then they would continue to aggressively spread their lies of safety and deliverance from the Babylonians. Ironically, if they had learned God's true message and had been just as determined to spread it, Judah and Jerusalem might have been turned from judgment (vss. 20-22).

PROPHETS ON THE RUN

To emphasize the importance of His message, God told the prophet Habakkuk, "Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it" (Hab. 2:2). Especially urgent communications were sent in the ancient world by runners—the equivalent of current overnight delivery services.

When the Lord complained that so-called prophets were running with their false messages, He showed how committed they were to deception (Jer. 23:21). They cared so much about keeping public morale high in the face of the Babylonian threat that they were determined to fake rush orders from God.

Distinguishing Truth from Error (23:23-32)

"Let the prophet who has a dream recount the dream, but let the one who has my word speak it faithfully. For what has straw to do with grain?" declares the LORD.

—Jeremiah 23:28

Jeremiah emphasized the Lord's opposition to the false prophets. These liars could not escape His notice and condemnation. He was not the kind of god neighboring nations believed in—a small, local deity ignorant of what was happening (vs. 23). No one could find a hiding place to escape God's detection (vs. 24). Jeremiah served an all-powerful, all-knowing God.

Jeremiah showed contempt when he pictured the false prophets proudly crowing, "I had a dream! I had a dream!" He was not denying that dreams could be prophetic. Rather, his words mocked their dreams as "delusions of their own minds" (vss. 25, 26).

During the reign of King Manasseh, Baal worship had caused the people of Judah to forget the name of the Lord (vs. 27). By the time of King Zedekiah, the lies of the false prophets caused the nation to forget. Ironically enough, it was prophecies given in His name that made them forget the name of the Lord. The problem wasn't that the people forgot the Lord; they forgot

DREAM FROM GOD

The Bible records a number of dreams that came from God. Joseph dreamed of being prominent in his family (Gen. 37:1-11). Pharaoh dreamed of years of plenty and famine (chap. 41). Nebuchadnezzar dreamed of a statue of gold, silver, bronze, and iron (Dan. 2). Zechariah had a series of night visions that could be categorized as prophetic dreams (Zech. 1:7—6:8).

Dreams were one of the ways the Lord said He would communicate with His prophets (Num. 12:6). Dreams were designated as one of the results of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the day of the Lord (Joel 2:28). But the dreams of the so-called prophets of Jeremiah's day were dreams of convenience. God told His people, "Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them" (Jer. 29:8b, 9).

their relationship with Him. To "forget the name" meant to forget the covenant they had made with the Lord. The false prophets who peddled their dreams as God's Word promoted beliefs and conduct contrary to the Mosaic law.

The Lord challenged the false prophets to place their dreams of peace and prosperity for Judah alongside the faithful words of His true prophet (vs. 28). When the evidence was in, the message of the false prophets would appear as worthless chaff to be discarded. The true prophecy from God, on the other hand, would be like kernels of grain that nourish all who eat them.

The Word of God consumes falsehood as a fire consumes worthless straw (vs. 29). It destroys fortresses of lies just as a jackhammer breaks up a boulder. Through Jeremiah the Lord urged the people of Judah to decide for themselves who delivered the wheat and who the straw. If you hear something that doesn't sound just right, if "red flags" go up in your mind, compare what you're hearing with the Word of God to determine its truthfulness.

Ask Yourself . . . *What false messages does the world ask me to believe?*

The Lord declared Himself opposed to three kinds of false prophets: those who claimed their messages were from God when, in fact, they were plagiarizing one another's speeches; those who manufactured their own prophetic utterances while claiming they spoke for God; and those who insisted that He was the source of their dreams (vss. 30-32).

The false prophets during the days of King Zedekiah had committed themselves to building up national morale with messages assuring the people that the Lord would keep them out of the hands of Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian army. Their deceptions—"reckless lies"—produced devastating results. God's people were led away from the truth that they needed to repent of their sins. The prophets may have meant to help, but they did immeasurable harm. They did not benefit the people in the least.

THE BURDEN OF THE LORD

Distorted Words (23:33-40)

"You must not mention 'a message from the LORD' again, because each one's own word becomes their own message. So you distort the words of the living God, the LORD Almighty, our God."

—Jeremiah 23:36

The final portion of Jeremiah 23 describes how false prophets were calling what they said "message[s] from the LORD." The primary sense of the word translated "message" is "burden." A true message from the Lord was a weighty matter that the hearers needed to pay special attention to. It seems that the false prophets had used "a message from the LORD" as the primary label for their so-called prophecies. Consequently, Jeremiah called on his audience to distinguish his true messages from the Lord from the false ones.

The Lord instructed Jeremiah that if anyone—whether ordinary citizen, prophet, or priest—said they were giving "a message from

Many Old Testament prophets described their messages and prophecies from the Lord as a *massa*, the Hebrew word for "burden." That word is used to describe a donkey's burden (Exod. 23:5), but in Numbers 11:11, 17 the word is used to describe the "burden" Moses carried for the people. The Lord told him to appoint 70 elders to help him lessen this "burden." To the prophets, *massa* was supposed to describe a special communiqué from God—something of profound consequence, often a warning of judgment to come.

Isaiah called many of his prophecies of judgment on the nations a *massa* (Isa. 13—23). Nahum's prophecy against Nineveh carried the weight of a *massa* (Nah. 1:1). Habakkuk's struggle with the justice of God's judgment pressured him like a *massa* (Hab. 1:1). Zechariah's prophecy of judgment on the nations qualified as a *massa* (Zech. 9:1). Malachi's indictment of spiritual sloppiness among the returned exiles counted as a *massa* also (Mal. 1:1).

the LORD," he was to challenge the existence of any such "message" (vs. 33). Instead of offering the typical "messages" of his day, Jeremiah was to hammer home the threat that God would abandon His people. Any false prophet who claimed to have a "message from the LORD" was threatened with direct punishment against him and his family (vs. 34).

The Lord condemned these fake prophets for fueling speculation about their latest messages of false hope (vs. 35). Instead of a weighty message or a spiritual burden, their words sought to lighten the weight of worry and concern. They were lulling Judah and Jerusalem into a fatal sense of security. Through Jeremiah, God told them they had to stop saying "a message from the LORD" to refer to their made-up prophecies (vs. 36).

The false prophets were distorting "the words of the living God, the LORD Almighty, our God." This seemingly repetitive, triple name for God made the accusation leveled by the Lord against the false prophets extremely grave. In order to advance their bankrupt political agenda, they ignored the words of the God of history, the God of the covenant, the God who cared for Judah.

Ask Yourself . . . *Have I ever heard God's Word distorted? How?*

God pronounced a judgment on the false prophets. Because they would not quit talking as though they were speakers for God, the Lord determined to cast them out of His presence along with the entire city of Jerusalem (vss. 37-39). The city that the false prophets claimed would be delivered would, in fact, set the pace for the judgment to come upon the prophets. The false prophets lied when they claimed to speak of weighty matters; the Lord always spoke the truth and delivered on the warnings He issued. We too can trust God to follow through on everything that He promises.

Jeremiah 24 in Brief

Jeremiah 24 dates from 597 B.C. immediately after Nebuchadnezzar deported King Jehoiachin and installed his uncle Zedekiah on the throne of Judah. The prophecy is illustrated by two baskets of figs. The basket of good figs represented the skilled artisans and upper-class families whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken to Babylon. The basket of inferior figs pictured weak King Zedekiah and his entourage of false prophets and ungodly counselors.

At another level, however, the good figs anticipated that the exiles would turn away from idolatry while in Babylon and commit themselves to the Lord and His law as the heart of their faith in God. Meanwhile, the bad figs indicated that the remaining inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem would keep on resisting the messages of Jeremiah and continue in their sins.

7 God's Law Carved on the Heart

Jeremiah 25—33

a Judah's Just Desserts (25:1-14)

This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years.

—Jeremiah 25:11

After defeating Egypt at Carchemish (north of Jerusalem) in 605 B.C., the Babylonians remained in the area, harassing other nations. Nebuchadnezzar rushed through Judah and laid siege to Jerusalem. Many of Jeremiah's messages date from about this time, perhaps because this was when his aide and secretary, Baruch [BEAR-uck], began to help record the prophet's messages (see 36:1, 4). Nebuchadnezzar made King Jehoiakim his vassal, took valuable articles from the temple, and carted off some of Jerusalem's young nobles (see Dan. 1:1-4).

Jeremiah had labored as God's prophet for twenty-three years (Jer. 25:3). Seventeen of those years had been during Josiah's reign. He continued during the three months of Jehoahaz's brief tenure and six years into Jehoiakim's wicked rule (vss. 1-3). Other prophets during this time were ignored by the people: Uriah died at the hands of Jehoiakim's paid agents (see 26:20-23); other true prophets included Zephaniah (early during Josiah's reign) and Habakkuk (about the time of the events in Jeremiah 25).

Jeremiah reported that the prophets sent by the Lord had called on the people to repent (vss. 4-6). But the people of Judah had refused to listen to the prophets of the Lord and continued to offend Him with their idolatry (vs. 7). As a result, the Lord threatened Judah and the surrounding nations with complete destruction by the Babylonians and their allies, various

This is a seal with the name Baruch, Jeremiah's scribe.



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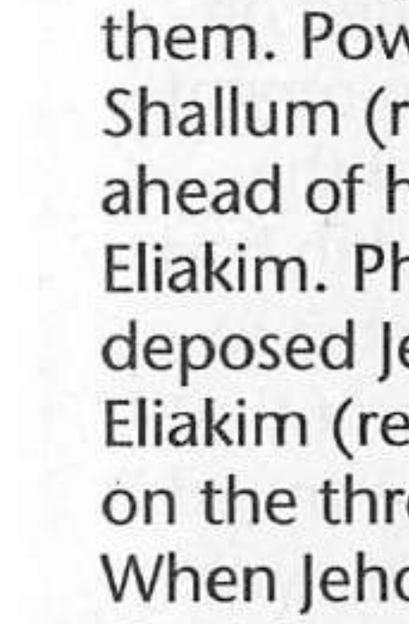


WHO'S WHO in the Palace

Jehoiakim was the second of three sons of Josiah who became king of Judah. He was older than his half brother Jehoahaz, whose reign only lasted three months before Pharaoh Neco deposed him. Jehoiakim was a bloodthirsty tyrant who scoffed at Jeremiah's pronouncements, which interfered with his personal greed. Zedekiah, Josiah's third son to become king, was Jehoahaz's full brother. He reigned after Jehoiakim's son Jehoiachin.



All the kings after Josiah were weak and subject to special interests or foreign governments. All were dependent on others to gain their position for them. Power brokers installed Shallum (renamed Jehoahaz) ahead of his older brother, Eliakim. Pharaoh Neco of Egypt deposed Jehoahaz and put Eliakim (renamed Jehoiakim) on the throne (II Kings 23:34). When Jehoiakim died, his son Coniah or Jeconiah (renamed Jehoiachin) was installed in his place (II Kings 24:6; Jer. 22:24;24:1). Three months later Nebuchadnezzar imprisoned Jehoiachin and named his uncle as king, Mattaniah or Zedekiah (II Kings 24:17).



groups ringing the north side of the Arabian Desert (vss. 8, 9).

Jeremiah used stark poetic pictures to predict the disappearance of peaceful, civilized life from Judah and the surrounding nations. Their land would be replaced with a wasteland, and they would enter seventy years of servitude to Babylon (vss. 10, 11). The writer of Chronicles saw these seventy years as the Sabbath rest for the land, time accumulated during 490 years when the people had neglected to allow the land to rest every seventh year, according to the Law (see II Chron. 36:21; compare Lev. 25:1-7).

Ask Yourself . . . *What sorrows have I seen come to those who neglect God? How can I prevent that kind of sorrow in my own life?*

With no specific way to measure the seventy years, some interpret this as a round number, perhaps a complete generation. Others see it as the period from 605 B.C. (the first attack on Jerusalem) to 536 B.C. (when Jerusalem was resettled). Still others calculate it from 586 B.C. (when the temple was destroyed) to 516 B.C. (when Zerubbabel dedicated the new temple).

Jeremiah saw that even though God would use the Babylonians as His divine tool of judgment, they would themselves have to be judged one day (Jer. 25:12-14). Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon were guilty of great cruelty and arrogance. The land of Babylon faced permanent desolation because of the guilt of its conquering armies. Jeremiah's

prophecy of judgment on Babylon was fulfilled when it was conquered by the Medes and Persians (see Dan. 5:30, 31).

Jeremiah 25:15—27:22 in Brief

As seen in the rest of chapter 25, Jeremiah listed other peoples who would taste the wrath of God in the form of the Babylonian conquest. He compared the coming judgment to a fierce storm. His anger he compared to a lion ravaging flocks and leaving shepherds in dismay.

Jeremiah 26 provides the historical context for the prophecies of chapters 7—10. When Jeremiah first predicted that Jerusalem would be destroyed as Shiloh had been, he was imprisoned. Some sought his execution. Calmer heads pointed out that Micah had made similar predictions without King Hezekiah ordering his death. Unfortunately, Uriah the prophet was martyred for preaching the same message.

Thirteen years after the events of Jeremiah 25—26 (595 B.C.), Jeremiah began to wear a wooden yoke on his neck as an object lesson: everyone needed to prepare themselves to submit to the yoke of Babylon. The prophet sent messages to the kings of surrounding nations to reinforce his graphic display of servitude. King Zedekiah and the priests and people of Judah received the same message. Jeremiah further warned them not to believe the lies of the false prophets who promised an early deliverance from the interference of Babylon.

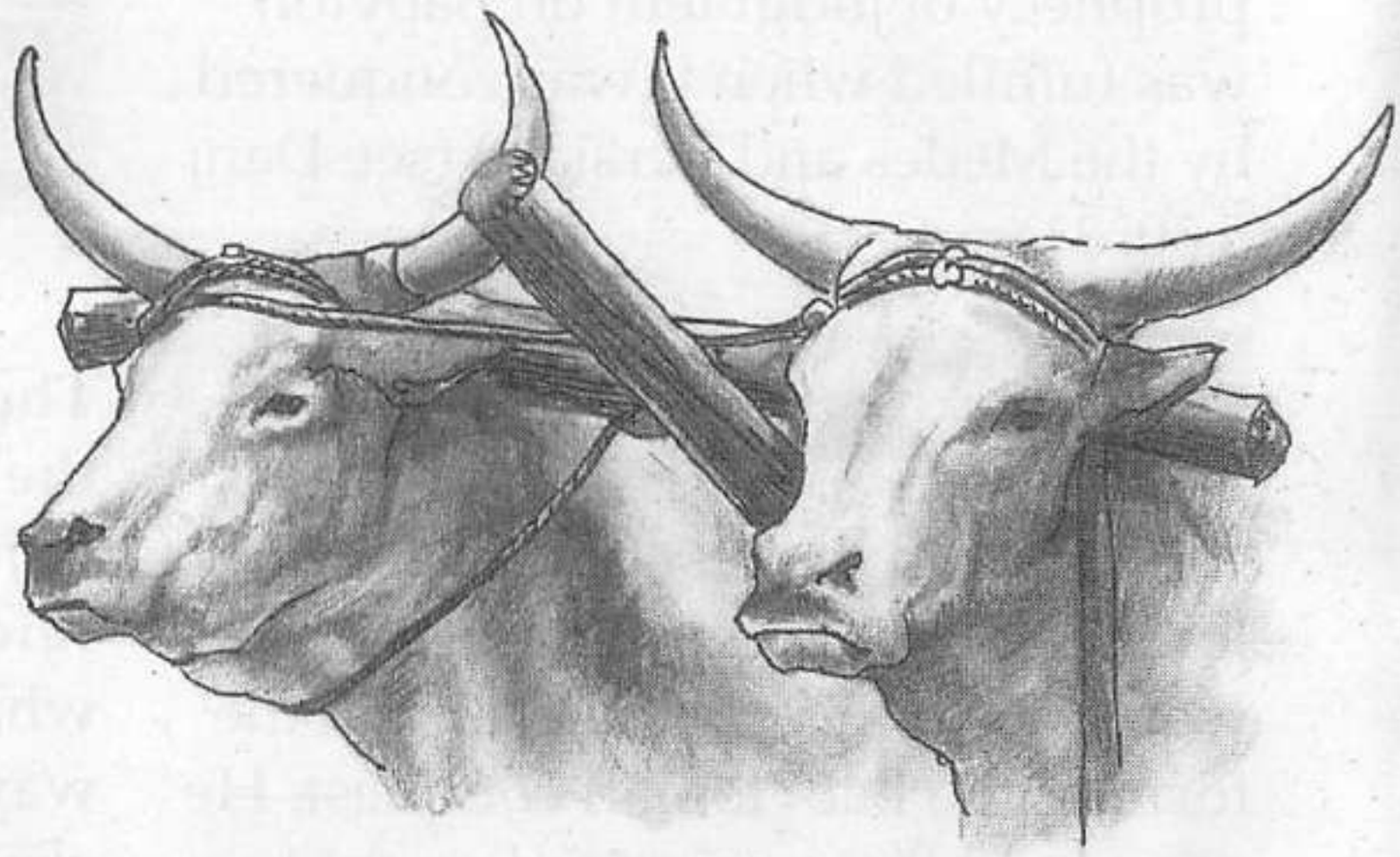
b Wishful Thinking (28:1-17)

Then the prophet Hananiah took the yoke off the neck of the prophet Jeremiah and broke it, and he said before all the people, "This is what the LORD says: 'In the same way I will break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon off the neck of all the nations within two years.' " **—Jeremiah 28:10, 11a**

Jeremiah continued to wear the wooden yoke as a reminder of the coming Babylonian rule. Sometime during that summer in 593 B.C., Hananiah, one of the false prophets, challenged Jeremiah's message of submission to Babylon. He confronted him in the temple courtyard before a large crowd of priests and people. Hananiah was from Gibeon, about five miles northwest of Jerusalem and, like Jeremiah's hometown of Anathoth, a city designated for the homes of priests and Levites. Hananiah, like Jeremiah, may have come from a priestly family.

Hananiah began his false prophecy with the same formula Jeremiah had used: "This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says . . ." (vss. 1, 2; see also 27:4). Hananiah predicted that the Lord would break the yoke of Babylonian dominance from Judah's neck. Then he gave three specific details: this turn of events would take place within two years; all the sacred temple furnishings would be returned;

Jeremiah's yoke made of "straps and crossbars" (Jer. 27:2) represented servitude to Babylon and punishment by the Lord.



and King Jehoiachin, whom Nebuchadnezzar had deported in 597 B.C. along with ten thousand Judahites (see II Kings 24:14), would come home with the other exiles (Jer. 28:3, 4).

Jeremiah gave his "Amen!" He wished that the Lord would return all the temple objects and deportees taken to Babylon (vss. 5, 6). However, it would require an unusual ability to accurately predict peace. Any prophet who made such a prediction should be suspect until the prophecy was fulfilled (vss. 7-9).

Having mimicked the pattern of Jeremiah's prophetic words, Hananiah now mimicked his use of an object lesson. He took the yoke from Jeremiah's neck and smashed it, repeating his claim that the Lord would deliver Judah from Babylon within two years. Jeremiah had no immediate response from the Lord, so he said nothing and went on his way (vss. 10, 11).

Ask Yourself . . . *Do I usually react to criticism hastily, or do I think before responding?*

Shortly thereafter, however, the Lord gave Jeremiah a response to Hananiah. The wooden yoke Hananiah had broken would be replaced with a more uncomfortable yoke of iron (vss. 12, 13). This yoke would be placed upon the shoulders of Judah by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. His power would be so extensive that even the wild animals of the desert would submit to him (vs. 14). The difference between the wooden yoke and the iron yoke may have illustrated the difference between submitting voluntarily to a dominant power and being forced to surrender to slavery.

The Lord also had a personal word of judgment for the false prophet Hananiah. Jeremiah told Hananiah that because he had encouraged the people to believe lies and feel secure when they needed to repent, he would die within the year. Jeremiah's prophecy came true. Hananiah died two months later (vss. 15-17).

Jeremiah 29:1—31:30 in Brief

After the second group of hostages had been taken away to Babylon, Jeremiah turned his focus from warning the people of Judah to encouraging the exiles in Babylon. He shifted his theme from judgment for sin to future restoration, sending his message in a letter with couri-

ers from King Zedekiah. He urged the exiles to settle down in Babylon and to disregard predictions of a rapid return to Judah. They would prosper and benefit as long as they worked for the peace and prosperity of Babylon. Besides, the Lord intended to take seventy years to reshape His people so that they would seek Him.

Jeremiah 30—32 has been called Jeremiah's "Book of Consolation" because its message of future hope contrasts with the dominant note of judgment throughout the rest of the book. Chapters 30 and 31 are remarkable for their emphasis on a better future when a reunited Israel would be back in the land, living out a new relationship with the Lord established by a new covenant. The Lord Himself would break the yoke of oppression from their necks and restore all of Israel's former blessings and more.

Israel's future depended on the everlasting love of God, making it possible for Israel to again be pure and chaste like a virgin. Like a Father gathering His children, the Lord would gather them; like a Shepherd watching over His regathered flock, the Lord would watch over them. He would turn their mourning into joy and bring them again to the land He had promised to them.

C Judah's Future Hope—A New Covenant (31:31-40)

"This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people."

—Jeremiah 31:33

Certainly this is the high point of Jeremiah's prophetic ministry—part of what is known as his "Book of Consolation." By saying "The time is coming," Jeremiah indicated that the new covenant would be part of the future messianic age (vs. 31). More than a century before (722 B.C.), the Assyrians had defeated and re-moved the residents of Israel (see II Kings 17:5, 6). Even though Israel no longer existed, however, it would be included along with Judah in the new covenant (Jer. 31:31), revealing this to be a new covenant for all God's people.

The problem of the old covenant made with Israel at Mount Sinai, according to Jeremiah, was that Israel continually broke it despite God's faithfulness. The new covenant would have to address the problem inherent in the old one; it would have to compensate for the inability of the people to perform up to God's standards.

The Lord described the essential difference between the covenants by

MORE THAN A CONTRACT

"Covenant" is a critical term in the Book of Jeremiah. In chapter 11 it appears five times where the prophet reminded the people that the coming judgment was simply the consequences (curses) of breaking their covenant with God. In chapters 31—34, the word "covenant" appears fifteen times, contrasting the blessings of the new covenant with the curses of the old.

A "covenant" was the primary way people in the ancient Middle East understood interpersonal relationships. It was a much broader concept than the modern terms "contract" and "treaty," even though the term included both of those senses. To them, a covenant extended to any relationship that involved responsibility: marriage, parenthood, even friendship. That's why the whole law could be summed up as love—to love God with all your being, and your neighbor as yourself (Matt. 22:37-40).

saying the new covenant would be internal, while the old was external. The new represented a relationship, while the old was more of a legal document (vss. 32, 33). The old was written on tablets of stone; the new would be written on human hearts (see II Cor. 3:3). Once the law of God could be implanted within people's hearts, then their relationship with God could be permanent.

Ask Yourself . . . *In what ways am I open to the Lord writing His Word on my heart?*

The Lord showed Jeremiah a time when all His people would directly know Him (Jer. 31:34). When that time would finally arrive, Jeremiah's role as a prophet would be obsolete. The people would no longer need someone to exhort them to know the Lord.

A critical aspect of this new relationship between God and His people hinged on the forgiveness of sins. God's law could not be written on hearts stained by sin. Their hearts required cleansing as a result of God's grace so they could be changed. Once He had forgiven them, God would deliberately forget their sins.

Ask Yourself . . . *What motivates me more: law or love? Why?*

The Lord vowed that the future of Israel as His people was as sure as the regular move-

ments of the heavenly bodies and the restless movements of the oceans (vss. 35, 36). Poetic language underscored God's strong commitment to His people: if the infinite could be measured or the unfathomable could be explored, only then would there be any chance that God would reject His people (vs. 37).

After all his warnings and messages of punishment, Jeremiah was finally allowed a more pleasurable task: to tell of the coming messianic age, the new covenant, and the rebuilding of Jerusalem. The phrase "the days are coming" (vs. 38) again suggests a rebuilding in messianic times and not just the rebuilding that came later after the exile in Babylon.

Jeremiah described the rebuilding in concrete terms. He named sites along the wall, listing them from the Tower of Hananel near the northeast corner of Jerusalem and proceeding counterclockwise around the city (vss. 38-40).

This rebuilt Jerusalem would "never again be uprooted or destroyed" (vs. 40). Since Jerusalem was destroyed in A.D. 70 by the Romans, many believe this was Jeremiah's glimpse of the new Jerusalem, God's eternal dwelling with His people.

The new covenant became a central biblical concept after Jeremiah's day. Jesus identified His death as the inauguration of the new covenant, and the Lord's Supper as its memorial meal (see Matt. 26:27-29). Paul explored the new covenant in II Corinthians 3:4—6:2, and the writer of Hebrews made it central in his argument (see Heb. 6:13—10:18). In the new covenant, God brings together all the children of Abraham—children of faith, whether Jew or Gentile (see Gal. 3:6-9).

Jeremiah 32—33 in Brief

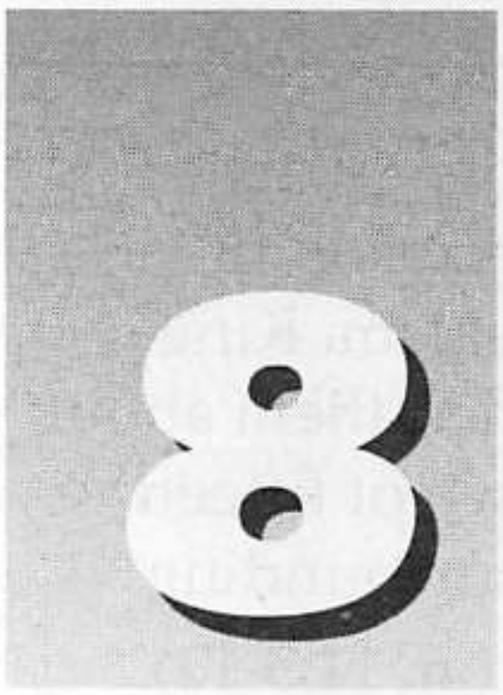
Chapters 32 and 33 were written during the horrible eighteen-month siege of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar (587–586 B.C.). Jeremiah had been imprisoned on false charges of trying to desert to the Babylonians. Eventually he was transferred from a dungeon to confinement in "the courtyard of the guard" in the palace of the king. King Zedekiah complained to the prophet about his prophecies of doom for Jerusalem and everyone in it, implying that the prophet's actions left him no choice but to confine Jeremiah.

Jeremiah's cousin visited him during his confinement and offered to sell him family property in Anathoth. The Lord instructed Jeremiah to buy the field as an object lesson that the people of Judah had a future in the land despite their upcoming defeat by the Babylonians. Jeremiah confessed confidence in the Lord even during the siege. The Lord again spoke of the necessity of judging Judah and renewed His promise of future blessing.

Chapter 33 continues the message of hope the Lord gave Jeremiah during the darkest days of Nebuchadnezzar's siege. Everything about to be torn down would be rebuilt.

Every deserted town would again be populated, every field tilled. "In those days and at that time"—in the messianic age—David's Son would reign, and the city of Jerusalem would bear His name.

God's covenant with His people was as certain as His covenant "with day and night and established the laws of heaven and earth." Chapter 33 concludes the section known as Jeremiah's "Book of Consolation."



Broken Covenants

Jeremiah 34—35

a A Change of Mind (34:1-7)

All the officials and people who entered into this covenant agreed that they would free their male and female slaves and no longer hold them in bondage. They agreed, and set them free. But afterward they changed their minds and took back the slaves they had freed and enslaved them again.

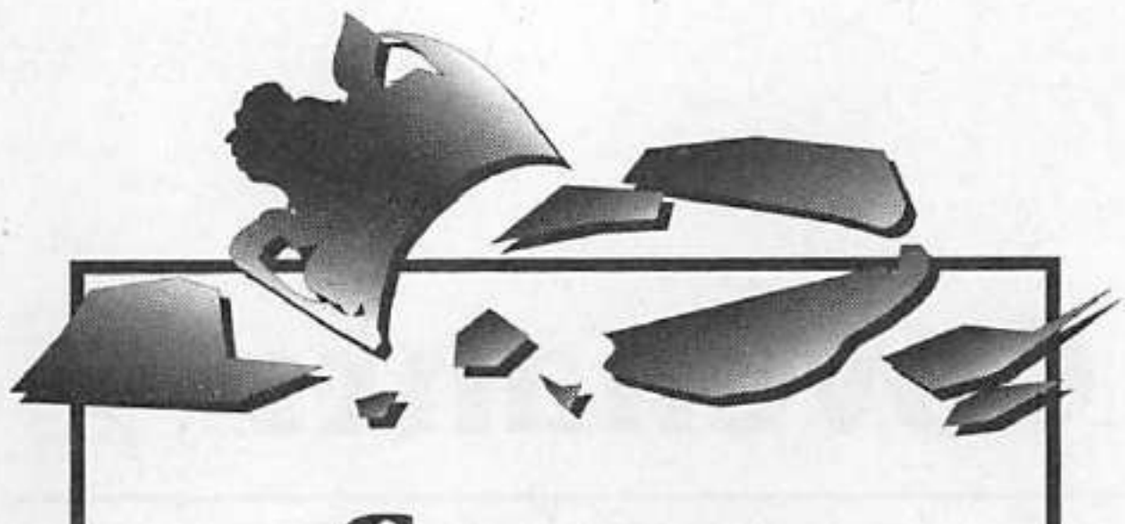
—Jeremiah 34:10, 11

With an army of soldiers from throughout the Babylonian Empire, Nebuchadnezzar launched his siege of Jerusalem. The siege would last eighteen months (from early 587 to mid-586 B.C.) before Jerusalem would finally fall. At the beginning of the campaign, even before Nebuchadnezzar had taken the cities surrounding Jerusalem, the Lord sent Jeremiah to King Zedekiah with a disturbing message (vss. 1, 2).

Jeremiah's message paralleled his earlier warning that Jerusalem would be defeated. He added a significant detail this time, however, saying that the city would be burned. To King Zedekiah, probably the most chilling part of Jeremiah's message was the threat that he would be deported to Babylon (vs. 3). But the Lord sent a promise along with the threat. Zedekiah would not die violently in warfare (vs. 4). He would die peacefully in Babylonian exile and be honored with a royal burial by his fellow Jews there (vs. 5). This was in contrast to the "burial of a donkey" given Zedekiah's half brother Jehoiakim, who may have been assassinated (see 22:18, 19). Though still king, he had not been mourned.

The funeral fire made for King Zedekiah would not be a cremation, which was rare in Israelite culture and done only under special circumstances (see Lev. 20:14; I Sam. 31:11-13; Amos 6:10). Rather, it would be a memorial bonfire, which could perhaps include sweet-smelling incense added to the flames (see II Chron. 16:14).

At the time Jeremiah gave this prophecy to Zedekiah, two fortified cities, Lachish [LAY-kish] and Azekah [ah-ZEE-kuh], still held out against the Babylonian thrust toward Jerusalem (Jer. 34:6, 7). Both cities were southwest of Jerusalem



Scraps from the Past

Archaeologists have found evidence of the Babylonian invasion of Jerusalem that occurred nearly twenty-six centuries ago. For example, broken pottery pieces, which were used to write messages on, have been discovered at Lachish, one of the last two fortified cities to hold out against the Babylonians, slowing their advance to Jerusalem. One of these clay pieces, called *ostraca*, contained a message from the commander of an outpost near Jerusalem to the commander leading the attack against Lachish. It stated, "We are watching for the fire signals of Lachish . . . for we cannot see Azekah."

near Philistine territory—Lachish thirty miles and Azekah fifteen miles from Jerusalem. King Rehoboam had fortified them about 350 years before as two of fifteen defensive positions surrounding Jerusalem (see II Chron. 11:5-12).

b Punishment for Covenant Breakers (34:8-22)

"This is what the LORD says: You have not obeyed me; you have not proclaimed freedom to your own people. So I now proclaim 'freedom' for you, declares the LORD—'freedom' to fall by the sword, plague and famine."

—Jeremiah 34:17

As the effects of the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem became unbearable, King Zedekiah arranged with the wealthy residents of the city to free all the enslaved Hebrews (vss. 34:8, 9). It's unclear if this action was taken because the king recognized that the slave owners were violating the law of God. Some think the owners hoped to reduce the number of mouths to feed during the siege. Perhaps the king hoped the freed slaves would want to protect their new status and help defend their besieged city.

The slave owners entered into a formal covenant guaranteeing the slaves their freedom (vs. 10). But then circumstances seemed to

improve. The Egyptian army led by Pharaoh Hophra advanced on the Babylonian rear lines, prompting the Babylonians to temporarily withdraw from Jerusalem. This raised false hopes within the city (see 37:5).

The wealthy people of Jerusalem, thinking the war was over, disregarded the covenant they had made and forced the former slaves back into submission and servitude (34:11).

This seesaw behavior might have been the result of a "foxhole conversion." Many soldiers will "commit their lives to God" in the trenches on the condition that He get them safely through the battle. When the battle's over and they're still alive, they abandon their promised commitment. In many cases, "decisions for Christ," when made under unusual or pressing circumstances, do not last when the difficult circumstances improve.

When times are hard, the temptation to bargain with God can be strong. But making rash promises in an attempt to gain God's help is a foolish thing to do. These prayers are often made without thought to the consequences.

The commitment and resolve necessary to follow through on the promise is not considered. "Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. . . . It is better not to make a vow than to make one and not fulfill it" (Eccl. 5:2, 5).

Ask Yourself . . . *Have I recently made a promise that I did not keep?*

The law of Moses included specific legislation restricting the degree to which fellow Hebrews could be enslaved. The law was to be a reminder to the people that their ancestors had been slaves in Egypt (Jer. 34:12, 13; see Lev. 25:39-42; Deut. 15:12-15). Every seventh year was to be a Sabbath year: the land was to lie fallow, debts were to be forgiven, and all Hebrew slaves were to be freed (Jer. 34:14). Hebrew servants, then, sold years of service measured to the next Sabbath year—the longer the service, the more valuable the servant's work. Under the law a master never technically owned a Hebrew slave. In practice, though, the wealthy slave owners of Jerusalem treated their Hebrew servants as exclusive property.

When they agreed to free their Hebrew slaves, the Lord regarded the deed as an act of repentance (vs. 15). And because they had made a solemn covenant in His temple concerning their decision, the Lord saw the vow as something that could not be taken back. By retracting their decision and repossessing their former slaves, they violated their covenant and profaned the name of the Lord (vs. 16).

Because the slave owners had proclaimed a bogus "freedom" and disregarded the covenant they had made, the Lord promised them an even more unattractive "freedom"—the freedom to die in horrible ways during a long, horrible siege (vs. 17).

Ancient biblical covenants were often established through a sacrificial ceremony where the parties to

the covenant would walk between two halves of the sacrificial animal (see Gen. 15:10). It is likely that the leaders, court officials, priests, and people who released the slaves had walked between the halves of a butchered calf. Some think the ceremony implied that those who broke the covenant would meet the same fate as the sacrificial animals.

The Lord threatened to slaughter the covenant breakers just as the ceremonial calf had been killed; the sacrificial animal pictured the severe penalties associated with violating solemn covenants (Jer. 34:18).

These consequences are reflected in an ancient Mesopotamian covenantal document. In the document, a king named Mati-ilu wrote, "This head is not the head of the ram, but the head of Mati-ilu, his sons, his nobles and the people of his land. If Mati-ilu violates this oath, as the head of this ram is struck off . . . so will the head of Mati-ilu be struck off."

The Lord threatened the leaders

CUTTING A DEAL

In English the biblical text reads, "I made a covenant with your ancestors" (Jer. 34:12) and "You even made a covenant before me in the house that bears my Name" (vs. 15). In Hebrew these statements literally begin, "I cut a covenant . . ." and "You even cut a covenant . . ." Thus even the language surrounding a covenant emphasized the ceremony of dividing the carcass of an animal and walking between the halves.

"Cutting" the covenant highlighted two important elements. **First,** every covenant had spiritual ramifications. When an animal was sacrificed, God was called as a witness to its bloodshed. These were serious, spiritual matters; there were no superficial covenants. **Second,** breaking a covenant invited serious consequences. Curses were a solemn business in the ancient world. People didn't make covenants they didn't intend to keep.

and slave owners with death and worse—the desecration of their corpses (vss. 19, 20). He promised Zedekiah that he would be captured by Nebuchadnezzar (vs. 21). Though the Babylonians had withdrawn to deal with the Egyptian army, the Lord would call them back to resume the siege. The words He used indicated that this was all His doing, as though He personally were destroying these cities: "I will lay waste the towns of Judah" (vs. 22).

C The Faithfulness of the Recabites (35:1-11)

We have obeyed everything our forefather Jonadab son of Recab commanded us. Neither we nor our wives nor our sons and daughters have ever drunk wine or built houses to live in or had vineyards, fields or crops. —Jeremiah 35:8, 9

Chapter 35 contains an example of how well promises should be kept. Though the incident is out of chronological order, it seems to have been included here to contrast with the breaking of promises by the slave owners in chapter 34. During the later years of King Jehoiakim, about a decade prior to the slavery covenant, an earlier Babylonian threat had caused many rural families to flock to Jerusalem for protection. Among them was a rather unconventional group of people called the Recabites.

The Lord directed Jeremiah to meet with the clan of the Recabites in a side room of the temple and serve them wine to drink (vss. 1, 2). This act of hospitality, however, set the stage for an important object lesson about faithfulness.

The temple built by Solomon had three stories of side rooms running along three of its outside walls (see I Kings 6:5, 6). The room where Jeremiah met with the Recabites was in the second tier of rooms, nearly above the doorkeeper's room (Jer. 35:3, 4). Presumably these rooms were on one or the other side of the temple near the front, where the doorkeeper could watch the entrance.

In this side room, Jeremiah set bowls of wine and cups before the members of the Recabite clan (vs. 5). The word "bowls" came from an Egyptian word that was used to describe a large serving container for pouring liquids into cups or drinking bowls.

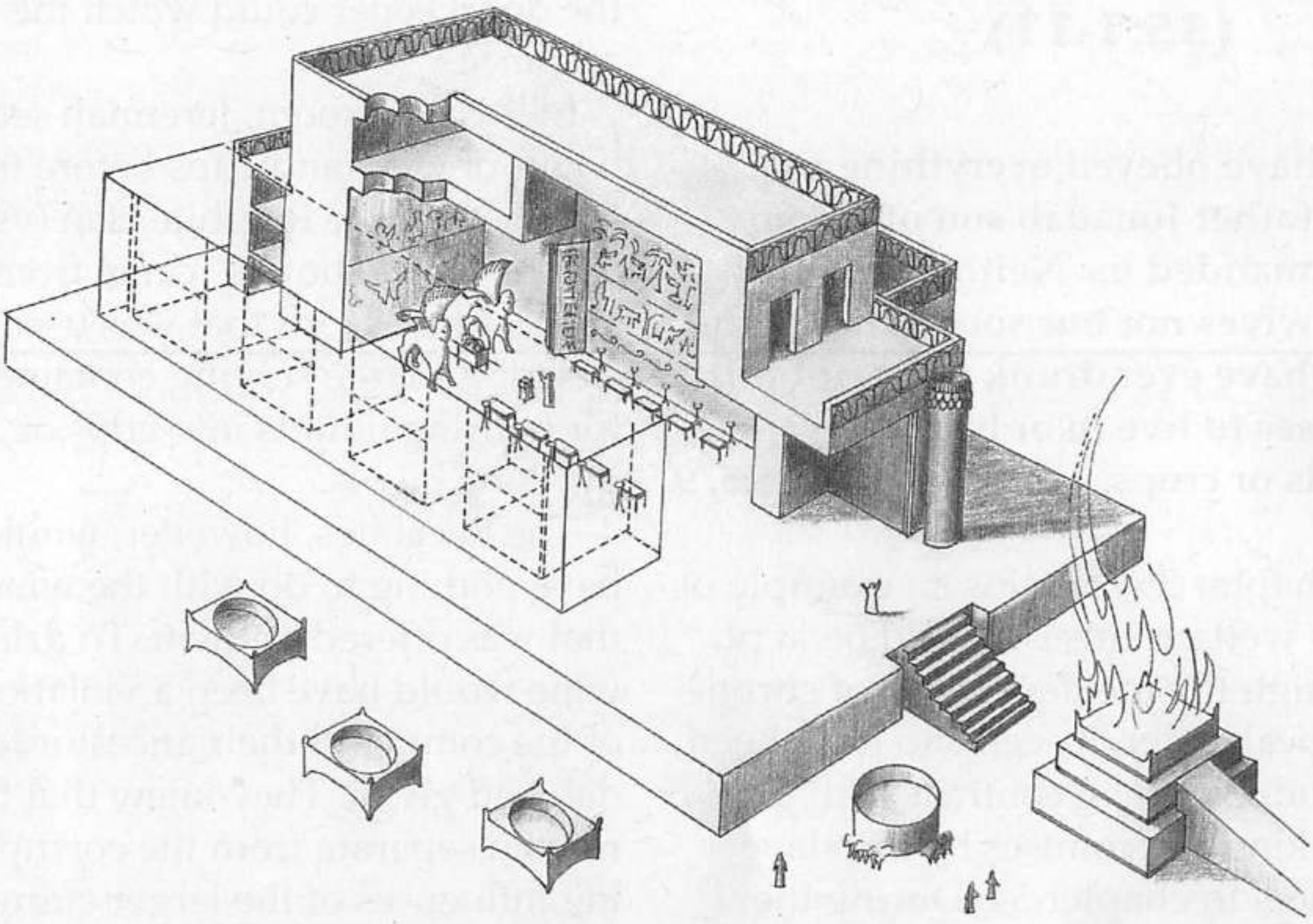
The Recabites, however, would have nothing to do with the wine that was offered to them. To drink wine would have been a violation of the command their ancestor Jonadab had given. They knew that to remain separate from the corrupting influences of the larger culture, they would have to remain faithful to their zealous ancestor's directions (vs. 6).

Ask Yourself . . . *As a Christian, how distinctive am I when contrasted with my culture?*

Jonadab, the son of Recab, was the ancestor every Recabite looked back to with reverence. Two hundred and fifty years earlier, after the death of King Ahab in the northern kingdom of Israel, Jonadab had assisted Jehu in removing Baal worship and exterminating the priests of Baal (see II Kings 10:15-27).

Jonadab was apparently as zealous as Jehu in his devotion to the God of Israel. In his zeal, he imposed several regulations, not only on his immediate family, but on all of his descendants. Jonadab required his descendants to take an oath to remain nomads generation after generation. They were to set themselves apart from the conventional ways of other peoples. As nomads they were not to live in houses, plant crops, tend vineyards, or drink wine. They had to live in tents and function as herders (Jer. 35:7-10).

For two and a half centuries the Recabites had kept every detail of their vow, until the Babylonian threat forced them into Jerusalem (vs. 11). It's possible that they continued to live in tents even in the city. At any rate, they would not drink the wine Jeremiah set before them, even in hospitality.



Some side rooms of the temple served the needs of temple personnel who maintained the structure and officiated in various worship activities. Some rooms were treasuries (I Chron. 28:12) or storage areas for the tithes of the people used to support the priests and Levites (Neh. 13:4-13). Jeremiah met with the Recabites in one of these side rooms.

d Reward for Covenant Keepers (35:12-19)

"This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: 'Jonadab son of Recab will never fail to have a descendant to serve me.' "
—Jeremiah 35:19

The Lord instructed Jeremiah to use the unwavering commitment of the Recabites as an object lesson to the rest of the people. Though the smug sophisticates of Jerusalem may have felt inclined to laugh at this nomadic clan, they could have learned a valuable lesson from them. The Lord commended the Recabites for their allegiance to the traditions of a respected ancestor. The people of Judah, by contrast, had been disloyal and disobedient to the Lord their God (vss. 12-14a).

Jeremiah's object lesson emphasized that the contrasts between the two peoples were many: The Recabites had been faithful to a single message given by their ancestor Jonadab; the Hebrews ignored prophet after prophet with multiple messages from the Lord (vss. 14b, 15). The Recabites went to great effort to keep a vow that held significance for this life only; the Hebrews dismissed a covenant that held eternal consequences. For more than 250 years the Recabites persevered in their commitment to their vows; the Hebrews offered vows to the Lord through sporadic spiritual renewal, usually maintaining their commitment no longer than a single generation (vs. 16). The Recabites would long be rewarded for their faithfulness; the Hebrews would soon be punished severely for their faithlessness (vss. 17-19).

Ask Yourself . . . *How can I be more like the Recabites in fulfilling my commitments?*

The residents of Judah and Jerusalem faced a short future. Soon, through the Babylonian invasions of 597 and 587–586 B.C., all the disasters prophesied by Jeremiah would come upon them. By contrast the Lord promised the Recabites a long and distinguished future: "Jonadab son of Recab will never fail to have a descendant to serve me" (vs. 19).

The Recabites were Kenites (see I Chron. 2:55), who were most likely distant relatives of Jethro, Moses' father-in-law. Though they were not Hebrews, his descendants settled along with Israel in the promised land. Because Jethro had been a priest in Midian (see Exod. 18:1, 9-12), some understand the words "to serve me" (Jer. 35:19) to have priestly overtones. Various traditions arising from ancient Jewish commentaries on this passage suggest that the Recabites were assigned special duties in the temple after the return from the Babylonian exile. Others, however, view the promise to be connected with similar wording elsewhere (see 33:17, 18). They suggest a Recabite role in worship during the future age.

Far more important than the

obscure details surrounding the Recabites is the clear point of Jeremiah's prophecy: the people of Judah and Jerusalem had been faithless to the covenant made with the Lord at Mount Sinai, even though it had been renewed at various times throughout their history. They were faithless to other covenants as well, such as the one they made when they freed their slaves during the siege of Jerusalem. The Recabites, on the other hand, set an example of faithfulness to their covenants, even during times of hardship.

9 The Indestructible Word of God

Jeremiah 36—38

a Recording the Word of God (36:1-15)

"Take a scroll and write on it all the words I have spoken to you concerning Israel, Judah and all the other nations from the time I began speaking to you in the reign of Josiah till now." —Jeremiah 36:2

The events of Jeremiah 36 occurred during the eventful fourth year of King Jehoiakim's reign, when the Babylonians defeated the Egyptian army near the headwaters of the Euphrates River (see 46:2). Several of Jeremiah's prophecies recorded earlier in the book probably date from this same time, although only one other prophecy specified the date (see 25:1).

The Lord directed Jeremiah to write down the prophecies he had received from God during the preceding twenty-one years. Ever since he had been called as a prophet, Jeremiah's ministry had encompassed "Israel, Judah and all the other nations" (36:1, 2), just as God had foretold (see 1:10). The messages about the other nations are previewed in 25:15-29 and expanded in chapters 46—51.

It seems likely that God wanted Jeremiah to write his prophecies down so that Judah would have yet another warning of impending judgment. Perhaps if the Judahites heard and read about the coming disaster, they would repent (36:3). Like multi-media today, Jeremiah's message would have greater impact if it was written as well as spoken. God's instructions to write down the prophecies may have been an act of mercy, giving individuals one more chance.

Ask Yourself . . . *What has the Lord done in the past to get my attention?*

Baruch [BEAR-uck] served Jeremiah for at least twenty years as his scribe or secretary (vs. 4; see 32:12, 13; 36:4) and stayed with him through the fall of Jerusalem and their forced move to Egypt (see 43:6). Baruch, a man of some importance, may have been the grandson of Jerusalem's "mayor" during King Josiah's reign (see 32:12; II Chron. 34:8). His brother was an official in Zedekiah's government (see Jer. 51:59). Baruch may have had political influence himself. After

the fall of Jerusalem, some leaders accused Jeremiah of being merely the spokesman for Baruch's political agenda (see 43:3).

While Jeremiah dictated, Baruch recorded the prophecies of the previous years on a scroll (36:4). There is no way of telling if the prophecies on this scroll were as detailed as the present biblical record of Jeremiah's messages. The scroll may have been similar to the Book of Jeremiah, or it may have contained briefer summaries. It seems that the scroll Baruch took to the temple and the palace could be read in a fairly short time.

Jeremiah had been prohibited from entering the temple (vs. 5), perhaps following the incidents of chapter 26. The priests and false prophets, angered by his messages predicting the destruction of the temple, had barely been restrained from executing Jeremiah. Since he

THE SCROLL OF JEREMIAH

Old Testament books were written on long strips of papyrus or parchment rolled up in scrolls. Scrolls were the ordinary form of books until after the time of Christ and the apostles. Some of our ordinary vocabulary about books comes from the time of scrolls. For example, English derives its word *volume* from the Latin verb "to roll up."

The ends of a scroll were attached to wooden rods and rolled up on them. The book was unrolled from one stick and rolled up onto the other like videotape in a cassette. The spools of the scroll were held side by side and the papyrus or parchment opened from right to left since Hebrew writing moves in that direction. Baruch would have written in columns a few inches in width that ran vertically from one edge of the roll to the other. These columns of text were called the "doors" of the scroll.

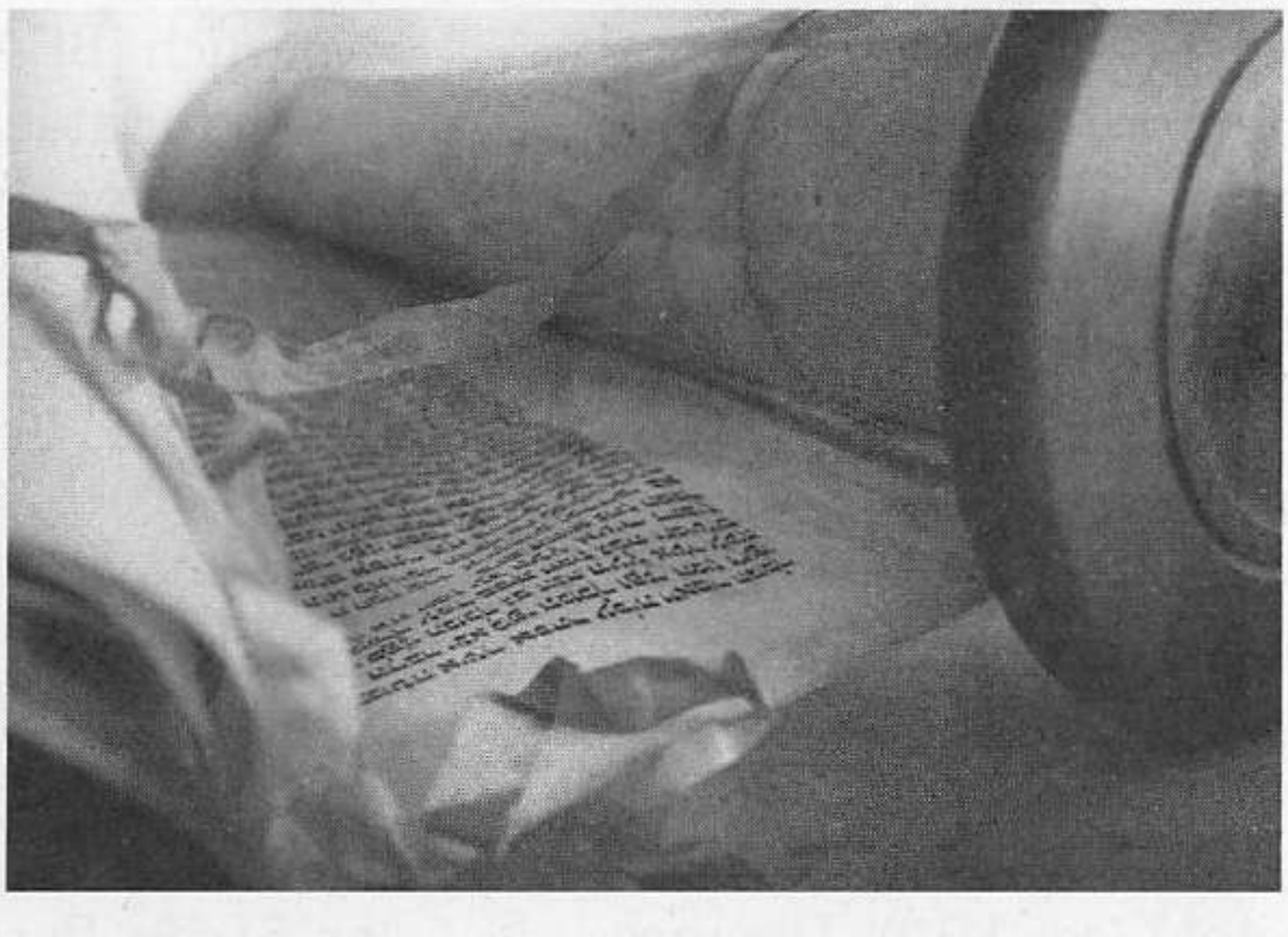


Photo: © Tetra Images/Getty Images

couldn't go, he sent Baruch to the temple to read the completed scroll. All who came to the temple would have a chance to hear the warning and repent (36:6, 7).

Jeremiah and Baruch carefully selected the time for the reading during a specially appointed fast (vss. 8-10). Before the Babylonian captivity, the Hebrew calendar scheduled only one regular fast, the Day of Atonement in the seventh month. Other fasts were called only in times of emergency (see Joel 2:12, 15). This fast could have been prompted by late rains and famine or fear stemming from Nebuchadnezzar's victory over Egypt.

Baruch read Jeremiah's words from the room of Gemariah near the New Gate of the temple complex. Gemariah's father, Shaphan, had been King Josiah's secretary, the official who read the law to the king when it had been found seventeen years before (see II Kings 22:3-10). A reading from Gemariah's chamber may have reminded the people of the reading his father had once done. The historic site may have prompted listeners to recognize Jeremiah's words as coming from God.

When Gemariah's son Micaiah heard Jeremiah's prophecies, he went to the palace and found Elishama, the secretary (Jer. 36:11, 12). He held the same office Micaiah's grandfather had held when he read the law to King Josiah. Elishama and other palace officials sent for Baruch and asked him to sit—the Oriental position of authority—and read to them (vss. 13-15).



Burning the Word of God (36:16-32)

Whenever Jehudi had read three or four columns of the scroll, the king cut them off with a scribe's knife and threw them into the firepot, until the entire scroll was burned in the fire. —Jeremiah 36:23

Jeremiah's prophecies struck fear into the hearts of King Jehoiakim's officials (vs. 16). They were likely afraid for a couple of reasons—not only because of the nature of Jeremiah's prophecies, but also because of the reaction they expected from King Jehoiakim. They knew the king's policies and personal attitudes were opposed to the spiritual values contained in the scroll. Further, he would be opposed to its favorable words about Babylon. Anticipating Jehoiakim's questions, the officials made sure they knew precisely who had authored the scroll (vss. 17, 18).

These officials were sympathetic to Jeremiah and Baruch. They were prepared to defend the scroll and speak in Jeremiah's behalf (vs. 25), but they knew that Jehoiakim would probably reject his message. As a precaution, they instructed Baruch to take Jeremiah and hide in a place that no one knew about (vs. 19). They remembered the execution of Uriah the prophet (see 26:20-23). In fact, Elnathan, who favored Jeremiah here (see 36:12, 25), may have been the Elnathan ordered by the king to bring Uriah back from Egypt (see 26:22).

Elishama left Jeremiah's scroll safely in his chamber and went with the officials to King Jehoiakim (36:20). They told the king everything that had happened at Gemariah's room in the temple and in the secretary's room in the palace. The king sent Jehudi to fetch the scroll and had him read it while the officials stood beside him (vs. 21).

In sharp contrast to Elishama and the officials who brought the scroll, Jehoiakim and his attendants showed nothing but contempt for Jeremiah's prophecies and the God who had sent him as a prophet. Whenever Jehudi finished reading a portion of the scroll and was ready to unwind another section, Jehoiakim cut off the part Jehudi had finished and fed his fire with it (vss. 22, 23). He and his court had none of the fear that had characterized the other men (vs. 24).

Jehoiakim's response was in sharp contrast to the reaction of Elishama and those with him. But his response also contrasted with Josiah's seventeen years earlier when he heard the Book of the Law (see II Kings 22:11). Revival followed the repentance of King Josiah, but judgment followed Jehoiakim's disregard for God's Word.

Ask Yourself . . . *How would I respond to a pointed, personal call to repentance?*

Even though three officials protested the destruction of the scroll, King Jehoiakim ordered others to arrest both Baruch the scribe and Jeremiah the prophet (Jer. 36:25, 26).

One official is identified as "a son of the king." Since Jehoiakim was thirty years old (compare II Kings 23:36), his sons could barely have been teenagers at the time. Probably "son" referred to one of the princes in the extended royal family.

Ancient Heating Systems

The Jerusalem palace likely was built on two levels to take advantage of the seasonal changes in climate. The upper level was open to the air to catch the summer breezes. Sheltered against the elements, the lower level would have been a good place in the ninth month (December) for Jehoiakim's winter apartment. To warm the king, charcoal or wood burned in a brazier or a small pit in the floor. But King Jehoiakim turned up the heat by burning the Word of God.



The king's attendants could not find Baruch and Jeremiah because the Lord saw to it that their hiding place remained a secret. Apparently, the Lord directed Jeremiah to use his time of seclusion to reproduce the scroll of prophecies that Jehoiakim had burned. God also showed Jeremiah Jehoiakim's motivation for burning the first scroll: he was angry about messages that predicted Babylon's destruction of Judah and Jerusalem (Jer. 36:27-29).

Ask Yourself . . . *How can I use setbacks as opportunities to further God's kingdom?*

As a consequence of destroying the Word of God, the Lord promised that Jehoiakim's descendants would never be allowed to sit on the throne of David (vss. 30, 31). Some object that his son Jehoiachin did in fact succeed his father as king (see II Kings 24:8). Others say that the three short months that eighteen-year-old Jehoiachin spent on the throne before Nebuchadnezzar brushed him aside confirm God's promise rather than deny it (see vs. 17). Jehoiakim's humiliating funeral was predicted earlier in Jeremiah 22:18, 19.

The second scroll of Jeremiah's prophecies became an expanded version of the first (36:32). Perhaps the present Book of Jeremiah began with the contents of this second scroll and later incorporated additional messages that occurred during the reign of King Zedekiah. While Baruch and Jeremiah hid from Jehoiakim, Baruch apparently became frightened and began to feel sorry for himself (see 45:3). For his part in transmitting the Word of God to future generations, the Lord gave Baruch a promise of protection in the middle of great difficulty (see vss. 4, 5)

Jeremiah 37 in Brief

Eighteen years after the events of chapter 36, King Zedekiah ruled a capital city under siege by the Babylonians (587 B.C.). The king seemed to want Jeremiah the man of God on his side, but he had lost his independence and much of his power to noblemen around him.

When the Babylonians temporarily lifted the siege of Jerusalem to deal with an approaching Egyptian army, Zedekiah asked Jeremiah to pray that the siege would be over for good. Instead, Jeremiah predicted the Babylonians would soon be back.

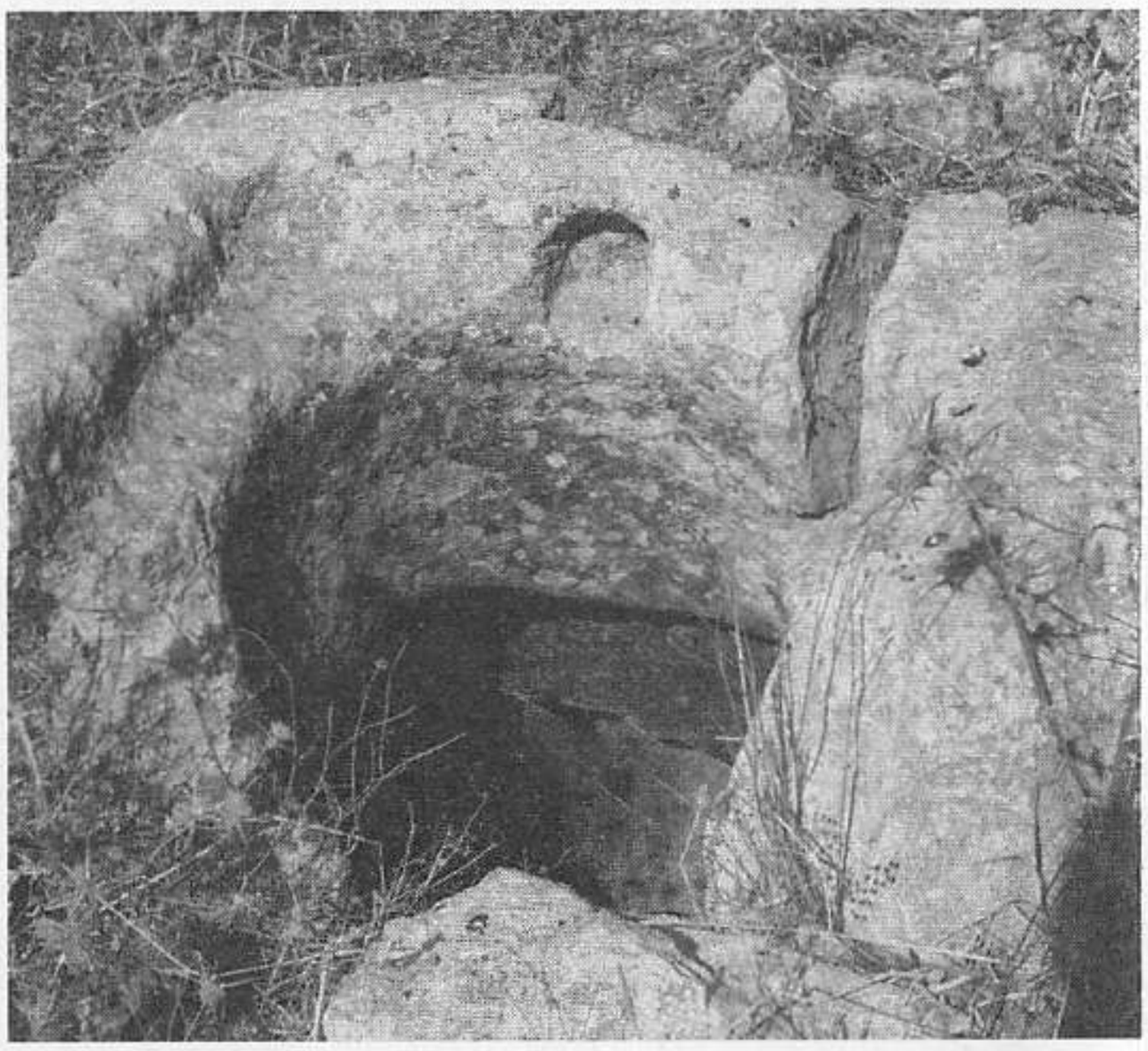
When the prophet tried to leave Jerusalem to see to some property in his hometown of Anathoth, he was arrested as a deserter to the Babylonians. He was beaten and put in a dungeon, where Zedekiah visited him, hoping to hear a good word from the Lord. Jeremiah repeated his message of judgment and protested the injustice of his imprisonment. In response, the king transferred Jeremiah to a better cell and ordered that he be fed as long as rations held out.

C Jailing the Prophet of God (38:1-13)

They took Jeremiah and put him into the cistern of Malkijah, the king's son, which was in the courtyard of the guard. They lowered Jeremiah by ropes into the cistern; it had no water in it, only mud, and Jeremiah sank down into the mud.
—Jeremiah 38:6

From his place of imprisonment in the courtyard of the palace, Jeremiah was able to continue spreading his message, telling the residents of Jerusalem to abandon the city and surrender to the Babylonians. He consistently declared that Judah's impending defeat was a necessary punishment for its past sins (vss. 1-3). It's easy to see why the king's officials viewed Jeremiah as a traitor promoting mutinous views. They felt he had to be executed to save the war effort. The Gedaliah mentioned here may have been the son of the Pashhur who had earlier beaten Jeremiah and put him in the stocks (see 20:1-6).

King Zedekiah caved in to the pressures of his noblemen (38:4, 5). They put Jeremiah in a cistern belonging to the king's son, one deep enough that they had to use ropes to lower him into it. Cisterns were pear-shaped cavities below houses or buildings used to collect and store rainwater. They typically were sealed with a kind of cement lining. Jeremiah, however, was put in an unused cistern; its bottom consisted of a thick layer of mire (vs. 6). The nobles may have intended to allow Jeremiah to die there, far from public view. They could insist his death was the unfortunate result of imprisonment for treason.



This opening to a cistern is found on the temple mount in Jerusalem. Jeremiah was cast into a cistern (or well) similar to this one.

Jeremiah had already endured ridicule and physical persecution. In the muck of the cistern, however, he faced a slow and agonizing death. Sinking into the mud, his spirits sank as well: "They tried to end my life in a pit . . .; the waters closed over my head, and I thought I was

Photo: Davidbena

about to perish" (Lam. 3:53, 54). Yet Jeremiah remains an inspiration for all who experience unexpected discouragement or setbacks. Any who have suffered from depression can learn from Jeremiah's example: "I called on your name, LORD, from the depths of the pit" (vs. 55).

Ask Yourself . . . *What's my response when I feel bogged down in overwhelming circumstances?*

Ebed-Melech's name meant "Servant of the King" (Jer. 38:7). He was an Ethiopian, perhaps a eunuch. The term translated "official" literally meant "eunuch," and that may be the meaning when applied to a foreigner. It's significant that it took a non-Hebrew to have the courage to intercede for a despised Jewish prophet (vss. 8, 9).

Ebed-Melech approached King Zedekiah "while the king was sitting in the Benjamin Gate" (vs. 7). The city gates were fortified structures that served as centers of commerce and legal activities. Ebed-Melech approached the king on a point of justice, questioning the harshness of

JEREMIAH'S JAILS

Jeremiah used quite a few Hebrew words to describe the different places in which he was imprisoned. As seen in 20:2, the prophet was put in "stocks"—a device to hold hands, feet, and head in a bowed and painful position.

Chapter 37 contains a wealth of expressions for incarceration. "Prison" (vss. 4, 15, 18) literally means "house of confinement." It's a generic term for being locked up.

Jonathan's house is literally called a "house of bonds." It is a stricter term than the previous one, perhaps indicating some sort of fetters. According to verse 16, Jeremiah was put in "a vaulted cell." This is the only occurrence of this noun in the Old Testament. The vaulted cell was in a "dungeon," or literally a "house of the cistern"—possibly an underground room that opened off the access area to a cistern.

As seen in 37:21, Jeremiah was placed in "the courtyard of the guard." This walled-in area belonged to the palace guards and would have been their parade ground and recreation area. When Jeremiah was confined in this area, he may not have been under lock and key, though he was undoubtedly under the eye of the palace sentries.

Finally, when Jeremiah was lowered into a "cistern" (38:6), he was put into a sealed chamber cut into the bedrock beneath Jerusalem. It was no place to have claustrophobia: there was no light, unless the lid was left off; the oxygen content of the air may have been poor; he could only sit or lie in the mud and probably received very little food (38:9). Imprisonment in the cistern was a cruel and unusual punishment, the worst kind of solitary confinement.

Jeremiah's treatment.

Evidently Zedekiah hadn't known that Jeremiah was in danger of starving in a dark, muddy cistern. He ordered Ebed-Melech to take thirty men and remove the prophet from the cistern (vs. 10). A few ancient versions of the Old Testament read "three" instead of "thirty," and some interpretations favor that reading. If there was any chance of resistance from the powerful nobles who wanted Jeremiah dead, however, a squad of thirty men would have made good sense.

Ebed-Melech continued to act more nobly than anyone else in the story when he obtained a supply of old rags to pad the ropes where they passed under Jeremiah's arms (vss. 11, 12). Thanks to the concern of this eunuch, Jeremiah was returned to the relative comfort of his cell in the palace courtyard (vs. 13).

Ask Yourself . . . *How can I give practical help to someone facing a discouraging situation?*

Jeremiah 38:14-28 in Brief

King Zedekiah once more asked Jeremiah for advice. Jeremiah told Zedekiah that if he would unconditionally surrender Jerusalem to the Babylonians, they would neither burn the city nor kill him. Fearing mistreatment from the citizens who had deserted to Nebuchadnezzar, Zedekiah would not trust Jeremiah's advice.

Zedekiah also feared his advisers and noblemen. He insisted that Jeremiah must promise not to tell the whole nature of their conference but only the part that had to do with the place of his confinement.



10 Judgment and Justice

Jeremiah 39—45

a Jerusalem Captured (39:1-10)

In the ninth year of Zedekiah king of Judah, in the tenth month, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon marched against Jerusalem with his whole army and laid siege to it. And on the ninth day of the fourth month of Zedekiah's eleventh year, the city wall was broken through.

—Jeremiah 39:1b, 2

Nebuchadnezzar personally led the assault against Jerusalem and rebellious Zedekiah (vss. 1, 2). In January 587 B.C., the Babylonian army besieged Judah's capital, hemming Jerusalem in for eighteen months. Finally, in July 586 B.C., the city's defenses gave way.

The Babylonians set up an occupation government with the Middle Gate as its base (vs. 3). This gate probably was near the center of the city in an inner wall between older and newer parts of Jerusalem. This fulfilled one of Jeremiah's first predictions (see 1:15).

Nergal-Sharezer [NUR-gal—sha-REE-zur], an official who sat in authority in the gate, was Nebuchadnezzar's son-in-law. Later he would revolt and assassinate Nebuchadnezzar's son to become emperor himself.

With the Babylonian officials seated formally in the center of civic life (see sidebar "Thrones in the City Gates," Lesson 1), King Zedekiah's government was officially over. Zedekiah and some other officials attempted to escape by night through the king's garden on the east side of the city (39:4). They may have slipped out through the Fountain Gate, hoping to sneak across the Kidron Valley and over the ridge of the Mount of Olives. Then they could have vanished into the wilds of the Jordan Valley and beyond.

Ask Yourself . . . *What happens when I try to avoid the consequences of my actions?*

Babylonian troops spotted and captured the fugitives (vs. 5). Then they moved the leading families some two hundred miles north to Riblah on the Orontes River. Nebuchadnezzar had moved his main camp there so he could keep his eye on Syria as well as Palestine.

UNDER SIEGE

Siege warfare played a major role in ancient conflicts. City walls kept invaders out, but they could also isolate the inhabitants within. By laying siege to a city, an attacking army could cut off the defenders' food, supplies, and—if possible—water. A siege could be a long and tedious means to weaken a city, but certain tactics helped the process along:

- Iron-tipped battering rams were swung from ropes or rolled forward on wheels to break through the city gates.
- Soldiers dug trenches beneath city walls to weaken their foundations. When they burned the support beams, the walls would collapse.
- Fires were also set against the base of the wall to weaken the sandstone or limestone blocks.
- With towers rolled into place, attackers could shoot arrows at defenders from the same height as the top of the wall.
- While archers cleared defenders away from the wall, soldiers climbed numerous ladders in an attempt to overrun the top.

A favorite Babylonian tactic was to build up a ramp of soil and debris against the weakest point of the wall. It could take months, but eventually the attackers could rush up the ramp and over the city's walls. Meanwhile, they denuded the surrounding countryside of trees to acquire material for building the ramp. Another result was that the process demoralized the defenders.

In typical Middle Eastern practice, Nebuchadnezzar dealt with the rebellious Judahites by executing the royal household. Zedekiah, however, suffered something worse than death. He was forced to watch his sons put to death, and then his eyes were put out, possibly by Nebuchadnezzar himself (vss. 6, 7). Jeremiah had predicted that Zedekiah would meet Nebuchadnezzar face-to-face and go to Babylon (see 32:3, 4). Ezekiel had predicted that though Zedekiah would be taken to Babylon, he would never see it (see Ezek. 12:13).

The Babylonian army burned the palace of Zedekiah and all the residential areas of the city (Jer. 39:8). Other biblical references speak of them burning the temple (see II Kings 25:9; II Chron. 36:19; Jer.

52:13). The temple is not mentioned in this chapter, perhaps because the focus is on Zedekiah's judgment.

While Nebuchadnezzar coordinated all Babylonian exploits from his base in Riblah, Nebuzaradan commanded the forces in Judah (Jer. 39:9). His title, "commander of the imperial guard," literally meant "chief butcher." This was a household title that through the centuries had become an exalted post. Nebuzaradan was responsible for identifying and deporting the most productive citizens. The peasants were permitted to remain and cultivate the ground (vs. 10).

To warn other nations against rebelling, the Babylonians intended to leave Jerusalem an unpopulated pile of rubble. Though they allowed people to remain in Judah, they didn't want to leave any strong-willed or influential people who might stir up trouble.

b Jeremiah Freed (39:11-18)

Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had given these orders about Jeremiah through Nebuzaradan commander of the imperial guard: "Take him and look after him; don't harm him but do for him whatever he asks."

—Jeremiah 39:11, 12

Nebuchadnezzar had heard about Jeremiah's attempts to convince Judah to submit to Babylon. Certainly those who had listened to the advice of his prophecies and fled Jerusalem must have explained to the Babylonians why they had deserted (see 38:19; 39:9). The Babylonians may have had other sources of intelligence inside Jerusalem who constantly kept them informed of the plans and morale of the inhabitants.

So when Nebuchadnezzar dispatched Nebuzaradan to oversee the final stages of the siege and destruction of Jerusalem, he gave him specific orders about how to deal with the prophet Jeremiah. Nebuzaradan was to be personally responsible for Jeremiah, protecting him and doing anything that the prophet asked (vss. 11, 12).

No one else in Jerusalem received red-carpet treatment except Jeremiah, the prophet of the Lord. For twenty-three years—ever since the death of King Josiah—Jeremiah had been rejected and abused by the people of God. In July 586 B.C., three delegates of the region's most powerful leader escorted Jeremiah from his place of confinement in the courtyard of the palace guards (vss. 13, 14a).

It appears that Nebuzaradan lost track of Jeremiah for awhile amid all the confusion of the takeover of Jerusalem and had to release him a second time (see 40:1). Eventually Jeremiah was sent for safekeeping to Gedaliah, who had been handpicked by Nebuchadnezzar to become governor of the province of Judah (39:14b; see 40:7). Jeremiah

probably felt secure in Gedaliah's care. His father, Ahikam, had protected Jeremiah from his enemies during the days of King Jehoiakim (see 26:24). Furthermore, Gedaliah's grandfather was Shaphan, King Josiah's secretary who read the newly found Book of the Law to the young king years before (see II Kings 22:12).

While King Zedekiah and others who had rejected God's Word through Jeremiah were marched in disgrace to Babylon, Jeremiah was permitted to stay in Judah "among his own people" (39:14). Despite the harsh messages the Lord had him deliver, Jeremiah had always loved his fellow Judahites, and preferred to be with them, even if it meant suffering with them. Sometimes God calls believers to minister to people who have hurt or offended them in the past.

As a further example of God's protection of those who obeyed Him during the siege, Jeremiah had given a private word of encouragement from the Lord to the Ethiopian eunuch Ebed-Melech (vss. 15-18; see 38:7-13). Ebed- Melech faced the Babylonian invasion confident of the Lord's protection. King Zedekiah had refused to accept a similar guarantee (see 38:17-23).

Ask Yourself . . . *Am I confident that God will take care of me, even during times of great loss?*

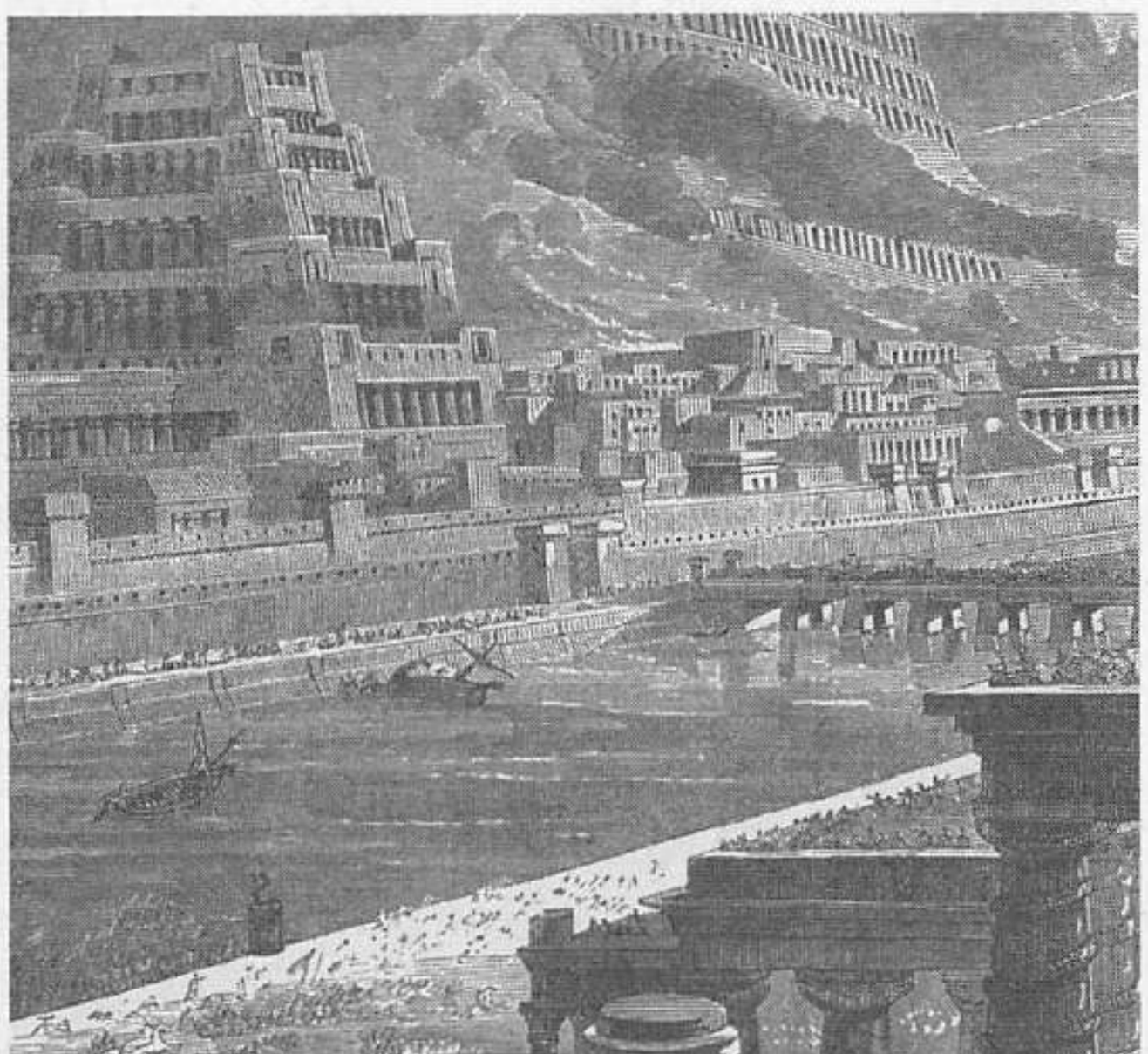
C Jeremiah Honored (40:1-6)

The commander gave him provisions and a present and let him go. So Jeremiah went to Gedaliah son of Ahikam at Mizpah and stayed with him among the people who were left behind in the land.

—Jeremiah 40:5b, 6

Jeremiah was apparently swept up with the mass of deportees and marched in chains to Ramah, about five miles north of Jerusalem (vs. 1). Ramah—Samuel's hometown during the last days of the judges (see I Sam. 7:17)—probably lay beyond

A drawing of Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon at the time of the captivity



Art: © DigitalVision/Getty Images

the radius of destruction created by the eighteen-month siege of the capital. It was used as the staging area to prepare the captives for their journey to Babylon.

When Nebuzaradan finally found Jeremiah in the detention camp at Ramah, he released him from the manacles on his wrists and delivered a prepared speech. The Babylonians did more than merely free Jeremiah; they honored him as a hero. It's likely that many of the Judahite captives heard Nebuchadnezzar's chief officer respectfully address the prophet they had so long despised.

Nebuzaradan showed the skills of international diplomacy necessary for communicating effectively to people of different cultures. He used the prophet's own expressions to phrase his statements about Jeremiah and the fall of Jerusalem (Jer. 40:2, 3). He credited Jeremiah's God with punishing His own people, even calling Him by name—the LORD (Yahweh). Nebuzaradan may have believed the Lord was a local deity—one god among thousands—or he may have been speaking as a politician.

Nebuzaradan offered Jeremiah his choice of retirement locations. The prophet could go to Babylon, where Nebuzaradan would look after him, or he could choose to live anywhere among the remnant who remained in Judah (vs. 4). It must have been immediately clear to Nebuzaradan that Jeremiah intended to stay. The Babylonian official advised him to attach himself to Gedaliah, the governor (vs. 5a). That was the closest thing to Babylonian protection Nebuzaradan could provide for Jeremiah if he remained in Judah. But because Nebuchadnezzar had granted Jeremiah full freedom, Nebuzaradan added, "Or go anywhere else you please."

Nebuzaradan honored Jeremiah with both supplies to sustain him until he could get settled and a present (vs. 5b). The gift showed the esteem in which Nebuchadnezzar and his court held Jeremiah, in contrast to the scorn the last kings of

THOSE MYSTERIOUS CHALDEANS

Jeremiah preferred to call the Babylonians "Chaldeans." Technically, the Chaldeans (Hebrew, *Kasdim*) were one ethnic group within the Babylonian empire. They were a fierce tribal group in southern Babylon who rose to control the government in the eighth century B.C. Nebuchadnezzar was a Chaldean, so it's easy to understand why his contemporaries considered "Chaldean" a synonym for "Babylonian."

"Chaldean" also developed a technical meaning that Daniel employed. He referred to the astrologers and priests of Babylon as "Chaldeans" (Dan. 2:2; 4:7; 5:7, 11). That use of the word contained no ethnic categorization.

Judah had heaped on him.

Ask Yourself . . . *How can I honor those who faithfully minister the Word of God?*

Jeremiah went to Gedaliah, the newly appointed governor, in Mizpah (vs. 6). Mizpah was a town two miles north of Ramah. Both were in the old tribal territory of Benjamin. The Babylonians wanted Jerusalem to remain a desolate warning to others who might consider rebelling. So the administrative center of Judah had to be located elsewhere. Many leading cities to the south, such as Azekah, Lachish, and Hebron, had been destroyed early in the war. King Asa had fortified Mizpah as a border post three hundred years earlier when Judah and Israel skirmished frequently in the area (see II Chron. 16:6)

d Gedaliah Assassinated (40:7—41:3)

Ishmael son of Nethaniah and the ten men who were with him got up and struck down Gedaliah son of Ahikam, the son of Shaphan, with the sword, killing the one whom the king of Babylon had appointed as governor over the land.
—Jeremiah 41:2

After the Babylonian army departed with Zedekiah and all the captives, bands of guerrilla fighters began to emerge from hiding in the Judean countryside. They had enough confidence in Gedaliah to join him rather than oppose him. But the situation in Judah was pathetic: the population consisted of peasants; the capital was tiny Mizpah instead of impressive Jerusalem (40:7, 8).

One thing the beleaguered remnant had going for them was a good governor. The armed bands that joined Gedaliah knew him as the son of Ahikam, an official under kings Josiah and Jehoiakim. Some of those who gathered together may have been concerned about the support Gedaliah's father had shown for Jeremiah, who was probably perceived by resistance fighters as a collaborator with the enemy.

The five named leaders plus the "sons of Ephai" introduced the strength of arms alongside Gedaliah's delegated authority. They must have been uneasy about their future: Gedaliah felt compelled to swear an oath assuring them that the Babylonians weren't going to harm them (vs. 9). He urged them to settle down in the towns and harvest the summer crops of grapes, olives, and fruit that had survived the turmoil. Gedaliah promised to act as a go-between for the remnant with their Babylonian rulers (vs. 10).

With the good news of some stability again in Judah, a second wave of fugitives returned from the nations where they had fled during the Babylonian invasion (vs.

11). By the end of the summer of 586 B.C., enough people were living in the countryside to harvest large quantities of summer fruit and make a great deal of wine (vs. 12). The people had some supplies to face the coming winter.

But not everything was rosy. Johanan, representing all of the guerrilla commanders, brought a warning to Gedaliah. Ishmael, one of Johanan's compatriots, wanted to kill Gedaliah at the instigation of the king of Ammon (vss. 13, 14). Johanan proposed killing Ishmael and disposing of his body secretly to preserve the shaky stability of the remnant community (vs. 15). Johanan must have felt the ends justified the means.

When the goal is something good, it can be tempting to use whatever means available to accomplish that good. But rationalizations like these can lead to even greater problems in the future.

Gedaliah resisted Johanan's proposal. Apparently he possessed information contrary to Johanan's about Ishmael (vs. 16).

Ask Yourself . . . *Have I ever compromised myself for a good goal?*

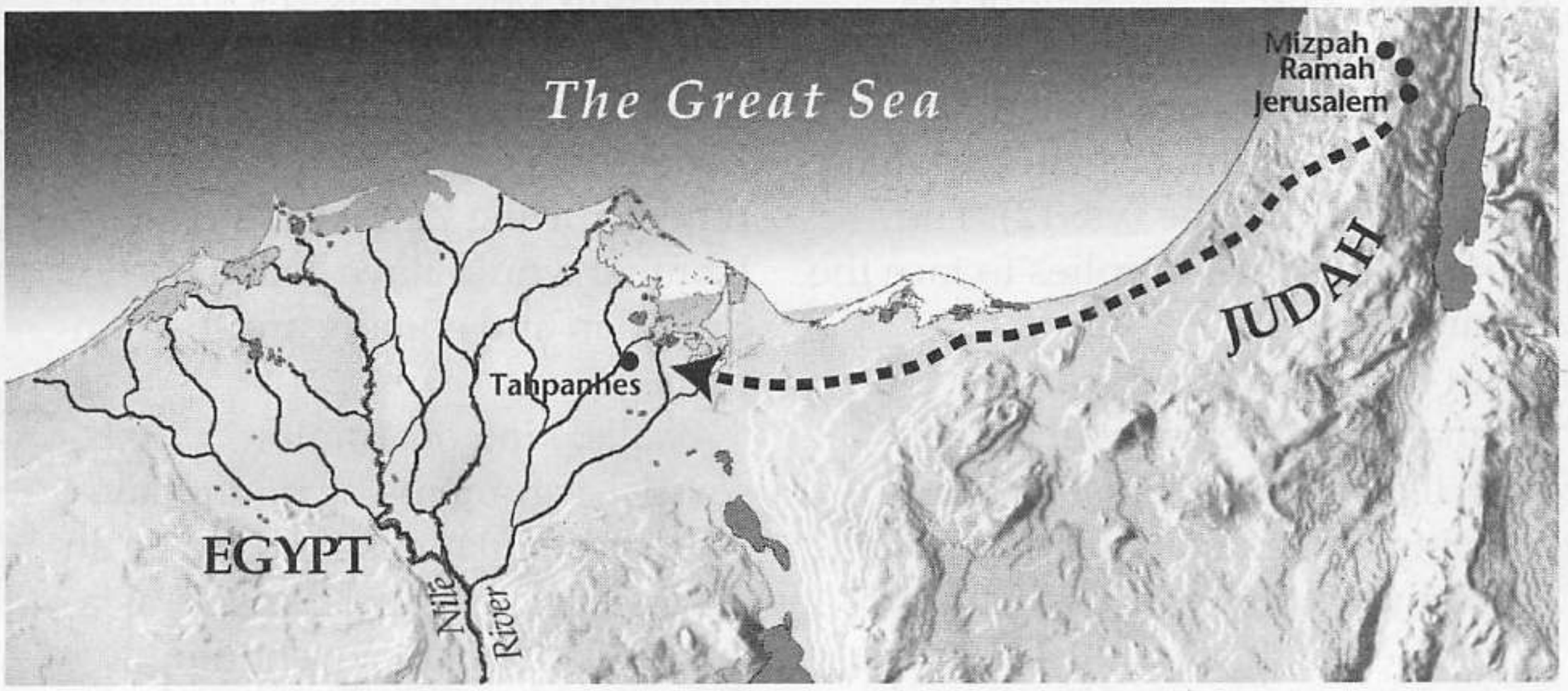
The governor was naive to think that he had no mortal enemies. Some observe that Gedaliah's weakness was an inability to diagnose situations and people. Because he was too emotionally involved with his work, he couldn't see the danger involved. This mistake cost him his life.

Ishmael was a descendant of Elishama, one of David's younger sons (41:1, see II Sam. 5:16). He also had been an officer in King Zedekiah's army at some point. If he reflected King Zedekiah's policies, Ishmael would have been pro-Egyptian and equally anti-Babylonian.

Baalis, king of Ammon, had several arguments he might have used to persuade Ishmael to be an assassin: (1) Ishmael himself, as a descendant of David, should have been governor; (2) Gedaliah was a traitor because he cooperated with Babylon and protected Jeremiah; and (3) Judah should be free from Babylonian domination.

Ishmael and his ten companions violated Middle Eastern standards of hospitality by savagely murdering their host at his table (Jer. 41:2). To complete the job, Ishmael and crew killed everyone associated with Gedaliah's government, including a small number of Babylonian guards (vs. 3). Jews traditionally commemorate the assassination of Gedaliah on the third day of the seventh month, during the ten days of repentance and reflection between Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year's day) and Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement).

Ishmael had the mind of a terrorist. He committed a symbolic act of violence that could produce only bad results. He didn't seem able to imagine what might happen next. Accordingly, he was doomed to be a pawn in the hands of an unscrupulous person like King Baalis of Ammon.



Gedaliah began his provincial government from Mizpah. After he was assassinated by Ishmael, the remnant feared Babylonian reprisal and forced Jeremiah and Baruch to accompany them on a flight to Egypt.

Ask Yourself . . . *What usually happens when I act before I think?*

Jeremiah 41:4—45:5 in Brief

Once Ishmael got started, his blood lust led him to further senseless murders. Johanan led the other guerrilla captains against Ishmael and delivered his captives. Then the remnant community, fearing what Babylon would do in retaliation, made plans to escape to Egypt.

Those who fled to Egypt forced Jeremiah and Baruch to go with them. Meanwhile, the Hebrews resumed worship of the Queen of Heaven, reckoning that the Babylonian capture of Jerusalem occurred because they were not protected for having neglected to worship her. Jeremiah found himself back where he had started, prophesying judgment because of persistent idolatry.

Chapter 45, addressed to Baruch years earlier, reflected the prophet's emotions in Egypt. Bearing God's word to rebellious people was a hard, unrewarding task. Though it led to disaster for the hardhearted masses, the prophet himself would survive.

11

God's Justice among the Nations

Jeremiah 46—52

a Egypt's Defeat at Carchemish (46:1-12)

You try many medicines in vain; there is no healing for you. The nations will hear of your shame; your cries will fill the earth.

—Jeremiah 46:11b, 12a

Jeremiah 46—51 contains a collection of prophecies about the nations surrounding Judah. The nations are covered (generally) from west to east, with the exception of Babylon, which is saved for last. The ten nations addressed are Egypt, Philistia, Moab, Ammon, Edom, Damascus (Syria), Kedar and Hazor together, Elam, and Babylon.

The Lord had more to say to Jeremiah about Egypt and Babylon than the other nations. Egypt was judged because its military might had tempted the kings of Judah to depend on treaties rather than God. The Babylonians were judged because they had abused their power, thinking they were accountable to no one. They would have to answer for failing to see that the Lord is sovereign over all the earth. He is not a local tribal deity, subservient to the Babylonian gods.

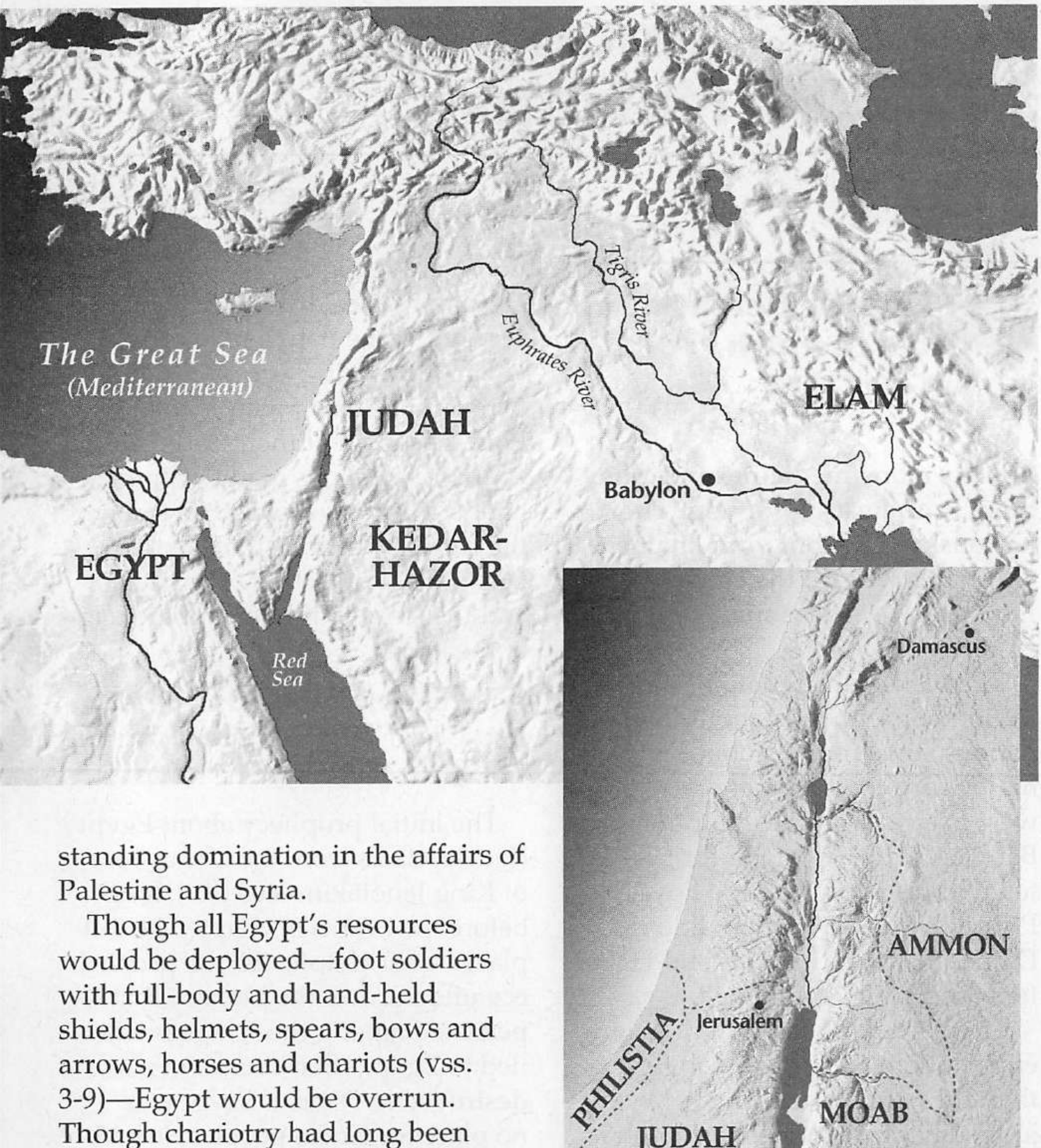
The Jews living as captives in Babylon without a temple to the Lord learned that their God did not dwell in buildings made by human hands. The heavens are His throne; the earth is His footstool (see Isa. 66:1). The destruction of Jerusalem and the temple did not end the reign of the Lord.

Ask Yourself . . . *Have I ever tried to "put God in a box"? If so, what were the limitations of that box?*

The initial prophecy about Egypt (Jer. 46) dates from the fourth year of King Jehoiakim (605 B.C.), long before the events of chapter 44. But placed after chapter 44, the prophecy underscores the idolatry that persisted among the refugees who fled to Egypt after Jerusalem was destroyed in 586 B.C. Egypt was no place for God's people. He had redeemed them from there once; they should not have gone back.

Jeremiah 46:2-12 poetically describes the Egyptian humiliation at the hands of the Babylonians at the battle of Carchemish. This battle brought an end to Egypt's long-

The Nations of Jeremiah's Prophecies



standing domination in the affairs of Palestine and Syria.

Though all Egypt's resources would be deployed—foot soldiers with full-body and hand-held shields, helmets, spears, bows and arrows, horses and chariots (vss. 3-9)—Egypt would be overrun. Though chariotry had long been an Egyptian military hallmark (see Exod. 14:5-9, 23-25), when the battle began, charioteers turned away in sheer terror, leading the foot soldiers in panicked retreat (Jer. 46:5).

Jeremiah pictured the army of Egypt stumbling and falling near the source of the Euphrates. The Babylonians would surge over the Egyptians like the Nile in full flood (vss. 6-8). Verse 9 pictures the survi-

vors in total disarray, fleeing south as fast as they can. Verse 10 is the bottom line: it wasn't the Babylonians who had done this—the Lord had arranged for Egypt's defeat to avenge its sins with battlefield sacrifices.

Egyptian civilization may have been as beautiful as a virgin (vs. 11), but its moral and spiritual decay had become intolerable to God. No remedy could save Egypt; God would punish and humiliate the nation (vs. 12).

Jeremiah's prophecies differ from others in that he paid little attention to the spiritual causes of God's judgment. He simply described the judgments, assuming his readers knew the specifics of the nations' guilt. It is intriguing to notice that God, who created all the peoples of the world, holds them all accountable—not just His chosen people.

Ask Yourself . . . *What was the "Egypt" from which God delivered me? Have I ever wanted to return?*

b Egypt's Defeat at Home (46:13-24)

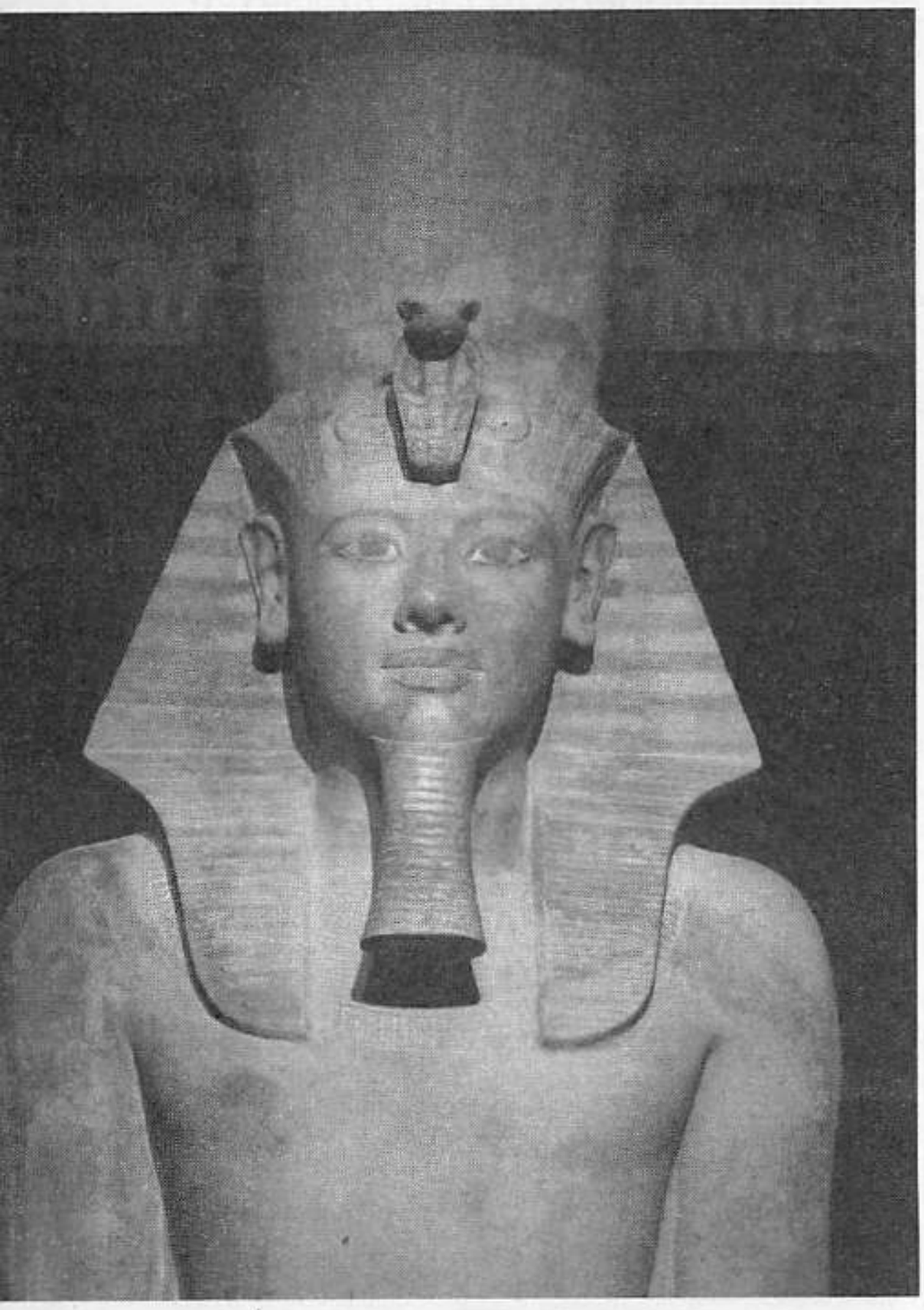
Egypt will hiss like a fleeing serpent as the enemy advances in force; they will come against her with axes, like men who cut down trees. —Jeremiah 46:22

The events of chapters 43 and 44 probably set the stage for Jeremiah's second prophecy in chapter 46. It, too, was against Egypt. Both sections cite the same place-names (46:14; compare 44:1): Migdol, an Egyptian city, had a Canaanite name that meant "watchtower," suggesting that it may have been an outpost on the eastern border of Egypt. If so, that would explain why it is first in the list of cities warned about the coming Babylonians. Memphis was the main city in Lower Egypt, situated on the Nile just before it divided into the delta region. Tahpanhes, where the fugitives from Judah settled (see 43:7), was a frontier city in the eastern delta region near modern Port Said.

Jeremiah warned these three cities to prepare themselves for the coming of Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians. Yet, no matter what defenses they might mount against the invaders, the Egyptian forces would ultimately end up in disarray—not because of the Babylonians, but because the Lord Himself would be fighting against them (46:15).

Many ancient armies were composed primarily of hired mercenaries from foreign lands. Jeremiah imagined Pharaoh's mercenaries deciding to desert and go home, criticizing Pharaoh for being all talk and no action (vss. 16, 17).

In this account of international power struggles, Jeremiah seemed to make a point by calling the Lord "the King" (vs. 18; see 8:19; 10:7, 10; 48:15; 51:57). Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar did what had been



The coiled asp on the forehead was part of the royal insignia of Pharaoh. Young Tutankhamen's headdress sports a serpent as evidence of his own divinity. Along with Judah, Egypt was rebuked by Jeremiah for its idolatry.

decreed by the Lord Almighty, even though they thought they were fulfilling their own agendas. God had raised up Nebuchadnezzar to stand out like Mount Tabor and Mount Carmel, two of the most prominent and impregnable mountains in Israel (46:18). Egypt was about to be laid waste (vs. 19).

Verses 20-24 combine a number of metaphors that are colorful and thought provoking. (1) Egypt was like "a beautiful heifer" (vs. 20)—valuable, yet too gentle to defend itself and dangerously attractive to a bull like Nebuchadnezzar. (2) The news of the coming invaders would be like the loud buzz of pesky gadflies. Such news would spook both the "beautiful heifer" and (3) the "fattened calves" (that is, Egypt's mercenary armies). They would all stampede rather than stand and fight (vs. 21). (4) The snake, a prominent symbol of Egypt, appeared even in the pharaohs' insignia. Egypt would sound like an angry serpent, hissing as it tried to escape (vs. 22a). (5) Egypt would be like a forest felled by an army of woodcutters carrying axes (vss. 22b, 23). A weapon previously unseen in Judah or Egypt, the battle-ax was used by the Babylonians. (6) Conquered Egypt would look like a devastated land mercilessly stripped by a plague of locusts (vs. 23b).

C Hope for Egypt and Israel (46:25-28)

"Egypt will be inhabited as in times past," declares the LORD. "Do not be fear, Jacob my servant; do not be dismayed, Israel. I will surely save you out of a distant place."
—Jeremiah 46:26b, 27a

Jeremiah's third prophecy concerning Egypt starts with the immediate threat of destruction by Babylon. But then it jumps into the future to offer words of hope for Egypt

and Israel. Though the Lord was the sovereign King of all nations on earth, He was uniquely related by covenant to Israel. His covenant with Israel stated that those nations that blessed Israel would experience God's blessing, while nations that cursed Israel would know His curse (see Gen. 12:3).

Egypt had done both. It had cursed Israel by enslaving the Israelites on the one hand (see Deut. 16:12) and seducing them on the other (see Num. 11:5, 6). For those actions, Egypt deserved God's curse. But Egypt also had welcomed Jacob and his sons. It had given them the best grazing lands and sheltered them from famine (see Exod. 1:1-7). Perhaps for that reason, God showed mercy toward Egypt and promised it a future, though a limited one (see Isa. 19:24, 25; Ezek. 29:13-16).

But first would come punishment. The Egyptian gods, Pharaoh, and all the nations that counted on Egypt would be punished. Nebuchadnezzar's conquest would reach far south into Upper Egypt, all the way to Thebes, whose chief god was Amon (Jer. 46:25, 26). Egypt would experience a great deal of discipline before any blessings. The fulfillment of this prophecy began at Carchemish when Egypt was crushed by Nebuchadnezzar.

Egypt, the land of bondage, could hardly be mentioned without also speaking of Israel's deliverance. In this case, Jeremiah's prophecies about Egypt conclude with a view toward Israel's future restoration.

EGYPTIAN DUALITY

The ancient Egyptians called their country Tawy, which means "the two lands." The Hebrew name for Egypt, Mizraim, is neither singular nor plural, but dual. (Some Hebrew nouns indicate a pair, such as eyes and ears.) Egypt was formed by the combination of two lands, generally called Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt, which were united about 3000 B.C.

Lower Egypt included the delta region and the northern part of the Nile River. Upper Egypt included the southern river valley and surrounding desert as far inland as the first waterfalls of the Nile. Jeremiah 46 alludes to the two regions of Egypt by focusing on the major city of each: Memphis was queen of the Nile delta in Lower Egypt (vss. 14, 19); Thebes ruled the Nile Valley in Upper Egypt (vs. 25).

Verses 27 and 28 are almost identical to 30:10, 11. By repeating the encouraging message of these verses, Jeremiah underscored its importance. This promise could calm Israel's

fears that it had no future.

God still had a plan for the nation. His people would be gathered from every place where they had been scattered and would be brought back safe and sound to the promised land. Because Jeremiah spoke of Israel, some say this promise applied to both the northern kingdom (dispersed by Assyria in 722 B.C.) and the southern kingdom (deported by Babylon in 586 B.C.).

Jeremiah indicated that God's wrath was not excessive or vindictive against Israel and Judah. They received the just consequences for their sins—discipline meant to purify the nation of its wicked ways so it would be true to the Lord in the future. God is a God of justice, but He desires results to come from discipline, not empty punishment.

Ask Yourself . . . *How have I benefited from God's discipline?*

Jeremiah 47:1—52:27a in Brief

Chapters 47—51 continue Jeremiah's prophecies of other nations of the Middle East. Philistia faced threats from Egypt on the south and Babylon on the north. Philistia's traditional allies, Tyre and Sidon, would be no help to her this time.

Jeremiah warned the Moabites of coming judgment. He included many place-names in his prophecy and filled it with poetic imagery. The Moabites, distant relations to the Israelites, were descendants of Lot's incestuous relationship with his older daughter (see Gen. 19:37). During Joshua's time, the Moabite women had lured the men of Israel into idolatry (see Num. 25:1-3). Jeremiah said Moab would be judged for its pride—a flaw that caused Moab to defy the Lord.

Ammon also was distantly related to Israel, having descended from Lot through his younger daughter (see Gen. 19:38). Jeremiah condemned the Ammonites for annexing territory God had given to the tribe of Gad on the east bank of the Jordan River.

The Edomites were the descendants of Jacob's twin brother, Esau (see chap. 36). Jeremiah's prophecy parallels Obadiah's: God would drive Edom from its impregnable rocky fortresses and the land would be desolate.

Damascus, the capital of Syria would be burned. Kedar and Hazor, centers for nomadic tribes in the Arabian desert, would fall to Babylon. Tents, flocks, and camels would be dispersed.

Jeremiah also prophesied about Elam, perhaps Babylon's strongest rival at the time. Though famed for their skills in archery, the Elamites still would not be able to prevail against Babylon. Jeremiah may have included this country far to the east to make a point: no one would frustrate God's purposes being fulfilled by Babylon.

Chapters 50 and 51 bring God's judgment full circle. Babylon, the very instrument of God's wrath on the rest of the nations, would also be judged. The gods the Babylo-

nians thought had enabled them to conquer the nations would be powerless against the living God. The Lord had used Babylon to destroy others, but the day was coming when He would bring the Medes (with Persian allies) to destroy Babylon. Jeremiah sent his prophecies about Babylon to the Jewish exiles in Babylon to encourage them.

Chapter 52 describes the capture of Zedekiah and the pillaging of the temple. Because he did not take Jeremiah's advice and surrender to the Babylonians peacefully, the king of Judah suffered incredible loss. Before his eyes, his sons were killed, perhaps by Nebachudnezzar himself. And then Zedekiah lost his eyes and was carried off into captivity. The Babylonians then pillaged the temple and burned it to the ground. Only the poor were allowed to remain in Jerusalem.



Judah in Captivity (52:27b-34)

This is the number of the people Nebuchadnezzar carried into exile: in the seventh year, 3,023 Jews; in Nebuchadnezzar's eighteenth year, 832 people from Jerusalem; in his twenty-third year, 745 Jews taken into exile by Nebuzaradan the commander of the imperial guard. There were 4,600 people in all.

—Jeremiah 52:28-30

The Book of Jeremiah ends with a sober summation of events. For forty years—from 626 to 586 B.C.—Jeremiah had warned Judah of God's coming judgment at the hands of the Babylonians. Because the people refused to listen to him, the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and deported its citizens.

Someone other than Jeremiah wrote chapter 52 (see 51:64), adding it to the book after Jehoiachin died (52:34). It nearly duplicates the text of II Kings 24:18—25:21, suggesting that God led a later writer to include that section as an epilogue to show how thoroughly Jeremiah's predictions came true.

Jeremiah 52 records three separate deportations from Judah that brought 4,600 people to Babylon (vss. 27b-30). Yet this figure differs significantly from the numbers listed in II Kings 24:14, where it is reported that 10,000 were deported in one campaign alone (597 B.C.). Some explain this discrepancy by saying that Jeremiah 52 counted only adult male Jews, but not the others taken captive—foreign mercenaries, immigrant artisans, women, and children.

Eleven years later still more people were taken from Judah to Babylon (Jer. 52:29), though the reported number seems quite small next to statements like "Nebuzaradan . . . carried into exile to Babylon the people who remained in the city, along with those who had gone over to him, and the rest of the people" (see 39:9). It's not clear why the number doesn't seem to match the description. Some think the number 832 points to a minor group of

captives that otherwise would have gone unnoticed, though that explanation still would not clarify why the major group was not mentioned. At any rate, the three numbers add up to the given total.

Still later, in 581 B.C., the Babylonians deported another 745 Jews (52:30), perhaps following the assassination of Gedaliah.

Thirty-seven years after Jehoiachin had been carried off to Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar's son, Evil-Merodach, became emperor (vs. 31). Perhaps to celebrate the passing of an era and his own coronation, Evil-Merodach released Jehoiachin from prison. Imprisoned since he was eighteen, Jehoiachin would have been fifty-five when he was given an honored place at the royal table (vss. 32-34). Even when we face long-term consequences of sin, we can remember that better days can yet come.

The writer seems to hint that Jehoiachin's turn of fate pointed toward a better day for all the exiles. Jehoiachin's release suggested that Jeremiah's prophecies of future blessings would come true—just as his predictions of judgment had.

Ask Yourself . . . *What unrealized dreams have I grieved over?*



AT HOME IN BABYLON

The deportees from Judah were forced by their captors to settle southeast of Babylon between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Nippur was the largest city in the area. Ezekiel identified a community of Jewish captives at Tel Abib along the Kebar River (Ezek. 1:1; 3:15). The Kebar was a navigable canal that exited the Euphrates in Babylon and rejoined it many miles downstream.

Little is known of the life of Jewish exiles in Babylon, though an anonymous psalmist remembered sadly, "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion" (Ps. 137:1). Years later when the Jews were permitted to return to their homeland, many chose to stay in Babylon (Ezra 1:5, 6). Those who were young and strong enough to travel the distance to Judah had been born and raised in Babylon. They had never seen Judah. Many of them would have been reluctant to leave familiar surroundings to travel to a strange place that had yet to recover from the ravages of a bygone war.

The Book of Lamentations

The Book of Lamentations is a highly personal response to national tragedy. Through the vehicle of five mournful poems, or funeral laments, the author expressed his own and his people's anguish over the destruction of Jerusalem, including the temple, at the hands of the Babylonians in 586 B.C.

In this sad postscript to the Book of Jeremiah, the reader encounters the awful consequences of rebellion against God. Even though almost nine hundred years earlier Moses had warned the Israelites of the terrible consequences that would result from disobedience, their allegiance to God grew cold as idols claimed the place of preeminence in the religious life of the nation.

Ultimately, Lamentations is a reminder that, for good or ill, God keeps His promises. This message is repeated over and over in God's covenantal relationship with Israel—disobedience brings judgment, repentance brings restoration and blessing. Even amid the rubble and ruin of burned-out lives, there is always hope.

It was this truth that caused the Jews held captive in Babylon to cry out to God in confession and repentance, asking for renewal and restoration.

In this respect, the Book of Lamentations is a call to our time to repent of our sins, both personal and national, and to renew our commitment to follow God. Only then can we enjoy the fruits of God's favor, among which are peace, joy, and hope. It was a lesson the people of Israel learned the hard way.

Author and Date

While this book does not identify its author, tradition names Jeremiah as the writer. This tradition goes back to the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament that was completed in the third century B.C.

In the introduction to Lamentations, the Septuagint says, "And it came to pass, after Israel was taken captive and Jerusalem had become desolate, that Jeremiah sat weeping, and lamented with this lamentation over Jerusalem and said . . ." (and Lamentations 1:1 follows).

Internal evidence also suggests that Jeremiah, "the weeping prophet," was the author. In the first place, he is connected with this type of literature in II Chronicles 35:25a: "Jeremiah composed laments for Josiah, and to this day all the male and female singers commemorate Josiah in the laments."

Furthermore, Jeremiah's authorship is supported by a number of comparisons between the Book of Jeremiah and the Book of Lamentations. Both refer to weeping and to eyes that overflow with tears (see Jer. 9:1, 18; 13:17; 14:17; Lam. 1:16; 2:11, 18).

In both books, the author appears to have been an eyewitness to the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem and the atrocities that followed (see Jer. 19:9; Lam. 2:20; 4:10).

If Jeremiah was the author of Lamentations, then the date of composition was sometime after the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. The occasion for the book's writing was clearly the desolation of the sacred city and the captivity of its people. The depth of feeling expressed in the book could only have come from one whose eyes had seen and whose heart had felt the pain and anguish of Jerusalem's utter desolation.

Style and Structure

Lamentations consists of five chapters, each of which is a funeral dirge or lament in the form of a poem or song. Chapters 1, 2, and 4 begin with a Hebrew word translated "How?"— a standard cry of grief to the Hebrews. The book's title in Hebrew is derived from this word.

These poems are recited in a kind of "limping meter," a rhythmic pattern in which the second half of a line of verse has one less beat than the first.

In Bible times, this type of poem was used by mourning women at wakes for the dead. The purpose of such poems was to eulogize the deceased and to emphasize the tragedy of their loss. To Jeremiah, the melancholy dirge seemed an appropriate vehicle to mourn the demise of his beloved Jerusalem and the aftermath of its "death."

Chapters 1—4 are alphabetical acrostics. Each of the twenty-two verses in chapters 1, 2, and 4 begins with one of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. In chapter 3, the climax of Jeremiah's lament, sixty-six verses are divided into twenty-two three-verse sets, with each verse of a set beginning with the same Hebrew letter. The acrostic pattern was most likely designed to help the reader remember the content of each lament.

In certain respects, the last chapter of Lamentations departs from the form and content of the first four chapters. For instance, chapter 5 is not an acrostic, Additionally, it contains a pointed prayer of confession ("Woe to us, for we have sinned!" 5:16) and a prayer of petition ("Restore us to yourself, LORD," 5:21)—features not seen in the earlier chapters.

In the words of Lamentations, we hear the heartfelt response of Jeremiah to the plight of his people and his desire that they turn back to God. We see the complete process of grief that must be undertaken if healing from tragedy is ever to occur.

12 Jeremiah's Lament

Lamentations 1—3

a Jerusalem's Desolation (1:1-11)

How deserted lies the city, once so full of people! How like a widow is she, who once was great among the nations! She who was queen among the provinces has now become a slave.

—Lamentations 1:1

In his first lament, Jeremiah painted a vivid picture of the extent of Jerusalem's destruction and desolation. The scene is one of a once-rich city reduced to an utterly impoverished existence. Jeremiah did not diminish what Jerusalem had lost.

The prophet began his eyewitness account by drawing three contrasts between the state of Jerusalem before the conquest and its state afterward. First, he noted that a city once teeming with people had become a ghost town. The best and brightest of the city had been deported to Babylon (vs. 1a). Nebuchadnezzar wanted no one to remain who had the ability to rebuild the city.

Second, he pointed out that a city formerly great among the nations was reduced to the status of a widow (vs. 1b). As some real widows of the day were, Jerusalem was absolutely alone and no longer able to support herself. Jeremiah and

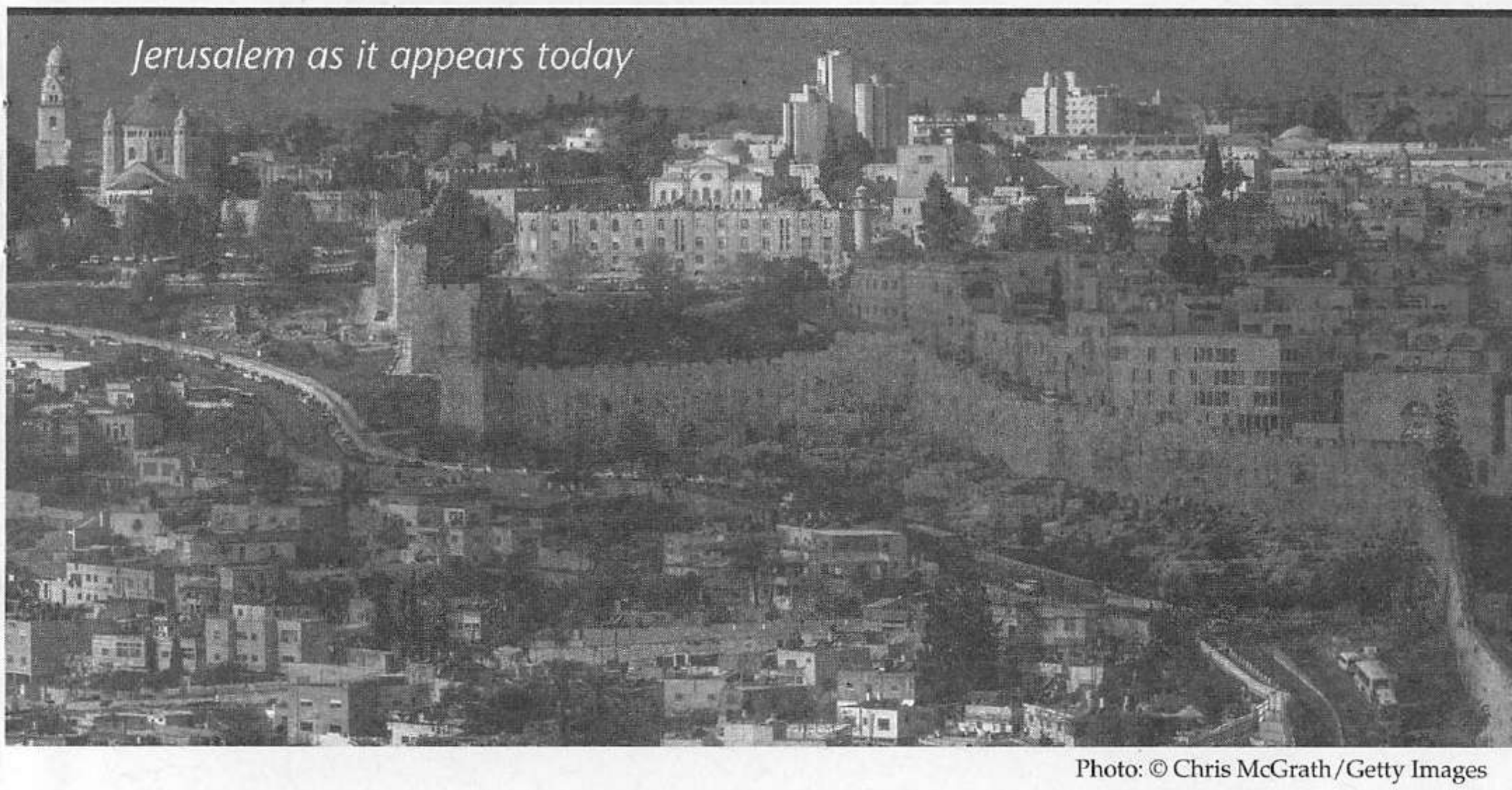


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other writers often endowed Jerusalem with feminine attributes. In the Old Testament, widows, orphans, and aliens were consistently depicted as the poorest and most helpless among the people, often with none but God to be their protector (see Exod. 22:22; Deut. 10:18; Isa. 1:17). Jerusalem had certainly reached this state of absolute dependence upon God.

Sometimes God allows difficult circumstances, even tragedy, into our lives so that we understand how much we need Him.

In a third contrast, Jeremiah highlighted Jerusalem's reversed social position, from queen to slave (Lam. 1:1c). No longer first among the provinces of the land, Jerusalem had become Babylon's serf. The price for Judah's sin was humiliation and loss of face.

Jeremiah followed his description of Jerusalem's desolation with the personified city's response to her plight. Jerusalem wept bitterly and none of her "lovers" (false gods) or former "friends" (political allies) were around to console her (vs. 2). At the time of her greatest need, her lovers had abandoned her and her friends had become traitors.

The test of true friendship often comes during times of trial. Those friends who come to our aid even in embarrassing circumstances are those who can be trusted absolutely.

Ask Yourself . . . *Who has comforted me during times of distress?*

After affording a glimpse of Jerusalem's reaction to her fallen state, Jeremiah returned once again to the extent of the damage done to the city and to Judah as a whole. Under the most extreme conditions, explained the prophet, Judah was uprooted from the land and sent into exile in Babylon, where rest and security were denied her. In weakness and distress, Judah was at the complete mercy of those who would lord it over her (vs. 3). The nation's captivity in Babylon extended from 605 to 538 B.C.

Jeremiah explained that mourning had settled over the once-thriving city now reduced to ruin. The picture is one of city roads untraveled, appointed feasts unattended, city gates (where business was normally conducted) deserted, priests groaning over a destroyed temple and suspended sacrifices, maidens grieving, and the city herself "in bitter anguish" (vs. 4).

God allowed the nation's enemies to conquer Judah and take away her former splendor. In the wake of this defeat, her "children" (residents) were sent captive into exile, while the princes (perhaps Zedekiah's sons and other leaders) fled before the enemy like frightened deer (vss. 5, 6). The sons of Zedekiah were ultimately captured and slaughtered before their father's eyes. Disregard for divine instruction can cause even God's anointed to flee adversaries like panic-stricken animals.

In stark contrast to her current condition of exile and affliction, Jerusalem remembered the former days of wealth and glory. But the memory was bitter and brought

anguish of mind. When she fell into the enemy's hands, there was no help or rescue—only mockery and laughter at her fate (vs. 7).

Without mincing words, the prophet indicted Jerusalem for her guilt before God. Her sin was so great that she was despised by those who formerly honored her. With deep groans, even Jerusalem herself turned away in shame to think of the transgressions that had brought her to such a disastrous end (vs. 8).

Sin may bring momentary gratification, but it never gives ultimate satisfaction, either for individuals or nations. Jerusalem failed to consider the consequences of her sin. Countless warnings had gone unheeded, until a patient God finally said, "Enough!" The time to pay for unrepented sin had come. God's rebellious people were forced to reap the fruit of their iniquity, and the price was great—an astounding fall unbroken by any cushion. Only after the fall did the people cry out for the Lord to consider the depth of their affliction at the hands of their enemies (vs. 9).

Ask Yourself . . . *What sinful attitudes and actions has the Spirit of God pointed out in me?*

Jeremiah outlined two tragic consequences of Jerusalem's sin. First, people once prohibited from entering the temple had plundered its treasures. Too late, the people learned that disobedience brings desecration and destruction. Second, because of their sin, the people were visited by famine. With the onset of the siege by Babylon, food became scarce. In order to stay alive, a despised people resorted to trading their treasures for bread (vss. 10, 11).

Lamentations 1:12-22 in Brief

Continuing to be personified in Jeremiah's first lament, Jerusalem pleaded with those who witnessed God's discipline upon her to have regard for her plight. This is followed by a cry to the Lord for vindication before her enemies. In her suffering, she called for divine retribution against the wickedness of those enemies who rejoiced over her calamity.

b God's Harsh Discipline (2:1-10)

How the Lord has covered the Daughter of Zion with the cloud of his anger! He has hurled down the splendor of Israel from heaven to earth; he has not remembered his footstool in the day of his anger.
—Lamentations 2:1

In the first ten verses of his second lament, Jeremiah zeroed in on the real cause of Jerusalem's destruction—God's judgment of her sin. Jeremiah explained that it was God's anger and wrath that resulted in the catastrophic collapse of the "Daughter of Zion," or the "Daughter of

THE BABYLONIAN SIEGE OF JERUSALEM

The Babylonian Chronicles, imprinted on clay tablets by scribes, left a record of the important events in the kings' reigns. The tablet pictured gives an account of the second siege of Jerusalem, around March 16, 597 B.C. It reads: "In the seventh year, the month Kislev, the king of Akkad [Babylon] mustered his army and . . . encamped against the city of Judah and on the second day of the month Adar he captured the city [and] seized [its] king. A king of his own choice he appointed in the city [and] taking the vast tribute he brought it into Babylon."

While Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king, no doubt eagerly accepted credit for his successful assaults against Jerusalem, Jeremiah was no less eager to set the record straight. The capture of Jerusalem, far from being a suspension of God's sovereignty, was a revelation of His righteousness. Babylon did not win because of its military might; Judah lost because of its sin against God.



Judah" —both references to the city of Jerusalem (vss. 1, 2). Completely ignored in this matter is Nebuchadnezzar and his vaunted war machine.

Ask Yourself . . . *Who has God used to exercise His loving discipline in my life?*

Jeremiah conveyed the overwhelming sense of devastation that he and the people of the city felt in the wake of such disaster. In the prophet's account, Jerusalem had not simply been defeated; she had been "torn down," "swallowed up," "brought her down . . . to the

 Photo: British Museum

ground," "cut off," "destroyed," and "laid waste." And this at the hands of a God who seemed like an enemy who had "burned," "spurned," "rejected," and "abandoned" His people (vss. 2-7).

The impact of God's anger was felt primarily in three realms in Judah: the physical, the personal, and the spiritual. Physically, the city of Jerusalem was ravaged. The structures affected included her dwellings and strongholds (fortifications), walls and gates, palaces, and, worst of all, the temple (vss. 8, 9a).

But the destruction of Jerusalem involved more than just buildings. The kingdom and princes of Judah had been brought down in dishonor. King Zedekiah was dethroned, and he and the royal family sent into exile (vs. 9b). Since the horn was a symbol of strength in the Old Testament, the reference in verse 3 to every horn in Israel being cut off, probably signifies the loss of all leadership in Judah. The few people who remained after the massive deportations to Babylon were left without an earthly shepherd. Even the worthless prophets who had failed to expose the people's sin were cut off from receiving instruction from God (vs. 9c).

The spiritual life of Judah was also affected by God's judgment. In His wrath, God destroyed the temple, His place of meeting with the people. Along with the demolition of the temple, the priests were spurned (vs. 6). Consequently, the law could neither be practiced nor taught, the appointed feasts and Sabbath observances were suspended, the altar was rejected, and the sanctuary was abandoned. Only the voice of a triumphant enemy could be heard in the temple precinct (vs. 7).

It is apparent that the devastation in the land was all-inclusive. It affected physical structures, spiritual and civil institutions, and all the people, great and small. Every leadership group, every high office—prophet, priest, and king—was impacted by the divine judgment.

Ask Yourself . . . *In the past, how has sin affected my health and relationships?*

It is little wonder after all this that Jeremiah pictured the elders sitting silently in dust and sackcloth, both signs of sorrow and suffering (vs. 10; see also Gen. 37:34; Job 2:12, 13; Neh. 9:1). The prophet also pictured the young women with their heads bowed to the ground, apparently rendered mute by the depth of their despair.

Lamentations 2:11-22 in Brief

Jeremiah poured out his heartbroken response to the deprivation of his people, especially the children. The devastation of the city was beyond comparison, a devastation that could have been avoided had the people not failed to comply with God's Word. While Jerusalem's enemies mocked the people in their fallen condition, it was God Himself who had brought this judgment upon Jerusalem's sin. In anguish,

Jeremiah called upon the Lord to consider the wretched scenes of cannibalism, annihilation, and death, which none escaped.

C Jeremiah's Suffering (3:1-18)

I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of the LORD's wrath.
—Lamentations 3:1

In the third lament, Jeremiah expressed his own suffering, and by extension that of his people, in a series of metaphors. This chapter is the pyramid peak of the whole book. The prophet's feelings of abandonment by God come through strongly in this section.

Jeremiah pointedly identified himself as a personal recipient of God's wrath against Judah (vs. 1). He began to write in this chapter not as Jerusalem suffering for its sins, but as an individual suffering himself. Both he and his countrymen had clearly seen "the rod of the LORD's wrath."

Even though Jeremiah repeatedly warned his people about God's impending judgment, he still had to participate in their punishment.

Ask Yourself . . . *Have I ever felt punished for someone else's sin?*

Here the prophet seemed baffled by this uncharacteristic act of God against His own people. Instead of being summoned into God's presence and given the benefit of divine guidance (light), he had been forced to grope about in the darkness for answers to what had happened (vs. 2). The original word for "driven" here is characteristically used for harshly driving animals, not the gentle leading of a shepherd. In-stead of the divine hand extended in loving nurture, Jeremiah felt only the firm, unrelenting hand of severe punishment (vs. 3). Jeremiah's sense of suffering was intense and truly exceptional.

Times of perceived spiritual darkness are common in the lives of Christians, especially highly committed followers of Christ. These periods of spiritual melancholy have come to be known as "the dark side of the cross." During these times, the Christian suffers a period of intense introspection and an increased awareness of personal sin. Prayers seem to go unheeded and God appears to be silent when we need Him most.

This "dark side of the cross" can be a time of intense spiritual growth, even though the opposite seems to be happening. With Job, we can say, "When [God] is at work in the north, I do not see him; when he turns to the south, I catch no glimpse of him. But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold" (Job 23:9, 10).

God's punishment brought both physical and mental suffering to Jeremiah. The prophet's complaint that God had made his skin and flesh grow old and had

broken his bones was metaphoric for his inner anguish (Lam. 3:4). The "breaking of bones" may refer to the pains associated with intense fever.

Jeremiah's reference to growing old here means that the distress had brought about the effects of aging within him. Sometimes the process of grief can make us feel much older than we really are. Jeremiah, left in a broken state, felt engulfed by a bitterness and hardship so great that his situation seemed like the darkness of death (vss. 5, 6). In this instance, "bitterness" meant the loss of all hope. It seemed to the distraught prophet that there was no way out, there was no escape from this affliction. He was imprisoned by walls of stone, bound in chains, and guarded by a deaf prison guard who refused to hear his prayers and cries for help (vss. 7-9). Jeremiah's thoughts here might be reminiscent of his time spent in the muddy cistern (see Jer. 38:6).

In two striking metaphors, Jeremiah pointedly expressed the belief that God's judgment had somehow targeted him. In the first, the prophet suggested that God was like a bear or lion that had leaped upon him from hiding and dragged him into the bushes, then left him mauled (Lam. 3:10, 11).

In the second metaphor, Jeremiah compared God to a huntsman who targeted Jeremiah, then pierced his heart with arrows (vss. 12, 13). These feelings of being hunted are reminiscent of Job 16:13. Even if he escaped his earthly foes, he would feel chased and then hunted down by God.

In both cases, Jeremiah saw God as having singled him out for suffering. In times of intense suffering, it is common for a person to become egocentric, thinking the world and even God is against him or her. If the grieving process is allowed to take its course, these feelings go away.

Far from giving him comfort, Jeremiah's people made him the butt of their jokes and mocked him with song and laughter (Lam. 3:14). In his abject condition, Jeremiah was left feeling like one gorged on bitterness and drunk with gall, his teeth broken on gravel and his body stomped into the dirt (vss. 15, 16). The bitter herbs here may be associated with wormwood, which are certain plants used to give a bitter flavor to some drinks.

With his peace and prosperity gone, the prophet seemed to conclude that only despair and hopelessness remained for him (vss. 17, 18). Israel's glory and splendor had disappeared, because the Jews' hope in the Lord was their glory. Jeremiah has been worn down to nothing.

Remarkably, this conclusion was followed by a complimentary portrait of a sovereign, loving God. In the face of all adversity, an understanding of God's just will and unfailing love should elicit hope and confidence in His plan for us. No matter how dark things may appear to us, we can have the confidence that someday God will make His glorious presence known to us once again.

Lamentations 3:19-66 in Brief

Jeremiah believed that an understanding of God's faithfulness in dealing with His people was reason for hope rather than despair. Even in his afflictions, the prophet remembered God's love, compassion, and faithfulness and found reason for hope and godly self-discipline. For the God he served was neither vindictive nor unjust in His condemnation of sin, but sought the repentance and return of His people that He might forgive their sins and restore them to Himself.

In this light Jeremiah could lead the Israelites in a prayer for deliverance and vindication. Even though he and his fellow citizens had suffered afflictions because of God's wrath, the prophet knew that rescue and redemption could come only from God.



13 Prayer for Restoration

Lamentations 4—5

a The Siege (4:1-11)

How the gold has lost its luster, the fine gold become dull! The sacred gems are scattered at every street corner. —Lamentations 4:1

In his fourth lament, Jeremiah emphasized the magnitude of Jerusalem's judgment by drawing a vivid picture of her splendor before the Babylonian siege and her condition after the fall. The first shock had worn off, and now the prophet was staring the incredible losses right in the eye. He had gone beyond the denial stage of grief, had expressed his anger, and now approached acceptance. The weeping prophet was coming to the end of his grief.

The prophet compared the sacred city to dull gold and scattered gems. In his explanation of the analogy, Jeremiah said the sons of Zion (the people of Jerusalem), as precious as gold treasures in their former state of splendor and glory, were now treated as if they were as worthless as ordinary clay pots (vss. 1, 2).

Due to the abundance of clay, almost all vessels in ancient Israel were made of this substance. Archaeological sites in the Middle East are consistently littered with pieces of pottery. When a clay pot broke, it was simply tossed out and replaced with a new one.

To Jeremiah, God's people, who had been as precious and valuable as gold in their former state, had become as common, valueless, and expendable as ordinary pottery.

Worst of all to Jeremiah was the treatment of Jerusalem's children by their parents during the siege.

He pointed out that even the detested jackal, a kind of wild dog that roamed the Mediterranean region in packs, nursed its young—yet the hungry cries of Jerusalem's little children for bread and water went unanswered.

Their parents had become as heartless and indifferent to the needs of their young as the desert ostrich, which carelessly lays its eggs on the sand where they may be trampled underfoot (vss. 3, 4; see Job 39:14-18). Under extreme distress, once-compassionate people can become utterly selfish.

But the children were not alone in

their distress. Jeremiah explained that the well-to-do and even those of royal station ("those brought up in royal purple," were without the delicacies they once enjoyed (Lam. 4:5).

Privilege and plenty had given way to abject poverty and utter destitution. The royal diet was replaced by famine; the royal wardrobe was exchanged for an ash heap.

There is a somber warning in these verses. Those who value the things of this world more than the things of God end up emotionally starved and clinging desperately to the ashes of their dreams.

Ask Yourself . . . *How much security do I place in what I own?*

To emphasize how severe Jerusalem's judgment was, Jeremiah maintained that her punishment was even worse than that of Sodom, whose judgment was carried out instantly by God (vs. 6; see Gen. 19:1-29). The judgment of that city was swift and immediate. There was no long siege resulting in famine, torture, and captivity for Sodom.

In Jerusalem, even wealth and social status provided no exemption from the cruelty of the Babylonians. Her princes' clear complexions were exchanged for sunburned skin drawn taut by the ravages of hunger (Lam. 4:7, 8). Such shriveled skin is a symptom of malnutrition and starvation. Reduced to skin and bones, the once privileged were not even recognizable as they, like everyone else, scavenged the city streets for food. War is often the great equalizer when it comes to class and economic status.

Jeremiah concluded that the lucky ones had died at the hands of the Babylonians, while the unfortunates were left to die slowly of starvation. The horrible proof of the truth of this (if any was needed) was the fact that once-compassionate mothers were so overcome by hunger that they cannibalized their own children

Jeremiah compared the heartless parents of besieged Jerusalem to the ostrich that carelessly leaves its eggs on the sand to be trampled upon.

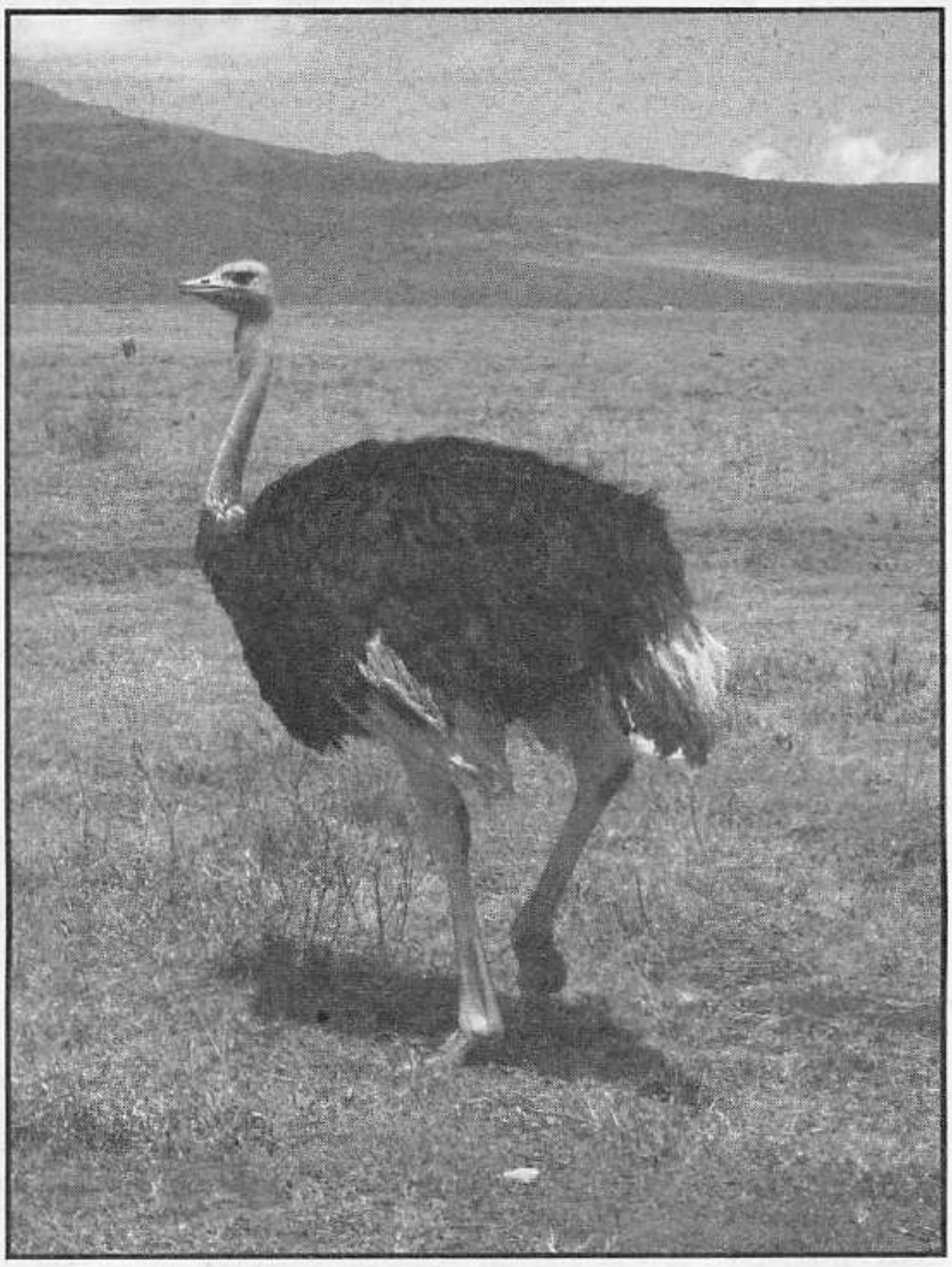


Photo: Chad Rosenthal

for food (vss. 9, 10). For Jeremiah, the conclusion was inescapable—Jerusalem had hit absolute rock bottom.

Once again Jeremiah stated that Jerusalem's distress was a direct result of God's wrath. In His fierce anger against His people, God had engulfed Jerusalem in a fire so intense that it completely destroyed the city—even down to its foundations (vs. 11).

b Jerusalem's Destruction (4:12-22)

[Jerusalem's destruction] happened because of the sins of her prophets and the iniquities of her priests, who shed within her the blood of the righteous. —Lamentations 4:13

In these verses, Jeremiah outlined the reasons for Jerusalem's calamity. Verses 12-16 reveal that what even Judah's enemies thought impossible—that Jerusalem could be captured and the temple violated—was brought about by the sins of God's own people. Judah had destroyed herself.

The enemy within was more dangerous than the enemy without. A door guarded by God, while impossible to break down from the outside, is easily unbolted from the inside.

Ask Yourself . . . *What are some of my "internal enemies"?*

Jerusalem was a fortress city that seemed to be unconquerable (vs. 12). During his reign, Hezekiah had made provision for an internal water supply and had fortified the city's defenses (see II Chron. 32:2-5). By Jeremiah's time, the city was considered impregnable, even by most of Judah's enemies.

The city's greatest threat came from within her walls—from her prophets and priests—not from without. Judah's corrupt leaders were guilty of shedding innocent blood (Lam. 4:13). Those who should have led the way in worship and righteous commitment to God had instead led the people into idolatry and sin. These leaders perpetuated the false belief that God would not allow His temple to be destroyed and therefore the city that contained His temple could never be taken.

The shedding of innocent blood had brought defilement upon the city's leaders so that they were regarded as ceremonially unclean and treated with contempt. Their personal pollution was so great that they were shunned as lepers and forced to live apart from the community of God's people. Scattered by God, the priests and elders of Judah wandered about in disgrace and dishonor (vss. 14-16). Sometimes God disciplines leaders more harshly than others.

While the first reason for Jerusalem's fall was the failure of her

priests and prophets, the second was her reliance upon earthly allies rather than her covenant partner—the sovereign Lord of the universe. In vain, lookouts in the city's towers looked for Egypt to come to the rescue, even though Jeremiah and Ezekiel had both warned that any hope of deliverance by that nation was futile (see Jer. 37:6-10; Ezek. 29:6-12a).

In the end, the Babylonians came swifter than eagles, relentlessly pursued their prey, subdued the city, then chased and captured those—including King Zedekiah—who tried to escape to the desert. Zedekiah, appointed to lead and protect the people, was powerless to provide security for those in his charge (Lam. 4:18-20). Thus Jerusalem's collapse was attributed to three failures: failed prophets and priests, a failed alliance with Egypt, and a failed monarchy.

Ask Yourself . . . *In whom do I place my greatest trust?*

In the final verses of this lament, Jeremiah drew a contrast between the "Daughter of Edom" and the "Daughter of Zion." Because of God's covenantal promises to Israel (see Deut. 28—30), God's people could hope for vindication and restoration for themselves and expect just retribution against their enemy Edom (Lam. 4:21, 22). The Jews could comfort themselves with the prospect that, whereas their own punishment would eventually be complete, that of Edom was yet to come.

Jerusalem's anger was justified, for Edom had been no neutral observer of the city's destruction. It had been glad when Jerusalem fell. For this reason, Edom was marked for God's judgment.

EDOM

A Kingdom Marked for Judgment

Edom was a mountainous kingdom south of the Dead Sea and east of the Great Rift Valley in what is now Jordan. The Edomites, descendants of Esau, were often enemies of the Jews (Gen. 27:41; Num. 20:14-21), descendants of Esau's twin brother, Jacob. Because of Edom's opposition to God's people, its destruction was prophesied (Isa. 34:5-15; Jer. 49:7-22; Ezek. 25:12-14; 35; Amos 1:11, 12; Obad.). In 582 B.C., four years after Jerusalem was destroyed, the same Babylonians who had been aided by the Edomites invaded and desolated Edom. The Herods were the last of the Edomite royal line. With the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, the descendants of Esau dropped from the pages of history.

C Jerusalem's Losses (5:1-18)

Remember, LORD, what has happened to us; look, and see our disgrace. —Lamentations 5:1

Jeremiah's final lament is a national prayer. The prophet understood that God alone was their only hope for restoration.

The prayer is in two parts. The first (vss. 1-18) is a cry to God to remember His people's plight, and it includes a confession of sin (vs. 16). The second part (vss. 19-22) is a call for national restoration and a return to God's favor.

The prayer opens with the survivors' plea to God to take notice of their pitiful condition and the disgraceful state to which they had been reduced (vs. 1). Jeremiah was not afraid to acknowledge his pain to God. The picture he gave is one of the suffering and hardship that typically fell to the nation who had lost a war.

On behalf of his people, Jeremiah pointed out that

- they had lost all their land and possessions (vs. 2);
- they had lost their power and rights as propertied, sovereign citizens (vs. 3);
- they were forced to pay exorbitantly for such basic necessities as water and fuel (vs. 4);
- they were hounded and persecuted wherever they went (vs. 5; compare Deut. 28:65-67);

The Siege of Jerusalem according to Josephus

The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (A.D. 37–100) gave this account of the siege of Jerusalem in 587–586 B.C.: "Now the king of Babylon was very intent and earnest upon the siege of Jerusalem; and he erected towers upon great banks of earth and from them repelled those that stood upon the walls: he also made a great number of such banks round about the whole city, the height of which was equal to those walls. . . . And this siege they endured for eighteen months, until they were destroyed by the famine, and by the darts which the enemy threw at them from the towers" (*The Antiquities of the Jews*).

• they were forced to beg for bread from despised neighbors (Lam. 5:6);

• they suffered the punishment of their parents (vs. 7);

• they were enslaved by low-ranking Babylonian officials with no hope of rescue (vs. 8);

• they were exposed to attack from desert tribes (vs. 9);

• they had to endure the constant ravages of hunger (vs. 10).

Following the description of the general suffering and hardship of the people, Jeremiah turned his attention to specific groups and to the impact God's judgment had upon them.

First mentioned are women of Judah, who suffered the horrors and indignity of rape by the brutal Babylonian occupiers (vs. 11). The immoral Babylonian warriors considered this practice one of the spoils of war.

The men of the city were no less ill-treated by their captors. Princes were hung by their hands and allowed to die a cruel death, while the elders of the city were treated with complete contempt (vs. 12). The Babylonians were feared because of the cruel, almost inhuman ways they treated those they defeated in battle.

The young men of the city were forced to perform tasks usually assigned to donkeys (vs. 13). Perhaps there was a shortage of animals, for anything edible had been consumed during the siege of the city. Under such conditions, hard labor was considered a privilege.

The normal business of Jerusalem, usually conducted by the elders at the city gate, and the sound of music, an expression of joy, had disappeared. The mirth and exuberance for life once found among the people had given way to a general state of mourning over a way of life that was no more (vss. 14, 15).

The crown, the glory that was once Jerusalem's, had fallen to the ground and was trampled in the dirt. The reality of this fact led Jeremiah to exclaim in a sudden outburst of contrition and confession on behalf of the people, "We have sinned!" (vs. 16). These three words can be a bitter pill to swallow—so bitter, in fact, that some people can be disciplined by God for years and still refuse to repent (see Rev. 16:10, 11).

Ask Yourself . . . *What is my attitude when I suffer the natural consequences of my sin?*

As a result of Judah's lost glory, forfeited because of her sin, the people's hearts were faint and their eyes were dim. Their hearts were faint from hunger and lack of courage. Their eyes were dim from excessive weeping and lack of vision for the future.

Perhaps the cold reality had settled in that the people had no one but themselves to blame for a desolate land now owned by foreign invaders and wild jackals (Lam. 5:17, 18).

Only after people take personal responsibility for their wrongdoing can the process of healing begin.

d Restoration and Renewal (5:19-22)

Restore us to yourself, LORD, that we may return; renew our days as of old.—Lamentations 5:21

With a description of her pitiful state given, Judah's prayer ended with a plea for divine action to reverse this tragedy. The plea is introduced with an acknowledgement of God's sovereign, eternal reign (vs. 19). God rules over each generation with the same impartial love. Obedience brings blessing; disobedience brings discipline.

God, it was understood, was still on His throne, even though David's throne had been vacated with the removal of Zedekiah. Even in times of difficulty, we must remember that God still in control of all of our circumstances. Complete confidence in God's sovereignty can be a great source of comfort in troubled times.

Babylon had not crushed Jerusalem because God was powerless to prevent it. The city had been destroyed because God ordained it, and He alone, at His good pleasure, could reverse Judah's fortunes. Even though the people knew that it was God Himself who had brought this disaster upon Judah, it was to Him that they instinctively turned for relief and restoration.

Ask Yourself . . . *Why should I turn to God for help if He is the one disciplining me?*

Here a play on words was employed to make the point. Earlier in the chapter, Jeremiah asked, "Remember, LORD, what has happened to us " (vs. 1a). In verse 20, he cried, "Why do you always forget us?"

This figurative language was used in a plea for God not to abandon or forsake His people, as if He had actually forgotten about them and their condition. Of course, God would never forget those who belong to Him, though at times He seems distant. It was an appeal to God's grace that was grounded upon His covenantal relationship with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (see Lev. 26:40-42) and their descendants.

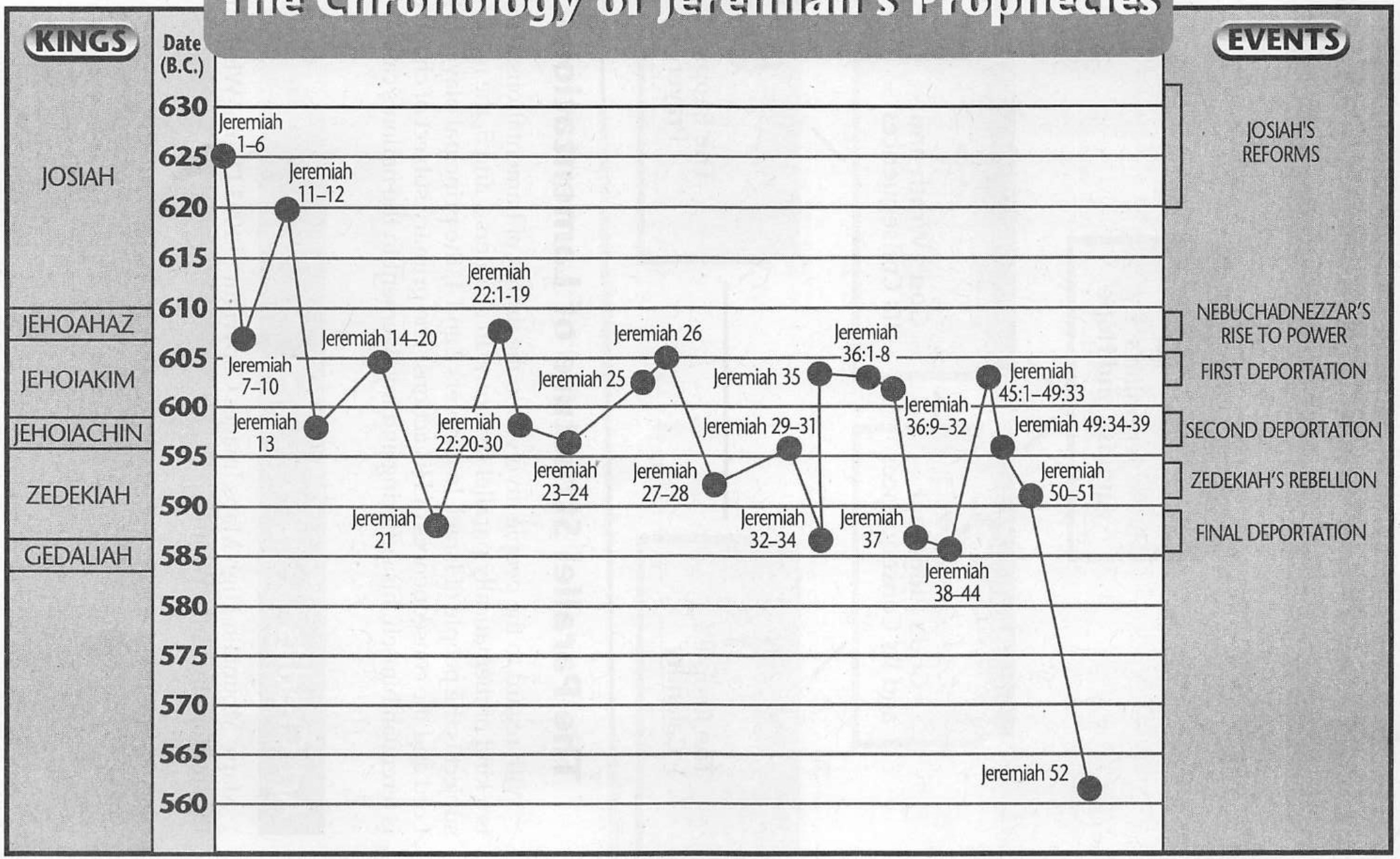
According to the agreement, if the people humbled their hearts and confessed their sin, God would "remember" (or fulfill) His covenantal promises to them. The thing specifically requested was that God would restore the people to fellowship and favor with Himself and to their former state of prosperity in the land.

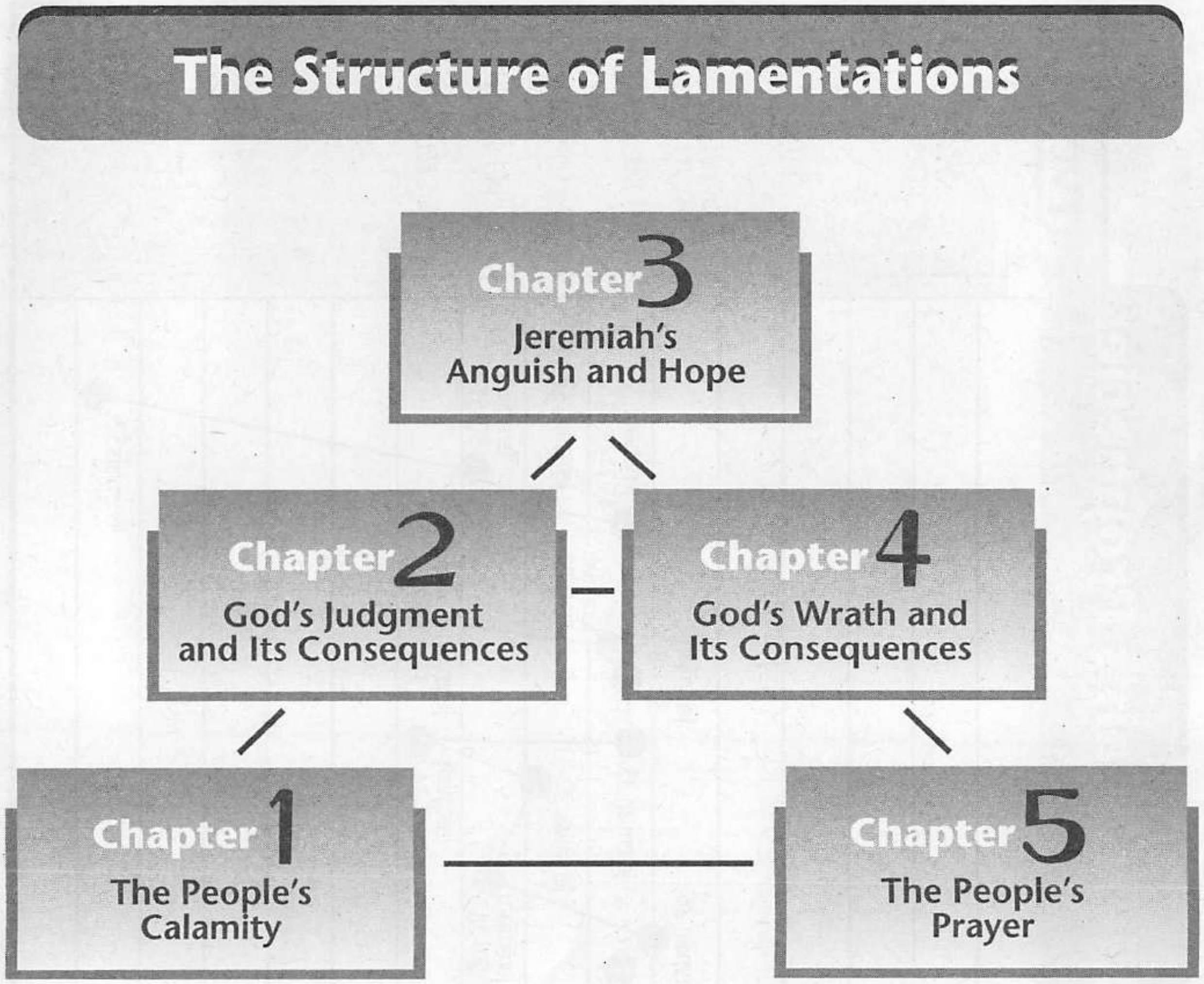
The only possible obstacle they saw to fulfillment of their request was God's having completely cut them off (Lam. 5:21, 22). This was something they knew to be impossible, for it would have been a direct violation of His covenantal promises to them (see Lev. 26:44; Jer. 31:31-37). When God's people humbled themselves, then restoration—sooner or later—was guaranteed.

Ask Yourself . . . *Am I certain that God's promises are absolutely trustworthy?*

It is of interest to note that in the public reading of Lamentations, verses 21 and 22 are often reversed in order to end the book on a positive note. Despite Judah's captivity and Jerusalem's destruction, God was still in control. He had not forgotten, nor ever could forget, His people. Though they might fail, His covenant with them never could. And so it is with God's people in every age: "Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness" (3:22, 23).

The Chronology of Jeremiah's Prophecies





The Parallel Structure of Lamentations

With regard to the people involved in the drama of Lamentations, there is a kind of thematically parallel structure. In chapters 1 and 5, the main subject is the people of Israel. In chapters 2 and 4, the principal player is the Lord and the consequences of His actions. The primary subject of chapter 3 is Jeremiah himself, his suffering and involvement in the nation's calamity.

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