

## LISTENING TO JEREMIAH

One of the puzzling questions in any study of the ministry of Jeremiah is why he did not comment upon the reforms of Josiah, particularly since the word of Yahweh came to him during Josiah's reign (1:1). We know that he held Josiah in high esteem (22:11, 15b-16). Furthermore, the kinds of reforms Josiah instituted were precisely along the lines called for by Jeremiah's preaching. For whatever reason, Jeremiah offered no remarks about the reform movement. Perhaps he felt that while the reforms were in order, they were more external than internal. They had produced more temple worship, but no real return to the ancient paths (6:16). Though outwardly there was the appearance of reformation, inwardly there was no genuine repentance. The clergy blandly announced that peace had been achieved with God, but Jeremiah was perceptive enough to know that it would take more than a change in the formal ritual of worship to avert tragedy (6:13-14; 8:10b-11). What he had evidently suspected all along became painfully evident when Josiah died.

The events at the close of the 7<sup>th</sup> century moved quickly. Josiah, though politically free by default for much of his reign from the Mesopotamian superpowers due to the internal struggles of Assyria, was once more facing a formidable antagonist. Babylon was on the march. In 616, Nebopolassar of Babylon invaded Assyrian territory. By 614, the sacred city of Ashur had fallen to Media, and a newly formed Medo-Babylonian alliance pushed the Assyrian defenders backward toward the west. In 612, Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, was put to siege and lasted only two and half months. Support came for Assyria from her vassal Egypt and prolonged her death struggle for another five years, but pushed back into northwest Mesopotamia, the Assyrians, who had lived by the sword, determined to die the same way. In 610, Haran, the temporary capital, also fell.



*In the summer of 609, Josiah mustered the Judean army in an attempt to ambush the Egyptians in the Megiddo Pass.*

In the summer of 609, Pharaoh Necho II of Egypt marched northward in an effort to join forces with the tottering Assyrian army. Josiah, who had long enjoyed freedom from Assyrian sovereignty, determined not to allow his former suzerain to recover. He no doubt viewed the weakening of Assyrian power to be essential to his own independence, and in a last-ditch effort to prevent the Egyptian army from joining the Assyrians, Josiah interposed his Judean army between the superpowers in the plain of Megiddo. It was too little too late. Josiah

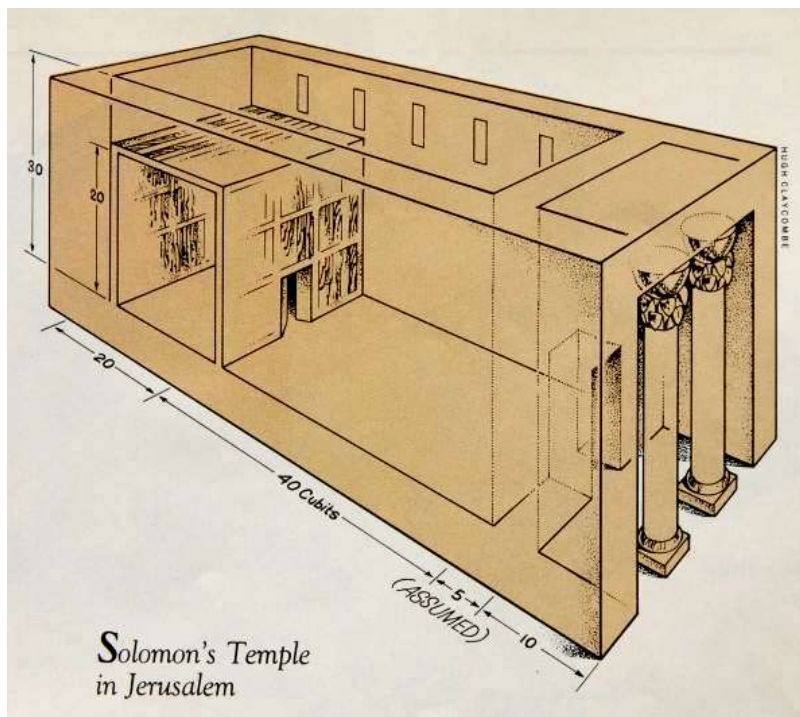
ignored the warning from Necho to stay away (2 Chr. 35:20-22), and he was mortally wounded by

an enemy archer's arrow (2 Kg. 23:29-30). Jeremiah was left to compose court dirges in response to the death of his beloved king (2 Chr. 35:25).<sup>1</sup>

The death of Josiah made clear the superficiality of the reform movement. His son Jehoahaz (Shallum) reigned only three months before Necho sent him into exile (2 Kg. 23:31-33). Though there may have been hope that he would be restored, Jeremiah predicted that Jehoahaz would die in Egypt (22:11-12), and so he did (2 Kg. 23:34b). In his place, Necho installed Jehoahaz' half-brother, Jehoiakim, as a puppet king, (2 Kg. 23:34a), demanding an exorbitant tribute (2 Chr. 36:2-4). Jehoiakim returned to the syncretistic ways of the kings before him (2 Kg. 23:36-37). The temple worship restored by Josiah continued, but it was a hollow form, and once again, Jeremiah stepped into the public arena.

### THE TEMPLE SERMON (7, 26)

To fully appreciate the next episode in Jeremiah's ministry, one must know something of the meaning of the temple to the people of Judah. A temple had been envisioned as far back as the exodus (Ex. 15:13-18). The tabernacle that Moses constructed, which was a sort of movable Mt. Sinai, was temporary. Once the Israelites were firmly planted in Canaan and had reached a state of peace, they were to build a permanent structure, one that would not be movable (Dt. 12:8-13). It was David who made plans for this temple (1 Chr. 28), and Solomon, his son, constructed it (2 Chr.



*Solomon's temple, like the tabernacle before it, had two rooms, an inner room (debir), called the Most Holy Place, and an ante-room (hekhal), called the Holy Place.*

3). The movable symbolism of Mt. Sinai now was transferred from the tabernacle to the new temple (Ps. 68:7-8, 15-18; Ps. 78:67-69). The glory of Yahweh that once had shrouded Mt. Sinai (Ex. 24:15-18) and filled the tabernacle (Ex. 40:34-35), now took up residence the new temple (2 Chr. 5:11-14; 7:1-3). It is to the point that the residence of Yahweh in the temple was considered to be perpetual, which is to say, "forever" (Ps. 48:1-3, 8, 12-14; 125:1-2). Hence, the people of Judah considered the temple to be a sign of their political security and a guarantee that they could not be dislodged from the land.

<sup>1</sup>According to Jewish tradition, Jeremiah had warned Josiah against engaging Necho (1 Esdras 1:28). The court dirges which Jeremiah wrote in honor of Josiah, according to this tradition, were preserved in the official court histories of the kings of Judah (1 Esdras 1:33), but they are no longer extant.

Jeremiah's temple sermon, given early in the reign of Jehoiakim (26:1), was a crucial juncture in the prophet's ministry, a fact indicated by it being described twice. The first version is given in Jeremiah's scroll (7), and the second is recorded in Baruch's memoirs (26). At the express instruction of Yahweh, Jeremiah stood in the temple courtyard near the gate to proclaim an oracle to the worshipers as they entered (7:1-2a; 26:1-6).

The content of the sermon is in 7:2b-15. It was a scathing denunciation of religious superficiality. The notion that a return to the ancient rituals would in themselves guarantee Yahweh's favor was terribly deceptive (7:4, 8). True religion was in more than lip service—it was in life (7:5-7). Real reform must affect more than liturgy (7:3), and if the piety of formal worship did not match what happened in the marketplace, then the religion was bankrupt (7:9-11). Just as Yahweh had said to Jeremiah in his original call (1:12), he was watching (7:11b)! The sermon closed with a recollection of the devastation of Shiloh, the central shrine that had been destroyed in the days of Eli (7:12-15; 1 Sa. 4). Furthermore, just as had the northern nation of Ephraim,<sup>2</sup> Judah would also go into exile. Disillusioned with the Deuteronomic reforms of Josiah, Jehoiakim had led the nation in a return to her fascination with paganism. The Judahites made cakes for Ishtar, the mother goddess of Assyria and Babylon (7:18). The barbarous ritual of child sacrifice was revived, and pagan abominations were set up once more in the temple as had been the case under Manasseh (7:30-31; cf. 1 Kg. 21:1-9). For Jeremiah, this pathway could only lead to disaster (7:19-26), and in fact, Yahweh indicated that the people would remain implacable (7:27-28). Their stubbornness was so severe that Yahweh said he had abandoned them to destruction (7:29, 33-34; 8:1-3); it was not even worth praying for them any longer (7:16).

As might be expected, Jeremiah's sermon created an uproar. He had flatly ignored the temple theology which was thought to guarantee the safety of the nation. The opinion of the official clergy was that he ought to be executed (26:10-11), but Jeremiah stood firm (26:12-15), and the court officials, recalling a similar oracle of Micah a century earlier (26:18; cf. Mic. 3:12), saved the day for him (26:17-19, 24). The danger was real, however, as shown by Jehoiakim's execution of one of Jeremiah's colleagues (26:20-23).



*This mold, excavated in the palace kitchen of Mari, was used for making cakes in the form of Ishtar, the love-goddess called the “Queen of Heaven.”*

### TALKING POINTS

- *Why do you think the king and the people of Judah were so fascinated by the fertility cults of the ancient Near East?*
- *Is there a danger of religious superficiality for modern Christians as was true for ancient Israel in which ritual replaces a genuine relationship with God?*

<sup>2</sup>It should be noted that in the prophets, the northern nation is often called Ephraim, after its most prominent tribe, just as the southern nation is called Judah, even though it also included Benjamin.

- *Yahweh told Jeremiah it was no use to even pray for the nation (7:16). How is this similar to John's statement about not praying for the "sin unto death" (1 Jn. 5:16)? Is there some spiritual "point of no return?"*

### **AN INCORRIGIBLE PEOPLE (8-10)**

The collection of poetic units (with a few prose elements) in 8:4--10:25 is a poignant description of the people of Judah and the city of Jerusalem as a community on its way to death. Two major themes dominate the oracles, the stubborn and incurable sinfulness of the people and the tragic fate that awaited them. Though the oracles are undated, internal evidence make it not unlikely that they were uttered in the early years of Jehoiakim.

#### **No Balm in Gilead**

In a series of hard-hitting metaphors, Jeremiah pronounced that the people were incorrigible. Was it possible for a people to apostatize and never repent? Jeremiah said, "Yes" (8:4-6)! Unlike even the birds who know when to migrate, the people of Judah were incapable of returning to God (8:7). For Judah's wound, there was no cure; no doctor could help; no medicine was effective (8:22). The nation was rampant with dishonesty and corruption (9:3-6). Religious and political leaders alike were equally deceptive. Priests, prophets, and theologians were shamelessly leading their people astray with pious platitudes (8:8-12). The shepherds (i.e., Judah's rulers) blatantly ignored God (10:21).

#### **The Deuteronomic Curse**

Because of her incurable sin, Yahweh intended to fulfil the curses promised to the nation for covenant violation in Deuteronomy (9:12-16). She would suffer drought (8:13, 20; cf. Dt. 28:18, 22-24), invasion (8:14-17; 9:20-22; 10:22; cf. Dt. 28:25-26) and exile (8:18-19; 9:10-11, 16-19; 10:17-18, 25b; cf. Dt. 28:36, 46-48, 63-64, 68). Such punishment was deserved (9:7-9), for while outwardly the nation maintained her traditional rituals, inwardly she was far from Yahweh (9:25-26).

#### **The Futility of Pagan Worship**

In denouncing the nation's sin, Jeremiah set up a vivid contrast between pagan idols and Yahweh. Paganism was filled with superstition and worthless deities who could neither speak nor act (10:1-5, 8-9, 11, 14-15). Jeremiah's memorable depiction of a pagan idol as a scarecrow in a melon patch deserves special mention (10:5). Yahweh, on the other hand, was unique (10:6-7). He had created the universe, and when he acts, the whole world comes to attention (10:10, 12-13, 16). If there is any room for the wise and the strong to boast, let it be in Yahweh alone (9:23-24)!

### **TALKING POINTS**

- *How important is moral integrity and theological faithfulness for modern Christian leaders?*
- *Contemporary westerners do not practice idolatry, at least not in the ancient sense, but what expressions of replacing God with other things might be modern forms of idolatry?*
- *The outward trappings of religion became an instrument of self-deception for the ancient Israelites. Why do you think this was so?*
- *How were Jesus' words about "discerning the times" (Mt. 16:2-3) similar to the message of Jeremiah (8:7)? How was Jeremiah's culture in ancient Judah similar to our own?*