

## LISTENING TO JEREMIAH

### JEREMIAH'S ACTED-OUT PARABLES

One acted out parable in Jeremiah's career has already been observed, the occasion when he constructed and wore an ox yoke as a symbol of the nation's coming exile (27:1ff.). There are several other occasions as well in which Jeremiah not only spoke an oracle but associated the oracle with a prophetic action.

#### The Linen Loincloth (13:1-11)

At Yahweh's instruction, Jeremiah bought and wore a linen loincloth (13:1-2).<sup>1</sup> Though he was to wear it, he was not to wash it, presumably so that it might deteriorate more quickly when it was soaked with perspiration. Next, Yahweh instructed Jeremiah to hide the loincloth in a cleft of rock near the Euphrates River (13:3-5). After a lengthy period of time, Jeremiah was instructed to return and retrieve the loincloth, by which time it had rotted beyond usage (13:6-7). This parabolic action symbolized Yahweh's relationship with his people. Just as the loincloth was worn next to the most intimate part of the body, so the nation was supposed to cling to Yahweh intimately (13:11). Just as Jeremiah removed and hid the loincloth, so Yahweh would reject the nation until it was spoiled and useless (13:8-10). The deposit of the loincloth by the Euphrates River symbolized the threat of Babylonian exile.

#### PROPHETIC ACTIONS

*Prophetic actions accompanying and illustrating prophetic words which proclaimed the mind of Yahweh are not uncommon in the Old Testament. A good example is the unnamed prophet in the period of the Omride dynasty who pronounced the death sentence on Ahab of Israel by the unusual method of demanding that another prophet wound him, after which he disguised himself with a headband over his eyes before confronting the king (1 Kg. 20:35-43). Another was the marriage of Hosea to a cult prostitute (Ho. 1:2-3). Isaiah's sons were named in such a way as to suggest a prophetic meaning (Is. 7:3; 8:1-4). Such prophetic gestures were more or less acted out parables, though they should not be confused with the more restricted definition of parable in the New Testament stories told by Jesus.*

#### The Smashed Wine Jars (13:12-14)



*Israelite Iron Age Storage Jars*

To one audience, Jeremiah commanded that they should fill every available wine jar with wine. The smashing of these jars symbolized the downfall of the dynasty of David and the city of Jerusalem, which were under the sentence of death, not merely from the Babylonians but from Yahweh. Both the king and queen mother were doomed (13:18), and the nation of Judah was destined for exile (13:19). Like a prostitute who has been raped and publicly exposed, so Judah would be shamed (13:22, 26-27). She was as unchangeable in her stubbornness as the black skin of an Ethiopian or the

<sup>1</sup>The loincloth was roughly equivalent to underwear, that is, the innermost piece of clothing.

markings on a leopard (13:23).

### Emotionless Stoicism (16)

To reinforce the abrupt end which was coming, Yahweh forbade Jeremiah to marry or to have children (16:1-2). Celibacy and childlessness symbolized the coming devastation (16:3-4). Furthermore, the prophet was forbidden to attend funerals or wedding feasts (16:5, 8). He was to be as emotionless as possible, neither mourning, showing sympathy, or expressing joy.

### The Potter's House (18)

At a potter's house, Jeremiah received the message that Israel, like clay in a potter's hand, was completely under the control of her sovereign Lord. The nation was not autonomous. Still, the condition of the clay was also a crucial factor. If the original intent of the potter was not possible, due to some deficiency in the clay, the clay could be reshaped into something else (18:4-6). Such a metaphor is double-edged, for it could result in disaster as well as honor. A vessel that was intended for honor could be rejected. One that was planned for destruction could become usable.



*Potters in Jeremiah's day used a hand-operated wheel, such as this one excavated at Hazor in northern Israel. The double wheel would not be invented for another couple of centuries.*

Extending this simile to the nation of Judah, Yahweh showed Jeremiah that the divine intent to uproot, tear down and destroy the nation (cf. 1:10a) could be altered by repentance (18:7-8, 11). At the same time, his intent to build up and plant the nation (cf. 1:10b), an intent that was made clear in the exodus from Egypt, could also be reconsidered (16:9-10). Since the nation had persisted in its waywardness, disaster was now inevitable (18:12-17). Yahweh stood ready to act in new ways if Judah should respond with new behavior. Thus, the nation possessed a freedom that the clay did not, and so the metaphor of the clay asserts the sovereignty of Yahweh, while the breaking of the metaphor asserts the freedom he grants to his people. Yet the people had become hardened in their rebellion, and it was now too late to hope for change.

### The Smashed Clay Jar (19)

Still using the metaphor of clay vessels, Yahweh showed Jeremiah that while the clay was capable of being reshaped while it was soft, when it hardened it was fit only for smashing. After buying a clay jar, Jeremiah took it to the valley south of Jerusalem near the Potsherd Gate (19:1-2). Both locations are important. The Valley of Ben-Hinnom was a cultic site for ritual child sacrifice (2 Kg. 23:10). The Potsherd Gate was an exit from the city apparently named after the fact that the local potters dumped their wasted vessels just outside. Judah's hardened participation in the terrible ritual of child sacrifice made her like a useless, wasted jar, fit only for the potter's field (19:3-9). With

priests and city elders looking on, Jeremiah smashed the clay jar as a symbol of the way Yahweh would smash Jerusalem and Judah (19:10-13). Returning to the temple, Jeremiah added yet another oracle of disaster because of the clay-hardened recalcitrance of the people (19:14-15).

### TALKING POINTS

- *How would the “parables” of Jeremiah reinforce his message of coming disaster?*
- *Given Jeremiah’s parable at the potter’s house, how does this story emphasize both the sovereignty of God as well as the freedom he gives to humans?*



*A pithos (large clay storage jar) excavated from Lachish, a few miles from Jerusalem.*

### The Cup of Wine (25)

Early in Jehoiakim's reign, just as Nebuchadnezzar came to power in Babylon (25:1-2), Jeremiah addressed the nation of Judah. For 23 years, he had preached to the people without noticeable effect (25:3-7). Now Yahweh had determined to destroy his people by this enemy from the north, and they would serve the Babylonians in exile for 70 years (25:8-11). Even though God would use the Babylonians as his instrument of judgment against Judah, he also intended to punish Babylon for her ruthlessness (25:12-14). In a vision, Yahweh handed to Jeremiah a cup of wine which symbolized his divine wrath against the nations (25:15-16; cf. Rv. 14:10). All the nations, Judah included, were obliged to drink from the cup (25:17-29). In a vision of the end of the world, Jeremiah described God's final devastation of the nations from one end of the earth to the other (25:30-38), a vision that has its greatest resolution in the Apocalypse of John (cf. Rv. 16:16; 19:19-21).

### The Recabites (35)

Also during Jehoiakim's tenure as king, Jeremiah used the Recabites as a living parable of contrast with the unfaithful nation. The Recabites, a semi-nomadic Kenite clan (cf. 1 Chr. 2:55), had for a long time reacted against the sedentary lifestyle of Israel (35:6-10). Their ancestor had been a witness to and possibly a participant in Jehu's slaughter of the house of Ahab some two centuries earlier (2 Kg. 10:15-17). As nomads, vineyard farming and wine-making was virtually unknown to them, and in any case, their ancestor had forbidden it. They had only forsaken their semi-nomadic existence after the land had been invaded by the invading foreigners (35:11).

Calling them to the temple, Jeremiah offered them wine, knowing in advance that they would refuse (35:3-5). Their refusal to drink wine, in honor of a 200-year old edict, starkly contrasted with Judah's repeated infidelity to Yahweh (35:12-16). As such, Yahweh pronounced that the Recabites would be blessed for their faithfulness (35:18-19), but Judah would be cursed for her stubborn infidelity (35:17).

### The Two Baskets of Figs (24)

After King Jehoiachin had been exiled in the First Deportation (598 BC) and Zedekiah had been established on the throne (2 Chr. 36:9-10), Yahweh called Jeremiah's attention to two baskets of figs which had been left in front of the temple (24:1-3). One basket held ripe figs, the other rotten figs.

One must remember that after the First Deportation, there were now two Jewish communities, one composed of civic leaders and skilled artisans who had been exiled to Babylon (deported along with Jehoiachin, the teenage king) while the other was composed of those remaining in the land under the puppet king Zedekiah (2 Kg. 24:14). It is likely that these two communities developed contending theological self-identities, the one in exile maintaining that it was the purest form of the Israelite community, since it had the rightful Davidic king among them, whom they hoped would be restored along with themselves (28:1-4; 29:8, 15-23), and the other in Jerusalem, arguing that they must be the purest form since they had not suffered deportation like the others. It was apparently to this latter group that the symbolism of the figs was directed.

The good figs, in fact, were *not* those left in the land. Rather, the good figs were those who had been deported (24:4-7). They corresponded to the positive side of Jeremiah's message, for in time they would be restored and planted (cf. 1:10b). The bad figs were those still left in the land with Zedekiah (24:8-10). Their future was certain destruction, for like rotten figs, they were so corrupt that they no longer had any value at all.



*Scrolls normally have writing on one side only. Double-deeds had both a sealed text (permanent legal description) and an open text (abstract available for inspection).*

Brooklyn Museum, New York

### The Field in Anathoth (32)

Near the end of Zedekiah's reign, when the nation of Judah was in its final death throes (the armies of Babylon were even then in their final siege of Jerusalem, 32:1-2), Jeremiah had been confined to the palace courtyard (32:3-5). During a respite in the siege, he had attempted to leave Jerusalem briefly to visit his ancestral home in the territory of Benjamin, not far to the north, but had subsequently been accused of defecting to the Babylonians (37:11-15). Consequently, he had been imprisoned in the courtyard (37:16-21). Yahweh instructed him to buy a field from his cousin Hanamel (32:6-8), who had perhaps fallen into debt or was preparing to give up his ancestral land in view of the impending disaster (cf. Lv. 25:25-31). In any case, Jeremiah did indeed purchase the land, arranging for the deeds to be drawn up by Baruch, his scribe (32:9-12).

The purchase of the land was a parable of hope for the future of the nation. To buy property in the face of such overwhelming circumstances must surely have seemed the height of folly, particularly for someone like Jeremiah who had consistently announced the coming desolation (32:24-25). However, just as the original vision had indicated, Jeremiah's message was one of both doom and hope (1:10). A restoration was coming (32:13-15), and nothing was too hard for Yahweh (32:17b, 27). Once more, fields, houses, and vineyards would be bought in the land (32:15, 42-44)!

### TALKING POINTS

- *Do you think the metaphor of the cup, symbolizing God's wrath, has any overtones in the language of Jesus in his final prayer in Gethsemane?*
- *How does the language of redemption in Jeremiah's purchase of property help us understand the spiritual idea of redemption in the cross of Christ?*