

13. Seventh Century BC





The seventh century in Judah began with the devastation of Judah by the Assyrian army under Sennacherib (701), and ended with the siege and capture of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army under Nebuchadnezzar (598).

Though Judah was devastated in 701, Jerusalem itself survived intact. The tribute demanded by Assyria was to weigh heavily on Judah for the first seventy years of the seventh century.

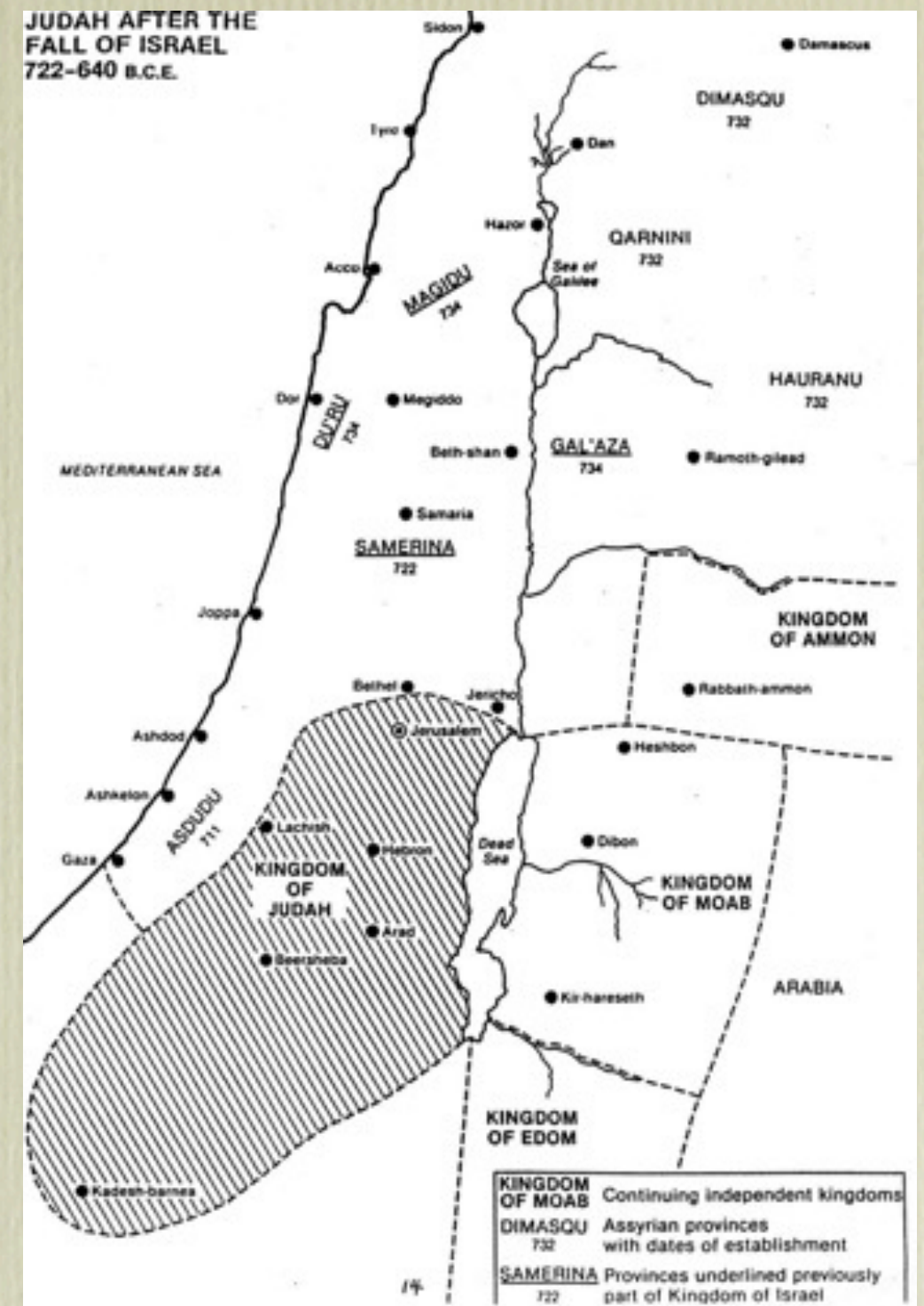
Hezekiah's son, Manasseh, came to the throne as a boy of 12 in 698 and reigned till 643. He had no choice but to submit to being a vassal of the Assyrian king. There would have been those in Judah, probably including priests from the smaller sanctuaries, who blamed Hezekiah for the way things turned out, and many welcomed Manasseh's long reign. Things fell apart religiously (see 2Kings 21:5-16), but because he was a loyal vassal of the powerful Assyrian king there was peace in Judah and growing economic prosperity.

During Manasseh's reign Egypt was conquered by Assyria. A puppet regime was created (the 26th Saite Dynasty). However, by the middle of the seventh century, Assyria's dominance in the region was beginning to wane. When Babylon revolted in 652, it took the Assyrian king, Ashurbanipal, four years to assert his authority.

In 640 Manasseh's son, Amon, was assassinated. Amon's eight-year old son, Josiah, inherited the throne. Josiah's twelfth year as king was the year of the death of Ashurbanipal, king of Assyria (628BC). Josiah seized the opportunity to throw off the vassalage that had kept Judah subject to Assyria for a century. He was determined to win back for Judah the northern kingdom and the land that tradition said was promised Israel by YHWH.



Josiah brooked no opposition in his determination to reform the religious life of his people. This was the opportunity that the Deuteronomic School had been waiting for. At last they had a champion ready to carry out with rigorous efficiency the reform for which they had been preparing.



In 622 on Josiah's orders, the temple was being cleared of Assyrian altars with a view to being re-consecrated, when a document, called 'the book of the law', was 'discovered' (1Kings 22:3; 2Chronicles 34:8). We are told that when Josiah heard 'the words of the book of the law' he 'made a covenant before YHWH, to follow YHWH, keeping his commandments, his decrees, and his statutes, with all his heart and all his soul, to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book. All the people joined in the covenant'(2Kings 23:3).

Josiah insisted that all cult had to take place in the Jerusalem Temple, and nowhere else. This centralising of the cult was the single most influential change brought about by Josiah's reform. It is backed up again and again in Deuteronomy, and accounts for many changes that dramatically affected the way worship was carried out in Judah. Things would never be the same again.

Josiah cleared Judah of cult sites, and expanded the borders in every direction. This was possible because Egypt was still not strong, and Assyria was fighting a losing battle with Babylon and with the Medes. In 614 Ashur was sacked by the Medes. Two years later it was Nineveh's turn.

‘Basically, the kingdom of Judah was a direct continuation of Judah under Manasseh’s rule. Its population probably did not exceed **seventy-five thousand**, with relatively dense occupation of the rural areas in the Judean hill country, a network of settlements in the arid zones of the east and south, and a relatively sparse population in the Shephelah. It was in many ways a densely settled city-state as the capital held about 10 percent of the population. Urban life in Jerusalem reached a peak that would be equaled only in Roman times. The state was well organised and highly centralised as in the time of Manasseh. But in terms of its religious development and literary expression of national identity, the era of Josiah marked a dramatic new stage in Judah’s history’(F&S page 289).

Population of Campbelltown in 2012 150,000

In 609 the Assyrian army suffered a crushing defeat at Haran. Neco II, Pharaoh of Egypt, was heading north to assist Assyria. It appears that he summoned Josiah to Megiddo to receive from him an oath of loyalty. He had him executed (he was only thirty-nine).

The prophet Zephaniah (c. 628-620BC)

Zephaniah's ministry took place 'in the days of King Josiah' (Zephaniah 1:1). He was ministering during the early days of Josiah's reform, a reform that he was inspired to encourage.

Zephaniah was influenced by Amos, a prophet whose ministry took place in the northern kingdom some 130 years earlier. Amos spoke of the 'Day of YHWH' as being a day when YHWH would act, not to save his people, as they assumed, but to punish them for their infidelity (see Amos 5:18-20).

Zephaniah urges his contemporaries to turn to YHWH before they are forced to face God's punishment. He declares that the Day of YHWH is imminent.

Though he speaks out against the people's sin, and is firm in insisting on the need for repentance, that is not his main focus. True prophet that he is, his primary focus is on YHWH, whose fidelity transcends human sin. Amos's scroll ends on this note (see Amos 9:11-15), so does Zephaniah's (see 3:14-20).

If the people were ever to enjoy the presence of YHWH in their midst and the blessing consequent upon such a communion, they would have to change their ways, and drastically (see 2:3). Like other prophets he explained God's punishment as an instrument in bringing about the purifying of the nation, and he bemoans the people's failure to repent (3:2, 7). As a true prophet his focus is on YHWH, and therefore he speaks of a remnant (3:12-13) and of restoration (2:7; 3:9). He concludes with a remarkable statement of the passionate exuberance of God's longing for intimate communion with his people, and the sheer delight God will have when this intimacy is restored (3:14-24).

The prophet Nahum

It was during Josiah's reign that Ashur, the religious capital of the Assyrian Empire, was sacked by the Medes, with the backing of Babylon (614BC). Nahum looks forward with delight to the imminent fall of Nineveh (it happened in 612BC). His oracles fit best some time in the period between 620 and 612, a decade or so after Zephaniah. He sees the collapse of Assyria as a sign of YHWH's blessing on Judah. His exultation at Assyria's imminent collapse is also delight at YHWH's faithfulness to his chosen people. Josiah's reforms were already bearing fruit, or so it must have seemed.




Zephaniah had urged his countrymen to change their ways. He had also promised the blessing of YHWH on the remnant who heeded YHWH's call. Nahum takes all this for granted. His focus concentrates on the fulfilment of Zephaniah's promise. Assyria is on its knees, and Nineveh, the capital of the mightiest empire, could not hold out much longer. Nahum gives expression to the pent up feelings of subject Judah against its powerful oppressor.

His is powerful poetry. The sudden shift from image to image sustains the excitement of the reader still today. Imagine its effect on Nahum's contemporaries.

Any people who have experienced the collapse of an oppressive enemy will understand Nahum's joy. Though our understanding of the place of God in warfare differs from Nahum's, he can still encourage us to believe in the ultimate triumph of good over evil. Though oppressive abuse of power can appear to dominate our world, evil cannot avoid the consequences that come in its train.

We cannot, however, follow Nahum in seeing mass destruction as an appropriate response to evil. We would do well to 'balance' a reading of Nahum by contemplating the final words of the book of Jonah:

'Should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?'(Jonah 4:11).



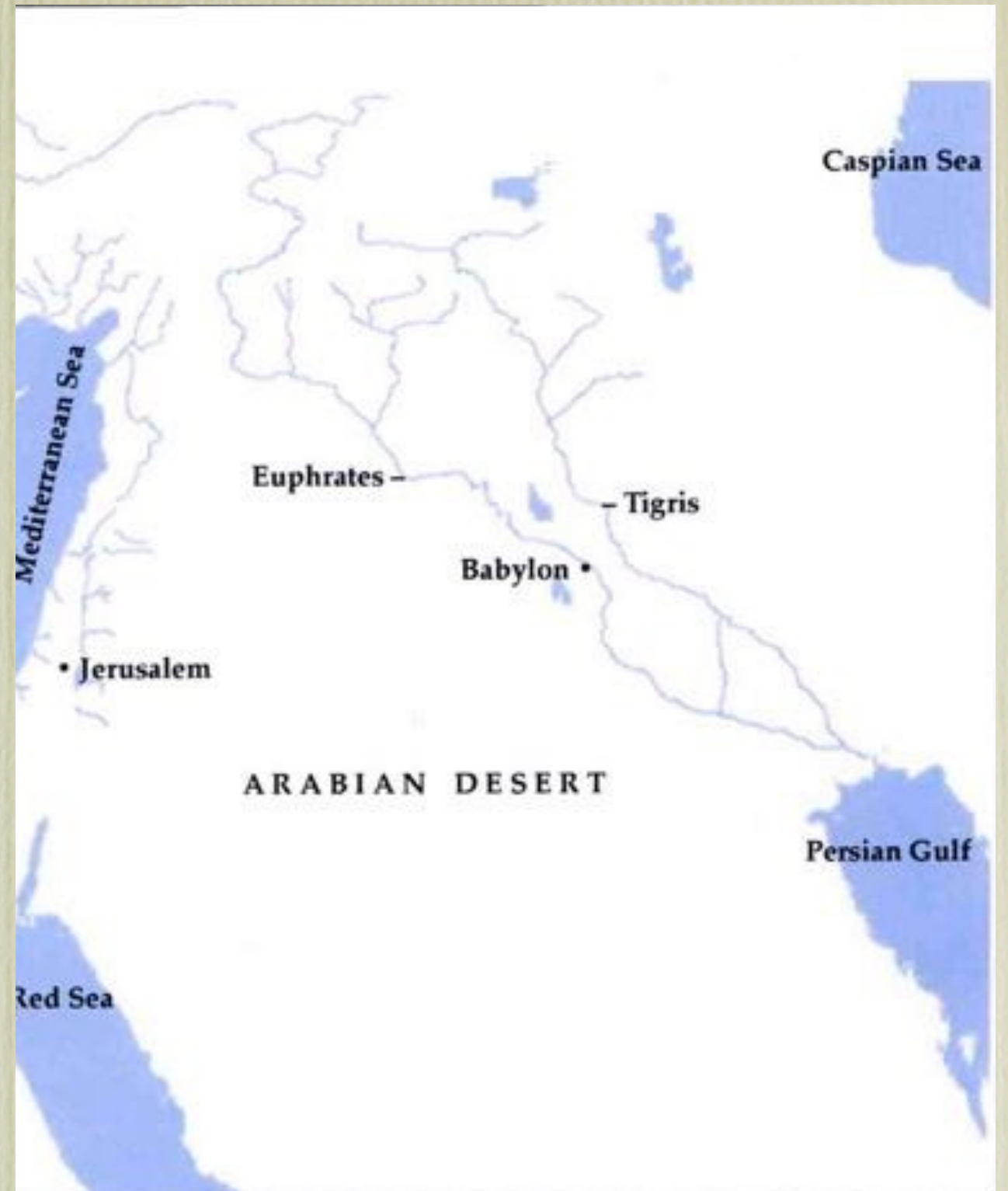
The final years of the Kingdom of Judah

When King Josiah died in 609BC, the king-makers of Judah bypassed Josiah's eldest son, Eliakim, and chose as king his younger brother, Shallum, who took the throne name Jehoahaz (see Jeremiah 22:11; 1Chronicles 3:15). They hoped he would continue the policies of his father, Josiah. However, Neco deposed him in favour of Eliakim, who was given the throne name, Jehoiakim. This began the unravelling of the independence that Josiah had achieved.

In 605 the Babylonian army led by Nebuchadnezzar defeated the combined forces of Assyria and Egypt in the battle of Carchemish. In 598 Nebuchadnezzar attacked Judah and besieged Jerusalem. Jehoiakim died during the siege. He was succeeded briefly by his eighteen year old son, Jeconiah (Coniah), who took the throne name Jehoiachin. He reigned for the first three months of 597BC. He decided to surrender, and the siege was lifted. He was taken into exile in Babylon, along with all the leading citizens. Nebuchadnezzar replaced Jehoiachin with his uncle, Mattaniah, who was given the throne name Zedekiah.



Zedekiah was tempted to seek alliance with Egypt and revolt against Babylon. When he finally did so, Nebuchadnezzar decided to lay siege to Jerusalem. This time he was determined to raze the city to the ground. He succeeded in 586BC. Another group of leading citizens was taken into exile.



The prophet Habakkuk (c. 605-590BC)

Habakkuk speaks out against the lack of justice in the institutions of Judah during Jehoiakim's reign. This injustice is accompanied by violence as the rich plunder the community. Habakkuk sees the attacks on Judah precipitated by 'the Chaldeans' (Habakkuk 1:6), as being YHWH's response to Judah's failure to live the Torah.

The material from Habakkuk 1:12 to 2:20 appears to come from the time of Zedekiah between the capture of Jerusalem in 598 and its sacking in 587, as it is written against the background of actual experience of Babylonian oppression. The psalm in chapter 3 forms an excellent conclusion to his oracles.

Habakkuk struggles with the violence of the aggressive policies of the new super-power, Babylon (Habakkuk chapter 1). He struggles to believe that justice will prevail (Habakkuk chapter 2); that ‘the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of YHWH, as the waters cover the sea’(Habakkuk 2:14). He gives voice to the oppressed as their cry pierces the heavens. God does not seem to be listening, or doing anything.

Habakkuk forces us to look at the systems under which we live in whatever nation we belong to (Habakkuk 1:2-4). He then expands our reflection to the international stage to look at the way stronger states dominate weaker ones and are able to manipulate systems to their own benefit while oppressing others (Habakkuk 1:12 - 2:1).

His ridicule of the pretensions of imperial power in 2:5-20 is also a warning to us personally not to put our trust in wealth, in security that is not based on faith, in power, or in honour and reputation. We must be careful not to worship what we can control. This goes even for the danger of limiting God to our inherited or contrived ways of understanding the deity.

In his concluding prayer (Habakkuk chapter 3) he affirms his belief in God's power, and, in spite of the calamity that appears inevitable (see Habakkuk 3:16), he concludes with one of the finest expressions of faith to be found in the Older Testament (see Habakkuk 3:17-19).

His key contribution is his insistence that the righteous will live, because of the faithfulness of YHWH, a theme taken up in the Newer Testament where Habakkuk 2:4 is quoted (see Galatians 3:10-13; Romans 1:17; Hebrews 10:37). To find real life, we must put our trust in the faithfulness of God, and persevere in fidelity to the covenant God has made with us.

Romans 1:17 (also Galatians 3:11; and see Hebrews 10:37-38)

Paul's basic thesis is that the Christian life flows from our sharing in Jesus' faith. He cites Habakkuk:

For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, **“The one who is righteous will live by faith”** (Habakkuk 2:3-4).

The prophet Jeremiah (627-587BC)

The bulk of Jeremiah's oracles are located in the reigns of Jehoiakim (609-598) and Zedekiah (597-587).

Jeremiah's was a lone voice, and his contemporaries dismissed him and his 'oracles' as the ravings of a religious crank. Moreover, there was no lack of self-acclaimed 'prophets' who kept reassuring the people that it was impossible for Jerusalem to fall, since its security was guaranteed by YHWH. Jeremiah kept insisting that their security depended on their fidelity. No one wanted to listen to him.

In 598BC the Babylonian army captured Jerusalem and the leaders were taken into exile.

Zedekiah kept vacillating between submission to Babylon and courting favour with Egypt. In 588 the Babylonian army again laid siege to the city. This time they showed no mercy. The city was burnt and the temple razed to the ground. More people were taken into exile. It was the end of an era. Judah, the last of the tribes of Israel, was utterly devastated. It was Jeremiah's lot to minister as a prophet during the terrible final years of Judah's decline. This accounts for the unrelenting criticism of the policies that led to the disasters of 597 and 586, and the dire warnings of divine punishment that all but fill his scroll.

To read the Jeremiah scroll we need to put ourselves among the exiles in Babylon as they tried to grasp what they understood as YHWH's will in using the Babylonians to humble Judah. We need to picture the elders, the priests, and scholars of various 'Schools', struggling to understand what had gone wrong. Jeremiah's oracles would have been an important source for their reflections, and their insights are incorporated into the scroll. Some of these insights are expressed in homiletic form, aimed at inspiring the other exiles to learn from Jeremiah. As one would expect, the homilies expressed what YHWH had revealed to Jeremiah by drawing out the implications of Jeremiah's words in ways that connected with the exiles' experience.

Jeremiah has a lot to say about divine punishment. This is to be expected for he lived through the capture of Jerusalem in 598 and its destruction in 587.

He also has a lot to say about so-called prophets who do not listen to God and so do not proclaim God's word (see, for example, Jeremiah 2:8; 5:13, 31; 6:13; 14:13-16; 23:14-40; 27:16; 29:8-9).

Jeremiah had a radical trust in YHWH. Along with this trust went an honesty in expressing his personal suffering and the doubts he experienced as well as the confusion he felt at God's giving him his ministry and then appearing to leave him high and dry, especially when the situation made it appear that his words were not being fulfilled. He felt used and even deceived. In no other prophetic scroll do we find such feelings expressed as powerfully and convincingly (see especially the section from 11:18 to 20:18).

It would be tragic if the extensive focus on divine punishment were to obscure Jeremiah's conviction concerning the special love YHWH has for his people.

‘I have forsaken my house, I have abandoned my heritage; I have given the beloved of my heart into the hands of her enemies’(12:7).

‘As the loincloth clings to one's loins, so I made the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah cling to me in order that they might be for me a people, a name, a praise, and a glory. But they would not listen’(13:11).

‘I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you’(31:3).

‘You show steadfast love to the thousandth generation, but repay the guilt of parents into the laps of their children after them, O great and mighty God whose name is YHWH of hosts’(32:8).

‘I thought how I would set you among my children, and give you a pleasant land, the most beautiful heritage of all the nations. And I thought you would call me, My Father, and would not turn from following me’(3:19).

‘My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain! Oh, the walls of my heart! My heart is beating wildly; I cannot keep silent; for I hear the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war’(4:19).

‘For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me’(8:21).

‘O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people!’(9:1).

‘Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he the child I delight in? As often as I speak against him, I still remember him. Therefore I am deeply moved for him; I will surely have mercy on him’(31:20).

The people are obstinate in their infidelity. YHWH, however, is always faithful to the covenant he has with his people (see Jeremiah 3:12; 11:3-4; 31:3-34; 32:40).

‘Let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am YHWH; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight’(4:27).

‘Surely I know the plans I have for you, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile’(29:11-14).

Because it is YHWH who is punishing, Jeremiah knows that the deserved punishment cannot be the final word. YHWH will bring the exiles home and restore ‘his land’(7:3), ‘his heritage’(12:8), ‘his vineyard’(12:10).

‘I will set my eyes upon them for good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up, and not tear them down; I will plant them, and not pluck them up. I will give them a heart to know that I am YHWH; and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart’(24:6-7).

‘As for you, have no fear, my servant Jacob, and do not be dismayed, O Israel; for I am going to save you from far away, and your offspring from the land of their captivity. Jacob shall return and have quiet and ease, and no one shall make him afraid. For I am with you, to save you ... you will be my people, and I will be your God’(30:10-11,22).

‘Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel! Again you shall take your tambourines, and go forth in the dance of the merry-makers. Again you shall plant vineyards on the mountains of Samaria; the planters shall plant, and shall enjoy the fruit’(31:4-5).

‘With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back, I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn’(31:9).

Jeremiah goes to the heart of Yahwism when, in the tradition of the prophets who went before him, he challenges his contemporaries to live justly. In one of his more powerful statements he challenges King Jehoiakim to follow the example of his father, Josiah:

‘Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice; who makes his neighbours work for nothing, and does not give them their wages; who says, “I will build myself a spacious house with large upper rooms,” and who cuts out windows for it, panelling it with cedar, and painting it with vermilion. Are you a king because you compete in cedar? Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? says YHWH. But your eyes and heart are only on your dishonest gain, for shedding innocent blood, and for practicing oppression and violence’(22:13-17).

Without justice, religious cult is valueless.

‘The priests did not say, “Where is YHWH?” Those who handle the law did not know me’(2:8).

‘Of what use to me is frankincense that comes from Sheba, or sweet cane from a distant land? Your burnt offerings are not acceptable, nor are your sacrifices pleasing to me’(6:20)

YHWH asks for sincerity of heart.

‘If you swear, “As YHWH lives!” in truth, in justice, and in uprightness, then nations shall be blessed by him, and by him they shall boast’(4:2).

‘The house of Israel is uncircumcised in heart’(9:26).

YHWH wants his people to obey his voice:

‘They do not know the way of YHWH, the law of their God ...
They all alike had broken the yoke, they had burst the
bonds’(5:4-5).

‘Thus says YHWH: Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for
the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it, and find
rest for your souls. But they said, “We will not walk in it.”(6:16).



YHWH wants his people to speak and to do the truth.

‘You shall say to them: This is the nation that did not obey the voice of YHWH their God, and did not accept discipline; truth has perished; it is cut off from their lips’(7:28).

‘They bend their tongues like bows; they have grown strong in the land for falsehood, and not for truth; for they proceed from evil to evil, and they do not know me’(9:3).

YHWH wants his people to ‘know’ him; that is to say, to live in communion with him, and enjoy the intimacy of love with which he, ‘the fountain of living water’(17:13), longs to bless them.

‘Let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am YHWH; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says YHWH’(9:24).

‘Hear this, O foolish and senseless people,
who have eyes, but do not see,
who have ears, but do not hear’(Jeremiah 5:21).

Jesus to his disciples complaining about having no bread:
‘Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear?
And do you not remember?’(Mark 8:18).

‘Has this house, which is called by my name,
become a den of robbers in your sight?’(Jeremiah 7:11).

‘Jesus was teaching and saying, “Is it not written,
‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’?
But you have made it a den of robbers’(Mark 11:17).

Matthew 2:18

After describing the slaughter of the innocent children of Bethlehem by King Herod who was hoping to kill Jesus, Matthew quotes Jeremiah who is describing the lamentation as the Jews are herded to Ramah to be dragged off into exile in Babylon.

“A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more”(Jeremiah 31:15).

Hebrews 8:8-12 (see also Hebrews 10:16-17)

The author of the Oration to the Hebrews sees in the Christian community the fulfilment of God's promise through Jeremiah:

“The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah; not like the covenant that I made with their ancestors, on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; for they did not continue in my covenant, and so I had no concern for them, says the Lord.

This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall not teach one another or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more”(Jeremiah 31:31-34).