



LEADERS' RESOURCE

FROM JUDGEMENT TO HOPE

Jeremiah the Prophet

NEW BIBLE COMMENTARY PORTION

JEREMIAH

Gordon McConville

(summarised by Rev'd Lynda Johnson)

Introduction

Author and background

Jeremiah prophesied to the kingdom of Judah during the reigns of kings Josiah (640–609 BC), Jehoahaz (609), Jehoiakim (609–597), Jehoiachin (597) and Zedekiah (597–587). The opening words of the book (1:2) tell us that his ministry began in 627 BC. His work, therefore, spanned forty years, a whole career, and coincided with the last years of the kingdom of Judah. Jeremiah may thus be regarded as one of the prophets of the exile, along with Ezekiel (see also page 628).

With Ezekiel, then, Jeremiah was a successor to the great prophets of a century or so earlier (Isaiah, Hosea, Amos, Micah), who had preached in the days when there were still two kingdoms, Israel (the northern kingdom) and Judah (the southern). The former, however, had been dismantled in 722 BC by the mighty Assyrians ('the rod of my [God's] anger'; Is. 10:5), after the warnings of Amos and others had gone unheeded. Jeremiah's Judah, therefore, though it had survived the Assyrian onslaught (see 2 Ki. 18-20), was a tiny and exposed remnant of God's people. Could it survive for long? The answer would depend on whether the people would hear the word of God through Jeremiah.

When Jeremiah first heard God's word, Assyria was no longer the force it once had been. It was in its decline (the fate of all empires) that King Josiah was able to reassert the ancient Israelite claim to the territory of the northern kingdom, lost a hundred years earlier (2 Ki. 23:15-20). In 612 BC, Nineveh the capital of Assyria, fell to the new power in the region, Babylon, which now represented the new threat to God's people. Jeremiah pictures it as an army that would come 'from the land of the north' (6:22). As a century earlier, so now, God's plans for his people were bound up with historical and political events over which he had control. He himself would bring this foe against his unfaithful people (5:15).

The message

Prophets often addressed their words to kings, because these had a special responsibility for maintaining the religious life of the people. In this respect Jeremiah is interesting because his ministry began at the time when King Josiah was reforming the religion of Judah. 2 Ki. 22-23 describes at length the measures he took and relates them to the discovery in the temple of the 'Book of the Law' (probably Deuteronomy), possibly lost during the long and corrupt reign of King Manasseh (see on 2 Ki. 22:8). This was in 621 BC, five years after Jeremiah's call. The reform may have been going on since 628, however, as is implied by 2 Ch. 34:3-7. Surprisingly, therefore, Jeremiah's preaching—highly critical of Judah—began during the reign of a just and faithful king. This may suggest that he thought the reform could not of itself produce the deep change in people which God desired. His call would be for a complete change of heart (4:4).

Jeremiah, nevertheless, criticized all the leaders within Judah for their failure to give true teaching and leadership according to the standards of the covenant for which they were responsible. Kings (ch. 22), prophets (23:9-40) and priests (2:7) are uncompromisingly attacked. (An exception is made for Josiah; 22:15-16.) The condemnation is the more striking because Jeremiah himself was both prophet and priest (1:1). The covenant people, in fact, were false through and through (9:3-6). That is the basis of Jeremiah's whole message.

The message itself, however, which was delivered over a long period and against a dramatically changing background, seems to have passed through several distinct stages. First, Jeremiah called for the people to repent of their sins so that they might not suffer at the hands of Babylon (3:12). At a certain point, however, he announced that God would indeed punish Judah at that nation's hands. The time for repentance was past; God's chastisement was now inevitable (21:1-10). However, this second stage was closely linked with the third, which was an announcement that the chastisement was for the purposes of restoration. In God's mercy the Babylonian exile would be a way to life for those who would accept the punishment (21:9; 24:4-7). It is within this last stage that the promises which include the hope of the new covenant (31:31-34) are to be understood. In the end, therefore, the covenant, once despised by Israel, is re-established by God's mercy.

Jeremiah himself was deeply involved in, and affected by, his message. He suffered because of [p. 671] it in certain obvious, outward ways, having to forgo normal social and family life (15:17; 16:2), being the object of plots against his life (11:18-23; 18:18) and the victim of imprisonments and beatings (20:1-6; 37:15-16; 38:6). Inwardly he was affected too, for he felt keenly the agony which he knew the people must endure (4:19-21; 10:19-22). Yet he also felt the passion of God against the sin around him (8:21-9:3). He therefore experienced the judgment from both sides, which placed an almost unbearable burden on him.

The pain that thus arose out of his prophetic calling is most poignantly expressed in the poetic passages often known as 'the confessions' (11:18-23; 12:1-6; 15:10-21; 17:12-18; 18:19-23; 20:7-18). In these he complains to God, almost bitterly. Yet out of them too come reassurances that God will finally save (15:19-21).

The message and the Christian reader

It is not a straightforward matter for the Christian reader to translate Jeremiah's message into something that is relevant for his or her life. What can God's judgment on his ancient people have to do with the life of the individual Christian? Indeed, how does Jeremiah's preaching of salvation to a nation, understood as restoration to a land, in the context of politics and war, relate to the Christian gospel?

A first answer is to point to the work of Christ. At the heart of Jeremiah's message is the truth that God punishes his people with a view to their salvation. This principle of salvation through judgment foreshadows above all the cross of Christ, in which he himself bore the judgment for human sin in order to save sinful humanity.

Jeremiah points to Christ also in the new covenant prophecies (chs. 30-33). These look first to a restoration of the ancient people of Judah to their land in faithfulness, but ultimately to Christ, who himself lives out the life of faithful 'Israel' and gives the Holy Spirit to those who are in him so that they too might participate in that faithful life.

However, if the book of Jeremiah chiefly points forward to the great things that Christ has done for his people, is there any way in which the book can be a guide for the living of the Christian life? The answer here also is that it can. In this connection it is important to understand that the Christian gospel does not concern individuals only, but the church as a body, and to suppose that there is a basic consistency in the way in which God deals with his people. This means, first, that the messages to Judah of both judgment and salvation may apply in a sense to the church as a body. Like God's people of old, it too needs to guard against complacency and should not think that it is above chastisement (*cf.* Rev. 2-3). It (or parts of it) may even undergo times of chastening, only to know God's renewal at last.

Secondly, Jeremiah highlights the need for responsible leadership and warns of how corruption in God's people can spread. He cautions against false trust among those who are religious, perhaps a false trust in religion itself. He shows how, when the church's life has become debased, its corrupt character can be transmitted from generation to generation (44:9). This perception may even apply to societies other than the church, national or traditional, and thus explain the transmission of hatreds

and prejudices within societies over centuries. The prophecy also exposes the psychology of sin and the strength of the inclination that human beings have towards it (3:6-10). The portrait of King Zedekiah is a great evocation of the eternal hesitation of human beings between good and evil.

Finally, the book has some marvellous expressions of joy in salvation, mainly in chs. 30-33. The poetry of these is itself an inspiration, and in their context in a prophecy which has so much to say about sin and judgment, they focus in their own unique way on the love and compassion of the God whose deepest desire is to give life and blessing to his creatures.

Form, structure and composition of the book

The book of Jeremiah is long and contains a variety of material. Some of it consists of the words of Jeremiah, spoken in the form of poetic oracles, or sayings (*e.g.* chs. 2-6); some of it has a more sermonic style (*e.g.* 7:1-15), printed as prose in most translations (including the NIV); there are also passages written *about* Jeremiah, presumably by someone else (*e.g.* ch. 26). Most of the poetic oracles are in chs. 1-20. Generally, we are not given the dates or settings of individual sayings of this sort. We have more information about the time and place of individual sayings and events in the sermons and the narratives. However, the book is not a biography; it tells about Jeremiah only in order to help proclaim his message.

We know little about how the book was formed. It does not follow a consistent chronological pattern, and it can be difficult to read in a connected way. It was probably formed in stages. This is suggested by ch. 36, where we read that the first scroll of Jeremiah's words was destroyed by King Jehoiakim and that Jeremiah then had another made, which contained more words than the first (36:32). It is also suggested by the fact that the Greek OT (the LXX) contains [p. 672] a shorter version of the book than that which appears in our Bibles. The prophet appears to have worked on the book's production with Baruch, his assistant and scribe. Baruch may have had a hand, therefore, in the composition of the book as we now know it.

Week 1 – The Call of Jeremiah – Jeremiah 1

Jeremiah was the son of a priest, his birthplace Anathoth being a city specially set aside for priestly families (1; *cf.* Jos. 21:18). It was close to Jerusalem, and the priests would have made the short journey to the city as required in order to perform their duties. In the normal course of events, Jeremiah would have exercised the priestly office in due time.

This expectation was interrupted, however, by his call to be a prophet. The phrase *The word of the LORD came to him* (2) is a typical way of speaking about a prophet's call in the OT (*cf.* Ho. 1:1; Joel 1:1; Ezk. 1:3; Mi. 1:1). It shows well how the prophetic mission was not sought by the person to whom it came. Rather, God chose the person for his purpose. His will, once revealed, required that Jeremiah yield himself wholly to it. His whole life would be affected by it deeply.

Jeremiah's first response to the call was most reluctant (6; *cf.* that of Moses, Ex. 4:10-13). He was only a young man (the word translated *child* might better be 'youth'; Jeremiah could have been around twenty). In a society which valued the wisdom of older people, he might well have felt unable to *speak*, *i.e.* a lack of any natural qualification to lead or to interpret events for the whole nation. The Lord, however, had anticipated his objection; he knew and appointed him before he was born (5). This is a remarkable statement of God's foreknowledge, and particularly of his calling of an individual. It puts all natural and acquired qualifications in the shade. It also puts other aspirations in the shade. When God called Jeremiah, he laid his hand on him in such a way that there could be no true choice but to hear and obey. He had been brought to this hour for this purpose. Yet, of course, he must choose, and must obey, and continue to do so throughout his ministry.

The word to Jeremiah not only reassured the prophet but also validated his ministry among the people. In this sense it comes to all (not just ministers or other church officials) who feel their inability to perform what they know God has called them to. It warns church people generally against being superficial in assessing the gifts and ministries of others.

God reassured Jeremiah that he would protect him from those who would oppose and hate him. As a bearer of God's word he shared, in a sense, in God's authority even over *kingdoms* (10). Jeremiah's message would indeed prove to be important for a number of nations, not just Judah and Babylon (see on chs. 46-51). God's words of both judgment and salvation would surely find their mark.

Jeremiah was given visions to confirm God's assurance to him that the call was authentic. The first vision, of an *almond tree*, depends for its meaning on the resemblance in Hebrew between the word for *almond tree* and the word for watching.

The second, of *a boiling pot*, shows that the message would be one of judgment at the hands of a people from the north (14). Babylon was not yet specified. The plural (*all the peoples... their kings*; 15-16) is vague. Jeremiah may not initially have known that Babylon would be the foe in question. The setting up of the *thrones* of foreign kings in the *gates of Jerusalem* (15) implies that they, and their gods, now ruled there. It looks as if the Lord himself had failed his people. But the prophet will show why their humiliation must be so.

The sin for which the people would be judged was the fundamental one of breaking the covenant with the Lord, by the rejection of him in favour of other gods (16). This was to attack the covenant at its roots, as the people had done at the time when it was first made, at Mount Sinai (Ex. 32). It will be a constant theme in the book.

Finally, Jeremiah was told again to stand firm (17). As the nation would have enemies, so would he, among the people themselves, including the powerful among them (18). The Lord, however, is more powerful than they, and he will protect him (19). The promise will have to be repeated—and kept (see 11:18-23).

2:1-8

Ch. 2 contains the essence of the prophet's accusation of Judah. In this opening passage the Lord recalls the earliest days of Israel's life, when he brought her out of slavery in Egypt and made her his people by a covenant at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19-24). The time in the *desert* (2) is remembered as one of faithfulness. In that unfruitful place it was essential to trust God for everything. And he had protected her from enemies (3b; see Ex. 17:8-13). (Israel had not always been faithful in the desert; note Ex. 32. Jeremiah, however, focuses on the desert as the place of true communion with God, as Hosea had also done; Ho. 2:14-15.)

The point of this picture of the faith of a past generation is to contrast it with the corruption of the people of Judah in Jeremiah's day. The Lord now calls them to account (4). The covenant involved a commitment on both sides. [p. 675] The Lord had promised land and blessing at the same time as requiring Israel's faithfulness. He now asks, rhetorically, whether some failure on his part had led to Israel's straying from him (5). The sin affected not the present generation only but their *fathers*.

The sin that had stolen the people's hearts was nothing less than idolatry. This was to reject the first and fundamental commandment (Ex. 20:3). In the land of Canaan, which God had given the people, they had worshipped Baal, the god commonly worshipped by the Canaanite peoples. (The term *worthless idols* in v 5, is a play on the name Baal in Hebrew; the point is that Baal was in fact powerless and empty). The people had thoroughly transferred their trust to Baal, the various leaders forsaking their specific responsibilities to the Lord and the people, and devoting themselves to this other god (8). This was bitter reward for the God who had led them through the dangers of the desert into a land of plenty (6-7; cf. Dt. 8:7-10). When he calls it his *inheritance* (7b), the point is not about how he got it, but that it belongs to him perpetually (cf. Lv. 25:23). His people, however, by their sin, have made it loathsome to him; they have corrupted themselves with those very practices he had once decisively removed from this land (Lv. 18:19-30).

2:9-28

In reality, it is Judah who has been the unfaithful covenant partner. Therefore the Lord now elaborates his accusation. The charge is of exchanging the true God for idols. *Their Glory* is a name for God (11), recalling his appearances to Israel in their desert wanderings (Ex. 40:34-35). The unnaturalness of turning from God is stressed in vs 10-12.

This turning from God to powerless idols, furthermore, is a delusion. Israel's and Judah's history itself shows this. *Lions* (15) seems to refer to Assyria, which had destroyed the northern kingdom in 722 BC (*cf.* v 18, and see the Introduction). That past defeat is matched by the more contemporary threat to Judah from Egypt. V 16 may be a reference to the death of King Josiah at the hands of Pharaoh Neco at Megiddo in 609 BC (2 Ki. 23:29). What hope, then, in attempted alliances with such empires (18)? This policy had been tried in the past, with Assyria (see 2 Ki. 16:7) and discredited (see on Is. 7). And some in Judah would seek refuge in Egypt from Babylon (24:8). All this would be in vain, and bring its own punishment (19).

The theme of falsity is also pursued in the images Jeremiah uses. Judah is a slave (14) where she should have been a servant of the Lord; she is a *prostitute* where she should have been his bride (20; *cf.* 3:1); she is a *wild vine* where she should have been a *choice vine* (21; *cf.* Is. 5:1-4). The false thing is so often an imitation and a mockery of the truth, promising all that the truth can bring. Nevertheless, there must be a reckoning when life is based on false ideas and false worship; and Judah's folly will be exposed, to her shame, as when a thief is caught in the act (26). In the moment of crisis, Judah may turn desperately to God again (27b); but this too is false, an attempt to use God, the genuine spirit of idolatry.

2:29-37

The main theme is returned to. It is Judah, not the Lord, who has been untrue to the covenant (31-32). To the charge of religious sin (33) is added that of social injustice (34), a common prophetic theme (*cf.* Am. 5:10-15). The Lord, however, cannot be deceived; no bulwark will suffice against him (36b); he will indeed punish his wayward people (35b, 37).

14:1-10

The supply of water could never be taken for granted in ancient Israel. Huge *cisterns* (3), carved out of rock and lined (the ‘broken cisterns’ of 2:13 are those whose lining is damaged), would retain water from flash flooding in the rainy seasons and would provide relief for some time during a drought. The drought in this case, however, is obviously severe and well advanced. The distress which such a thing brings (4-6) is sadly well known in our times too.

Since water is so fundamental to life, its supply is a basic covenant blessing, and its withholding a great curse (Dt. 28:12, 24). Whereas droughts in general may be seen simply as natural disasters, within Judah’s covenant relationship with God such a thing must be seen as his judgment on them. The exact date of this drought is not known; it may have been relatively close in time to the coming of the Babylonians, to judge by the pairing of *famine* with *sword* in v 12.

The picture of the drought is followed by a confession of sin and an appeal to the Lord for help. It is like some of the so-called ‘laments’ of the Psalms (*e.g.* Ps. 10:1). The Lord should act in order to show his power to do so (7); ever since the exodus from Egypt, he has been the true Saviour of Israel; he is, finally, known as [p. 684] the God of Israel (9b). The prayer may be in the mouth of Jeremiah on behalf of the people. The Lord’s frosty response to this (10) is in line with his forbidding Jeremiah to pray. (See also the people’s insincere confession in 3:22-25.) The phrase *this people*, as a retort to v 9b, strikingly avoids the covenantal ‘my people’ (9:7).

14:11-22

The prohibition of prayer (11; *cf.* 7:16; 11:14) in this context means that neither this present famine nor other signs of judgment will be removed. Rather, the picture in vs 11-16 is broadened to *sword, famine and plague*, a trio which is intended to cover the full range of human misery. The curses of Dt. 28:15-68 are basically variations on these themes.

There were evidently those prophets who hastened to assure the people that their suffering did *not* mean the curses of the covenant. Merely being an official prophet, however (*cf.* 1 Ki. 22:5-8), did not guarantee that one had the word of God (1 Ki. 22:24)! To claim to have the authority to prophesy when God had not given a message was particularly heinous. False prophets would bring the people down with them (15b-16).

Vs 17-18 represent again the pain of the Lord through the mouth, and the experience, of Jeremiah. The Lord is not indifferent to the grief of the people, even though he himself brings it upon them as judgment. His mourning corresponds to Judah's (1; cf. 9:1).

The prayer that follows (19-22) has elements known from certain Psalms (*e.g.* Pss. 74, 79)—the protest to God about his harsh treatment of the people, confession, appeal to him to act on the grounds of the covenant and for the honour of his name. It is not yet a prayer that can properly be attributed to the people. As a prayer of Jeremiah for the people it has already been rejected (14:11). As an utterance of Jeremiah, a faithful Israelite, it might yet have a promise of grace. (See below on 15:19-21.)

Two broken pots and a confession

18:1-18

The two signs involving a broken pot (here and in 19:1-14) are significantly different from each other. In this incident, Jeremiah goes to the potter's house and observes him at work. The potter, displeased with the pot he is making makes another out of the same clay. The Lord then declares that, like the potter, he is free to revise his intentions for Judah (6). The principle is developed in vs 7-10 and applied to any nation. The crucial point, however (11), is that, even though the Lord has formed a plan to judge his people, there is still time for them to repent and avert the disaster. Late repentance will still be honoured by God; the principle also appears in Jesus' life and ministry (Lk. 15:11-32; 23:40-43). The Lord's appeal to them to change is real, even though he knows that they will not respond (12). When they are judged it will be as a result of their own choosing. This point is very clear throughout Jeremiah's preaching. Why does the Lord need to remake them? Because of the hardness of their hearts (13-18). The illustrations are of constancy in nature: the snow on the peaks of Lebanon, always issuing in cool streams. This constancy contrasts with Judah's unfaithfulness, and at the same time shows it to be unnatural (15; for the kind of argument, *cf.* 8:4-7). It is also the height of folly. The *ancient paths* (15; *cf.* 6:16) were safe; *bypaths* could be dangerous. The resultant ruin will make the people an object of scorn—the regular fate of a defeated nation (*cf.* 25:9; 51:37, the latter said of Babylon). These verses, following the call to repent in vs 5-12, suggest that the call has been in vain.

18:19-23

The occasion of Jeremiah's fifth confession, like that of the first (11:18-23), is a plot against him, apparently by leading figures in the land (18). The three classes named give a clue as to the roles of the chief figures in the establishment. (The *wise*, in this context, are those who counselled kings; like Ahithophel in 2 Sa. 16:23). The reason for the plot, obviously, is Jeremiah's criticism of such figures (2:8; 8:8-11). There is no explicit plan to kill him here; however, the accusation made might well have been that of treason (*cf.* 37:13), and this in itself could have endangered his life.

The confession itself is almost entirely a prayer for judgment on his enemies. The *good* which he has done them (20) is to have told the truth and prayed for them. The central part of the prayer (21-22) might be read as Jeremiah's [p. 687] resignation: this is what they have chosen; now it must come, awful though it be. If the motive in v 23 is blameworthy, the sentiment is still in line with God's declared purpose and with the prohibition of the prophet's prayer *for* the people.

‘Build houses in Babylon’

If people in Judah wanted to believe that the effects of the first Babylonian invasion would soon be undone, so too did those who had already been taken into exile there. Jeremiah now sends them a letter (showing, incidentally, that communication between the two locations remained possible; there was always traffic around the trade route that lay between them. The family of Shaphan again appears in Jeremiah’s service in v 3; *cf.* 26:24). In Babylon too the various classes of society are represented (chiefly the upper and better off classes; 2 Ki. 24:14). And there too there is a battle for their mind; prophets are persuading them that they will soon be home (8-9).

The letter contains what seems like bad news, but also a great encouragement. The bad news is that the exile will not be short. Jeremiah repeats his message that it will last seventy years (10; *cf.* 25:11). However, in the ‘death’ of exile are the seeds of new life. The letter begins to reverse the hitherto bleak preaching of the prophet. Where once he had himself refrained from marrying as a sign that marrying and having children would cease in Judah (16:2), now the exiles may return to normal relationships (6). The people may again increase in number, whereas his previous message had seemed to promise only extinction (4:7).

Just when all planning seems futile, the Lord has plans again for his people (11). The act that had seemed to put an end to the covenant in fact gives life where there had been but the appearance of it. The story illustrates neatly the difference between the Lord’s thinking and human plans (Pr. 16:9; Is. 55:8). What seems to be the end of hope is but the end of tawdry dreams; with God there is always a real future. In it, there is willing and joyful communion with him, no longer hidden by human self-seeking. Nor is this future in some unreal ‘spiritual’ realm. It exists within normal life; hence the marrying and the houses, and—in time—the returning to the ancient land (14). The phrase translated *bring you back from captivity* is richer than this suggests, implying the full restoration of life in all its dimensions. It will recur several times in the following chapters.

29:15-32

To the objection that the exiles had their own prophets (15), Jeremiah replies with a summary of his former message of judgment, recalling the vision of the bad figs which had condemned those who would refuse the exile (17; *cf.* 24:8-10). There was to be no false hope for the exiles in the fact that Zedekiah still sat on a throne in Jerusalem, or that the temple still stood.

The letter continues with words of judgment against particular prophets who, like Hananiah (ch. 28), are declaring Jeremiah's words invalid. Ahab and Zedekiah (not the king) have shown their falseness by their adulterous lives (20-23). In the light of the fulfilment of Jeremiah's words about Hananiah (28:17), his prophecy about them is ominous indeed (22). Shemaiah the Nehelamite opposes Jeremiah as directly as he can at such a distance, by refuting his letter in a reply to one of the priests. He too has dared too much, and will know the anger of God (24-32).

A remnant returns

This chapter contains a number of pictures of the restored people, headed by a variation of the covenant–formula (1; cf. 30:22) and a poetic statement about renewal that lies beyond judgment (2).

The *Virgin* image has only been used ironically before (18:13-15); here (4), it contrasts with the former ‘prostitute’ (2:20). In the new covenant, the former stains have been washed away. The new life, moreover, is one that can be portrayed in images that are homely and joyful. The idea of Israel as *Virgin* leads into the colourful picture of the young women of the land going out to dance, perhaps at a festival (cf. Jdg. 21:20-21). Farmers will harvest crops and celebrate in due course the bounty of God in worship in Jerusalem (6b). All this will be because the love of God does not come to an end in judgment; his love does not die. It is expressed in that special love (*loving-kindness*) which he has set upon his people (3).

A people returns from exile (7-9), a remnant (see 6:9), yet in great number, bringing their infirmities, yet weeping for joy, as the Lord, their father, picks out for them a level path. Israel is the *foremost of the nations* (7), no longer merely one of those whom God punished by Nebuchadnezzar (27:8); she is so simply because she has been chosen to know God’s love (cf. Dt. 7:7-8).

A further oracle is addressed to the nations (10-14). A joyful people is tended by its *shepherd* (cf. 23:3), its blessings pictured in concrete terms: corn, wine and oil, the basic symbols of bounty (cf. Dt. 7:13); a garden and dancing (again, cf. v 4). The whole community is portrayed in the contrasts of male and female, young and old, priest and lay (13-14). All this is meant as a witness to the nations that God is faithful to his people and able to bless them as he promises. No nation can hold them when he decides to redeem them (11; cf. Rom. 8:31).

The strong feminine imagery continues (15-22) with Rachel weeping for her children. Rachel, the younger wife of Jacob, was the mother of Joseph (Gn. 35:24), the ancestor of the northern tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh. Her weeping stands for the grief of Israel, especially all its mothers, over its losses, the northern tribes into Assyrian exile, the southern to Babylon. That weeping is answered by this restoration (16-17). Ephraim (standing for all Israel) is portrayed as repenting in truth (contrast past false repentances; 3:22b-25). Their turning towards God is met by his turning towards them (18); in the past they had only turned away (3:22a). God himself has done all this; his compassion is finally more decisive than his judgment (20; cf. Ho. 11:8).

There follows an appeal (21-22), showing that even in this new order the Lord still calls his people to faithfulness. The last line (22b) is obscure, but may be an image of a mother [p. 695] protecting her male child, a happy echo of Rachel weeping for her children. This secure people is also a worshipping one (23-25).

The oracles to this point in the chapter seem to have been given to Jeremiah in a dream (26).

31:27-40

The preamble to the new covenant (27-30) answers a proverb of the time of the exile which complained that that generation was suffering for the sins of preceding ones (*cf.* Ezk. 18:2). Rather, the Lord would deal with each generation, and even each individual, separately and justly.

The idea of a new covenant has been contained in all the prophecies of chs. 30-31 so far. Now it is spelt out (31-34). It is made with both Israel and Judah. The renewal goes right back to Abraham and Moses, not just to the fall of Judah, and re-creates the covenant; 'new' can mean 'renewed'.

This covenant, however, will be different from the one which previous generations had broken (32). It will be written on people's hearts, not just on stones, like the Ten Commandments (33; *cf.* Ex. 24:12). In other words, the covenant will be a warm delight to the people, not a cold prescription. This had always been the ideal (*cf.* Dt. 10:16; 30:6), but now it would be realized, because in some way the Lord would create the desire and ability in his people (*I will write...*).

Two characteristics of the new covenant are now mentioned (34). First, people will not need to be encouraged to know God, because all will know him. Such knowledge means not only a knowledge of God's character and ways, but is personal, and implies a commitment of the will. It is a response to his knowledge of us, which is also a total commitment of himself. Secondly, God will forgive the sins of the people in a new and decisive way (*cf.* Heb. 10:1-17).

The following two passages affirm, first, that the new covenant will be everlasting (35-37), and secondly, that as a result of it the city of Jerusalem will be rebuilt (38-40).

Additional note on the interpretation of the new covenant

The plain sense of the prophecy in 31:31-34 relates it to the historical nations of Israel and Judah. It refers, in the first place, to the return of exiles from Babylon. This is clear from the reference to the rebuilding of the city in vs 38-40. The whole tendency of chs. 30-31 has been in this direction also. The new covenant prophecy, therefore, has a first fulfilment when God brings back the exiles in 539 BC and the following years.

However, the prophecy suggests more than this. The inclusion of 'Israel', which had ceased to exist as a nation by Jeremiah's time, suggests that a deeper fulfilment is looked for than a mere physical return to the land. The ancient covenant is to be fulfilled at last in a new way, by a people that is capable of entering into it, by God's help.

The NT teaches that the decisive fulfilment of the new covenant prophecy takes place in Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 11:25; Heb. 8:7-13; 9:15). This means that God's covenant is finally achieved in the people who are 'in Christ'. The new kind of forgiveness is possible because he has made a once-for-all sacrifice for sin that makes all other sacrifices obsolete (Heb. 10:15-18). It is a covenant that cannot end because it has been perfected by Christ. Even so, his new people are called to faithfulness and given the Holy Spirit in order to enable them.

There is, therefore, a parallel between how God acted towards ancient Judah in bringing them back from Babylon and how he acts to the whole world in Christ. Ancient Israel and Judah have their counterpart in the church, which is Christ's body and calls all people to him.