# Jeremiah 31:27-34

In the case of Isaiah, we can deduce that the book named after this prophet includes actual prophecies by Isaiah, stories about the prophet, and also prophecies and sermons by later prophets that were in part inspired by his. It may be that the same applies to the book called Jeremiah. If it does, then these may then break up in a similar way to the material in the book called Isaiah. Broadly speaking, Jeremiah’s own prophecies will be the ones in poetry, while other people will have contributed the stories about him and the prose prophecies such as 31:27-34. But to be truthful, no one knows whether this is actually so; the evidence is much less clear than is the case with Isaiah. So we do not actually know whether this particular passage is a prophecy by Jeremiah or one by a later prophet. Fortunately this need make no difference to its interpretation. Its place in the book invites us to read it in the context of the fact that Judah and the city of Jerusalem were to fall to Babylon in 587.

The northern kingdom of Israel had fallen to Assyria, Babylon’s predecessor as great power in the Middle East, 150 years previously. Admittedly Jeremiah himself was a living proof that God had not wholly cast off northern Israel, for he came from the clan of Benjamin. It lived just north of Jerusalem, but technically it belonged to northern Israel. Perhaps the continuing existence of the rump of Israel had thus encouraged people to believe that God had not abandoned it. If so, God is about to take away even that sign of hope. Judah and what is left of Israel will both fall. As the land of Israel once had its population taken away by Assyria, so Judah will have its population taken away by Babylon. God had thus appointed Jeremiah over nations and kingdoms in connection with plucking up and pulling down, destroying and overthrowing, and God’s word was coming true (1:10).

But there had been more to God’s appointment of Jeremiah. Perhaps surprisingly, God had gone on to speak about building and planting (1:10). Now God takes up those words from the beginning of Jeremiah’s ministry (see v. 28). Most of God’s words back then, and during Jeremiah’s ministry, concerned plucking up and breaking down, overthrowing and destroying. In other words they concerned bringing “evil” (v. 28). “Evil” denotes calamity or disaster. As in Isaiah 45:7, the implication is not that God does moral evil. Like English, Hebrew has a word that means moral evil (*resha*‘) and also a word that means “bad” (*ra*‘), which can denote moral evil but can also refer to things that are calamitous or disastrous. It is the second word that comes here.

The words about calamity have been fulfilled. The prophecy presupposes the actual fall of the city and the taking away of its people. The upside to that fulfilment is that it opens up the possibility of believing that the words about restoration will be fulfilled. It does that in more than one way. The words about renewal could not be fulfilled until the words about destruction had been. But in addition, the fulfilment of Jeremiah’s words about destruction was also grounds for trusting in the words about restoration. Jeremiah has been shown to be a true prophet, and his God had been shown to be really sovereign in events.

One outworking of that sovereignty will be the sowing of the land with new seed (v. 27). Jeremiah refers not to literal seed but to the metaphorical seed constituted by a new human and animal population. The prophecy presupposes that many of the people will indeed have been transported to Babylon, and many of the animals will die in war, or die in the chaos and neglect that follows Babylonian victory. It is noteworthy that the household that is to be rebuilt is the household of Israel and of Judah. It transpires that the continuing existence of a rump of the house of northern Israel was indeed a sign that God had not finished with it. How could this not be so? How could God abandon Israel?

There will be another feature of God’s restoration of the people. They will then no longer complain that the children have a bad taste in their mouth as a result of their parents having eaten something unpleasant.

At present, they are asking “Why do bad things happen to good people?” There is no one answer to this question, in Jeremiah’s day or ours, though there are several different answers that may apply to different people. Jeremiah affirms that the other side of this coming calamity, people will no longer have reason to make this complaint.

His declaration that we all stand individually before God, responsible for our own destiny, is congenial in the modern age, and people have been inclined to assume that of course this is the truth. The Old Testament is here getting beyond the view expressed elsewhere that children pay for their parents’ sins. The people were simply misguided in suggesting that they were paying the penalty for their ancestors’ wrongdoing. Because that is the unbalanced prejudice of our culture, we need to face the truth in what they were saying. Early in Jeremiah’s ministry, King Josiah had tried to bring about a wide-ranging reform of religious and social life in Judah and the rump of Israel (see e.g., 22:15-16; 2 Kings 22—23). This had included eliminating the Assyrian and Canaanite religious customs that prevailed in Jerusalem. But he had failed, and his successors had gone back on his work. And that was the cause of the calamity coming on the city. With hindsight one might say that matters had gone too far. It was already too late. The parents had eaten things that were bad, and the children were left with the bad taste.

It is a fact that the lives of parents affect children. That is part of the way God made humanity. We are bound up in the bundle of life together and not able to subsist on our own from the beginning of our lives, like some animals. That gives us great blessing, but in other contexts we pay a price. It does not mean that we are not responsible for making our own response to God and to life; we cannot blame our parents. It does mean that some people may have a harder time than others in making the right response.

In different contexts there may be a need to stress the importance of the corporate relationships of family and community, or to stress the reality of individual responsibility. Jeremiah lived in a time when people were paralyzed by their awareness of the cost they were paying for their ancestors’ actions, and they needed to be reminded that they could make their own response to God. Modern Western culture needs the reminder of the way our decisions affect our contemporaries and the people who come after us, who may not be able to avoid paying a price for what we do or fail to do.

Fifty years after the fall of Jerusalem, God began the process of sowing and building and planting and changing people. As Assyria had given way to Babylon, so Babylon gave way to Persia. The new Persian government commissioned Judeans living in Babylon to return to Judah to begin the renewing of city and community there, “in order that the word of the Yahweh by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished” (Ezra 1:1). The Christian church can thus read this prophecy in at least two ways.

One is that we see it as an instance of God’s commitment to the Jewish people, not least when it is overcome by calamity. God ever says anew to the Jewish people “I will watch over them to build and to plant”. In our own lifetime we have seen a number of ways in which God has once more fulfilled this promise, not least against the terrible background of calamity in the Holocaust.

The second is that insofar as we as Christians have been admitted in Christ into membership of the people of God, the promises that God made to Israel apply to us—not in place of Israel, but through our association with Israel. In the West the church has also been plucked up, broken down, overthrown and destroyed, and has gone through calamity. It is hard for us to acknowledge that this is so. It is harder in the USA than in Europe, because secularization has not proceeded as far in the USA and Christian faith still has considerable respect. But only when we acknowledge that it is so can we begin to claim the promise that God also watches over us “ to build and to plant.”

# Jeremiah 31:31-34

Jerusalem is about to fall to Babylon, many more of its people will be transported to Babylon, Davidic rule will be terminated, and the temple in Jerusalem will be destroyed. All this is a sign that the covenant relationship between Yahweh and Israel had broken down. In that context there is something that Yahweh has definitively said about the future (v. 31). A situation that seems hopeless therefore ceases to be so.

Yahweh’s promise envisages more than a mere renewing of the Mosaic covenant. It had been renewed before, after the rebellion at Sinai (Exod 34) and after the wandering through the wilderness (Deut 29:1). Jeremiah 31 speaks rather of the making of a new covenant. The situation is thus more like that when the Sinai covenant itself succeeded the covenant with Israel’s ancestors (see Genesis 17), when new acts of God and new forms of responsive human acts succeeded the preceding ones. On each occasion the new covenant was, of course, in continuity with the preceding covenant, yet it also involved substantial newness.

Like the Sinai covenant, this new covenant will involve the whole people, Israel and Judah (v. 31). In this context, “Israel” refers to the northern tribes. On the eve of the fall of Jerusalem, it could have seemed that Judah was finished. It would have seemed even more certain that northern Israel had been finished long ago, e.g. when Assyria brought its political life to an end, transported its people, and replaced them by other peoples from Mesopotamia. The promise about Israel and Judah results from the knowledge that when Yahweh has made a commitment to a people, that commitment never collapses.

But the promise recognizes that the situation requires a really new covenant, one with provisions that are different from the provisions of the Sinai covenant in any of its forms. Arguably that covenant had always been broken-backed. The Noah covenant and the Abraham covenant had been based entirely on Yahweh’s gracious promise. They required no human response in order to “work”, except for men’s acceptance of the Abrahamic sign of circumcision. Indeed, Yahweh’s commitment in the time of Noah explicitly recognized that this commitment needed to allow for inveterate human sinfulness. It was useless to make a covenant conditional on human response.

The Moses covenant shows the same recognition. At Sinai, Israel had broken it and it had needed renewing only minutes after it was made (Exod 32—34). In the plains of Moab, Moses keeps emphasizing the stubbornness of the people and envisages the relationship with Yahweh breaking down. It is not surprising, then, that the covenant has now broken down terminally. Its entire basis was inadequate.

In what way had it broken down? The essence of the covenant relationship lies in the expression “I am your God and you are my people” (v. 33). A covenant is essentially a relationship, though a relationship that has been formalized and entered into solemnly. Admittedly, this particular covenant is not an equal relationship. Yahweh refers to the fact that the people had broken the covenant “though I was their husband” (v. 33). The term presupposes a relationship, but it is a hierarchical relationship. The ordinary Hebrew expression for “their husband” literally means “their man,” and is thus open to an egalitarian interpretation. But this passage uses an expression that suggests “your master.” It is a patriarchal marriage that is presupposed here. But arguably that providentially provides a more suitable model for understanding the relationship between God and the people. That is an unequal one, relationship, but a real one. It was supposed to involve a real mutual commitment.

The trouble is that Israel had always found it impossible to be faithful to Yahweh as husband. Archaeological discoveries give clear testimony to the worship of many gods and goddesses in Israel and Judah, supporting the picture that appears in the Old Testament. This archaeological work also shows that as well as worshiping other deities, they attempted to worship Yahweh by means of images. So they ignored the very basic requirements of the Torah expressed in the first two of the Ten Words, on acknowledging other gods and on worshiping Yahweh by means of images.

There is another aspect of the breaking of the covenant that incenses prophets such as Jeremiah. As well as failing to be faithful to Yahweh in these two ways, people fail to be faithful to one another. There is no faithfulness or compassion or mutual commitment in the land. People to do behave rightly in their relationships with one another. To put it in terms of Jesus’s summary of the Torah, they fail in their love for God and they fail in their love for one another.

It is such failure that has led to the collapse of the old covenant. Yahweh therefore promises a covenant with a different basis. Yahweh intends to make a covenant based on the inscribing of the Torah within people, in their minds. Anatomically the location of this inscription is their hearts, but in Old Testament-speak the heart is the center of the person. It is not so much the location of emotions as the location of thinking and the formation of attitude. So the heart stands for something closer to what we call the mind (cf NIV).

So whereas Christians may assume that the point of this inscribing of the torah in people’s minds is to cause them to live lives characterized by a detailed obedience to all the individual requirements of the Torah, the context suggests we then miss the point. What Yahweh is seeking is the success of that one-to-one exclusive relationship. The promise is designed to make it possible for the people to “know” Yahweh. In such contexts “knowledge” implies neither mere awareness of facts nor an inner personal relationship. It implies recognition, acknowledgment, and commitment (see e.g., 1:5; 2:8; 5:4-5; 9:3). Yahweh intends to do something to the people’s inner beings that will make them give Yahweh the response that the Torah looks for. Yahweh will then be their God and they will be Yahweh’s people. They will not need to be urged by people such as prophets to be loyal to Yahweh rather than following other gods or worshiping by means of images, and to be committed to one another. They will do it.

The Abrahamic covenant was based on a promise, which is something. The Mosaic covenant was based on an act of deliverance, which is more. The new covenant will be based on an extraordinary act of forgiveness. That is the most powerful, healing, and winsome act that any person can ever do for another. Of course Israel’s life had been based on forgiveness before—since Sinai, indeed (see Exod 32—34). But the act of forgiveness that Yahweh will now undertake in restoring the people after the collapse of the covenant will break into their spirits in a wholly new way. They will know themselves as an extraordinarily loved and forgiven people. That will change them inside and make them respond to Yahweh in a way they never have before.

Like the promise in vv. 27-30, this promise about a new covenant received its first fulfilment in the life of Judah after the exile. Whereas Josiah had failed in his reform project, since the return from exile the Jewish people that they have indeed acknowledged Yahweh alone, and have done so in a way that gave up images of God. They thus fulfilled the fundamental expectations of the covenant relationship. Further, from the later prophets we get nothing like the social critique that we got from the earlier prophets. The community is much nearer a mutual covenant commitment.

The idea of a new covenant was then one of many Old Testament ideas that Jesus and the New Testament writers used to illumine what Jesus did. It is for this reason that it appears in the lectionary for Lent 5. We do not have to claim that this is the first or only fulfilment of this promise of God’s, and thereby downplay the significance of God’s work in the Jewish people. Indeed, it is characteristic of New Testament use of such prophecies that they are re-applications of the Old Testament words, and this is another example. The death of Christ and the pouring out of the Spirit set relationships with God on a new basis. It was a new covenant.

Nor is that the end of the story. When Paul quotes v. 34 in Romans 11:27, he does so to reaffirm that the promise is still to be fulfilled. This, too, is not to deny that it has been fulfilled, but it does shut us off from the one-to-one prediction-fulfilment model that we often work with. Indeed, we only need to consider briefly the life of the Christian church to know that vv. 31-34 still need some fulfilment. A read of them now gives us grounds for gratitude for what God has done, confidence for what God will yet do, and prayer for God to do it now.