# What Would Jeremiah Say?

I’m going to begin with a reading from Jeremiah chapter 2.

4Listen to Yahweh’s message, Jacob’s household, all the families of Israel’s household.

5Yahweh has said this:

“What wrongdoing did your ancestors find in me that they went far away from me.

They went after emptiness and became emptiness, 6and they didn’t say ‘Where is Yahweh,

the one who brought us up from the country of Egypt and enabled us to go through the wilderness,

through a country of steppe and pit, a country of drought and deep darkness,

a country through which no one passed and where no human being lived?’

7I enabled you to come into a country of farmland to eat its fruit and its good things.

But you came and defiled my country; you made my possession an outrage.

8The priests didn’t say, ‘Where is Yahweh?’; the people controlling the Teaching didn’t acknowledge me.

The shepherds rebelled against me, the prophets prophesied by Ba‘al, and followed beings that couldn’t achieve anything.

9Therefore I shall contend with you more (Yahweh’s declaration), and contend with your grandchildren.

10Because cross over to the shores of Cyprus and see, send off to Qedar and observe well, see if something like this has happened.

11Has a nation changed its gods, when those are not gods?

But my people have changed my splendor for what doesn’t achieve anything.

12Be devastated at this, heavens, shudder, be utterly desolate (Yahweh’s declaration).

13Because my people have done two evil things.

They’ve abandoned me, the fountain of running water,

to dig themselves cisterns, breakable cisterns, that can’t [hold] water.

What would Jeremiah say if he were at SBL instead of simply being talked about? The time in which we live is a little like Jeremiah’s. People sometimes speak of the church in the United States as being in exile, but that seems an exaggeration. But it’s much less strong and influential than it used to be. It’s on the way to being in exile. So we’re living at a moment like Jeremiah’s. Most of his ministry belonged in the decades before the exile, when there was a possibility of avoiding it. We’re living in that kind of time and Jeremiah’s analysis of Judah’s situation is transferable to ours.

In those verses I read, he lays out the basics of his message over four decades. He asks the question we might ask, why are we in a reduced state, a shadow of our former self? There are reasons.

For Jerusalem, the first is that they have forgotten their gospel, the good news, the story of what God did for them, the story about the God who brought them out of Egypt and gave them the land, and they haven’t asked where God was when things went south.

The second reason is that they have given up on God’s written word. “The people controlling the Teaching, the Torah, didn’t acknowledge me,” God says. The written word of God wasn’t shaping their relationship with God and their lives.

Instead, thirdly, they’ve turned to other spiritual resources. They’ve abandoned the fountain of running water, to dig themselves cisterns, that can’t hold water.” The best water supply is a spring or a well, where you can always get fresh water. Alternatively you have to make do with a tank to collect water in the winter and use during the summer. But if the tank leaks, it has deathly implications. How stupid to give up a spring and choose to rely on a tank, specifically a tank that leaks? Yet Israel has done so.

It happened because they thought the culture around them had the answer to their key needs, and they assimilated to the culture. Israel needed a deity who could make crops and flocks and herds and families grow, a God relevant to everyday life. Could Yahweh be that? Baal specialized in it. Israel assimilated to the culture around in how it lived its religious life and went about seeking to ensure that life worked. Everyday pressures made them stop thinking about the story that made them who they were and had the power to keep them, and about the written word of God that was designed to shape them. They gave up on the gospel, they gave up on God’s written word, and they assimilated to the culture. Or perhaps more subtlely, they continued to call God Yahweh, but they had so changed God’s nature to that of Ba‘al that in effect they were worshiping Ba‘al.

Parallel factors affect the church in our context. To start at the end: as a church we have assimilated to our culture. Our everyday needs are different, but the result is the same. Israel couldn’t be sure about its everyday outer needs. We’re more preoccupied with our more abstract, inner needs, needs that *our* culture encourages us to think about. Where will I get my significance? What can I do to make myself count? Where is there someone who cares about me and understands me? Where can I find intimacy? Inside, we are isolated and empty.

We then try to make the gospel focus on those needs. We do so in worship, which becomes the way we deal with our emptiness and our isolation. Worship is designed to make us feel good. The point about God is to make us feel good. So worship abandons the reading of scripture, because that’s boring. A couple of weeks ago I was talking with a pastor from a “Bible Church.” Bible churches are part of a movement that emphasizes what its name implies. But this pastor commented that they don’t usually read the Bible in church in its own right. Bible reading happens only in the context of the sermon. I went to a mega-church a while ago. It was the same there. I went to a Pentecostal church. It was the same there. It’s not surprising that many graduate students arrive at Fuller never having read the Bible.

Likewise worship abandons reference to the gospel story, because those events happened a long time ago, and they don’t look very relevant. So you can go through a whole worship service without hearing any reference to the gospel events – the way God created the world, and delivered Israel, and sent Jesus to live and die for us, and raised him from the dead. Israel had forgotten the gospel and given up on God’s written word because it was so concerned with its personal needs. It has happened to us, too.

There’s a tragic paradox here. What we need is to be brought out of ourselves by seeing our lives set in the context of a bigger picture, a bigger story, the gospel story. But we are so overwhelmed by our emptiness and our isolation and our insignificance that we don’t pay attention to this bigger story. All we want to do inside church as outside church is think about ourselves in our need. Scripture and the gospel are boring and irrelevant. So we turn God into someone whose focus is on meeting those needs. In worship we use many of the same words our forebears used, the words God and Lord and Jesus, but the content we read into them comes from the contemporary context. A new age person could come into worship and find 90% or even 100% of what we say and do quite acceptable. We are scratching where we itch. But when you have a serious itch, you need more than scratching to put it right. We are trying to short-circuit the process whereby God gives content and meaning to our lives. We make God a quick fix for our needs. But quick fixes don’t work. The only fix that works is the gospel story and the scriptures where we find that story. But in worship we have given up on those.

We have devised a religion to enable us to give expression to our individual sad selves and we hope it will make us feel better, but it doesn’t. We leave just as sad as when we arrived. We think that more of the same is the solution. If we make the worship livelier, it will work. But we’re trying to get a drink from a tank with no water. We’ve focused on our immediate felt needs and given up on the gospel story that made us what we are. We are focused on me, rather than on God, scripture, the church, the gospel, and our calling on God. We have assimilated to the culture, as Israel did. We’ve forgotten the big picture. We think the gospel is just about me and God. Especially about me.

There’s another way people compensate for a sense of lost-ness and insignificance and loss of conviction about the gospel. It’s a concern about social justice. Jeremiah would be enthusiastic about that passion, of course, though he’d be worried that we’ve taken our understanding of social justice from our culture, too, and not thought out how the Bible looks at the topic. We think it’s obvious what social justice means, and we share the conviction of the culture that it can be achieved, and we’re on our way to the same fate as overcame the enthusiasts for social justice in the 1920s. It’s another of the factors that threatens the demise of the church here over the next decade or two.

The parents of many of the present generation knew the gospel and knew the Bible and could be seeking to broaden it by an involvement in the culture and an involvement with social justice, but the current generation doesn’t have that background in the gospel and the Bible, so it will inevitably simply assimilate to the culture and its social concerns, read those back into the Bible, and lose the real gospel about God.

Fifty or sixty years ago there was some surface similarity between Christian values and the values of the culture, and the church could proceed by identifying with the culture and setting out to be a Christianized version of it or looking for signs of redemption within it. The culture has now moved further and further from a Christian perspective. We long ago reached a point when the church needed to become the embodiment of an alternative vision for being human, but it has been unable to make that revolutionary move. Jeremiah would warn us that we will die of assimilation to the culture.

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We’ve forgotten the gospel, we’ve turned our back on Scripture, we’ve assimilated to the culture, and we’re on our way to exile. Another way of speaking about going into exile is to speak of the withdrawal of the Holy Spirit.

We were studying Psalm 51 last quarter, with its prayer “Don’t take your Holy Spirit from me.” A student commented, “How great to know that now God wouldn’t ever take his Holy Spirit from us.” In Anglican prayer we pray that prayer every day. Are we misguided? Sure, God will never randomly abandon us. God can be trusted. But can we forfeit the Holy Spirit’s presence?

The question came home in September as Kathleen and I went around the cities in Turkey where John sent letters to the churches, and places Paul visited, and places where the church agreed on its creeds. Everywhere you wake up each day to the call of the minaret. Virtually nowhere is there a Christian community. The Eastern Mediterranean was the cradle of the development of Christian faith, but the church is gone. The situation looks rather similar in Europe. Didn’t God take his Holy Spirit away from these churches?

As well as asking what Jeremiah would say, then, I’ve been asking what the John of the book of Revelation would say if he were at SBL instead of just being talked about. From Patmos you can see Turkey. John sat there in confinement and looked across at the country whose churches in those gigantic Roman cities were on his heart. So what did John do?

Revelation implies that he worshiped and prayed. Certainly he wrote, because Revelation is the fruit of his time there. What useless things to do, worship and pray and write! Like Jeremiah, John had been able to preach earlier in his life, but eventually had to stop. Both Jeremiah and John were taken into confinement, into exile. The communities they cared about got destroyed. Yet both wrote, and the writings of both had an influence and importance way beyond their day. I don’t know whether they thought they might. You who by virtue of being here are probably people who write or hope to write. Maybe it suggests that should write something worthwhile, something that might be of use to the church the other side of its coming exile.

When we talk about scholarship and research and even master’s level study, we sometimes speak of introducing people to the scholarly conversation. But for the most part the scholarly conversation is empty. One thing you can be sure of is that today’s new insights will seem hopelessly outdated to tomorrow’s scholarship. Some people think of intertextuality as a conversation between texts in which they are their own world, with no points of contact with a real world outside the texts. The scholarly conversation is uncomfortably parallel. It doesn’t link with a real world outside the articles in JBL. If you are going to write, don’t write something designed to make a contribution to a conversation. Write something that is true and will be of use to the church the other side of its coming exile.

If the church is to evade its threatened exile or to be restored after it, it wouldn’t be surprising if God has to be the one who makes it happen, which might heighten the importance of the worship and prayer that John stresses, and also the importance of the Holy Spirit. When I came to California, I was surprised at something I found. In Britain the charismatic/Pentecostal movement was largely indigenized within the existent churches. In the United States when there is a new movement of the Spirit, the tradition is to start a new church. This lets the existent churches off the hook and lets the new churches do what they like. Fuller’s version **w**as that you chose between being a theological thinker in SOT or being open to the Spirit in SWM, and the two sides didn’t talk to one another. Eventually the problem went away because the generation involved in the charismatic/Pentecostal movement passed.

I asked an SOT graduate who is a pastor in a big Pentecostal church though not from a Pentecostal background how the traditional marks of Pentecostalism surface in his church. They don’t feature, because the church wants to be seeker-friendly, to reach outsiders, people on the church’s fringe. I was once involved in a dinner conversation with students about some of these questions about the Holy Spirit, and one of the students sounded so bemused that she reminded me of the believers in Ephesus who hadn’t even heard that there was a Holy Spirit. Christian faith becomes something we do, which suits us Americans, because we like to be in charge, in control. Or it becomes something we think about, which suits us theologians.

Here’s an agenda for theologians, then. Pray for the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the church rather than its withdrawal, and think about the theology of that. Teach people to lead worship in a way that reflects the gospel and gives prominence to Scripture. Write about things that matter and things that are true and things that will last. Let all this activity be preparation for the church’s coming exile, or even open up the possibility of a renewed outpouring of the Holy Spirit that could avert exile.