

The Seventh Century B.C.

Two significant events mark the beginning and end of the seventh century B.C. in the history of Judah. In 701 Jerusalem was besieged by the army of Assyria and although the city was ultimately saved, every other fortified city was taken and the territory of Judah much reduced. A century later, a new threat had arisen in the shape of Babylon under Nebuchadrezzar II (This version of the name is the correct one: its Babylonian form was Nabu-kudurri-usur. It is the form used in the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, though 2 Kings and Daniel use the popular form, Nebuchadnezzar).

In 604, the armies of Babylon under Nebuchadrezzar, having conquered Nineveh, the capital of Assyria in 612, defeated Egypt at Carchemish to the north of Israel. From then on, Judah was firmly within the Babylonian sphere of influence.

Between these dates, the century was dominated by the long reign of Manasseh (687-642). Little is heard of him in the pages of the Bible (2 Kings 21:1-18; 2 Chronicles 33:1-20), but he appears to have been a willing vassal of Assyria, perhaps calculating that only thus could he remain in power. Worship of the Lord was downgraded in importance and worship of foreign deities, particularly those popular with the Assyrians, promoted.

The decline of the power of Assyria is reflected in the prophetic books of Nahum and Zephaniah and the rise of Babylon in the book of Habakkuk. That decline allowed Judah a brief period of prosperity and relative independence under the energetic reforming king, Josiah (640-609 B.C; 2 Kings 22 - 23). However, from early in Josiah's reign, the prophet Jeremiah was prophesying the eventual downfall of Jerusalem. The days when the Lord would save the city for the sake of his servant David (2 Kings 19:34) were over. Instead, there was to be God-sent disaster as the outcome of Judah's sins.

Day 172. Psalm 76; 2 Kings 18 - 19

Hezekiah and Assyria

Psalm 76

The Lord's victory over the world's rulers at Jerusalem.

2 Kings 18 - 19

Three comparisons run through these chapters: a comparison of Hezekiah with the kings who preceded him; of the fate of Jerusalem with that of Samaria; and between the Lord and pagan gods.

Hezekiah's father Ahaz had put his trust in Assyria rather than in the Lord. Isaiah 7 is the account of how the prophet tried unsuccessfully to change his mind. In contrast, Hezekiah was faithful to the inheritance he had received from David (18:3). He may in fact have been trusting in Egypt more than was good for him, as the Assyrian general's taunt suggests (18:21), but in the end he was forced to rely on the Lord, who delivered him (19:1-4).

Whereas Samaria was destroyed because of its rulers' violation of the covenant with the Lord, Jerusalem was saved. The Lord defended his city for his own sake and the sake of David (19:34). The Assyrian attack had stripped away virtually all the territory of Judaea except for the city itself (see Isaiah 1:5-9) but its eventual relief gave hope that a faithful remnant would begin the task of rebuilding (19:29-31; see Isaiah 1:9).

In the midst of apparent defeat, Isaiah continued to proclaim the power and purpose of God. Behind the Assyrian general's boast that it was the Lord who had told him to attack Jerusalem lies the irony that in fact the invasion was an expression of God's judgment. Nevertheless, in contrast to the gods of the nations, the Lord is both the Creator of the world and the controller of history. The fate of Jerusalem is in his hands and not those of foreign armies. Even the Assyrians face his judgment on their arrogant boasting, lies, threats and ridicule. (19:14-19,25-26; see Isaiah 10:5-19, 14:24-27). Sennacherib's death is seen as an example of the fate of the wicked (19:35-37).

Hezekiah: 715-687 B.C.

Day 173. Proverbs 25 - 27

Observations on Everyday Conduct

Proverbs 25 - 27

Hezekiah's reign saw a mini-revival of Israelite culture. As part of this revival, the king's wise men collected and arranged a group of proverbs which were not chosen for the original collection in chapters 10 - 24. They are mainly, but not exclusively grouped by subject: the court, 25:2-10; saying the right thing, 25:11-15; good relationships, 25:16-end; foolishness 26:1-12; laziness, 26:13-16; quarrelling, 26:17-end; true friendship 27:1-10; prudence, 27:12-end. Many of the proverbs, including whole series, consist of comparisons, from both nature and human life. Often, the comparisons imply a moral judgment on particular kinds of conduct; but usually they simply comment on the wisdom (or lack of it) of an action. Jesus too made frequent use of comparisons in his teaching.

Wisdom is an ideal qualification for a king, a quality which includes being able to keep one's counsel (25:2-3). As we have frequently seen in the previous collection, wisdom requires to be complemented by righteousness and humility, so here, these are the qualities fitting for the court (25:4-7).

A word aptly spoken (25:11) is another ideal of wise conduct. This includes a fitting rebuke (25:12) and faithful reporting of a message (25:13).

26:4 and 26:5 imply two definitions of "answering a fool according to his folly." 26:4 implies not taking him seriously, 26:5 implies responding to a silly question by giving a silly answer!

True friendship includes open rebuke when merited, as well as earnest counsel (27:5,9). It can withstand anger and even fury, but not jealousy (27:4). A friend near at hand is more valuable and better to be relied on than a relation far away (27:10).

27:23-end warn against the folly of attempting to live on money, without paying attention to the productive capacity which underlies it, a word of wisdom for modern day economists and politicians.

Day 174. Psalm 37; Proverbs 28 - 29

The Reward of the Righteous

Psalm 37; Proverbs 28 - 29

Psalm 37 is a "wisdom psalm". Its style is similar to Proverbs and its purpose to teach trust and encourage good conduct rather than to praise or thank God. Its theme is a common one in the wisdom tradition: the reward of the righteous and the eventual downfall of the evil. These are also the dominant theme of Proverbs 28 and 29.

It is important to recognise that both the psalm and the proverbs acknowledge that there *is* a problem: evil does lead to much misery, especially when practised by those in power (28:3,12,15,16,28; 29:2,4,5,12); too often the wicked appear to be getting away with it, and it is easy for the righteous to wonder what the Lord is doing to allow it (Psalm 37:1,7). So the writers do not minimise the problem of evil, but they believe that the wicked will get their just deserts in the end and the righteous will eventually be rewarded (28:8,9,10,13,18,20,25,27; 29:6,23,25). The right response is to live upright, faithful lives and to trust in the Lord (Psalm 37:1-11). A generation after Hezekiah the prophet Habakkuk considered this problem in the context of world politics and came to the same conclusion (Habakkuk 2:4).

Proverbs 28 and 29 add two further observations to this general conclusion. To live the kind of life of which God approves and which will eventually be rewarded is not easy: it requires discipline of both the young and the old and in several different spheres of life (see, for example, 28:7,14,19; 29:3,15,17,18,20). Secondly, the righteous and the wicked often fail to understand each other because they have a different standard of morality. A person with a well developed sense of justice will think and act differently from someone without (28:5,11; 29:7,9,27).

Many objections have been raised to this apparently simple solution to the problem of evil, and they appear in other parts of the Old Testament, especially the books of Job and Ecclesiastes. But this does not mean that the optimistic outlook of the writers of these proverbs and Psalm 37 is in error. In fact Jesus endorses it, quoting 37:11 in the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:5) and assuring his followers that they need not worry about things which the

wicked run after because God will look after them (Matthew 6:24-end). If we consider the order of the verses in Psalm 37, another important point emerges. The belief that the wicked will get their just deserts is not offered as a ground for trust in God. Rather, trust in God is the ground for the belief that in the end he will prove just.

Day 175 Psalm 49; Proverbs 30 - 31

Wealth and Character

Psalm 49

The opening words of the psalm show that it is a wisdom poem. Like Psalm 37, there is neither prayer nor thanksgiving, simply a meditation on the deceptiveness of wealth. The author's message is that rich and poor alike have to face death (v.5-11), riches cannot prevent it (v.7-9) and the rich cannot take their wealth with them (v.16-19). The danger of wealth is that it can tempt you to trust in it instead of in God; for those who do, including those who are not rich themselves but who take their values from the rich, death is the end, putting us on the same level as the animals (v.12-14,20). But for those who put their trust in God, the author sees something better: a future not in Sheol, the place of departed spirits, but in the presence of God (v.15; see also Psalm 16:9-11; 62:10-12).

Proverbs 30

Chapters 30 and 31 are an appendix to Proverbs of an unknown date containing miscellaneous sayings of the wise, two of whom are named. Nothing is known about Agur (30:1), and it is not clear whether the whole chapter is to be attributed to him or only the first few verses. His opening oracle is reminiscent of Job. The wise man's wisdom has shown him how much he *doesn't* know of the world. His response, like the author of Ecclesiastes, is to put his trust in God and live an upright life (30:5-6).

Proverbs 31

The words of King Lemuel are an example of "vocational" wisdom, the closest in the book of Proverbs to the Egyptian tradition of wisdom sayings. A king is to be moderate in regard to both drink and sex (31:3-5) and to have regard especially for those who cannot protect themselves (31:8-9).

In biblical times, the people of Israel accepted without question that a woman's role was a domestic one. As a result, it was the husband who was the public figure, who spoke for the family and took part in public life (see 31:23). In this man's world, the value of a woman was the respect she brought to her husband by her character and conduct (31:10-12,31). But the domestic role had a status and honour of its own; moreover the tradition of

Israel contains many women of standing who act wisely and independently such as Rahab (Joshua 2), Deborah (Judges 4), Abigail (1 Samuel 25) and Ruth.

The sayings in 31:10-31 take the form of an acrostic poem, in which each verse begins with a successive letter of the alphabet. A picture emerges of a woman who is capable, decisive, economically independent, hardworking, strong and generous to the poor. The key to her character is the fear of the Lord (31:30); thus the book comes full circle, opening with the declaration that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (1:7) and closing with a concrete example of the fear of the Lord in everyday life.

Day 176. Psalm 89; 2 Kings 20 - 21 (Isaiah 38 - 39)

Manasseh

Psalm 89

What begins as a psalm of confidence ends as a prayer of bewilderment. The subject is the covenant with David and his house, in which God promised David that a son of his would always occupy his throne (2 Samuel 7:11-16). The memory of this promise inspired Judah with the confidence that Jerusalem would be protected for ever and its king continue to occupy a position of influence in international affairs. In the psalm, the worshippers try to make sense of the failure of these hopes.

In verses 5-18 they praise God for his faithfulness in creation. When the sun rose each day and the seasons followed their regular course Israel saw not the workings of scientific laws but the faithfulness of the Lord. These verses include two images common throughout the Near East. The first (89:5-8) pictures the "heavenly council" in which one god is pre-eminent. The second (89:9-12) refers to an ancient myth of creation in which the creator god defeats the sea-monster, here called "Rahab", and makes the world out of her carcass. In the psalm, it is the Lord who is the pre-eminent god.

The faithfulness of the Lord in creation forms the background for the next section, verses 19-37, celebrating his faithfulness to the Davidic covenant. Judah's king is the "first-born" (89:27), in other words the most exalted of all kings, and the covenant with him is perpetual (89:28,36-37). However, in verses 38-51 the king asks what has become of God's promises. Although in some psalms a prophetic answer to the worshipper's plea is given and others end with an expression of confidence in being heard, here there is no answer. Only the question remains.

After the return from exile there were brief hopes in Jerusalem of a restoration of the Davidic dynasty, expressed by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, but these quickly faded. No earthly king inherited the promises; instead Jesus reigns over the whole creation as the king in David's line.

2 Kings 20 (Isaiah 38 - 39)

Hezekiah's willingness to ask for a sign from the Lord in his distress contrasts with the rebelliousness of his father, Ahaz (Isaiah 7:10-12).

No doubt Hezekiah was courted by Babylon because of their joint interest in opposing Assyria, but the visit of the Babylonian envoys became the occasion for the first warning of the coming destruction of Jerusalem. Whereas the Lord would defend Jerusalem from the Assyrians, the Babylonians would capture and destroy it.

These two stories of Hezekiah's reign are repeated in Isaiah 38 and 39, which also include a prayer of Hezekiah on his recovery from illness.

2 Kings 21

The first ten years of the fifty-five ascribed to Manasseh (697-687 B.C.) were shared as a co-regency with his father. During his reign Assyria reached the peak of its power, defeating Egypt and sacking the city of Thebes. Unable to stand up to the might of the world's dominant empire, Manasseh may well have seen the worship of pagan deities as his only possible policy. But the worship of Canaanite gods (21:2-9) was combined with injustice and oppression (21:16), just as it had been in Israel before the fall of Samaria. The historian sees the sins of Manasseh as the main cause of the Lord's resolve to punish Judah. He had saved the city from Assyria, but he now resolved to save it no longer (21:12-15).

Manasseh 687-642 B.C. Amon 642-640 B.C.

Day 177. Psalm 46; Nahum

The Fall of Nineveh

Psalm 46

The sovereignty of God over the nations.

Nahum

Assyria's domination of the whole region also contained the seeds of its own destruction. Eventually Egypt reasserted itself under a new dynasty, while in the east the Medes and the Babylonians began to rebel and the Scythians to raid across the empire's northern border. After the death of the emperor Ashurbanipal, Assyria's decline was swift. Nahum's prophecy is a confident prediction of the fall of Nineveh. Its date is uncertain, but its confidence reflects the optimism of Josiah's reign, when Assyria was in terminal decline and before Babylon had appeared as a new and even greater threat. Nineveh was taken by the Babylonians and Medes in 612 B.C., who turned the city into rubble.

The core of the book is formed by the vivid descriptions of the fall of Nineveh in chapters 2 and 3. Nahum's poetry is some of the best in the Old Testament, the short staccato lines expressing the speed and tension of battle. But the descriptions of the battle are placed securely in a theological framework emphasising that Nineveh's defeat comes about as a result of the Lord's judgement (2:13; 3:1). Just as Isaiah had foreseen (Isaiah 10:5-19; 37:22-29) Assyria is to reap the rewards of her cruelty to other nations and her rebellious arrogance against God (1:11; 3:19). There is no call for Judah to repent, but this is irrelevant. Nineveh is to be judged for her sins, irrespective of what becomes of God's people. Her destruction is not an expression of vengeance for the humiliation of Samaria and Jerusalem, but of the universal sovereignty of God.

Chapter 1 provides a theological framework for the battle songs by reminding us of the character of God: slow to anger, but sure in his judgement when his wrath is aroused (Exodus 20:4-6; 34:5-7). The description of his coming is reminiscent of the "theophanies" of Exodus 19:16-19, Psalm 77:16-18 and Micah 1:3-4. The wrath of the Lord is

something good (1:7): it comes to put things right, to punish arrogance and cruelty and release the oppressed.

Arising from the certainty of judgement on God's enemies are some verses of comfort for Judah (1:12-13,15; 2:2). But despite the reforms of Josiah, in the longer term Judah failed to take advantage of God's patience.

Day 178. Psalm 75; Zephaniah

Judgement on the Nations

Psalm 75

The Lord judges arrogance and unrighteousness.

Zephaniah

1:1 tells us that Zephaniah was a great-grandson of king Hezekiah and that the period of his ministry coincided with the reign of Josiah, the successor of Amon. Despite his privileged birth, Zephaniah was very critical of the nobles and the royal family (1:8). His words probably date from the early part of Josiah's reign, before the reform of 621 B.C. (see notes on 2 Kings 22 - 23). In contrast to Nahum, Judah is included in the Lord's judgement, but its purpose is to purify her before her eventual restoration.

In popular religion, the "day of the Lord" was to be the time when the Lord would establish his own people at the head of the nations. The main thrust of Zephaniah's message is that the "day of the Lord" will mean judgement on Judah as well (1:14-end; Amos had a similar message for the nation of Israel in his time: Amos 5:18-20). The predictions of cosmic destruction (1:2-3) are a conventional description of God's coming judgement. But instead of vindicating his people, God will judge those who worship other gods (1:5-6), the upper class for dishonesty and oppression (1:8-9) and the merchants and all wealthy for complacency, and presumably for dishonesty (1:10-13). The first set of oracles ends with a call to repentance by the humble of the land in a bid to avert the Lord's anger (2:1-3).

The second set of oracles begins with a series of denunciations of the nations surrounding Judah for their hostility. The devastation wrought by Assyria is seen as the Lord's judgement, but a remnant of his people will be saved to inherit their lands (2:7,9). The oracles against the nations lead to another denunciation of Jerusalem, its rulers and officials, priests and prophets, for their pride in rejecting the Lord (3:1-4) and their failure to heed the warning given by the fate of surrounding nations (3:6-7). Now the prophet sees the nations gathered at Jerusalem to face the Lord's anger (3:8), as a result of which they are led to acknowledge him (3:9) and set free the scattered exiles of Israel to return to Jerusalem to serve him (3:10-13).

Again it is the humble and meek (3:12) who will form the core of the new and righteous community.

The final oracle of praise (3:14-end) was probably written in the time of the exile. It envisages rejoicing both in Jerusalem and in heaven at the return of the scattered exiles.

Day 179. Psalm 34; Habakkuk

The God of History

Psalm 34

The righteous may have to suffer many trials, but the Lord is still in control and will deliver them in the end.

Habakkuk

The book of Habakkuk is an intensely personal record of the prophet's wrestling with the major issues of his time in an attempt to probe the mystery of God's purpose. It probably dates from the reign of Jehoiakim (609-598 B.C.) when opposition to the government was distinctly dangerous (Jeremiah 26:20-end). Instead of messages for the people, Habakkuk consists mainly of a dialogue between the prophet and God.

The prophet's first question is about the prosperity of the wicked and the suffering of the innocent. In 1:2-4 he looks at the society in which he lives with all its violence and injustice and asks why God is prepared to tolerate it. The answer given in 1:5-11 is that God is preparing to use Babylon to judge his people. It repeats the lesson of Isaiah - that God is in control of the destinies of the nations and uses them to discipline his own people. But this raises a further and more profound question in the prophet's mind (1:12-end). The Babylonians are even worse than the people of Judah. Is it not a contradiction to use them as agents of justice? Moreover, God is righteous and holy; how can he have anything to do with such evil people as the Babylonians, let alone use them to bring about his purposes?

It is a difficult question, but rather than despair Habakkuk puts himself in an attitude of waiting and watching in order to receive the answer (2:1). He is an example of faith seeking understanding, patiently waiting for answers to the difficult questions of experience, honestly raised. What the Lord finally tells him forms the climax of the book (2:2-4). The vision awaits its fulfilment. God's purpose in history is a mystery which will finally be revealed only at the appointed time. In the meantime the righteous are to live by faith. "Faith" here means, "faithfulness." They are to live patiently and faithfully, trusting in God's ultimate control.

In the rest of the book, the two sides of this answer are expanded in turn. First comes a series of woes against the wicked, expressing confidence in their final destruction. In the end they will overreach themselves, bringing shame and destruction upon themselves because of the hatred of the peoples they plunder and oppress (2:5-17). They in their turn will drink the cup of the Lord's judgment (2:16). Despite appearances, the Lord reigns (2:20) and one day the whole world will know it (2:14).

Chapter 3 is a psalm, setting out the prayer of the righteous. It is modelled on ancient psalms of victory such as those in Psalm 68 and Judges 5. The singer remembers the victory of the Lord in battle over evil nations. Even in the worst of times, he waits in patience and trust for deliverance.

The "Scroll of Baruch" (Jeremiah 36)

Jeremiah 36 records the occasion in the fourth year of Jehoiakim (605 B.C.) when Jeremiah was told to make a collection of his words from the time of his call and record it on a scroll. The oracles were recorded and later read by Baruch the scribe, then read to a group of assembled nobles and officials and finally to the king. The original scroll was destroyed when Jehoiakim burnt it, but Jeremiah and Baruch then made a fresh copy to which "many similar words" were subsequently added (36:32).

The original scroll was short enough to be read aloud three times in a single day. It contained a summary of Jeremiah's messages over a 23 year period covering his call, Josiah's reforms and the early years of Jehoiakim. The "words" recorded would most probably have been the prophetic oracles which formed the core of his message on each occasion rather than extended speeches. Moreover, it contained an unmistakable prediction of disaster and destruction at the hands of the king of Babylon (36:29). It was subsequently preserved and further oracles added.

Taking all these characteristics into consideration, it is possible that chapters 1 - 6 formed the original "scroll of Baruch". They begin with an account of Jeremiah's call, which would have given authority to his words. The oracles in chapter 2 are heavily influenced by Hosea, and perhaps come from the early years of his ministry when Jeremiah was a very young man. Chapter 3, with its appeal to the northern kingdom of Israel, reflects the progress of Josiah's reforms after 621 B.C. Finally, chapters 4, 5 and 6 warn of the danger of invasion from "the north", reflecting the growing power of Babylon.

Day 180. Psalm 63; Jeremiah 1 - 2

The Call of Jeremiah

Psalm 63

A prayer of trust in God.

Jeremiah 1

The period of Jeremiah's ministry is the most precisely dated of all the prophets, beginning about 627 B.C. some five or six years before the reformation of Josiah and ending shortly after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. His call reflects the power of the word of the Lord, which was about to "uproot, tear down, destroy and overthrow" (1:10) and its certainty. The village of Anathoth is still surrounded by groves of almond trees. Through the verbal similarity of "shaqed" (almond) with "shoqed" (watching) Jeremiah received the Lord's promise that his words would be fulfilled (1:11-12).

The power of God's word contrasts markedly with the weakness of the prophet. At the time of his call he was still young and unmarried and seems by temperament to have been shy and sensitive, unsuited to the task of proclaiming a message of judgement. But Jeremiah did not have to supply the power; his responsibility was simply to be faithful so that God's word could accomplish its task (1:7-8). Later, he complained of the constraining power of the word, so that he was unable to avoid preaching his unpopular message (20:7-9). By choosing him as a prophet, the Lord was taking over his life in a radical way.

The instrument of destruction was to be the newly emerging world power, Babylon under Nebuchadrezzar, but at this point Jeremiah was shown only destruction from the north (1:13-15). This is the route which would be taken by any aggressor from Mesopotamia, travelling by the Fertile Crescent up the Tigris and Euphrates valleys to avoid crossing the desert which lay between, before turning south through modern Syria. Although Nineveh fell in 612 B.C. it was not until Nebuchadrezzar overcame Egypt at Carchemish in 605 B.C. that his power was secure.

Jeremiah 2

Assuming that these oracles are the original scroll of Baruch, chapter 2 contains Jeremiah's earliest messages, reflecting the state of Judah's society and worship before Josiah's reforms, the legacy of Manasseh's long reign. Judah's situation was in many ways similar to that of Israel in the time of Hosea, with problems of foreign alliances and religious syncretism. Especially in his early prophecies, Jeremiah was heavily influenced by Hosea, suggesting that the earlier prophet's words had been collected and remembered in some circles of Judaeon society. Signs of Hosea's influence include:

- the Lord takes Israel as his bride, an image first used by Hosea and now revived 100 years later by Jeremiah (2:2; Hosea 2:2; 3:1)
- the years in the wilderness prior to the adoption of either agriculture or Baal worship were a time of devotion (2:2-3; Hosea 2:14-15)
- the land of Israel and all its good things were the Lord's gift for which he deserved his people's love (2:7; Hosea 2:8)
- idolatry is spiritual adultery, the action of an unfaithful wife, breaking her covenant with her partner (2:20-25,32-33; 3:1-10; Hosea 2:5-13; 4:10-end)
- the imagery of the court-room, in which God accuses his people of unfaithfulness (2:5,9; Hosea 2:2; 4:1-6; 12:2)
- the priests and prophets had led the people astray by failing to teach them the Law (2:8; Hosea 4:6-9)
- the Lord looks for true knowledge of him, but does not find it (2:8; Hosea 4:6)
- shifting alliances with Egypt and Assyria do Judah no good just as they led to the downfall of Israel (2:14-19; Hosea 7:8-12; 11:5)
- both Hosea and Jeremiah used "return" as a key word to call their people to repentance (Jeremiah 3:12,14,22; 4:1-4; Hosea 6:1; 14:1).

For Jeremiah as for Hosea, it was Judah's idolatry and unfaithfulness which was the main problem (2:10-13) without forgetting injustice and oppression (2:34). As with Hosea, Jeremiah was called to threaten judgment and call for a change of heart and just like Hosea, the message cost him great heartache and tears (see 8:18 - 9:3).

Day 181. Psalm 140; Jeremiah 3 - 4

Call to Repentance

Psalm 140

A prayer for help against enemies.

Jeremiah 3:1 - 4:4

Like Hosea, Jeremiah saw the shallowness of the people's devotion and it grieved him deeply. Like Hosea, his desire was to see his contemporaries "return" to the Lord in penitence and wholehearted commitment. But knowing their hearts it seemed impossible. In 3:1-5 he castigates Judah for the worship of idols alongside the Lord. They supposed that God would not mind as long as they kept up a show of devotion. In fact, such mixed worship is the equivalent of a woman divorced for infidelity; a return to her first husband is impossible.

In Jeremiah's time the northern state of Israel had been devastated by Assyria and was home to many different peoples pursuing a mixture of worship (2 Kings 17:24-end). But when the power of Assyria began to wane, Josiah introduced reforms to Israel as well as Judah with the aim of making Jerusalem a centre of worship for the whole of the former united kingdom (2 Kings 23:15-20). In support of the king's reforming policy, Jeremiah calls upon Israel to return (3:6-14). Yet even while he did so, he knew that the reforms had no real hold over the hearts of the people even in Judah (3:10).

In 3:22-end Jeremiah sees the call to return answered by the people of Judah, but just as Hosea had done (Hosea 6:1-6) he insisted on genuine repentance. They must put aside their idols completely (4:1), stop taking the Lord's name in vain (4:2) and repent from their hearts (4:3-4). Outward conformity to the Law, symbolised by circumcision, is not enough. What is needed is "circumcision of the heart" - a wholehearted attitude of devotion.

Jeremiah 4:5-end

With 4:5, Jeremiah begins to announce the coming disaster from the north. But he was frustrated by the complacency of the people around him, especially the king, his officials, the priests and the prophets (4:9). The court

prophets were busy proclaiming "peace" or "shalom", God's will for the welfare of Judah (4:10), putting their trust in the tradition of Isaiah, through whom the Lord promised to defend Jerusalem (Isaiah 37:35). Jeremiah's words appeared to be nothing but empty threats.

As the Lord's spokesman to his people, Jeremiah identified strongly with both. The anguish of 4:19-21 is both the Lord's and the prophet's. Both are dismayed by the failure of Judah to recognise the disaster coming upon them.

Day 182. Psalm 53; Jeremiah 5 - 6

The Enemy from the North

Psalm 53

The folly of those who ignore God.

Jeremiah 5 - 6

Chapter 1 recorded Jeremiah's call in 627 B.C. and chapter 2 his early preaching. Chapter 3, with its appeal to the northern kingdom of Israel, reflects Josiah's attempt to spread his reforms there and also points to Jeremiah's disillusionment with the reforms, when he saw how little difference they made to the real attitudes of the people of Judah (3:10; 4:1-4). In chapters 4, 5 and 6 the threat of divine punishment in the form of a Babylonian invasion grows ever more explicit.

Abraham had pleaded with God to spare Sodom and Gomorrah for the sake of ten righteous people (Genesis 18:22-end). Now God invites Jeremiah to see if he can find one righteous person for whom Jerusalem should be spared (5:1). It is unlikely that Jeremiah was the only true servant of the Lord, but even so Judah had become irredeemable. There were not enough people with a desire to serve God to make genuine reform a possibility. It was the false prophets and complacent priests with their message of security who were believed; Jeremiah's messages fell largely on deaf ears (5:12-14, 30-31; 6:13-14). So the Lord insists that he is justified in intending to destroy the city, since its people are wilfully and persistently unfaithful (5:7-11, 26-29; 6:16-20).

Moreover, judgement is coming because the people have failed to listen to the prophets, in particular to Jeremiah himself. They think that the Lord's words are harmless, but in fact they are powerful (5:14). Their effect is to test the people as an assayer uses fire to separate the pure metal from the dross. But the smelting process is ineffective; there is no pure metal to be found and so the silver is rejected (6:27-end).
