

Thinking the Unthinkable: Anticipating the Dreaded and Undesired

by Art Katz

The sermon explores the challenge of exile and the need for a new vision of God in events, highlighting the importance of genuine repentance and collective accountability for restoration.

Scripture: Jeremiah 7:5

Topics: "Faith in Crisis", "Judgment and Deliverance"

Description

Art Katz emphasizes the necessity of grappling with the unthinkable realities of faith, particularly in the context of historical calamities like the Babylonian Exile and the Holocaust. He argues that true faith is tested not by favorable circumstances but by the ability to endure and find hope amidst catastrophic events. The messages of prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel serve as a reminder that judgment and deliverance are intertwined, and that understanding God's character requires a deep engagement with both His justice and mercy. Katz warns against the complacency of false security in religious institutions, urging the Church to prepare for potential calamities by recognizing the continuity of sin and the need for genuine repentance. Ultimately, he calls for a prophetic voice that can articulate both the reality of judgment and the promise of restoration.

Transcript

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Citings from: A Theology of Exile by Thomas M. Raitt; Fortress Press, 1977.

What can reasonably be expected from a "God of Providence" in the view of His people is shattered when ultimate catastrophe breaks.

Historical events could be made to support a certain framework of theological assumptions as long as they moved within a reasonable latitude of variables. Exile was [is, will be] an unreasonable variation. [As unthinkable as the recent Holocaust, or a future defeat and expulsion!...] [for] the survival of a lived faith is

not so much determined by how it can build on the advantages provided by events flowing in a supportive direction; rather, the survival depends more on whether faith can endure the worst reversals imaginable [for it is calculated to destroy all lesser faiths and bring us, both the Church and Israel, into a qualitatively new one].

One can hardly exaggerate the challenge to Israel's faith posed by the collapse of the national state, and the removal of its survivors to captivity in a land hundreds of miles away. The rude and crushing factuality of these events brought to an end traditions of expectation which had been developing in Israel for over six hundred years. The one tradition which could approach making sense of the catastrophe, namely, that catastrophe itself is the consequence and judgment for sin, is totally incompatible with present Jewish self-assessment. [A very cause for the catastrophe?]. The prophetic assurance that the nation's suffering would be proportionate to its sins had to stretch itself out of reasonable proportions [though a concept familiar and acceptable to our biblically related forebears] to protect God's justice in the face of these horrible reversals.

Jeremiah and Ezekiel, whose role it was to interpret the onset of the Babylonian Exile, develop a "theology of disaster" promising a regeneration beyond anything known previously that is unqualified and unconditional. Their proclamation of that hope, and ours, is entirely proportionate to the unflinching proclamation of the disaster as judgment! Jeremiah and Ezekiel's "Oracles of Judgment," as will ours, were more painful to utter [because they were] delivered in the actual existential situation of Judah's demise. Likewise, their "Oracles of Deliverance" required deeper faith and hope in the future because there was as yet no historical hint that such a turn of events could become an actuality.

This is very much, in my opinion, what shall be prophetically required from the Church in the Last Days, when the word (i.e. Isa. 35) is required to sustain those who would likely otherwise perish before the actual deliverance comes. This is a critical provision of mercy from the same God who judges!

One cannot appreciate Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Oracles of Judgment and Deliverance as the answers they are unless one develops a feeling for the questions they presuppose [which] strain the limit of Israelite faith.

Had such questions been asked about the Holocaust, they might have not needed to be raised again!

[They] were given the grace to answer these poignant questions by significantly expanding the framework of Israelite faith through a rediscovery of additional foundations [i.e. a deepened understanding of God Himself, which is to say not about Him, but of Him, which is as rare and remote as our sufferings are everywhere present and chronic.]. Some hint of the paradigm for our own times is seen in that the Exile refuses to fit the main models used to understand how God revealed Himself in and through the Old Testament....one would have no way of holding together how the God of Israel could make unconditional promises of punishment and extermination; then a few chapters and a few years later promise unconditional and sweeping deliverance...Thus the traditional, theological conservative model for understanding has great difficulty dealing with the unique pressures of Exile and the inner dynamic of the faith that can alone respond to it.

But how are we to understand the Exile under this model?...It is a reality...which cannot be readily understood under the previously existing [i.e., conventional] convenient frameworks of interpretation. Our understanding of events must mature. One is pushed to realize that religious belief cannot simply draw on the traditions of the past, but must be ready to re-synthesize them creatively and faithfully in order to say

"yes" to a present that is disturbing, and to a future which is problematic.

This is the whole issue for the Church of the Last Days, as to whether it will become apostate or apostolic!

One cannot institutionalize as final, definitive, or normative any single perceived pattern of how God works in history [For to say how God works, is to say who God is]. Events set for theology its task, and refuse to submit to any secure system of interpretation...It was the devastating impact of the Babylonian Exile which first forced them out of what had become an institutionalized, orthodox view of how God acts in history. Unlike many people today, who, unable to find God in history, look for God in nature...Jeremiah and Ezekiel broke through to a new vision of God in events. [The failure to rightly interpret the disaster of 70 A.D. according to that which was prophesied by Jesus, resulted in today's rabbinical Judaism cheating untold millions of the prospect of salvation, setting in motion the inevitability of future and greater disaster!].

God is not God as He in fact is until man cannot define Him; nor is He Lord till we have submitted to Him as the indefinable God. To think we "know" and to "name" God is, in effect, to have dominion over Him. We want the security of "knowing" more than we want the tensions of true faith.

What these two prophets of the Exile communicate is seldom understood and even more rarely accepted...Grappling [i.e., "turning aside to see"] with the onset of the Exile, they show us how religion redefines itself and creates structure of interpretation supportive for faith in the midst of troubled times [i.e., as we again face the prospect of exile and expulsion].

Contrary to the opposition that pits God's judgments against His mercies, Raitt has,

"come to see judgment and deliverance in creative interaction...They are not totally separate entities; ultimately they come from the same source and center. They are bound together in the unity of the divine will and the unity of the Divine Person. [In fact], it is precisely the latent or residual presence of justice and will toward judgment in the midst of unconditional deliverance which differentiates the epoch of salvation from the shallow grace of false prophecy." [No "grace" at all, but a deception that could lead to the unpreparedness of saints and their collapse when the unanticipated calamity falls!].

God is triune and composite, not only in His Persons, but also in His acts. Could it be that the simplistic and erroneous monotheism lauded by Judaism misses the one because it misses the other? What of Christians who cannot reconcile the God of judgment and the God of mercy as One? Is their God the god of their own making--and hence, without God? Can this view of God that reconciles His judgments with His deliverance be a key against Last Days' deception as well? How does the prophet go from the proclamation of the one to the proclamation of the other, except that his own self is contradicted unto death? It is only through that death that he can be an oracle unto life.

What is the rationale then by which a whole people are brought into judgment?

The institution of secular law has no precedent for God bringing His whole people under accusation...A different framework is needed to understand that. [Neither the Holocaust nor future judgment is explicable to our conventional frames of reference, which is just, as I have been suggesting, what God is wanting to destroy!]. There is nothing...in secular law court procedure to provide a basis for the view that the nation as a whole was accountable to Yahweh. Only where an obligation exists can an accusation be raised. This obligation, presumed by the prophets, is defined through the covenant relationship between Yahweh and

Israel. [Valid and in force even when unknown or undesired by subsequent generations. A view so lost to contemporary Jews--and even to ourselves--locked as we are into individualistic modalities and mentalities.]

Equally lost to us is the biblical concept of "solidarity in sin" by which past and future generations are joined in collective accountability. Walter Eichrodt aptly summarizes this in his *Theology of the Old Testament* (Westminster Press, 1961-67; vol.2, p.407):

The prophets bring not only their own contemporaries before God's judgment, and denounce them for their rebellion, but also see them linked with all previous generations in a unitary entity, for which the sins of the fathers are also the sins of those now alive, and will be required of them, while at the same time the fact that the sinful condition of the present generation has resulted from the perverted direction of an earlier one in no sense does away with the responsibility of the former.

What does this mean? Only that we remain in unbroken continuum with our forebears, continuing in and perpetuating their sins even as our own, until we come to a repentant acknowledgment of that past which is our present. The timeless word of God in Leviticus 26:40 waits yet to be fulfilled by us. There is no negation or cancellation of sin, but rather, like debt, a cumulative growth when unpaid, no matter how long deferred, and is compounded by the neglect of its acknowledgment. Is it not on this very basis that we still pursue the untried and unjudged perpetrators of the Nazi horror? However long deferred that accountability, we still feel justified in requiring it at all costs! How much more then, God with us as His covenanted people?

Their [prophetic] messages then are in the nature of an indictment for breach of covenant...[When have we answered it? Heard it?]. The ideological framework necessary to understand the prophetic Oracles of Judgment is the covenant tradition associated with Moses. [In that], there is the promise of Blessing or Curses that invites every conceivable disaster for unfaithfulness. The discovery of the Mosaic covenant in the book of Deuteronomy sparked the revival under King Josiah.

Is it not the ground to which Israel's present understanding must be brought? How is it that historical Jewish calamity is never examined in that context? We are entirely outside the biblical, let alone the Deuteronomic, context. Is not our failure to tell Jacob his sins and Israel their iniquity? What "comfort" can be ministered to Israel, except that the true, unremedied cause of her sorrows be made known? Is not every other kind of comfort false? We stumble here, because the exaltation of the Jew is the secret exaltation of ourselves, and likewise their condemnation, the condemnation upon all fleshly self-righteousness. Covenant stipulations are binding--as an autonomous, lawless generation chooses not to know.

Furthermore, the consequences of this as curse might be deferred and need not be instantaneous or immediate. This tends to blur the causal connection, but it does not obliterate or remove it. Not willing that any should perish, God waits. Where are the prophets now, who would communicate this understanding instead of condescending to Israel's view of herself as victim? Having lost all sense of this causal connection, we do not see the linkage between Israel's present apostasy and her historic suffering. This is expressed today in Judaism's efforts to assure that future calamity will be avoided through education! Not being able to see the past interventions of God as His judgment nullifies all hope in believing for future intervention in mercy. That God intervenes at all in the affairs of men is ultimate offense to the liberal mind, bent even now to obtaining its own salvation through its own efforts.

As modern, post-Enlightenment Jews, we are equally as adverse to the concept of sin as we are to believing for divine intervention. Only the true prophetic voice can direct secularized Jewish consciousness to a lost biblical consciousness. Paul R. Sponheim's article "Sin and Evil" (vol. I, Braaten/Jenson's Christian Dogmatics, p.376) shows the connection between the two:

The act of sin in its reality...produces a destiny. [has consequences]. Particularly in the Old Testament this sense of correspondence between crime and punishment plays a role, though not an unchallenged one. This sense of nemesis in history, of divine judgment active in life, depends on the theme of [seeing] God's continuing activity [intervention] in the world. Our task is to recognize [proclaim] that the biblical witness calls for such a notion in understanding God's reaction to sin.

The Continuity of Judgment: When is a Nation Absolved?

While the author is unflinching in reviewing the severity of the Oracles of Judgment expressed through the ultimate prophets of exile, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, he narrows them to having "only a limited historical application."

It must be admitted that the theme of rejection in a passage like Jeremiah 14:19-15:4 is made to be quite comprehensive and, for the generation to which it was addressed, ultimate in meaning (p.62).

My question is whether present Jewry is still under the indictment. What has happened to nullify its continuing validity? Has the spirit of the people appreciably changed? How are they more qualified now for what they were rejected for then? Has God altered His requirements? To bestow upon a later generation what was denied the former (not vastly different in character than the one that was judged) is to, in effect, annul that judgment itself as invalid and unjustified, rendering the later generation unfit to see its own calamities as being related to the former.

There is a timelessness to judgment that the contemporary mind cannot grasp, as if what was divinely appropriate in ancient or biblical times is inappropriate--even inconceivable--in modernity! It is a mindset that implies the God who is the same yesterday, today, and forever, has sort of "grown-up" and need not again express wrath, fury, and devastation. When such devastations come, they are attributed to "nature," or the caprice of man. In the destruction of the Temple,

Every personal and theological hope tied to the inviolability of Zion was smashed...God desecrated His own temple [and] with it, God's protective presence was withdrawn from Jerusalem [resulting in] immediate and horrible consequences.

We need to be cautious, lest we be guilty today of the same presumption, being so assured of a present inviolability, i.e., that "God will not allow" hundreds of thousands of Russian immigrants to come, and then face disaster. By that logic, the Holocaust itself could not have been expected or forewarned; by that logic, a future Holocaust is rendered unthinkable and will be all the more devastating, morally as well as physically, should it come.

Again, if God is the same yesterday, today, and forever, then why should His response to Israel differ presently from what it was historically and prophetically? If the causative factors remain unchanged (covenant breaking, sin, apostasy), then should not also the penalty? In fact, one should expect greater penalty for the examples of judgment for unrepentant sin that remain unrecognized and unconsidered. Should not the resemblance of present Israel's moral and spiritual condition to that generation that was

judged and dispersed at least be a cause for caution and concern for the future? Such phrases as, "For her wound is incurable" (Mic. 1:8); "The transgressions of Israel were found in you" (Mic. 1:13); "this evil nation" (Jer. 8:3); "the generation under His wrath" (Jer. 7:29), are suggestive of not just a people living at that time, but a pervasive condition that remains still--and must remain--until it is removed by genuine repentance or the miraculous re-creation of the nation from out of death!

Jeremiah 8:5 hints at an unbroken continuum of sin in God's anguished question: "Why then is this people of Jerusalem slidden back by a perpetual backsliding?" Webster's Dictionary defines "perpetual" as "never ceasing, continuing forever in future time...continuing or continued without intermission; uninterrupted; permanent, fixed; without intermission; without limitation." Is that not cause to not only look back at the weight of Israel's past transgressions, but also forward? The mere passage of time does not alter the historically demonstrated disposition of this people, and one day we shall brokenly acknowledge this (Jer. 3:25):

We lie down in our shame, and our confusion covereth us: For we have sinned against the Lord our God, we and our fathers, from our youth even unto this day, and have not obeyed the voice of the Lord our God.

God's plea to "Only acknowledge thine iniquity" (Jer. 3:13) evidently goes unheard, right up to the time of the Millennium, when, at that time, "they shall call Jerusalem the throne of the Lord...neither shall they walk any more after the imagination of their evil heart" (3:17). Though the whole land will be made desolate, in His mercy, God says, "Yet will I not make a full end" (4:27). In that "end," it is the unchangeable character of God--not that of Israel--that brings covenant mercy! The adamant condition of Israel, even in the face of judgments, indicates why restoration must exclusively be the work of God:

Thou hast stricken them, but they have not grieved; Thou hast consumed them, but they have refused to receive correction: They have made their faces harder than a rock; they have refused to return (Jer. 5:3).

One wonders if Israel could mourn when they see Him whom they have pierced were it not for the Spirit of grace and supplication first being poured out (Zech.12:10)! In this sense, one might also consider that not the least of God's purposes in allowing the establishment of the political state and insuring its existence till now is to give opportunity to see that nothing has changed, and "given enough rope," Israel would again "hang herself" in demonstration of that disposition unchanged from the time of her fathers. What has happened since 1948 that would indicate otherwise? How does present Israel differ morally and spiritually from its diasporic condition in the nations--always recognized by biblical commentators as the continuing evidence of unaltered judgment? One suspects, by the increasing evidence at every hand, that the present condition is possibly worse (Jer. 7:23-26). Had there been a change in the nation's condition, it would necessarily require the alteration of Israel's view of Jesus as Messiah and an acknowledgment of the nation's sin in His rejection and crucifixion. This continuing rejection therefore bespeaks an unchanged condition, and this despite the Holocaust and the prospect there for repentant turning, let alone in the centuries of diasporic persecutions that preceded it.

Why, in this greatest calamity of contemporary Jewish existence, was the classic interpretive principle of "judgment in proportion to our sins" not applied? The very existence of the Diaspora itself should have been cause for inquiry of this kind. In a prophecy likely yet to be fulfilled, this is what the Lord proclaims:

The days are coming when I will punish all who are circumcised only in the flesh--Egypt, Judah, Edom, Ammon, Moab and all who live in the desert in distant places. For all these nations are really uncircumcised, and even the whole house of Israel is uncircumcised in heart (Jer. 9:25-6).

What needs to be asked is whether the penalties of broken covenant are now abrogated or voided. Because the blessings have been lost, are we exempt from the penalty of its curses? Are not all of the descendants of those who contracted with God at Sinai (Deut. 29:14-15) subsumed in its agreements, whether or not we know them, or consider them as valid? Are not these warnings of Jeremiah as appropriate now, to the present occupants of Jerusalem and Israel, as they were then?

If you really change your ways and your actions, and deal with each other justly, if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your harm, then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your forefathers for ever and ever (Jer. 7:5-7).

Notice, in this statement, the high priority given to the alien in the land. Today, there is little present public acknowledgment of this biblical injunction, but rather, on the part increasingly of many, a quite unabashed "death to the Arabs" mentality, as if God had not spoken! Should there be yet another expulsion--and there is sufficient scriptural suggestion to warrant it--might it not likely be for this explicit covenantal requirement? How hauntingly appropriate is the Lord's indictment then for this people now:

Why does Jerusalem always turn away?...No one repents of his wickedness, saying, "What have I done?" Each pursues his own course...but my people do not know the requirements of the Lord (Jer. 8:5-7).

If the word "generation" can be taken to mean "a people of the same kind," as well as those of a particular time span, then the present occupants of Israel need to fear the statement of God in Jeremiah 7:29: "the Lord has rejected and abandoned this generation that is under His wrath."

Walter Brueggemann (Abiding Astonishment, Westminster, John Knox Press, p.27) writes:

In such a construal, covenantal obedience, covenantal possibility, and covenantal risk disappear from public practice. When it is forgotten that God cares intensely about issues of justice and righteousness, then it follows quickly that human persons and human institutions can also scuttle such concerns. The abrogation of the commandments permits self-serving, self-indulgent forms of public life.

Many more testimonies of the unbroken continuum of sin abound in Scripture. Our problem is that we do not see as God sees or remember as God remembers. Our reckonings are individualistic rather than corporate, and we do not see ourselves as implicated or culpable in the sins of our fathers. Therefore, in Scripture we often find a rehearsal or review of a long-standing historical condition yet unrequited, which indicates, "that which is past is now" (Ecc. 3:15).

Since the day that your fathers came forth out of the land of Egypt unto this day I have sent unto you all my servants, the prophets, rising up early and sending them; yet they hearkened not unto me, nor inclined their ear, but hardened their neck; they did worse than their fathers (Jer. 7:25,26).

By this testimony, God brings the past into the present ("unto this day") in that unbroken continuum of sin. For what reason should we dismiss this same divine logic in our present? Stephen had a Spirit-inspired outburst in Acts 7:51: "As your fathers have done, so do ye also; you do always grieve the Holy Spirit." This statement indicates that nothing has changed. What national act of repentant acknowledgment has severed this continuum? Are we not still under its indictment?

Von Rad, in his classic work, *The Theology of the Old Testament* (vol.2, p.278), indicates that these fulfillments are yet future:

It is remarkable that the event [the return from Babylonian exile] made no particular impact either on its own or on future generations. The return was not accompanied by miraculous events--indeed, those who took part in it did not in any way regard it as a saving event. If they had done so, they would never have allowed it to fall into oblivion as if it were of no particular significance. It was obviously not as the fulfillment of a great prophetic prediction. Deutero-Isaiah's prophecies had therefore still to be fulfilled.

The Phenomenon of False Prophets

Assuredly as God has sent His true prophets, there have also been others, who bring "welcome" words of seeming comfort, but they are, nevertheless, false.

From the prophet even unto the priest every one dealeth falsely. For they have healed the hurt of the daughter of my people slightly, saying, Peace, peace; when there is no peace (Jer. 8:10-11).

We see this again in Jeremiah 7:4:

Trust ye not in lying words, saying, "The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord."

Here, the nation had made a fetish of its temple, as if its structure guaranteed their safety, independent of their sinful condition, which invited the judgments warned. Is it not so today as well? Are there not voices assuring us that impending disaster cannot come, and, miscalculating the millennial assurances and blessing yet distant, invoke them now, to persuade many that present Israel is safe within its borders and will never be moved? The hoped for confidence that recent peace negotiations gives promise of "peace and safety" is too chillingly suggestive of the "sudden destruction" spoken of in 1st Thessalonians 5:3. Someone wrote, "He is no true friend, but your deadliest enemy, who flatters you in your false security, healing your spiritual hurt slightly, instead of probing the deadly disease to its inmost roots, and cutting out the deeply-seated cancer."

Even if a national restoration were not to be obtained by such preaching, could not individual sinners be saved thereby? To the false confidence that God would never allow the destruction of His own temple and capitol city, comes the word of explicit judgment:

Therefore will I do unto this house, which is called by my name, wherein ye trust [present political Israel?].as I have done to Shiloh. And I will cast you out of my sight, as I have cast out all your brethren, even the whole seed of Ephraim (Jer. 7:14-5).

God's anger is kindled against false prophets and false prophecy. They have lied about the Lord and said,

He will do nothing! No harm will come to us; we will never see sword or famine. The prophets are but wind and the word is not in them; so let what they say be done unto them (Jer. 5:12,13).

What more pathetic and final lament in Jeremiah 5:30,31 than:

A horrible and shocking thing has happened in the land: The prophets prophesy falsely and the priests bear rule by their means, and my people love to have it so; and what will you do in the end of it all?

What is yet more ominous is the suggested conjunction between the statements of the false prophets and the calamity that follows:

Yet they lean upon the Lord and say, 'Is not the Lord among us? No disaster will come upon us.' Therefore because of you, Zion will be plowed like a field, Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble, the temple hill a mound overgrown with thickets (Mic. 3:11,12).

The judgment against the false prophets is severe in vs. 6,7:

The sun will set for the prophets, and the day will be dark for them. The seers will be ashamed and the diviners disgraced. They will cover their faces because there is no answer from God.

A somewhat similar misuse of God lies in the invoking of prophetic promises by secular, socialistic Zionists, who are utterly atheistic in their denial of God. What validity do these have, if in fact there is no God? What divine censure is invited by using the word of God as political expediency? What of the nation and its character founded and perpetuated on such a basis?

On the contrary, John Bright writes (Covenant and Promises, Westminster Press, 1976),

Deuteronomy places the nation's very existence under the stipulation of covenant. It knows nothing of unconditional promises! Even the promise of the land is laid under warning and threat. In positively classical fashion, it addresses Israel as if she stood perpetually antecedent to the giving of the land--as if the promise of the land, long ago fulfilled, was yet an open question and subject to conditions. It addresses each generation as if they had themselves stood with their ancestors at Sinai and had personally bound themselves to the terms of the covenant (Deut. 5:1-5). Since in its view, all Israelites of whatever generation have committed themselves to Yahweh's covenant, Deuteronomy calls them to absolute obedience to the covenant stipulations, and warns them, that if they do not obey, all the promised blessings will be taken away (pp.129-130).

Where has there ever been so much as a hint that its conditions are passed, that Israel, of whatever generation, is exempt from these demands? Does not the apparent absence of the blessings (Deut. 30:16), the increasing anxiety and stress, the fears that grow worse daily, indicate that the God of these covenantal requirements is God still? How impertinent, in view of a 2000-year expulsion, validating Yahweh's oaths, do we think to unilaterally re-possess the land without first returning to the God of Sinai and His covenantal demands?

No wonder the godly Josiah tore his clothing in dismay! It must have seemed to him that, because of the derelictions, the curse was already hovering over the nation, and must soon bear it down to its ruin. The thought must have occurred to him that the nation had been living in a fool's paradise in assuming that Yahweh was irrevocably committed to its defense (p.131).

What, then, of now?

It [the biblical testimony, our diasporic history and that of present Israel till now] seeks to show that at every step of the way history itself has shown the theology of the covenant, as expressed in Deuteronomy, to be true. And it begs the people to heed the lessons of history before the midnight hour strikes (pp.132-3).

The notion that the nation might be threatened with destruction was simply too terrible to be entertained...they found security in the physical presence of the Temple in their midst...since they could not believe that he would ever allow it to be destroyed, they felt equally confident that the city in which it stood was safe...and turn[ed] it into a dogma of absolute validity for all time to come...no matter what! Any

suggestion that he [God] might allow Jerusalem to be taken and destroyed could only be regarded as treason and blasphemy! (p.139).

How much of today's confidence, even on the part of believers, is an echo of this tragic, false hope? Jeremiah laments Israel's failure to remember her God:

They never said "Where is Yahweh who brought us up from Egypt's land, who guided us through the desert...land of drought and of danger, land through which nobody passes, where no human being dwells?" (2:6).

What a description of what must be the experience of the outcasts of Israel just prior to the millennial return that will not be forgotten! The very refusal "to take seriously the possibility of death, and the curse" was, for Jeremiah, "that his people were incorrigible in their backsliding":

Why, then, has this people slid back in backsliding perpetual? They cling to deceit. They refuse to return. (Jer.8:5).

All his life Jeremiah collided with prophets who promised peace to an unrepentant and obdurate people. For them he had nothing but contempt. They are windbags and liars whose word did no come from Yahweh, but sprang from their own wishful thinking [See Jer. 23:16-17]...If they were true prophets, they would not lull the people into a false sense of security, but would warn of Yahweh's wrath and seek to turn the people to penitence (p.156).

And this despite the apparent futility (Jer. 13:23) of a people not only incorrigible, but totally depraved! (Jer. 5:1- 9).

They are condemned by the terms of the covenant to a judgment that would be fearful, certain, and complete--so fearful as to unhinge the fixed order of creation and to plunge it once more into primeval chaos (4:23-26). When that judgment came, the way was laid open for a spiritual crisis of the first magnitude. For many, it must have been sheer disillusionment. Yahweh's very status and character as God was thrown into question...Others of the people, feeling that they had done nothing to deserve the calamity that had befallen them, were moved to question the justice of God...and still others, accepting the tragedy as Yahweh's just judgment, were trapped in hopeless despair...Such people hardly had the will to survive...one can say that she could not possibly have survived if she could not have found some explanation of the tragedy in terms of her faith...One shudders to think of the outcome had only the voices of religion in her midst been those of priest and professional prophet proclaiming the inviolability of Zion...But it was just that desperately needed explanation that Jeremiah (together with Ezekiel and the Deuteronomic writers) gave. Precisely in that his message was one of judgment--of stern uncompromising judgment--it was a saving message. It gave the tragedy explanation--and in advance--precisely in terms of the covenant that had made Israel a people in the first place (p.189).

The truth is that Jeremiah believed in the sure and unconditional purposes of God for his people just as firmly [more firmly than] as his opponents did...that beyond the judgment, God would once again come to his people in mercy; he would never finally cast them off (Jer. 31:35-37). What form [then] would that hope for the farther future take?..The eschatological future in Jeremiah's preaching took the only form, that in view of his theology, it could take: the promise of a new covenant (pp.192-4).

The awful chasm between the demands of covenant by which the nation was judged and the sure promises of God...is bridged from the side of the divine grace...So it is that God, who has condemned his people by the terms of the covenant, will come to them again in the wilderness of the exile, and will make with them a new and eternal covenant...[with] a people who are made new (p.196).

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