



Good News
Bible Reading Program

A free educational service provided by the United Church of God, *an International Association*

— June 2003 —

DATE	READING TOPIC	SCRIPTURES
1 June	Charges against Israel and Judah	Jeremiah 2
2 June	God's wife has committed harlotry; Call to repentance	Jeremiah 3:1-4:4
3 June	Warning of Judah's coming invasion; Jeremiah mourns	Jeremiah 4:5-31
4-8 June	FIVE-DAY BREAK (one of four planned breaks in the year)	
9 June	Reasons for coming judgment	Jeremiah 5
10 June	Further warning of impending judgment	Jeremiah 6
11 June	God wants obedience, not just the form of religion	Jeremiah 7:1-27
12 June	Judgment on abominable religious practices	Jeremiah 7:28-8:17
13 June	Punishment for shameless disobedience; Jeremiah laments	Jeremiah 8:18-9:26
14 June	Decorated trees; God's people to captivity; Fury on the nations	Jeremiah 10
15 June	The finding of the Book of the Law	2 Kings 22:3-20; 2 Chronicles 34:8-28
16 June	Josiah commands the restoration of proper worship	2 Chronicles 34:29-33; 2 Kings 23:1-20
17 June	Josiah's great Passover	2 Chronicles 35:1-19; 2 Kings 23:21-25
18 June	God's coming wrath; Peace for those who trust in Him	Nahum 1
19 June	Nineveh's coming destruction; Reasons for judgment	Nahum 2-3
20 June	Judah's coming punishment; Death of Josiah; Reign of Jehoahaz over Judah; Reign of Jehoiakim over Judah; Message concerning Shallum (Jehoahaz) and Jehoiakim	2 Kings 23:26-37; 2 Chronicles 35:20-36:5; Jeremiah 22:1-23
21 June	The covenant broken; Judah cursed	Jeremiah 11:1-17
22 June	Plot against Jeremiah; His complaint; God's response; Further prophecy against Judah; Punishment and hope of the gentiles	Jeremiah 11:18-12:17
23 June	Jeremiah on trial for his life; Death of Urijah; Jeremiah spared	Jeremiah 26
24 June	Droughts; Sword, famine and pestilence will certainly follow	Jeremiah 14:1-15:9
25 June	Jeremiah's dejection; God's exhortation and reassurance	Jeremiah 15:10-21
26 June	Jeremiah's lifestyle as witness against Judah; Israel's future return; Imminent punishment; Nations will come to know God	Jeremiah 16
27 June	Judah's sin and punishment; Trust in man vs. trust in God; Jeremiah prays for salvation and vindication; Honor the Sabbath	Jeremiah 17
28 June	God will use the Chaldeans to punish His people	Habakkuk 1-2
29 June	The Chaldeans will be punished; Psalm of the coming of God in judgment	Habakkuk 3
30 June	Defeat of Necho's army at Carchemish and further retreat	Jeremiah 46:1-12

Highlights to Think About From This Month's Reading

“Broken Cisterns” (Jeremiah 2)

June 1

Jeremiah was to “go and cry in the hearing of Jerusalem,” yet his message was about all Israel (Jeremiah 2:1-3). And then God’s message was to go to the “house of Jacob and all the families of the house of Israel” (verse 4). Yet remember that the northern kingdom of Israel had been taken into captivity a century earlier. Still, we do know that, around three years after Jeremiah’s ministry began, a small percentage of Israelites actually returned to the land for a short period—that is, the Scythians who overran the region. Thus, it is likely that Jeremiah’s message was intended in some measure for Jews and Israelites of His day. But notice again that the message was for “*all* the families of the house of Israel.” Because the Israelites were scattered throughout the Assyrian Empire at the time Jeremiah prophesied, with many near the Black and Caspian Seas, we may safely assume that his message was never delivered to them in that age.

Since God would not deliver a message to people who could never hear it, these prophecies must then be *dual*, directed more to the descendants of Israel in the latter days, particularly since the descriptions in this chapter and much of the book certainly fit our American and British societies and much of the world today. (In the book of Jeremiah, “Israel” is named almost as much as “Judah.” And “Jerusalem”—ancient capital of all 12 tribes—sometimes clearly refers more to Israel than to Judah.)

The Israelites have a short memory, soon forgetting the source of past and present blessings (verses 7, 32), and quickly turning to myriad forms of idolatry. “Those who handle the law” (verse 8) have turned from the true God and His law to *false* gods! Whereas most cultures cling to their traditions and gods, Israel, chosen by God to receive the true religion (the only way that brings true reward!), has been quick to forsake God and to do so “for what does not profit” (verse 11). These are the “two evils” here—forsaking God and substituting false gods (verse 13). “God, the fountain of living waters, offered a limitless supply of fresh, life-giving sustenance. Instead the people chose broken cisterns, which were useless for storing water and useless for sustaining life” (*The Nelson Study Bible*, note on verse 13). God proclaims a dire penalty for rejecting Him, “the fountain of living waters,” in Jeremiah 17:13.

As He often does, God colorfully portrays the utter stupidity of making gods of wood and stone, but Israel and Judah make as many dumb deities as the number of cities in Judah (2:27-28). “See if *they* can save you in the time of your trouble!” God taunts (compare verse 28). Today, our peoples still trust in worthless and inanimate things to save us—such as our weapons of war and our money. And some still serve actual idols, seeing power in crosses, statues of Mary, good luck charms, etc. And then there is a wrong trust in other people, directly condemned elsewhere in Jeremiah (17:5).

Verses 14-16 of chapter 2 show that though God had freed Israel from slavery, the nation subjected itself to vassalage and subsequent plunder and slavery by the Assyrians after making a failed deal with the Egyptians (Noph and Tahpanhes, also known as Memphis and Daphne, were principal cities in northern Egypt). In verse 18, Sihor, meaning “Black,” is a reference to the Nile River, while “the River” associated with Assyria is the Euphrates. Judah is here basically warned, “Why trust in Egypt or Assyria when they cannot save?” This should serve as a warning to us now. For modern Israelites often make the mistake of putting more trust in alliances than in Almighty God (compare verses 36-37).

Jeremiah repeatedly portrays Israel and Judah as an unfaithful wife who has both deserted her loving, generous husband and also committed adultery, “playing the harlot,” with multiple lovers—false gods and national allies (verse 20). She takes steps to “wash” herself (verse 22)—efforts to *feel* and *appear* righteous. But it is her *heart* that needs washing—her *thoughts* purified (compare 4:14). And only through true repentance, God’s forgiveness and God’s power can one be truly spiritually cleansed. Israel is adulterous not just by being seduced, but by actively enticing partners like a female animal in heat (verses 23-25).

Worse, not only has Israel not received correction, but God rebukes the people: “Your sword has devoured your prophets like a destroying lion” (verse 30). Sadly, Israel and Judah have always rejected God’s true servants—even subjecting them to martyrdom. While that is not happening right now, times are prophesied to get much worse. God also says, “On your skirts is found the blood of the lives of the poor innocents” (verse 34). Today there is little difference. The most innocent are the children. Few children now are sacrificed to fire, but many are murdered, many more *unborn* children

are slaughtered, and society is so twisted, corrupt and degenerate that nearly all children are set on a path of life that leads to death.

Because obedience to God's absolute laws brings automatic blessings, and disobedience brings automatic penalties, He tells Israel, "You've brought this on yourself" (compare verse 17) and "Your own wickedness will correct you" (verse 19). While a national warning, it is incumbent upon each of us individually to respond. If we are living contrary to God's way, that will eventually catch up with us. Indeed, that is surely producing consequences already. Let us all, then, turn to God now and remain loyal—and avoid the suffering sin brings.

"Return, O Backsliding Children...for I Am Married to You" (Jeremiah 3–4:4) June 2

The law stated in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 that, after a divorce where one spouse then marries another, and the second marriage is terminated by divorce or death, remarriage to the original spouse is forbidden. This is comparable to Israel's situation—but not exactly the same since Israel did not actually marry other gods (indeed, the false gods Israel has pursued don't really exist). While God looked upon the idolatry of Israel and Judah as "play[ing] the harlot with many lovers," He says He will yet take her back if she will but repent (Jeremiah 3:1).

But that is not immediately forthcoming. God remarks, "You have had a harlot's forehead [never blushing]; you refuse to be ashamed" (verse 3; compare 6:15). Continually acting against one's conscience leads to a *seared* conscience (see 1 Timothy 4:2)—repeated immorality leads to amorality. Logically, one would think that Judah would have learned some fear of God when she saw God punish the house of Israel with divorce, destruction, and captivity. But no, "treacherous Judah" sank lower than Israel! Any appearance of returning to God was done "in pretense" (3:8-11).

It is interesting to note that though God says He issued a certificate of divorce to Israel (verse 8), He still claims to be married to the Israelites in verse 14. This is because, though God put away Israel as a whole, He maintained His covenant relationship with a *remnant* of Israel—in Jeremiah's day meaning the faithful of Judah. Yet God would also consider *individuals* of the house of Israel as part of this remnant if they would repent and return to Him (same verse). In verse 12 Jeremiah is told to proclaim the message to the north. This may well have been directed to those Israelites (the Scythians) who came back into the land of the northern kingdom at this time. They are said to be "more righteous" than Judah—which makes sense when we realize that many of these Israelites (perhaps humbled from their captivity) were soon going to help Josiah purge the land of idolatry and observe his great Passover.

Yet, as explained in the highlights for chapter 2, the message was meant for *all* the families of Israel—meaning this call to repentance is likely intended primarily for the end time. In the last days, much of end-time Israel is still to be found mainly to the north of Judea—northwest that is—prior to and during their final captivity (send for our free booklet *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy* to learn more). For those physical Israelites who repent, God will take them as individuals and join them to the faithful remnant of Israel—the remnant according to grace, meaning the Church of God (see Romans 11:5). Yet also intended here is the return from captivity of those of the physical remnant of Israel to God at the time of Christ's return—when, according to this and many other prophecies, they too collectively repent and become spiritual Israelites according to grace.

Israel and Judah will finally and truly return to God "in those days," at which time the two houses will be rejoined (verse 18). Notice that Israel and Judah will "come *together* out of the land of the north" (same verse). This never happened in ancient times following the Assyrian captivity of Israel or the Babylonian captivity of Judah. It is clearly a prophecy of the end time.

Then the actual presence of Jesus Christ and the throne of the Lord will make the glory of Israel's history—when the Ark of the Covenant was merely a type of that throne—unimportant and unmemorable by comparison (verses 16-17). Incidentally, some have speculated that the fact of the ark not being mentioned anymore after Christ's return is an indication that it will have had prominent mention *just prior* to His return—that it may yet be found and play some part in end-time events if it was not destroyed in ancient times (see highlights on Isaiah 17–18). Of course, even an event as stunning and incredible as finding the Ark of the Covenant would be paled into utter insignificance by the return of Jesus Christ in power and glory to rule all nations.

At last, Israel and the world will have "shepherds according to My heart," who will "feed the Israelites with knowledge and understanding" (verse 15). This likely had a forerunner in Jeremiah's day—meaning Jeremiah, Zephaniah, other contemporary prophets, faithful priests and the faithful king Josiah. They provided spiritual leadership to the Israelites returning back then. Today the

shepherds are God's faithful ministers. And in the coming reign of Christ, which is apparently the predominant reference, the shepherds will be Christ, the glorified saints and righteous human leaders.

All Israel will then submit to God and revere Him as Father, no longer turning away from Him (verse 19). The nation will no longer respond in a mere pretense of repentance—for the return to God will be genuine (verses 22-25).

Jeremiah 4, which continues on from the end of chapter 3, begins with a play on words. God tells Israel, "If you will return [from captivity to their homeland]...return to Me [that is, in a spiritual sense—meaning repentance]" (4:1). In verse 3, the message is directed to the people of Judah—perhaps both to those of Jeremiah's day and to people far in the future. As for God's instruction to break up the fallow ground and not sowing among thorns, it should be noted that the reference is to "unused soil, not a regularly plowed field. Israel [including Judah] needed a new field in which to sow its seed of faithfulness, a radical departure from its ways of sin and idolatry" (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verse 3).

In verse 4, we see that the main purpose of circumcision is to illustrate the need for mankind to remove any hardness of heart and all barriers separating us from God. This repeats what God told the Israelites just before He first brought them in to the Promised Land (see Deuteronomy 10:16). If the people refuse to heed, the consequences will be severe.

"The Sound of the Trumpet" (Jeremiah 4:5-31)

June 3

Verse 5 of chapter 4 begins a prophecy that continues to the end of chapter 6. It is addressed here at the outset to Judah and Jerusalem. This undoubtedly referred to the Jews of Jeremiah's day, but could also refer to future inhabitants of the land. Moreover, reference is later made to the recipients of the message being the "house of Israel" or "house of Jacob" *as well as* Judah (see 5:15, 19). Israel had been taken into captivity long before Jeremiah wrote, so that at least would seem to look to the future.

Still, the message was clearly intended for Jeremiah's fellow countrymen. Tragically, the people do not yet heed God's call to repentance (see 4:4). They are therefore instructed to "blow the trumpet" (verse 5), the *shofar* or ram's horn, an "alarm of war" (verse 19)—a symbol repeated throughout Scripture. For God will bring "disaster from the north." As explained in the highlights for chapter 1, this was the course of invasion followed by *ancient* Babylon and that will yet be followed by *end-time* Babylon.

The warning is to be raised from Dan to Ephraim (verse 15). These areas were in the northernmost and southernmost parts of the ancient northern kingdom and would have seen a northern threat coming against Judah.

God warns of "watchers" (verse 16), which could indicate advanced scouts of a coming army. However, the term may also be translated "besiegers" (*Jamieson, Fausset & Brown's Commentary*, note on verse 16).

All this was rather unsettling to Jeremiah. He was "overwhelmed at what God was about to bring upon Jerusalem. This passage indicates the deep inner struggle Jeremiah faced in his proclamation of the divine message. Jeremiah challenged God's dealings with His people, claiming that God had *deceived* the people with a message of peace" (note on Jeremiah 4:10). Remember that in chapter 3 God had just told Jeremiah to convey a message of Israel's repentance and return under the reign of the Messiah. *Now* here he was delivering an ominous message of *doom*—to people he deeply cared about. God well understood Jeremiah's compassion—and was no doubt merciful to him in his anguished remarks.

Verse 18 declares that the people have brought this on themselves. Just as in today's world, God said the people are "experts at doing what is evil, but failures at doing what is good" (verse 22, Today's English Version).

The prophet then sees in vision a destroyed land—employing the same language used in Scripture of the chaotic, desolate planet Earth before man's creation (verse 23; see Genesis 1:2). It is now the result of the destruction God will bring because of the people's sins (see verse 26). But thankfully, the land will not be *utterly* destroyed and not everyone will die (verse 27; 5:18). Yet the consequences will be severe—and, as the people are set in their sinful ways, the punishment is now inevitable (4:28).

If Zion tries to appease, distract and seduce her enemies—like a harlot with seductive clothes and makeup, offering favors—it won't work (verse 30). Instead, she will soon experience unavoidable pain, as a woman in labor with her first child. And in the end, her lovers will become her murderers (verse 31).

FIVE-DAY BREAK**June 4-8**

Starting June 4, there is break in the program for five days. Regular reading resumes June 9. (There are four planned breaks in each calendar year. This allows more time for personal study at these occasions and perhaps an opportunity for you to catch up in the reading if you have fallen behind.)

“And My People Love to Have It So” (Jeremiah 5)**June 9**

Jeremiah 5 continues on from chapter 4. See, God says to the prophet, if you can find *anyone* in Jerusalem “who seeks the truth, and I will pardon her” (5:1). Shockingly, the context implies that no one could be found.

Jeremiah considers that many people are poor and uneducated (verse 4), so maybe he will have success if he goes “to the great men and speak to them, for they have known the way of the LORD”—having had access to the Scriptures and history, being literate people (verse 5). “But these have altogether broken the yoke”—they have rejected God’s authority and cast off any restraint (same verse). Therefore the wild animals (the gentiles) will slay them and take over their cities because “their backslidings have increased” (verse 6). “How shall I pardon you for this?,” God asks in verse 7. “Therefore you are inexcusable, O man.... In accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath” (Romans 2:1-6).

The Israelites have a long history of lusting for and engaging in all the pagan philosophies and practices of Satan’s world, when God has not only given them the *best* religion, but the *only true* religion on earth. God pictures them as being led strictly by sensual impulse rather than any intelligence (verses 7-8). “Shall I not punish them for these things?” says the LORD. ‘And shall I not avenge myself on such a nation as this?’ (verse 9). After relating more of their sins, He repeats the question (verse 29)—and again a few chapters later (9:9).

The imagery of God breaking off sinful “branches” of Israel (5:10) is later used by the apostle Paul (see Romans 11). God is especially angry with false ministers who claim to be His spokesmen, and yet mislead the people with lies and false security (Jeremiah 5:12-13).

God proclaims: “I will bring a nation against you from afar.... a nation whose language you do not know.... They are all mighty men [well-armed and brutal]” (verses 15-17). This is dual, relating to Jeremiah’s day and the end time, for verse 18 says, “Nevertheless *in those days* [indicating the *last days*]...I will not make a complete end of you.” God says, “Declare this *in the house of Jacob* and proclaim it in Judah.”

The recalcitrance of the people is largely explained by the fact that they are spiritually blind and deaf (verses 20-21). Yet all creation is a proof of God. And if people don’t understand anything else, they ought at least to realize that they must obey their Maker (verse 24). Again, it is the people’s sins that deprive them of blessings and happiness (verse 25).

“For among My people are found wicked men,” God declares—extremely evil people who will do anything to anybody for personal gain, usually for money (verses 26-29). But the root cause of the evils is false religion. It is a “horrible thing” to God that “prophets prophesy [preach or teach] falsely, and the priests rule by their own power [not by God’s Spirit]; *and My people love to have it so*” (verses 30-31). What a sad indictment! People would rather listen to lies than the truth. We especially see it today in the name of tolerance. Anyone who would label the behavior of others as wrong is looked upon as a bigot and hatemonger. And when criticism is silenced, there is soon no fear of consequences, as in verses 12-13.

The last verse asks the critical question, “But what will you do in the end [that is, when the hammer of judgment falls]?” The apostle Peter later asked a similar question: “Therefore, since all these things [the physical world around us] will be dissolved, *what manner of persons ought you to be* in holy conduct and godliness...?” (2 Peter 3:11). We should all be asking *ourselves* such questions.

“Peace, Peace!’ When There Is No Peace” (Jeremiah 6)**June 10**

The prophecy of the previous chapters continues and concludes in Jeremiah 6.

Jerusalem was situated in the former borderlands between Benjamin and Judah—and the tribe of Benjamin had remained part of the southern kingdom of Judah. So the “children of Benjamin” in verse 1 would represent the inhabitants dwelling on the north side of the city. Tekoa and Beth Haccerem were a few miles *south* of Jerusalem. Thus, the city and its outlying areas are all under immediate threat. Again, as in chapters 1 and 4, the people are warned that “disaster appears out of the north” (6:1, 22)—from ancient and end-time Babylon.

In verse 2, Judah is likened to a vulnerable and helpless woman. She sees her enemies surrounding her, but she is unprepared—for their attack is coming that night (verses 3-5). In verses 6-8, God directs Judah's enemies to make ready for their attack of Jerusalem. The only hope for Zion's inhabitants is to "be instructed" by God, but "their ear is uncircumcised [covered]" (verse 10)—they won't listen. God's Word is actually offensive to them (verse 10, NIV). "It's one thing for a modern society to be pluralistic and permit differences in belief and values. It's another thing for a society to become increasingly hostile to Christian beliefs and biblical values. Where the Word of the Lord offends, judgment will surely fall" (Lawrence Richards, *The Bible Reader's Companion*, 1991, note on verse 10).

Therefore God warns that He is about to unleash His fury on all the people, "because from the least of them even to the greatest of them, *everyone is given to covetousness*; and from the prophet even to the priest, *everyone deals falsely*" (verses 8-13). "Healing the hurt of My people slightly" (see verse 14) refers to easing any discomfort concerning possible consequences by speaking reassuring words of promised "peace." This was the mantra even as conditions worsened—just as it often is today. Appeals to conscience did no good because the people "were not at all ashamed" (verse 15)—another example of people "having their own conscience seared with a hot iron" (1 Timothy 4:2). The words of this section of Jeremiah, it should be noted, are repeated later in the book (see 8:10-12).

God reminds the people of the "old paths" and "good way"—the laws He revealed long ago that expressed His way of life (6:16). The Jewish Tanakh renders it this way: "Stand by the roads and consider, inquire about ancient paths: Which is the road to happiness? Travel, it, and find tranquillity for yourselves." But they refuse to walk that way (same verse). God sent watchmen who trumpeted warnings, but they wouldn't listen (verse 17). So He says, "I will certainly bring calamity" (verse 19).

Offerings and sacrifices without obedience are worthless (verses 18-20). Or, put another way, "Religion without righteousness reeks" (*Bible Reader's Companion*, note on verse 20). God and His inexorable laws are stumbling blocks to those who want to walk contrary to them (verse 21; compare Isaiah 8:14). Also, just as God has many ways to give success to the righteous, He has many ways to cause failure to those who live in defiance of Him.

God uses Jeremiah as an assayer of metals to analyze the people for purity, but instead of silver (truth and righteousness), he finds only other metals of little value (verses 27-28). "In ancient times lead and silver were put in a crucible together and heated. The lead oxidized and carried off the alloys of baser metals, leaving the silver pure. The image of the refiner's fire is found several times in the O[ld] T[estament] and suggests a test for moral quality. Here, however, God's attempt to purify His people is futile. The ore is so impure that no silver can be found, and the whole batch is dumped out" (note on verses 27-30).

Trusting in Form Without Substance (Jeremiah 7:1-27)

June 11

The message here is one of rebuke, warning and exhortation. Delivered in a public place, it is a call for the people to "amend their ways" (verse 3). The people of Jeremiah's day had a *form* of religion—they worshiped in God's temple. But this gave them a false sense of security—indeed, they believed a lie. The temple of the Lord is presented in verse 4 as almost a chant. It was viewed as a superstitious talisman to save them. The same thing often happens today. People may place too much faith in considering themselves part of God's *spiritual* temple—His *Church*—rather than in God Himself. They may think that just because they attend worship services and consider themselves a member of the Church that this will save them—an example of the false reasoning of righteousness by association.

But God demands heartfelt obedience. Incredibly, part of the lie the people believe is that God's law somehow no longer applies—that, in a twisted view of God's grace, they are "delivered to do all these abominations" (verse 10). Yet God decries this for the outrage that it is, stating that His temple has become to them a "den of thieves" (verse 11). "The 'den' of robbers was the refuge where they hid out in search of their next victim. The analogy is devastating. How could God's people steal, murder, commit adultery and perjury, and worship other gods (v. 9), and then assume 'we are safe' because of God's house?" (*Bible Reader's Companion*, note on verse 11). Jesus would later quote verse 11 when He chased the moneychangers out of the temple of His day (Matthew 21:13).

God brings up an example from Israel's history to make His point. In the time of the judges, Shiloh, in the land of Ephraim (Joshua 18:1), was the site of the tabernacle of God with the Ark of the Covenant—just as Jerusalem was later the site of the temple. Back then, "leaders in the family of Eli had abused their priestly position for personal gain, and idolatry was rampant in the land. When

the Israelites attempted to use the ark as a victory-giving talisman, the ark was captured (see 1 Sam. 4) and the sanctuary was destroyed by the Philistines” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on Jeremiah 7:12). Shiloh was later destroyed and abandoned, and today, as in Jeremiah’s day, one can go to Shiloh and see nothing but desolation and a few scattered ruins. The lesson is striking. Clearly, Judah’s confidence in the temple is misplaced. So is placing such confidence in any church or organization. Such thinking carried many into apostasy at the end of the first century—and the pattern has been sadly repeated throughout the centuries. What is vital is that we be firmly grounded with a personal relationship with God, rather than unquestioningly following a church or organization and trusting in loyalty to that organization to ensure our salvation.

In verse 16, the people had descended so far into depravity that God actually forbade Jeremiah from interceding for them.

God then strongly rebukes Israel for worshiping “the queen of heaven” (verses 17-18). This goddess, also mentioned in Jeremiah 44:15-30, is elsewhere referred to as Ashtoreth—known to other Middle Eastern cultures as Ishtar or Astarte—from which the modern name *Easter* derives. As *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* reports: “The term ‘Easter’ is not of Christian origin. It is another form of *Astarte*, one of the titles of the Chaldean goddess, the queen of heaven. The festival of Pasch [Passover] in post apostolic times was a continuation of the Jewish feast.... From this Pasch the pagan festival of ‘Easter’ was quite distinct and was introduced into the apostate Western religion, as part of the attempt to adapt pagan festivals to Christianity” (“Easter,” New Testament section, 1985).

Ishtar was a fertility goddess. And today rabbits and eggs are the symbols of sexual fertility and procreation used to celebrate the holiday named after her. Indeed, the special “cakes for the queen of heaven” (verse 18) may be the origin of the popular Easter custom of hot cross buns. It is also interesting to note that many of those who worship Mary as the “Mother of God” today also refer to her as the “Queen of Heaven.”

Because of their rebellion, terrible punishment was coming on the Jews of Jeremiah’s day (verse 20)—and will likewise come upon all Israel of the *latter* days, as many other prophecies confirm.

Again, God says there is too much emphasis on *form* of religion and not enough on right *substance*. He tells them to go ahead and make all the sacrifices they want but that it won’t do them any good (verse 21). God did not command such sacrifices when He first delivered Israel from Egypt. The first thing He commanded was obedience (verses 22-23). Consider that some people today may give offerings or do a few good deeds believing that’s enough to satisfy God. Others may do far more—being legalistically meticulous over the smallest details of obedience—and yet ignore the weightier matters of the law, as was the case with the Pharisees whom Christ denounced in His day (see Matthew 23:23; 1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

Through the centuries, the Israelites had failed to obey (Jeremiah 7:24)—and this despite the fact that God had sent so many prophets. In Mark 12:1-12, Christ related a parable that expressed the efforts God had made in this regard—all to no avail. God tells Jeremiah that his situation will be no different—the people will not listen to him either (Jeremiah 7:27). And even now, with Jeremiah’s words nearly everywhere in modern Israel (being part of the Bible), they still don’t.

Supplementary Reading: “Easter: Masking a Biblical Truth,” *Holidays or Holidays: Does It Matter Which Days We Keep?*, pp. 10-16.

Judgment on Abominations (Jeremiah 7:28–8:17)

June 12

Because of the people’s refusal to obey, God has Jeremiah tell them to cut off their hair—an apparently figurative reference. “The Heb[rew] feminine form tells us that it’s Jerusalem [rather than Jeremiah] who is to cut her hair. The reference is to a person who made a Nazarite vow and was set aside as holy [as all Israel was supposed to be in a sense]. If defiled, one had to cut off his or her hair to symbolize pollution [see Numbers 6:1-21]” (*Bible Reader’s Companion*, note on 7:29).

The Jews had gone so far as to set up abominations—idols and pagan altars—in the temple of God (this having occurred a few decades earlier during the reign of Manasseh). And they went further still, sacrificing their children at Tophet: “In the valley of Hinnom, a gruesome place throughout the history of Judah, King Manasseh had built an altar to the pagan god, Molech. There the children of worshippers were burned on a fiery altar as sacrifices to the pagan god. ‘Topheth’ means ‘fireplace’ or ‘furnace’ and was probably the name of a pit dug in the ground for this abominable ritual” (Russell Dilday, *Mastering the Old Testament*, 1987, Vol. 9, p. 484).

Of this ghastly practice, God says, “...which I did *not* command, nor did it [even] come into My heart” (Jeremiah 7:31)—seeming to imply that they believed God *had* commanded it. Why would

they have thought such a thing? Because their worship was syncretistic—blending paganism into the true religion. The Hebrew word for “Lord” was *Baal*, a name that also denoted the false sun god. And God was their King, the Hebrew word for which was *Melek* or *Molech*, another name denoting a pagan deity. Many thus believed that the Lord and King—in their mind the true God—had commanded their traditional religious practices, when these practices had actually come from paganism. God would not accept such worship even if people believed they were properly serving Him through it (see Deuteronomy 12:29-32).

God says the Valley of Hinnom (*Gai Hinnom* or, in the Greek New Testament, *Gehenna*) will be renamed the Valley of Slaughter—“so named because of the great slaughter of the Jews about to take place at Jerusalem: a just retribution of their sin in slaying their children to Moloch in Tophet” (*Jamieson, Fausset & Brown’s Commentary*, note on Jeremiah 7:32). However, it is likely that this is also representative of the terrible punishment to come on Judah and Israel in the end time. It may also be typical of the final judgment on all rebellion since the New Testament 12 times uses *Gehenna* as a designation for the place of final punishment, where the incorrigibly wicked will be burned up—called the “lake of fire” in the book of Revelation.

In chapter 8, we see the propensity of conquering nations to dishonor the dead. In ancient times, they would often dig up the graves—usually tombs and ossuaries—for anything of value to plunder (verses 1-2). This was, of course, looked upon as a horrible desecration. The point is that death and destruction are not the full measure of punishment. The people are also to suffer national ignominy and shame. The ones who aren’t dead will *wish* they were dead—being dragged away as slaves (verse 3).

God laments that His people are perpetual backsliders (verse 5). He heard their past cries for relief and rescued them many times—but they just won’t turn their lives around (verse 6). In verse 7 God points out that while birds know when it is time to take major action in migrating, responding to promptings God has put within them, human beings seem oblivious to God’s promptings to obey Him—the increasing calamities intended as warnings.

In verses 8-9, the educated people who are supposed to be preserving and teaching God’s Word have actually rejected it—and proclaim falsehood instead. As the apostle Paul later remarked of pagan philosophers, “Professing to be wise, they became fools” (Romans 1:22).

Warning of judgment then, God repeats the reason He gave for it in Jeremiah 6:10-15 (8:10-12). God tells Jeremiah that punishment is coming (verse 13), whereupon the prophet relates the sentiments the people will express when judgment falls (verses 14-16). Forces of enemy invasion are described in the past tense to demonstrate the certainty of their coming—and, terrifyingly, they are declared to be *God’s* forces (verse 16)—carrying out His will—and likened to the plague of serpents He sent among the ancient Israelites when they rebelled in the wilderness (verse 17; see Numbers 21:6).

Proceeding From Evil to Evil (Jeremiah 8:18–9:26)

June 13

As we read through these sections, it is evident that a dialogue is transpiring, wherein sometimes Jeremiah speaks and sometimes God speaks directly—and sometimes one of them relates the words, or *future* words, of the people. Verse 18 begins a lament of Jeremiah. In verse 19, he quotes the future words of the people, “wondering that God should have delivered them up to the enemy, seeing that He is Zion’s king, dwelling in her” (*Jamieson, Fausset & Brown’s Commentary*, note on verse 19). Of course, they shouldn’t have placed so much stock in this—just as they shouldn’t have relied too much on the temple in chapter 7. God interjects at the end of 8:19 to explain that the people have brought the situation on themselves. Verse 20 then has the people speaking a proverb about the harvest being past and the summer being ended. “Meaning: One season of hope after another has passed, but the looked-for deliverance never came, and now all hope is gone” (note on verse 20).

This is all too much for Jeremiah. He says he is deeply hurt over what is going to happen to his people—the NIV has “crushed,” the Hebrew here meaning “broken” or “shattered” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verses 20-22). “Rather than gloat at the vindication of his ministry, Jeremiah is heartbroken at the suffering of his fellow countrymen. Love for God and love for others sometimes are in tension. But loving God doesn’t mean we must stop caring for others, even when their tragedies are a consequence of their own sins” (*Bible Reader’s Companion*, note on verse 21). Indeed, God Himself actually cares for these others even more than we do. And He looks for people who will love as He loves—who are willing to “stand in the gap” for mankind (compare Ezekiel 22:30). This quality abounds in Scripture among the leaders God chose—such as Abraham (Genesis 18:24), Job and Noah (Ezekiel 14:14, 20), Moses (Psalm 106:23), the apostle Paul (Romans 11:1),

and of course Jesus Christ (John 3:17; Hebrews 7:25). We must exhibit this quality too (1 Timothy 2:1).

Jeremiah asks, “Is there no balm in Gilead...?”—that is, to heal the people. “The region of Gilead was known for its balsam ointment (see Gen. 37:25). There is no healing, physical or spiritual, for a people intent on rebelling against God” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on Jeremiah 8:20-22). The prophet’s lament continues into verse 2. Yet it appears that the last sentence of this verse begins another interjection by God, an interjection made clearer in verse 3, wherein He identifies blatant sins of the people—that they are not “valiant for the truth” but, instead, “proceed from evil to evil.” In the same verse He says, “They do not know Me.” Nor, as we previously read, did they understand His judgment (8:7). “Like his northern counterpart Hosea (see Hosea 4:6), Jeremiah identified the people’s major deficiency as their lack of knowledge of the Lord and His judgment” (note on 8:7). And yet they were supposed to be Israelites—of God’s own nation. Sadly, in one negative respect they did take after their father Israel—or, rather, Jacob as he was named before his conversion. God says, “Every brother will utterly supplant” or, literally, “trip up by the heel” (*JFB Commentary*, note on verse 4). This is the root meaning of the name Jacob, who was deceitful in supplanting His brother Esau before he changed and turned his life around.

In verse 9, God repeats His question regarding punishment from chapter 5 (verses 9, 29). It is almost as if He is convincing Himself that this action needs to take place. He is loath to completely remove His people and allow destruction to come. But He must—for their sake and for *everyone’s* sake. All people must know where forsaking God’s law leads (compare verses 12-16).

In verses 17-22, God speaks of a resultant time of great sorrow. “This brief poem has been called the most brilliant elegy in the O[ld] T[estament]. The weeping women are professional mourners hired to wail loudly at funerals. The prophet calls for them to quickly train their daughters, for there will not be enough of such women to put to rest all the slain. When death, like a robber, climbs in through the windows [verse 21], every household will be affected. We can lock our doors against disaster. But there is always some window through which calamity can creep unexpectedly. For security we must rely on the Lord (v. 23)” (*Bible Reader’s Companion*, note on verses 17-22).

Indeed, verse 23 shows that the only way we as human beings should legitimately feel good about ourselves is through the acceptance we have in God through knowing Him, understanding His character and—as the clear implication is—exhibiting His character traits in our own lives. Yet this is not truly glorying in ourselves, as we know that all of this comes only through God’s grace. That’s why Paul paraphrased the verse this way: “He who glories, let him glory in the LORD” (1 Corinthians 1:31; see verses 29-30).

To truly live by God’s character requires a spiritual change within us—a circumcision of the heart and not just of the flesh (see Deuteronomy 10:16; Jeremiah 4:4). In fact, Paul later states that mere circumcision of the flesh is counted as *uncircumcision* if it is not accompanied by obedience to God (see Romans 2:23-29). In Jeremiah 9:25-26, God says He will punish Judah along with its uncircumcised national neighbors. In an end-time context, it is of interest to know that the Muslims practice circumcision. Thus most of the men of Egypt, Edom, Ammon and Moab today are circumcised as a matter of their religion. But God looks on them all, including Judah, as uncircumcised because they are uncircumcised in heart. Interestingly, Judah here “is listed as just another nation. In fact, it is not even at the head of the list. The point of this text is similar to the concept of temple inviolability (ch. 7). Just as God would destroy even the temple (7:12-14), so He would ignore even circumcision when it was merely an outward symbol (see Deut. 10:12-22)” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on Jeremiah 9:25-26).

“Learn Not the Way of the Heathen” (Jeremiah 10)

June 14

In this chapter, God makes it very clear: “Learn not the way of the heathen...for the customs of the peoples are vain” (verses 2-3, KJV), stressing His total rejection of practices adopted from other religions even if they are intended to honor Him. For God is never honored by disobedience. We can read Deuteronomy 12:29-32 and 2 Corinthians 6:14 along with these verses.

God first points out here that pagans were “dismayed at the signs of heaven” (Jeremiah 10:2). As believers in astrology, they considered their lives to be controlled by celestial events. Today, it is no different among the huge number of people who make daily decisions based on their horoscopes. This practice is utterly condemned by God. Even if astrological forces existed—which they do not—the Almighty Creator and Ruler of the universe would have power over them.

Worse still, the sun, moon, planets and stars were actually *worshipped* by ancient nations—and their movements were used to determine times for worship. Again, this was all based on fear and

superstition. For instance, the winter solstice was observed because the sun reached its lowest zenith on that day, the shortest day of the year. It was believed that worship, fires and sacrifices were needed to encourage and boost the sun god back to his higher station. Afterward, the people celebrated the rebirth of the sun.

Indeed, the sun god was understood to have been born of his mother goddess around the time of the winter solstice—in fact, by the reckoning of various ancient cultures, on December 25. Evergreen plants and trees were used in this particular worship because they seemed to retain life through the winter months. These customs have continued down to our day in the form of the Christmas tree and decorations of holly and mistletoe.

Continuing then in Jeremiah 10, at least in the King James, New King James or Jewish Publication Society translations, the Christmas tree must surely come to mind. However, many mainstream Christian scholars, and other Bible versions, identify the objects addressed in this section as wooden poles or idols. That is certainly possible. In fact, it may even be likely if the word translated “workman” in verse 3 can only mean a skilled craftsman and if the word translated “ax” here can mean a carving tool, as some have rendered it. The exact meaning of the verse remains unclear.

Interestingly, it should be noted that the Hebrew word translated “wooden idol” in verse 8, *ets*, is normally translated “tree” in the Bible. Notice God’s instruction back in Deuteronomy 16:21: “You shall not plant for yourself any tree [*ets*], as a wooden image [*asherah*], near the altar which you build for yourself to the LORD your God.”

There are a number of references in Scripture to Asherah—understood to be an idol representation of the goddess Ashtoreth or Astarte, the mother goddess referred to in Scripture as the “queen of heaven” (mentioned in the highlights on Jeremiah 7:1-27). “From the Biblical references, it appears that Asherah is referred to in three manifestations: (1) as an image, probably a statue or figurine representing the goddess herself; (2) as a tree; and (3) as a tree trunk. The latter two are, in effect, symbols of the goddess” (Ruth Hestrin, “Understanding Asherah: Exploring Semitic Iconography,” *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Sept.–Oct. 1991, p. 50). Indeed, the phrase “under every green tree” (Deuteronomy 12:2), is used a number of times in Scripture to denote a pagan sacred place—that is, not just trees but *evergreen* trees.

Jeremiah 10 is indeed talking about the setting up of idols. But what many fail to realize in reading through the chapter is that sometimes trees themselves were set up by ancient pagans as idols. Depending on the exact meaning of the words translated workman and ax in the chapter, a carved idol or an actual tree could be meant. Both were cut from the forest, with stands fashioned to keep them fixed and upright but still able to be moved and set up anywhere (compare verses 3-5). Both, in the ancient world, were decorated with silver and gold and draped with costly fabrics (compare verses 4, 9). With tree idols, idolatrous metal ornaments were sometimes fashioned and hung from the branches—which verse 9 could be describing. Yet the verse could alternatively be a reference to metal adornments for a carved idol.

In direct disobedience to God, the Jews under Manasseh actually set up an *asherah* in honor of Baal, the son and husband of Ashtoreth (see 2 Kings 21:3). Indeed, such was used in surrounding cultures to honor the sun-god Baal and his mother on the *birthday* of the sun, December 25—which is when this abomination of Manasseh may have taken place, in imitation of neighboring societies. Even if that’s not exactly what Manasseh did, it is rather likely that such decorated trees in winter would have been part of the Jews’ worship of Baal, as in other cultures.

More amazing to consider is the fact that in the syncretistic blending of religions, Baal (“Lord”) was identified with the *true* Lord. Thus, the apostate Jews, in copying pagan worship customs, may well have set up decorated evergreen trees to worship the birthday of the true Lord—the One who later came to earth as Jesus Christ! And the Lord called their adoption of such customs to honor Him an abomination. Indeed, He still does.

While people today do not *worship* trees when they set up Christmas trees or other evergreen decorations such as holly and mistletoe, they are nevertheless using accoutrements of past idolatry to supposedly honor God. Yet the true God will have none of it. He sees it as disobedience and rebellion—and idolatrously clinging to tradition over His direct commandments. For anything that comes before the true God is an idol, whether we literally bow down to it or not. Indeed, it is even possible that *modern* Christmas trees are intended by Jeremiah’s words—particularly when we consider that this may be, as it seems to be on some level, an end-time prophecy to the “house of Israel” that speaks of God’s coming wrath on the nations and the destruction of all idolatry (compare verses 1, 10-11, 15). For in the end time, the Israelite nations are not setting up wooden Asherah

poles. But every winter, there are millions and millions of Christmas trees. And even if Christmas trees are not directly intended by the prophecy, the principle is the same.

Eventually, all false gods will be utterly destroyed—not only through the obliteration of physical idols but through removing falsehood from the minds of all people. Verses 12-13 tell of God who created all the things that people worship. The latter part of verse 13 is also found in Psalm 135:7—it is not clear which was written down first. Jeremiah 10:14-15 goes on to reveal the folly of idolatrous worship (compare Isaiah 44:14-18; Romans 1:22-31). And verse 16 of Jeremiah 10 focuses again on the true and living God—the Maker of all things. He is here referred to as the “Portion” or “share” of His people—as He supplies our every need and will one day share His very power and glory with all who will submit to Him and His righteous ways. (Verses 12-16 are repeated in Jeremiah 51:15-19.)

But the time of the exaltation of Israel is yet future. For the time being, God pronounces His judgment on the people of the land (verses 17-18, 21-22). Jeremiah is again distraught, personally identifying with the hurt of the people (verses 19-20). He pleads with God, stating that it is not possible for mankind to find the right way—rather, the people need God to direct their steps (verse 23). Standing in the place of Judah, Jeremiah does not ask God to avert punishment—as God had told him not to (see Jeremiah 7:16). Rather, He asks that God’s correction be according to His sense of righteous judgment and fair justice (10:24)—and that it rightly be poured out as well on the nations who have been enemies of God and His people (verse 25).

Supplementary Reading: “Christmas: The Untold Story,” *Holidays or Holidays: Does It Matter Which Days We Keep?*, pp. 4-9.

Finding the Book of the Law (2 Kings 22:3-20; 2 Chronicles 34:8-28)

June 15

Around 622 B.C., six years after commencing his purge of paganism from the land, King Josiah began his restoration of the temple, putting the final seal on his plan to restore the true worship of the true God. The writer of Chronicles mentions two men who made up the king’s commission who are not mentioned in Kings: Maaseiah, the city governor, and Joah, the son of Joahaz, the recorder. “Josiah’s choice of Shaphan to head the royal commission was a wise one; for his godly influence was to be felt not only in his own time but in that of his sons Ahikam (Jer 26:24), Elashah (Jer 29:3), and Gemariah (Jer 36:10, 25), and his grandson Gedaliah (Jer 39:14)” (*The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, footnote on 2 Kings 22:4).

The people were asked to contribute to the restoration and, as had happened under the rule of Joash (2 Kings 12:15), no audit was required. Josiah’s appointments proved their loyalty in carrying out God’s work.

In the process of restoring the temple, the high priest Hilkiah found the “Book of the Law.” Various ideas have been put forward about what the “book” was and why it was lost. *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* notes: “It is later called the ‘Book of the Covenant’ (v. 30) which suggests Exodus 19-24 (cf. 24:7). Yet the curses that the book contained (v. 24) suggests Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28; and the ensuing stress on the central sanctuary (2 Kings 23:8-9) implies Deuteronomy 12, etc. ‘The Book’ thus was at least the Book of Deuteronomy [that is, according to this source]. It is called ‘the covenant’ in Deut 29:1, for example. It contains the curses (Deut 28) and it alone calls for a central sanctuary and was stored at the temple usually by the side of the ark (Deut 31:25-26)” (note on 2 Chronicles 34:14). Some, however, believe the Book of the Law to refer to the entire Law or Pentateuch—that is, the five books of Moses. Oddly enough, Joshua is said to have written about the Israelites’ recommitment to God late in his life “in the Book of the Law of God” (Joshua 24:26), well after Moses had written the Pentateuch. So it is not entirely certain what all is meant.

Continuing in *Expositor’s*: ‘The Book,’ however seems to have become misplaced during the apostate administrations of the previous kings, Manasseh and Amon, under whom the ark had been moved about (2 Chronicles 35:3)” (same note).

In his book *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel*, Eugene Merrill comments: “It is not possible to enter into the debate about the precise contents of the scroll found by Hilkiah. It clearly consisted of at least Deuteronomy and likely the entire Pentateuch, for some of the policies which Josiah proceeded to implement presuppose the teachings of Moses. A more baffling question is, How could the Torah have been lost for decades, not to be recovered until 622 and even then only by accident? Liberal scholarship argues that the document in question was the Book of Deuteronomy and that it had never been lost at all. It was, rather, a piece composed [recently] by a prophetic circle interested in bringing about reform. In order to give it canonical authority it was

attributed to Moses. It may, in fact, have drawn upon authentic Mosaic tradition. In any case, it was not a product of the hand of Moses but of anonymous scribes of the seventh century. Perhaps, it is proposed, it was drafted by an underground movement in the days of Manasseh and placed in the temple in the hope that it might be found and might inspire Manasseh to seek after Yahweh. It was not discovered in his day, however, and only by chance finally surfaced in 622.

“This reconstruction disregards universal Jewish tradition about the authorship of Deuteronomy and also fails to explain how it is possible that no one in Josiah’s time, including the priests and scribes, questioned the alleged Mosaic authorship of a document about which there was, supposedly, not one shred of tradition. Moreover, those aspects of Josiah’s reformation which appear to be based uniquely on the teaching of Deuteronomy are attested to in Israel’s religious life long before Josiah. The critic must concede that the major prescriptions of Deuteronomy were known long before the discovery of the scroll in the temple. This being so, is it really incredible that Deuteronomy had long existed and had simply been suppressed until its providential discovery by Hilkiah?

“In the era of the printing press and the dissemination of the printed page in multiplied millions of copies it is difficult to appreciate the scarcity of written texts in the ancient world. But even some of the most important works composed on durable clay tablets are known only in single copies despite the recovery of some of the great libraries of the ancient past. What, then, must be said of those Old Testament writings which were penned on fragile and perishable materials such as papyrus, leather, and parchment? Furthermore, it is most unlikely that the Scriptures at any time in Old Testament Israel existed in more than a few dozen copies at the very most. Unless scrupulous care were taken to preserve them, they would be subject to the ravages of war and natural disaster or simply disintegrate with time. There is no reason, then, why a diabolical, despotic ruler such as Manasseh could not have seized virtually all the copies of the Torah and destroyed them in order to advance his own apostate ends. Somehow in the providence of God a pious priest or scribe managed to safeguard a copy in a hiding place in the temple and prayed that it might not perish until it could once more take its position as the bedrock of Israel’s life. This undoubtedly is what happened” (1987, pp. 444-445).

Realizing the newfound book was very likely of God—and that His instructions had been flouted by the nation—Josiah was grief-stricken. The tearing of clothes was an expression of extreme grief during biblical times (compare Genesis 37:29; 44:13; 1 Samuel 4:12; 2 Samuel 15:32; Matthew 26:65). But God requires more than just an outward show of grief. He wants the same tender heart that Josiah had (see Joel 2:12-14).

Josiah set up a delegation to seek God’s will. The delegation, headed by Hilkiah, went to Huldah the prophetess, a common practice in the Old Testament (see 1 Kings 22:5-12; 1 Samuel 23:2). There have been a number of prophetesses in the Bible, including Miriam (Exodus 15:20), Isaiah’s wife (Isaiah 8:1-4, 18), Deborah (Judges 4-5) and Anna (Luke 2:36-38). “There were also false women prophets, such as Noadiah in Nehemiah 6:14 and those prophetesses in Ezekiel 13:17, but they were rebuked not because they were women or because they prophesied; instead, they were rebuked because what they said was false and not a revelation from God. Women were not chattel to be ordered about and used as men pleased in the Old Testament, ranking slightly above a man’s ox or donkey! They were fellow heirs of the image of God, charged with tasks that exhibited the originality, independence, and management ability of the ‘woman of valor’ in Proverbs 31 and were called to enter holistically into sharing all of the joys and labours of life” (Walter Kaiser Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 1983, p. 207). It should, though, be pointed out that the New Testament makes it clear that women are not to be ordained as elders or preach during worship services.

The Second Quarter of Jerusalem (2 Kings 22:14) most likely refers to one of two districts referred to in Nehemiah 3:9-12 and Zephaniah 1:10. Although the location isn’t certain, it was most likely in the commercial area and indicates that Huldah and her husband lived in poor circumstances.

A puzzling question to some is why Josiah’s delegation went to a prophetess rather than the more well-known prophets of the time, such as Jeremiah and Zephaniah. It could simply be that they weren’t so well known at the time—or perhaps they were then preaching in another part of Judah. In any event, they were not needed for the task. Huldah was truly a prophetess of God. She sent two messages back, one to the man who sent them to her and the other to Josiah—a message of condemnation for Judah but of peace for the king.

Some have wondered why Josiah soon died in battle when God had promised him peace. We will take up this question when we read later of the king’s death.

Purging the Land (2 Chronicles 34:29-33; 2 Kings 23:1-20)**June 16**

“Josiah’s humble, obedient response to the book was and remains a model of how all people should respond to God’s revealed Word. Josiah listened to Scripture, allowed its words of truth to judge him, and humbly confessed that he had neglected God’s commands (34:18, 19). After learning more about its truths (34:21), he shared the Scripture with others and led them in following it. He had the book read before the entire nation and led the Israelites in recommitting their lives to the Lord (34:29-31)” (“INDepth: The Book of the Law of the Lord,” *Nelson Study Bible*, sidebar on 2 Chronicles 34).

In 2 Kings 23:3 Josiah makes his covenant standing by a pillar—or *on* a pillar, as it could also be translated. This is referred to as *his place* in 2 Chronicles 34:31. It appears to be the coronation pillar stone mentioned in the crowning of Joash (see 2 Kings 11:14).

Josiah then essentially imposed God’s law on the people. Imposition may seem harsh, but we read in these passages that 18 years after Josiah came to the throne, there were still plenty of pagan traditions and idolatrous practices throughout Judah (2 Kings 23:4-20). This chapter highlights again how far the nation had sunk.

According to *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, although the Hebrew word translated “perverted persons” in verse 7 “denotes the ‘male shrine prostitutes,’ probably the term is used generically for prostitutes of both sexes who were employed in the heinous Canaanite fertility rites” (footnote on verse 7). Even though God forbade the practice (Deuteronomy 23:17) and reforming kings abolished it, it always came back.

The references in 2 Kings 23:8 to Geba (northern Judah) and Beersheba (southern Judah) show that high places (a generic term for worship places, not necessarily elevated) had to be rooted out everywhere. Josiah then takes steps to root out the most heinous remains of pagan worship, defiling Tophet, the place of child sacrifice in the Valley of Hinnom, and removing the idolatrous objects from God’s temple: “Apparently, the references in [2 Kings 23:11-12] are to various ceremonies involved in the worship of the sun, moon, and stars. Chariots and horses played a big part in the worship of the sun, probably because of the idea that the sun god drives across the sky in his chariot. In the literature of other nations, the sun god is pictured riding a winged chariot. Here, the horses and chariots mentioned were probably large statues, though they may have been miniature figurines used in astral worship. Rooftop shrines like those described in verse 12 were also related to this same pagan cult, which was introduced by King Ahaz” (Russell Dilday, *Mastering the Old Testament*, 1987, Vol. 9, p. 484). Indeed, in excavations “small horses with solar disks on their foreheads have been found both at Jerusalem and Hazor” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verse 11).

Josiah started his reforms by defiling the cult places of worship and filling them with human bones (verses 14-15). Then he carried out what he had been prophesied to do by name long before in burning human bones on the pagan altar at Bethel, defiling it forever (verses 16-18; see 1 Kings 13:1-3). And he did likewise with the pagan altars throughout the land. It should be noted that this was done throughout even Samaria (2 Kings 23:19), the territory of the northern kingdom, which was recently occupied—starting about two years before the current major purge—by a major contingent of Scythians, that is, Israelites.

Josiah’s Passover (2 Chronicles 35:1-19; 2 Kings 23:21-25)**June 17**

Josiah wasn’t just content to remove all the paganism. He purged spiritual “leaven” from the land in preparation of the Passover and Days of Unleavened Bread. For his next reform was to reintroduce God’s sacred festivals. These begin with the Passover on the 14th day of the first month of the Hebrew calendar (March–April on the modern Western calendar).

Josiah showed his love for his people by his generosity, providing animals for the sacrifices and offerings from his own herds and flocks. This was a magnificent celebration. Some commentators have called the numbers a gross exaggeration, yet when we consider the scope of the celebration, that there had never been a Passover like it in Israel or Judah, the number is realistic. Even so, it was still far short of the number of animals used by Solomon at the dedication of the temple (see 1 Kings 8:63). The sheep and goats were used for the Passover lambs. The cattle would have been used for peace offerings and most likely for general use through the Feast of Unleavened Bread that followed the Passover for a further seven days.

Again it is made clear that the Passover was kept by “all Judah and Israel who were present.” The northern kingdom had been taken captive a century prior. But this makes sense when we realize that a sizable group of Israelites reoccupied the northern territories at this time, known to history as the Scythians. Perhaps many of them responded to the preaching of Jeremiah in Jeremiah

3—wherein God instructed them to return—and to the tremendous leadership and example of King Josiah.

To learn more about the Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and all of God's festivals, please download or send for our free booklet, *God's Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*.

Introduction to Nahum (Nahum 1)

June 18

Little is known of the prophet Nahum, whose message concerns the coming destruction of Nineveh, capital of the Assyrian Empire. The time of his prophecy is ascertained from two key facts. The fall of the Egyptian city of Thebes (No Amon), which occurred in 663 B.C., is mentioned as a past event (3:8). And the fall of Nineveh, which occurred in 612 B.C., was yet future. So Nahum must have written between these dates.

The prophet is called an Elkoshite (1:1), apparently after a native city named Elkosh, the location of which is uncertain. Some maintain that, "since Nahum wrote considerably after the destruction of Israel in 722 B.C., we may assume that Elkosh was in Judah" (*Nelson Study Bible*, introductory notes on Nahum). And Nahum does specifically address Judah in the prophecy (verse 15). Others, however, point out: "His name is in the word 'Capernaum' [modern Kfar Nahum], which means 'village of Nahum.' This may indicate that he was a resident, or founder, of Capernaum.... Elkosh, his birthplace, was probably nearby" (*Halley's Bible Handbook*, 1965, "Nahum"). This at first glance seems odd since Capernaum was located on the north coast of the Sea of Galilee, in the land of the former northern kingdom of Israel. But a period of residence in Capernaum could actually make sense if Nahum preached during the time of Josiah, when Israelites known as Scythians reoccupied the area of the northern kingdom for a decade or so prior to Assyria's fall. Perhaps Nahum lived for a while in the area of Capernaum, preaching to these Israelites. *The Nelson Study Bible* suggests that his book was written "under the reform of Josiah in 622 B.C." And that would fit the time frame of Scythian occupation.

He could not have been born nearby, however, as that would have been too long before the Scythian occupation. So Elkosh may have been in Judah even if Nahum later lived in Capernaum. *Smith's Bible Dictionary*, however, places Elkosh much farther away: "This place is located at the modern *Alkush*, a village on the east bank of the Tigris," the area of ancient Assyria ("Elkosh"). *Halley's Bible Handbook* comments on this, "There is said to have been an Elkosh on the Tigris, 20 miles north of Nineveh, and that Nahum may have been among the Israelite captives." Surprisingly, this is quite possible. Perhaps Nahum was actually among the Scythians who came back to the Promised Land from northern Mesopotamia. He may have given witness to Nineveh itself of its coming destruction before later proclaiming these words to Judah. However, it should be pointed out that there is no indication that Nahum's words were ever actually communicated to the ancient Assyrians.

In any case, we can be confident that these words of Nahum were communicated to the people of Judah—for it is the Jews who preserved his prophecy. The name Nahum means "Comfort," and his words—foretelling the destruction of Israel and Judah's terrible enemy—were certainly of great comfort. Assyria, portrayed as a den of ravaging lions feeding on the blood of the nations, was brutal beyond imagination (2:11-13). Though Nineveh had temporarily repented at Jonah's preaching around 150 years before and had been spared, the capital city of Assyria is now marked for destruction. And God will bring infinitely more power and finality than Assyria had brought upon her enemies.

We should not miss the duality of this warning. There are clear indications that it is also an end-time prophecy. First is the mention of the "day of trouble" (1:7), which signifies the future Day of the Lord. Then there's the fact that God's people will be afflicted no more (verse 12), the wicked enemy never again allowed to pass through their land (verse 15)—which has not been true of the Jewish people in the more than 2,600 years since the fall of ancient Nineveh. And finally, the description of Nineveh as the great harlot of sorceries (3:4) ties it directly to other prophecies of end-time Babylon (see Isaiah 47; Revelation 17-18). At the end, modern Assyria will once again arise as the foe of Israel (see Isaiah 10:5-6). As explained in the Bible Reading Program highlights on Isaiah 10, it is the people of Central Europe who are, in large part, descended from the ancient Assyrians. Nineveh may represent the seat of power of a future Central European nation or of the empire this people will come to dominate. For modern Assyria will be the foremost nation of the coming Beast power, end-time Babylon, which will once again enslave Israel and then fight against

Christ at His second coming (see Revelation 13; 17; 18). And once again she will be brought to utter destruction!

Thus, the book of Nahum is a book of stern warning—to the peoples of Central Europe yes, but in a larger sense to the entire European empire they will be part of and, in an even larger sense still, to all who will oppose God and His people. However, it is a book of blessing and great comfort to all who will stand with God and put their trust in Him (Nahum 1:7)—including any of Assyrian descent who will forsake the ways of sin and pursue God’s Kingdom and righteousness. Ultimately, under the rule of Christ, the Assyrian nation will repent and serve God alongside the Israelites (Isaiah 19:23-25). But dark times will precede this wonderful future.

The Lord Avenges His People (Nahum 1)

June 18 Cont’d

The book opens with a portrait of God as an avenger of His people. The term is used in different forms three times in verse 2. He is further described as jealous and furious. The fact that He is “slow to anger” in verse 3 may be a reminder of Jonah’s visit to Nineveh long before, when God stayed His hand in response to the citizens’ repentance. But now they had devolved into their former conduct. In an end-time setting, we should remember that the peoples of Central Europe and other Europeans have been exposed to Scripture for centuries—with all of its godly instructions and warnings against disobedience such as Jonah gave—and yet a regime to rival the Third Reich is going to eventually arise again among them.

God’s all-consuming power is witnessed by His control over all elements of the earth (verses 3-6)—a common formula in the Minor Prophets. Yet His fierce anger against His enemies is contrasted with His goodness toward those who trust in Him (verse 7). If we remain faithful, we will be preserved through the day of trouble—be it any time of great difficulty or the worst time of trouble ever seen, which is yet to come upon the earth.

In verse 8, the end of Nineveh comes with an overflowing flood. “It is believed that the invaders of Nineveh entered the city through its flooded waterways” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verse 8). This may well be as the city was guarded by walls 100 feet high. And it seems to be supported by Nahum 2:6. “Archaeologists have found evidence of flood debris that may be associated with the destruction of the city” (note on 2:6). Still, it should be noted that an overwhelming flood can simply signify an invading enemy army in Scripture (see Isaiah 59:19; Jeremiah 46:7-8; 47:2; Psalm 18:16-17; 69:1-2).

In Nahum 1:9-11, the prophet directly addresses Nineveh, seen as conspiring and plotting against God. This could apply in some sense to Assyria’s planned invasion of Jerusalem in the days of Hezekiah—but that was perhaps 80 years before Nahum wrote. Since this doesn’t appear to refer to anything that transpired in Nahum’s own day, it seems to make more sense to view this in an end-time context—when the peoples of Central Europe, as part of the final Beast power, will destroy the modern Israelite nations and then oppose Christ at His return (see our free booklet *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy*). The “wicked counselor” of verse 11 could be the end-time Beast dictator or his accomplice, the false prophet—or perhaps even Satan the Devil, the dragon who empowers their evil system (see Revelation 16:13-14 and our free booklet *The Book of Revelation Unveiled*).

Verses 12-13 of Nahum 1 contain a message to God’s people. Though Assyria feels safe, she will be utterly cut off. No more will God afflict His people with this destructive empire. The bursting of bonds shows that His people will be enslaved by this empire in the last days (compare Jeremiah 30:8). Thankfully, God will free them—and free them for good.

In Nahum 1:14, the prophet proclaims to Nineveh the direct warning of God. Its idolatrous religion will be brought to an end. In ancient times, this was centered on the worship of the forefather of the Assyrians, Asshur (see Genesis 10:22; “Assyria, Asshur,” *Smith’s Bible Dictionary*). Yet he was, it appears, in many respects confused with the ancient founder of Nineveh and Babylon, Nimrod (see Genesis 10:8-12). And the worship of Nimrod has actually persisted to the present day in what the book of Revelation calls “Mystery Babylon,” a great false religion masquerading as Christianity that dominates the world. It will come to an end with the return of Christ.

God also states that Nineveh will be buried. Concerning ancient Nineveh, “this prophecy came true literally—the city was destroyed so completely that its very existence was questioned until its discovery by archaeologists in the nineteenth century ([Nahum] 3:13-15)” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on 1:14). “For all its might, Nineveh fell quickly into ruin, leaving no trace but a mound which is known today as Tell Kuyunjik, ‘the mound of many sheep’” (*Eerdmans Handbook to the Bible*, note

on Nahum 3). Yet that was but a forerunner of the destruction that will ultimately come on the end-time Assyro-Babylonian superpower centered in Europe.

In verse 15 of chapter 1, Nahum repeats a prophecy of Isaiah (see Isaiah 52:7). It applies to God's servants proclaiming His gospel (meaning "good news"). First and foremost it is a prophecy of the coming of Jesus Christ, who "came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God" (Mark 1:14). This may even refer here to Christ's *second* coming—when He announces to the world His intention to bring peace (see Zechariah 9:10) and then brings world peace at last (following a period of terrible rebellion against Him at the end). "Behold...!" the message says here in Nahum and in Isaiah. And indeed, "every eye will see Him" (Revelation 1:7).

Also in Nahum 1:15, the Jews are told to keep their appointed feasts. Indeed, the feasts the Jews observe are *God's* feasts (see Leviticus 23)—and God is telling them to keep these feasts in an end-time context, as frankly all of mankind should. Yet, before the end, the Jews will apparently be *forbidden* to observe God's festivals by the invading European power—a repeat of what occurred when Syrian ruler Antiochus Epiphanes took over the land in the second century B.C. (see "Just What Is the Abomination of Desolation?," *The Good News*, Jan.–Feb. 2002, pp. 8-9, 24). But God will remove the end-time invader, enabling the Jews to freely observe His festivals again. Indeed, that is the point of this wonderful verse of Nahum.

"Woe to the Bloody City!" (Nahum 2–3)

June 19

"Man the fort!" God sarcastically says to Nineveh in verse 1 of chapter 2—as if they could defend themselves against His judgment. It is not clear who is meant in verse 1 by "he who scatters" or "he that dasheth in pieces" (KJV). It could be a reference to God Himself. The returning Jesus Christ at the end time will dash His enemies in pieces (Revelation 2:26-28). Or it could refer to other forces God brings against Assyria. Indeed, the latter seems to be supported somewhat by Nahum 2:2, as we will see.

The King James Version translators rendered verse 2 to say that God "hath turned away" the excellence of Jacob—perhaps seeing this from the emptied and ruined state of Israel at the end of the verse. Yet many other versions, including the New King James and Jewish Tanakh, translate this to say God "will restore" the excellence of Jacob. In this picture, the emptiers (the Assyrians) have emptied and ruined the Israelites. But God will restore them—and He restores "Jacob" (the rejected, physical Israelites) to be like "Israel" (His chosen covenant people).

Thus, verses 1 and 2 appear to be telling Nineveh to defend itself against a restored Israel. It is fascinating to consider that ancient Nineveh was overthrown by a coalition of Chaldean Babylonians, Medes *and* Scythians—the latter being Israelites taken into captivity more than a century earlier by the Assyrians (see our free booklet *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy*). This may have been a partial fulfillment of the prophecy. But the ancient Scythians did not represent a truly restored Israel. This would seem to apply more to the latter days. In the future, the European Beast power is going to devastate the countries of modern Israel and empty them of most of their people. But around the time of Christ's return, God will empower a resurgence of His people—and they will be used to help bring down the end-time Beast power, to "break [Babylon] in pieces" (see Jeremiah 51:19-24; compare Isaiah 41:11-16; Micah 4:13; Zechariah 12:6; 14:14). Furthermore, consider that *spiritual* Israel—the Church of God—will be glorified with divine power at this time and will accompany Jesus Christ as He confronts His enemies. Indeed, the dashing to pieces of enemies will be put in their power (see again Revelation 2:26-28).

Verses 3-4 of Nahum 2 are images of warfare—perhaps even modern warfare, as chariots with flaming torches that run like lightning could signify tanks and the like. In verse 3, the phrase "the spears are brandished" is literally "the fir trees shall be terribly shaken" (KJV).

Verse 6 says the gates of the rivers are opened, as mentioned in the previous reading. This would seem to tie back to 1:8, whether it is a literal flood or a flood of armies. In either case, the result is the same: "The palace is dissolved." Historian Will Durant writes: "Sennacherib [who came against Judah in the days of Hezekiah] raised at Nineveh a royal mansion called 'The Incomparable,' surpassing in size all other palaces of antiquity" (*The Story of Civilization*, Vol. 1: *Our Oriental Heritage*, 1963 ed., p. 282). Through the reign of Sennacherib's son Esarhaddon, the palace had deteriorated so much that, when the next emperor, Ashurbanipal—the last great ancient Assyrian emperor—came to power, he extravagantly rebuilt it (pp. 282-283). But the great palace was destroyed when Nineveh was invaded. Likewise, in the end time, the palace of the final dictator of the Beast power will be "dissolved."

Nahum 2:7 in the New King James Version begins with the words “It is decreed.” But this is an attempt to translate a word of uncertain meaning, *Huzzab*—often perceived as a name. The immediate mention of “she...and her maidservants” would seem to support this. *Huzzab* comes from a root meaning “stand”—thus the idea of “establish” or “decree.” But some see it as one who “stood by the king”—implying a queen (*Jamieson, Fausset & Brown’s Commentary*, note on 2:7). This may well be related to the harlot of chapter 3, which is almost certainly to be equated with Babylon the Great, the harlot who sits as queen over the nations (see Isaiah 47; Revelation 17–18), the great ruling false church. She, the great captor, will herself be led away captive.

In Nahum 2:8, Nineveh’s soldiers flee away in spite of the efforts of military leaders to rally them. Nineveh possesses enormous wealth from its plunder of other nations and the invaders are urged to take the spoil of victory (verse 9). Amazingly, the city is finally emptied (verse 10). The powerful ravenous beast is itself devoured because God has brought stronger forces against her (verses 10-13). (The symbolism of lions is appropriate for Assyria here, as its ancient emperors often compared themselves to lions in power.)

Chapter 3 recaps the whole scene in a “woe oracle,” pronounced over those doomed by God. Nineveh is described as a bloody city, constantly at war, deceitful in foreign policy and plundering her neighbors (verses 1-3). We have seen the like in the Third Reich. Yet that was but a forerunner of the end-time European empire yet to appear on the world scene. But as this prophecy shows, in the end Assyria (ancient and future) will itself be bloodied and plundered.

Verse 4 describes the “seductive harlot, the mistress of sorceries”—again, clearly a reference to end-time Babylon, dominated by the Babylonian mystery religion, as described in Isaiah 47 and Revelation 17–18. Nineveh would in this sense seem to represent the spiritual capital of the coming European empire—Rome—or at least the great religion centered there. In Isaiah 47 God tells this “Lady of Kingdoms” (verse 5) that she will be punished, mentioning “the multitude of your sorceries” and “the great abundance of your enchantments” (verse 9). In Nahum 3:4 she is said to have sold entire nations. This has happened and will happen in a spiritual sense—as this system has given peoples over to the ruler of this world and His evil doctrines for her increased power and wealth. But it has also happened literally, as the Roman bishops of the Middle Ages gave peoples over to various despots to ensure the dominions of the church. There will also be a literal fulfillment when the end-time harlot participates in the selling of conquered peoples prior to Christ’s return (Revelation 18:9-13). For her abominations God will cause her to be shamed, defiled and destroyed (Nahum 3:5-7; see Revelation 17:16).

In Nahum 3:8, God refers to No-Amon—the city of Thebes in Egypt. Thebes had itself sat on a great river, the mighty Nile. It had been the seat of many pharaohs and a major center of religious worship and sprawling temples. Her neighbors were allied with her, yet she fell in ignominy to the Assyrians in 663 B.C., her children slaughtered and her mighty ones taken captive (verses 9-10). Here, God announces that Nineveh will fare just as badly before His coming onslaught. Nineveh will be taken as easily as ripe figs are shaken from a tree. The soldiers of Assyria will be as drunken or as women in the coming battle and her fortresses useless (verses 11-13). Her leaders will disappear when the need for them is greatest (verse 17). They will sleep in the dust and be forgotten (verse 18). The peoples who are left will at last rejoice—relieved at the removal of the empire’s continual oppression and harsh treatment of them (verse 19). All this surely came to pass in 612 B.C. as a type of what is yet to occur in the last days.

Notice historian Will Durant’s account of what happened to ancient Nineveh: “Ashurbanipal died in 626 B.C. Fourteen years later an army of Babylonians under Nabopolassar united with an army of Medes under Cyaxares and a horde of Scythians from the Caucasus, and with amazing ease and swiftness captured the citadels of the north. Nineveh was laid waste as ruthlessly and completely as her kings had once ravaged Susa and Babylon; the city was put to the torch, the population was slaughtered or enslaved, and the palace so recently built by Ashurbanipal was sacked and destroyed. At one blow Assyria disappeared from history. Nothing remained of her except certain tactics and weapons of war, certain voluted capitals of semi-‘Ionic’ columns, and certain methods of provincial administration that passed down to Persia, Macedon and Rome. The Near East remembered her for a while as a merciless unifier of a dozen lesser states; and the Jews recalled Nineveh vengefully as ‘the bloody city, full of lies and robbery.’ In a little while all but the mightiest of the Great Kings were forgotten, and all their royal palaces were in ruins under the drifting sands. Two hundred years after its capture, Xenophon’s Ten Thousand marched over the mounds that had been Nineveh, and never suspected that these were the site of the ancient metropolis that had ruled half the world. Not a stone

remained visible of all the temples with which Assyria's pious warriors had sought to beautify their greatest capital. Even Ashur, the everlasting god, was dead" (pp. 283-284).

Let this serve as a warning to the coming Europe superpower soon to dominate the globe—as the book of Nahum is surely meant to be.

The Stunning Death of Judah's Most Righteous King

(2 Kings 23:26-37; 2 Chronicles 35:20–36:5; Jeremiah 22:1-23)

June 20

Despite the incredible reforms under Josiah, the changes for the people were only superficial and God knew it would not be long before they were openly rebelling against Him again. They had shown their true colors under the wicked reigns of Manasseh and Amon—and inside they were really no different. So God pronounces calamity on Judah. But remember that He had promised before that this calamity would not come until after Josiah's death (2 Kings 22:16-20). And eventually, his death came—13 years after his great Passover, and three years after the fall of Nineveh.

"Pharaoh Necho [II] (609-594 B.C.) was the recently crowned king of Egypt's twenty-sixth dynasty. During the long years of Josiah's reign (640-609 B.C.), Assyrian power had steadily crumbled until, as Nahum had predicted, Nineveh itself had fallen (612 B.C.) to a coalition of Chaldeans, Medes, and others. The surviving Assyrian forces had regrouped at Haran. Because Egypt was a long-standing ally of Assyria [since its integration into the empire several decades earlier], Necho journeyed northward to help the beleaguered Assyrians" (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on 2 Kings 23:29-30). The King James Version incorrectly has Necho marching *against* the Assyrians.

"Pharaoh Necho turned up in Judah at the head of a more impressive-looking Egyptian army than had been fielded in centuries. Taking advantage of Assyrian decline, Necho's father Psammetichus I [who had been appointed pharaoh by Assyrian emperor Ashurbanipal] had greatly revived his country's clout as a superpower" (Ian Wilson, *The Bible Is History*, 1999, p. 174). "Emboldened by his success... Psammetichus refused to continue payment of tribute to Assyria...though Egypt remained more or less an ally of Assyria until his death and even beyond" (Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, p. 439). Perhaps Necho at this later time was not so much interested in restoring Assyria as he was in keeping a balance among the Mesopotamian powers. If Assyria were utterly eliminated, Babylon would fill the void as an unchecked power, creating major problems for Egypt. In any event, Necho advanced up the coastal plain, through Philistine territory. But this area was now under the control of Judah's king, Josiah.

"A Hebrew letter written in his time has been found at 'Mesad Hashavyahu,' a fortress built on the coast between Jabneh and Ashdod. According to the letter, an Israelite governor resided at the fort; thus, Josiah ruled also over this area, expanding his kingdom at the expense of the Philistine cities" (Yohanan Aharoni and Michael Avi-Yonah, *The Macmillan Bible Atlas*, 1977, p. 102). Indeed, remember that, apparently with earlier help from the Scythians, Josiah's "purification of worship was carried out not only in Jerusalem and Judah, but also 'in the cities of Manasseh and Ephraim and Simeon, even unto Naphtali...throughout the land of Israel' (2 Chron. 34:6-7). Thus, we may assume that Josiah again ruled in all these areas and annexed the Assyrian provinces which had been founded in the territory of the kingdom of Israel: Samaria, Megiddo, and possibly also Gilead. This is confirmed by the fact that he fought at Megiddo" (p. 102).

"When Pharaoh Neco passed through Judah on his way to fight the Babylonians at Carchemish, Josiah marched out to meet him in battle. It is far from clear why he did so. Most likely is the suggestion that he wanted to assure Judah's independence among the nations. Had he permitted the Egyptians to pass through, he could have been considered to be a collaborator against Babylon" ("Josiah," Paul Gardner, editor, *The Complete Who's Who in the Bible*, 1995, p. 384). There is no doubt that Josiah would not have wanted anyone helping Assyria back into power. And it is possible that Judah still maintained a residual alliance with Babylon since the days of Hezekiah. Then again, perhaps Josiah simply did what any ruler would do when an uninvited foreign army comes marching through your land—put a stop to it to make sure your borders are respected.

"Neco was disturbed at Josiah's refusal [to back off]. He sent a message with a religious overtone. He argued that God had told him to move quickly, that Josiah's hostile acts were a threat to the accomplishment of God's will, and that God would punish him for it" (p. 384). Now God, it is true, did at times speak to pagan rulers about a course of action He wanted them to take (see Genesis 20:6; 41:25; Daniel 2:28). Yet ancient monarchs often made such claims falsely. And Josiah really had no reason to believe God had actually spoken to the Egyptian pharaoh. He assumed it was a lie—as most of us probably would were we in his shoes.

So what did Josiah do wrong? He is often accused of “meddling in someone else’s affairs.” But it’s not really someone else’s affair when a foreign army is marching through your country and you’re the king. Perhaps, then, the only obvious thing Josiah can be faulted for is a failure to ask God what to do. It would seem that he could have asked the priests to consult the Urim and Thummim. Or he could have sought out a prophet. However, it may be that this would have taken time Josiah did not think he could afford in the situation—though this would be improper reasoning since God’s will is paramount. Perhaps Josiah assumed that it was always God’s will for the king to defend the nation’s borders. We just don’t know. In any case, God *had* communicated a message to Necho or in some way impressed on his mind the need to act as he did (see 2 Chronicles 35:22). And Josiah was mortally wounded.

But Josiah did not die on the battlefield. He died in Jerusalem and was buried there with full honors. Perhaps this was because God had promised, “Surely...I will gather you to your fathers, and you shall be gathered to your grave in peace...” (2 Kings 22:20). And indeed, he died in peace though he had been wounded in battle.

With Josiah’s resistance, Pharaoh Necho was sufficiently delayed so that Haran was lost to the Assyrians. This is rather interesting to contemplate. God had directed Necho to make haste. And if he had made it to Haran in time, the Assyrians would presumably have held out against the Babylonians. Yet was this truly God’s will? More poignantly, did Josiah actually cause God’s will to be thwarted? Certainly not! It makes far more sense to realize that it was actually God’s intent that Necho *not* make it on time. Why then did He tell Necho to make haste? Perhaps it was to create the very situation that brought about the death of Josiah—and consequently placed Judah under Egyptian rule (for Necho now ruled all the territory up to the Euphrates).

Consider what a righteous ruler Josiah was. And yet God allowed Him to be killed at the age of 39. In Isaiah 57:1, God said: “The righteous perishes, and no man takes it to heart; merciful men are taken away, while no one considers that the righteous is taken away from evil. He shall enter into peace; they shall rest in their beds, each one walking in his uprightness.” Perhaps this, more than anything, is why Josiah died when he did. It was time for Judah to be punished—and Josiah had to be taken out of the way first. Rather than our being overly critical of a final mistake on his part, especially lacking information to properly judge exactly what happened, we would do better to focus on the tremendous, positive example of this great ruler, as Jeremiah did (Jeremiah 22:15-16). Indeed, Jeremiah led the nation in a lament—the words of which have not been preserved—over losing the most righteous king Judah ever had (2 Chronicles 35:25; see 2 Kings 23:25).

“The Wind Shall Eat Up All Your Rulers”

(2 Kings 23:26-37; 2 Chronicles 35:20–36:5; Jeremiah 22:1-23)

June 20 Cont’d

In the wake of Josiah’s death, Josiah’s son Jehoahaz was made king by “the people of the land” (2 Chronicles 36:1). This “was a technical term that referred to a body of leaders such as a council of elders or a kind of informal parliament (see 33:25). This group acted in a time of crisis, such as the death of Josiah in battle [actually, *from* battle]. His loss was made worse by the fact that he had at least four sons who could succeed him. Josiah [probably not expecting to die for many years] may not have made his choice of successor clear” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on 36:1).

“Jehoahaz (called Shallum in Jer. 22:11) was Josiah’s third son (see [2 Kings] 24:18; 1 Chr. 3:15). The name Jehoahaz means ‘The Lord Has Grasped.’ This is the same name as the king of Israel, the son of Jehu (10:35). Johanan, Josiah’s first son, apparently had died and Eliakim (or Jehoiakim), the second son, was bypassed. A fourth son, Mattaniah (or Zedekiah), would eventually ascend to the throne and rule as Judah’s last king (598-586 B.C.)” (note on 2 Kings 23:31). Sadly, the reforms of Josiah’s magnificent reign didn’t last. Jehoahaz turned out to be evil like Josiah’s predecessors. But he only reigned three months.

“Jehoahaz’s reign of three months came to an end with the return of Pharaoh Necho from Haran. Jehoahaz was summoned to Riblah, Necho’s headquarters in Syria. Then he was led away to die in Egypt. His brother Eliakim was installed on the throne with his name changed to Jehoiakim. Judah thus became no more than a vassal of Egypt. The curse for Judah’s disobedience was about to fall (see Deut. 28:64-68)” (note on 2 Kings 23:31). Necho, it appears, did not accept Judah’s appointment of its own king. He wanted it made clear that no one would now reign in Judah except by *his* appointment. The change of Eliakim’s name to Jehoiakim also demonstrated the pharaoh’s overlordship. Regrettably, Jehoiakim, like his brother, did not follow in Josiah’s ways but continued in the evil ways of most of Judah’s rulers.

Jeremiah addresses these events and prophesies the outcome in most of Jeremiah 22. In 2 Chronicles 35:25, the prophet leads the nation in a lament. Jewish custom, which derives from biblical times, is a week of intense grief as the first part of a month of official mourning (for close family members a lesser form of mourning might continue for a year). Jeremiah 22:10 shows that more than three months have passed since Josiah's death. Jeremiah says to no longer weep for him—but to instead weep for his successor Shallum (Jehoahaz), who has been taken away to Egypt, never to return (verses 10-12).

Jeremiah then launches into a scathing prophecy against Jehoiakim, addressing him first in the third person (verses 13-14), then as “you” (verses 15-17) and finally by name (verse 18). Jeremiah's description speaks for itself. Like so many people in power, Jehoiakim looked after his own interests at the expense of his subjects, building a great palace while extorting from his subjects to pay tribute to Egypt. This was in direct violation of God's law (Leviticus 19:13).

Jeremiah uses Jehoiakim's father Josiah as an example of true godly leadership—doing what is right and just, defending the cause of the poor and needy. He explains that this is what it means to really “know God” (see verse 16). Indeed, Josiah did this and lived well—without having to oppress people (verse 15). Having a huge mansion might look impressive, but it doesn't equate with godliness and true leadership. Jehoiakim suffered from a malady experienced by many people in power—covetousness (verse 17). And, as Jethro advised Moses more than 800 years earlier, covetous people make for poor leaders (Exodus 18:21). Indeed, this led to still worse sins.

The first part of Jeremiah 22 appears to also relate to the reign of Jehoiakim, as there is no break between verses 9 and 10. It further illustrates the decline in justice and righteousness that followed Josiah's reign. God says to the king, “You are Gilead to Me, the head of Lebanon...” (verse 6). These places “were sources for timber for the royal palaces. These luxurious residences would be reduced to deserted wilderness and set ablaze if the kings disobeyed the covenant” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verses 6-7). And sadly Jehoiakim and the other kings following Josiah did just that. Verses 8-9 foretell the right conclusion other nations will eventually reach about Jerusalem's destruction, just as Moses had warned in Deuteronomy 29:24-28.

Jeremiah also pronounces judgment on Jehoiakim personally. Some of this may have been added later, following Jehoiakim's attempt to destroy Jeremiah's recorded prophecies (see Jeremiah 36:27-32, especially verse 32). There will be no national lament or proper burial for Jehoiakim (Jeremiah 22:18-19; compare 36:30). The people of Judah will instead lament their worsening circumstances. God tells them to go cry in Lebanon to the north, in Bashan to the northeast and in Abarim in the southeast (Jeremiah 22:20)—perhaps indicating the length over which Josiah had extended his rule. The nation's “lovers” or allies will themselves be carried away when destruction comes and will thus provide no help (verses 20-22). That destruction, unstated here, will come from Babylon. (Babylon is mentioned in verse 25, but that part of chapter 22 is beyond our current reading, as it was evidently given later, during the reign of Jehoiakim's son Jeconiah.) In verse 23, the “inhabitants of Lebanon, making your nest in the cedars,” apparently refers not to Lebanon of the north but, as verses 6-7 indicate, to Jerusalem, “(Isa. 37:24; Jer. 22:23; Ezek. 17:3, 12; for Lebanon's cedars were used in building the temple and houses of Jerusalem; and its beauty made it a fit type of the metropolis)” (*Jamieson, Fausset & Brown's Commentary*, note on Habakkuk 2:17). The national armory from Solomon's time was actually called “the House of the Forest of Lebanon” (see 1 Kings 7:2; 10:16-17; Isaiah 22:8). And the wealthy of Judah built cedar mansions aloof from the common people to ensure protection (compare Habakkuk 2:9). Yet no reliance on the temple, palace, armory or rich neighborhoods would save the people of Judah from what was coming. The winds of adversity and invasion would eat up their rulers and bring them to shame for their wickedness (Jeremiah 22:22).

Historian Walter Kaiser Jr. sums up this period of Judah's history: “The drama of the final years of Judah and the Davidic line of kings involved the three major international powers of the day: Assyria, Babylon, and Egypt. Of course, there were minor roles given to the Cimmerians, the Scythians, Medes, and other people groups who longed to fill the vacuum as Assyria began to show signs of weakening. Three of the final four decades of the seventh century (640-609 B.C.) provided a glimmer of hope and the prospect of revival of a restored and even a reunited nation as a result of Josiah's reform in 621 B.C. Alas, however, the maelstrom of international unrest proved too much for the last five Davidic kings of Judah in the last decade of the seventh century and the first decade and a half of the sixth century (600-587 B.C.). Two of the last five Davidic kings met their deaths as a direct result of involvement in these international struggles, while the other three died in exile” (*A History of Israel*, 1998, p. 386).

The Broken Covenant (Jeremiah 11:1-17)**June 21**

Jeremiah 11 is a clear break from preceding chapters in the book. The section hearkens to God's covenant with His people—which included blessings for obedience to God's law and curses for disobedience. During Josiah's reign, the nation had renewed its covenant relationship with God after the Book of the Law was found. But the recommitment of the people was merely outward as their return to evil ways following Josiah's death made clear. "To a forgetful people the prophet says that the ancient stipulations still hold force, including the curses on the unfaithful. A date in the reign of Jehoiakim is appropriate for this discourse. Apparently Jeremiah was residing in, or frequenting, his native Anathoth, for he is made aware of a plot against him [there] (11:18-21)" (*The New Bible Commentary: Revised*, 1976, note on 11:1–12:17).

Because of Judah's violation of the covenant, God pronounces the curse on disobedience called for in the covenant (verse 3). Verse 5 ends with Jeremiah responding, "So be it"—or, in Hebrew, *Amen*, which was the response the people were to give to the proclamation of the curses according to Deuteronomy 27:15-26, showing concurrence with God's justice.

All the towns of Judah as well as the city of Jerusalem were to hear God's case against Judah (Jeremiah 11:6). In verses 9-10, God describes the return of the people to their evil and idolatrous ways following Josiah's death as an intentional plot—a planned rebellion to throw off the yoke Josiah had put on them. Just as the house of Israel had broken God's covenant, so had Judah (verse 10).

Thus, God decreed that certain calamity was coming (verse 11). The many gods of the people wouldn't save them (verse 12). God interjects with scorn over the fact that Judah had as many gods as they had towns (verse 13)—perhaps meaning that each town had its own god. Sadly, this statement is a repeat of the one made in Jeremiah 2:28, showing that the people had not changed at all since the time prior to Josiah's reformation. Furthermore, God adds the fact that they had as many shrines to Baal as they had streets! So He repeats his earlier directive that Jeremiah not pray for them (11:14; see 7:16).

In verse 15 of chapter 11, "My beloved" refers to "Judah, who remains the object of Yahweh's love although she must leave His house for her hypocrisy" (*New Bible Commentary*, note on verses 15-16). The mention of "holy flesh" in verse 15 is unclear in the New King James Version. Most other translations render this as meaning sacred offerings. For example, the New International Version has, "Can consecrated meat avert your punishment?" "The reference is to sacrifices offered at the temple. It is hypocritical as well as futile to hurry to church after sinning and then return eagerly to your sins" (*Bible Reader's Companion*, note on verse 15).

God looked on His beloved Bride—His people Israel, of whom Judah was now the remnant—as a beautiful and fruitful green olive tree (as King David was inspired to describe himself in Psalm 52:8). Olive oil represented richness and blessing (Psalm 23:5; 104:15). But here the tree is pictured with broken and burning branches. These branches, representing individual sinning Israelites, were to be broken off. Paul later uses this imagery in Romans 11.

Jeremiah 11:18–12:6, the first part of our next reading, appears to be an interjection, as 12:7 seems to pick up from 11:17.

Plot to Kill Jeremiah; Message for Neighboring Lands (Jeremiah 11:18–12:17) June 22

Jeremiah 11 concludes with a plot against the prophet's life. Those behind it wanted to destroy "the tree with its fruit" (verse 19)—that is, the prophet with his prophecies. But God gave Jeremiah supernatural awareness of it. Indeed, God had warned when Jeremiah was first called that such threats would come—and He had encouraged him with the promise of divine protection and help (Jeremiah 1:17-19). Yet that was long ago, and it is possible that Jeremiah had not faced such threats so far—as he surely had state protection during the reign of godly Josiah. Now Josiah was dead though, and the nation was conspiring against God and His prophets. Moreover, the circumstances no doubt made this situation particularly difficult for Jeremiah: "Throughout his four decades of service to God the prophet would know the wrath of kings and courtiers, prophets and priests, and the entire population of Judah. He would be accused of betraying his country. He would be imprisoned and almost killed. But perhaps nothing would hurt as much as this first crisis, when God revealed that the people of his hometown, Anathoth, were plotting to murder him! The conspiracy was even more dreadful because Anathoth was a city settled by priestly families. Anyone who has taken a stand for his or her moral convictions, or witnessed outspokenly about faith in Christ, will understand the pain of ridicule or rejection. But few have any notion of the hurt Jeremiah experienced when those he had known from childhood wanted to take his life" (*Bible Reader's Companion*, note on 11:18-20).

This parallels the reception Jesus Christ later experienced in *His* hometown of Nazareth (see Luke 4:16-29). Indeed, there are other parallels with Christ here as well. “His own familiar friends had plotted against the prophet. The language [about being a lamb led to the slaughter] is exactly the same as that applied to Messiah (Isa. 53:7). Each prophet and patriarch exemplified in his own person some one feature or more in the manifold attributes and sufferings of the Messiah to come; just as the saints have done since His coming (Gal. 2:20; Phil. 3:10; Col. 1:24)” (*Jamieson, Fausset & Brown’s Commentary*, note on Jeremiah 11:19).

Jeremiah lays the case before God as the righteous Judge and Vindicator. And God pronounces a punishment of death by sword and famine, both of which would come with the later Babylonian invasion and siege. God says that “no remnant” would be left to “the men of Anathoth” (verse 23)—that is, to the men involved in the conspiracy. That there were some in the town who weren’t involved is evident from the fact that Ezra later reported that some men of Anathoth returned to the town following the Babylonian captivity (see Ezra 2:1, 23).

In Jeremiah 12, we see the prophet terribly disturbed at the whole affair. He asks questions that had been asked before. “Why does the way of the wicked prosper?” (verse 1; see Job 12:6; Psalm 73:12). He remarks on how such treacherous people spoke of God often—indeed, Anathoth was a town of priests!—but their hearts were far from Him (Matthew 15:8; Isaiah 29:13). This is a problem so many have today. They give lip service to following Christ, but they don’t obey Him (Matthew 7:21-23). In contrast, Jeremiah served God from the heart as God well knew (Jeremiah 12:3). How strange then that the wicked seemed to have it so good and he seemed to have it so hard.

Jeremiah seems to wonder why God is talking about doing something but not yet doing it. He pleads for God to act. As he had been like a lamb led to the slaughter, he asks that they experience the same (verse 3). In verse 4, Jeremiah appears to be remarking on droughts that were already occurring as warnings of greater punishment to come (see 14:1-6). These hurt the plants and animals but were not reforming the wicked! They still said, “He [Jeremiah] will not see our final end” (12:4). In other words, they were basically saying that he would die before them—that he would be killed and they would go on living, in no worry over this dreadful “final end” he spoke of.

In verse 5, instead of giving an answer of comfort, God says things are going to get much worse. He first uses the metaphor of a race. If Jeremiah is worn out in his contest with the “footmen” (the men of Anathoth), how can he make it against “horses” (the much greater and more powerful antagonists he still has to face)? If he can’t take it in peacetime (as he yet suffered no actual harm), how would he make it through the “floodplain [or thicket] of the Jordan”? That is, as this expression connoted “the wild, luxuriant and beast-infested growths of the hot marshy land beside the Jordan” (*New Bible Commentary*, note on verse 5), how would he endure real physical suffering later? Even now, it was already worse than Jeremiah knew. Some of his own family members were part of the conspiracy against him (verse 6).

The fact is, God had already told Jeremiah He would handle it—and would protect him. So He now expects the prophet to grit his teeth and develop strength. That is a call to character. Indeed, what he was now going through was to prepare him for tougher times ahead. It is very much like the Christian experience today. God does not remove all our trials. We constantly witness the seeming prosperity of those who don’t follow His ways while things don’t always go so well for us. Moreover, our families and others close to us sometimes turn against us as Jesus warned (Matthew 10:36). But in spite of it all we must remain strong and devoted to following God—just as Jeremiah was required to. And in doing so, there will be great reward (see Mark 10:29-30).

In Jeremiah 12:7, God appears to simply pick right back up where He left off in 11:17—as if to say, “All right then, let’s get back to it.” But in his words there is a message for Jeremiah and his situation. God basically states that He has had to forsake *His* house and those *He* loves because others have ruined them. God, we see, does not ask His people to endure things that He Himself has not endured. This was made most evident in the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh to suffer and die for the sins of the world.

After speaking of the destruction that would come on His people for their sins, He then turns to the surrounding lands—“evil neighbors” who worshiped other gods and taught God’s people to do the same (verses 14-17). They would now invade. These neighbors “included the powerful nations of Babylon and Assyria, as well as opportunistic kingdoms like Edom, Moab, and Ammon. These latter kingdoms seized land, crops, and hostages when Judah was weakened by invasion” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verse 14). Ultimately, God would bring punishment on them all. But He also “gave them an amazing promise: He would show compassion on them by allowing them to learn about him, the God of Israel, even as they had taught the Israelites about their gods (12.16). Rather than just

wiping them from the face of the earth, the Lord would give them an opportunity to turn from their worthless idols and serve him. This was truly amazing kindness. This gesture shows God's heart of compassion for all the people of the world. It demonstrates the truth that Peter would later express, that the Lord is 'patient, because he wants everyone to turn from sin and no one to be lost' (2 P[eter] 3:9 [Contemporary English Version]) ("An Amazing Promise," *Word in Life Bible*, 1998, sidebar on Jeremiah 12:14-17).

The beginning of Jeremiah 13 (verses 1-5) may have followed chapter 12 in time order, but since the remainder of chapter 13, explaining the significance of the first five verses, appears to refer to events during the reign of Jehoiakim's son Jehoiachin or Jeconiah (compare verses 6, 18), we will read all of chapter 13 at a later time.

Jeremiah on Trial for His Life (Jeremiah 26)

June 23

The incidents described in this chapter take place at the beginning of Jehoiakim's reign—thus around 608 B.C. Some commentators believe this chapter is parallel with chapter 7 because in both places God has Jeremiah proclaim at the temple the object lesson of Shiloh. If they are the same incident, then chapters 7 through 10 should fall here in time order. And that may be. However, the wording of chapter 7 could imply that Josiah had not yet destroyed Tophet, the place of child sacrifice, which would lend support to the chronological arrangement followed in the Bible Reading Program. Jeremiah, therefore, may be essentially repeating a proclamation he gave more than 13 years earlier (as he likewise later repeats some of the statements concerning Tophet in chapter 19).

The reference to "all the cities of Judah" coming to worship (26:2) indicates that this was most likely one of the nation's annual festivals. The essence of Jeremiah's address to the people was that Judah needed to repent or Jerusalem would suffer the same fate as Shiloh. As explained in the highlights for Jeremiah 7, even though Shiloh had been the resting place of the tabernacle and Ark of the Covenant, God had allowed it to be destroyed. The people were at this time still placing too much trust in the temple and Jerusalem and their forms of worship. God, they reasoned, would never allow His holy temple and city to be destroyed. But they were wrong.

Verse 3 of chapter 26 highlights an important principle found throughout Scripture. Even though God threatens dire consequences, He is prepared to relent if the people respond and turn from their evil ways (see 18:7-8; 1 Kings 21:29; Joel 2:13; Jonah 3:10). If they don't, the punishment would fall. Jerusalem would be made a "curse to all nations"—that is, destroyed to provide an example to all nations (Jeremiah 26:6).

The religious leaders then stirred up the assembled worshipers against Jeremiah. They basically arrested him, telling him he would receive the death penalty for what they saw as his blasphemy in saying God's temple would be destroyed. Jesus would later suffer similar reaction from religious leaders over the many proclamations He made that they perceived as a threat to their continuing power, including His declaration that the temple would be destroyed (see Luke 21:5-6; 22:2).

In Jeremiah's case, a hearing was convened before "all the princes and all the people" (Jeremiah 26:11-12), which may have denoted a bicameral national council or high court. The "princes" here didn't necessarily belong to the royal family, even though they came from the king's house. The Hebrew word from which the word "princes" is translated "may denote leaders, chieftains.... [The word] also appears frequently as a word representing royal rulers and officials, no doubt of sundry ranks and titles.... Thus Jer[emiah] 26:11 speaks of the princes of Judah, and the context (vv. 10-16) depicts them as occupying the 'king's house,' to possessing judicial power, ordering Jeremiah to die or to be spared" (Harris, Archer and Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 1980, Vol. 2, p. 884). Verse 17 says that certain "elders of the land" addressed the "assembly of the people." Perhaps these elders were members of this assembly, serving as clan or town representatives.

"Jeremiah gave a threefold defense on his own behalf. First, he announced that the LORD had sent him to deliver the message they had heard. He was not a false prophet. Second, he announced that his message was conditional. If the people would reform their ways (cf. 3:12; 7:3) God promised not to bring about the disaster. Thus Jeremiah's message did offer some hope for the city. Third, Jeremiah warned that if they put him to death they would bring the guilt of innocent blood on themselves. They would be guilty in God's sight of murdering an innocent man" (*The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, note on Jeremiah 26:12-17).

While this may have caused some of them a measure of concern, the reaction of the officials in verse 16 is based more on legal technicality than on any belief in what Jeremiah was saying. A prophet could not be put to death unless he spoke in the name of another god or his prophecy turned out to be false. The latter could not as yet be determined. And the former had not been committed,

as Jeremiah had spoken in the name of the true God of Israel. So Jeremiah seemed to be off the hook. But what really tipped the scales in his favor was the citing of a precedent by certain elders in verse 17—that of Micah’s proclamation of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple given more than 90 years earlier, in which King Hezekiah, the supreme judge of the time, did not have Micah executed. “This is really a fine defense, and the argument was perfectly conclusive. Some think that it was Ahikam [mentioned in verse 24] who undertook the prophet’s defense” (*Adam Clarke’s Commentary*, note on verse 17).

The chapter ends with a brief story of another prophet of God named Urijah (or Uriah), mentioned only here in Scripture. Jehoiakim had sought to put him to death, so he fled to Egypt. But being a vassal of Egypt at this time, Judah had extradition rights and Urijah was brought home to his execution. This episode may have been inserted here to show that even though Jeremiah’s case seemed pretty ironclad, the state still posed a danger—as a corrupt king such as Jehoiakim could quite easily see to it that a prophet was executed. In any event, Jeremiah was saved with the help of Ahikam, which may refer to the preceding court defense or perhaps the prophet actually taking refuge with him.

Interestingly, Ahikam was the son of Shaphan, who had served under faithful King Josiah. “The family of Shaphan played an important part in the final years of Judah.... Shaphan was King Josiah’s secretary who reported the finding of the Law to Josiah (2 Kings 22:3-13). Shaphan had at least four sons—three of whom were mentioned in a positive way by Jeremiah (Ahikam, Gemariah, and Elasah). The fourth son, Jaazaniah, was the ‘black sheep’ of the family; his presence among the idol-worshippers in the temple caught Ezekiel by surprise (Ezek. 8:11). Ahikam’s son, Gedaliah, was appointed governor of Judah by Nebuchadnezzar after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.” (*Bible Knowledge Commentary*, note on verse 24).

Droughts Will Give Way to More Severe Punishment (Jeremiah 14:1–15:9) June 24

Drought, first apparently mentioned in 12:4, continues to afflict the land (14:1-6; see also 23:10). Things get so bad that the people resort to calling on God, Jeremiah here recording the people’s plea for relief in which they confessed their sins and asked God to save them for His own name’s sake (14:7-9). This was according to the prayer Solomon had long before prayed at the temple’s dedication: “When the heavens are shut up and there is no rain because they have sinned against You, when they pray toward this place and confess your name, and turn from their sin because you afflict them, then hear in heaven, and forgive the sin of Your servants, Your people Israel, that You may teach them the good way in which they should walk; and send rain on Your land which You have given to Your people as an inheritance” (1 Kings 8:35-36).

But there was a major problem here. The people confessed but they did not “turn from their sin” as Solomon had stated. They asked God to act for the sake of His name (His reputation) after they had, by their wicked conduct, profaned God’s name among the nations—and would not desist from doing so. Therefore, their repentance is meaningless and God will not accept it. He knows that such pleas always come in times of need. In the past He answered the calls over and over again. This time He has drawn the line and will follow through with the threatened punishment (Jeremiah 14:10). Again, God tells Jeremiah not to pray for the people (verse 11; compare 7:16; 11:14).

In verse 12 of chapter 14, God says that He will not accept any of their hypocritical displays of piety but will send worse punishment than just the droughts. The people will be consumed by the sword (of warfare), by famine and by pestilence (disease epidemics). Centuries before, King David was given a choice between these three punishments for sin (see 2 Samuel 24:13). But the people of Judah would now suffer all three (Jeremiah 14:12; compare 16:4; 24:10; 27:8, 13; 29:17-18; Ezekiel 14:21). Indeed, these terrible occurrences have often formed a cycle in human history. In war, people are pillaged, their crops and livestock ruined, their water taken or polluted. This leads to famine. Widespread malnourishment then weakens people to the point of greater susceptibility to infection with disease.

Jeremiah’s love for the people is obvious. While he is not allowed to pray for the people’s deliverance from punishment, he proposes mitigating circumstances that may alleviate the people’s guilt to some degree. “He says it’s the prophets’ fault. The prophets have misled the ordinary folks. There are two things to note here. First, we are each responsible for our own choices. We can’t pass that on to anyone else, even preachers! Second, the prophets *were* guilty of misleading Judah and would suffer more greatly than others [compare James 1:1-3]. [But] don’t suppose that ‘he said it was all right’ or ‘I was obeying orders’ relieves us of responsibility” (*Bible Reader’s Companion*, note on Jeremiah 14:13-16, emphasis added).

In verses 17-18, God gives Jeremiah a lament to utter when the prophesied punishment actually comes. “Jeremiah’s tears, portraying his own and the Lord’s anguish over a destroyed people, are part of his message to them and have the force of an ‘acted oracle.’ They show the backlash of the message of doom on him who preaches it, and none should preach destruction who cannot weep for those under its threat” (*New Bible Commentary*, note on verse 17). Surely we will feel the same when we see our nations suffer in the years ahead. Indeed, many tears were shed by God’s people over the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York. Thus we can certainly empathize with Jeremiah.

At the end of verse 18, it is not clear in this case if the “land they do not know” is a foreign land or their homeland so devastated as to be unrecognizable. Eventually, as other prophecies make clear, they will be removed to a foreign land.

In verses 19-22, the people make another empty plea for mercy. “The people of Judah based their hope for relief on an appeal to God to act for the sake of (1) His name, (2) His temple (e.g., His ‘glorious throne’), and (3) His covenant. Why was the plea empty? Because Israel’s blatant idolatry had already dragged God’s name through the mud. His temple was defiled by those who supposed they could [brazenly] sin and still worship. And His covenant had been broken by those who now wanted to claim it. There comes a time when only judgment can preserve God’s honor” (*Bible Reader’s Companion*, note on verse 21).

So God responds in Jeremiah 15:1-9 with His determination to proceed. Moses and Samuel were among the great leaders of God who interceded for Israel with favorable results (Exodus 32:11; 1 Samuel 7:9). But even *their* intercession would avail nothing for the people now. Verse 2 of Jeremiah 15 is rather ominous, telling the prophet to respond to inquiries about where to go (i.e., what to do now) with the pronouncement of judgment. “The imagery of dogs, birds and beasts devouring human flesh vividly illustrates not only death but desecration” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verses 3-4). These animals may also portray gentile nations here.

“The basis for this desecration is the defilement of Jerusalem that took place during the reign of Manasseh, when idolatry reigned in the temple courts and children were sacrificed to Molech” (note on verses 3-4). Manasseh was the most evil king Judah ever had (2 Kings 21:9-18). It seems he did turn to God later, but had caused much damage to the relationship between Judah and God. “He was now dead, but the effects of his sins still remained. How much evil one bad man can cause! The evil fruits remain even after he himself has received repentance and forgiveness. The people had followed his wicked example ever since; and it is implied that it was only through the long-suffering of God that the penal consequences had been suspended up to the present time (cf. I Kings 14:16; II Kings 21:11; 23:26; 24:3, 4)” (*Jamieson, Fausset & Brown’s Commentary*, note on verse 4).

“As Waters That Fail?” (Jeremiah 15:10-21)

June 25

Jeremiah has faithfully pronounced the message God has told him to. But no one, of course, is happy to hear it. His comment regarding not having lent for interest is “proverbial for, ‘I have given no cause for strife against me’” (*Jamieson, Fausset & Brown’s Commentary*, note on verse 10). Yet his preaching has generated nothing *but* strife it seems. Everyone hates him, whereupon Jeremiah is understandably dejected. He wishes he hadn’t been born. “Note that his call was from the womb and that God decreed from birth that he would be a prophet (see 1:5; 20:14-18)” (*The HarperCollins Study Bible*, 1993, note on Jeremiah 15:10).

The Hebrew of verse 11 is difficult. The New Revised Standard Version renders it, “The LORD said: Surely I have intervened in your life for good, surely I have imposed enemies on you in a time of trouble and in a time of distress.” But, God asks in verse 12, can anyone break iron and bronze? This appears to symbolize Jeremiah, whom God referred to as an “iron pillar” and “bronze walls” in his call (1:18; compare 15:20). That is, God would protect him.

In verses 13-14 it is not clear whether God is speaking to Jeremiah or to Judah again. The latter seems more likely but some have suggested that Jeremiah is to experience some measure of punishment as a representative of the people—perhaps, in some sense, as a type of Christ. We do know that Jeremiah was later carried away against his will to Egypt. In any case, Jeremiah asks that God, in fairness, would protect him and take vengeance on the real wrongdoers, those who are persecuting him. The prophet declares his faithfulness to God. He “ate” God’s words—accepting and internalizing them and finding joy in them (verse 16). He was not part of the assembly of mockers because 1) he would not mock God’s message and 2) what he preached prevented him from being part of the assembly at all—he was isolated from everyone.

In verse 18, we see Jeremiah in great anguish over his predicament. But then he goes too far. Having declared his own faithfulness, he actually accuses God of faithlessness. God is the fountain of living waters (2:13), but now Jeremiah wonders if He is not like a dried up stream as far as the prophet's welfare is concerned.

In 15:19, God responds with a gentle rebuke. It is a rebuke because God calls on Jeremiah to "return"—the Old Testament word for *repent*. He tells him to "take the precious from the vile"—an "image from metals: 'If thou wilt separate what is precious in thee (the divine graces imparted) from what is vile (thy natural corruptions, impatience, and hasty words), thou shalt be as My mouth': my mouthpiece (Exod. 4:16)" (*JFB Commentary*, note on Jeremiah 15:19). God warns him, "Let them return to you [that is, let the people change to walking in your right, faithful ways], but you must not return to them [you must not change to walking in their wrong, faithless ways]." If Jeremiah turns from his negative, wrong thoughts, then he will be able to continue in God's service and God will continue to protect him, just as was promised at Jeremiah's initial call (verse 20). It is in this way that God's rebuke is gentle, for it is accompanied by a wonderful positive reassurance of His enduring faithfulness even despite the weakness of His servant. This is something for which we should all be ever so grateful.

Jeremiah Not to Marry or Participate in Judah's Social Life (Jeremiah 16) June 26

Jeremiah is commanded by God not to marry and have children while in Judah. He is also forbidden from taking part in social activities such as mourning and feasting. Both were to serve as a witness against Judah. "The prophet is ordered to behave in an eccentric manner [as prophets often were]...; celibacy was extremely uncommon, refusal to participate in funerary rites ill-mannered and disrespectful. Both actions had one meaning: There is no future here" (*New Bible Commentary*, note on verses 1-21). "The prohibition against marriage is to underscore the coming death and destruction that will face parents and children. Even burial will be denied the dead. The theme of lament is repeated in God's refusal to allow Jeremiah to intercede on the people's behalf (7:16; 14:11-12; 15:1). He is also forbidden to rejoice with them, for joy will be taken from the land during the impending destruction and exile" (*HarperCollins Study Bible*, note on 16:1-13). Jeremiah 16:9 is a repetition of 7:34—and will be repeated again in 25:10.

Moreover, the restrictions imposed on Jeremiah actually served his well-being. He would not have been able to have a normal family life anyway with his commission and the animosity it brought. Furthermore, the near future was going to be calamitous—"so severe that the single state would be then (contrary to the ordinary course of things) preferable to the married (cf. I Cor. 7:8; 26:29; Matt. 24:19; Luke 23:29)" (*Jamieson, Fausset & Brown's Commentary*, note on verse 2). In times of great trial, worry over loved ones increases the pain of the circumstances. This being so, we can perhaps see how the prohibition against fraternizing in normal social contexts was also a great blessing to Jeremiah. It kept him from developing close friendships with those who were soon to suffer. Moreover, we should consider that many of the social customs of the people, such as those in Jeremiah 16:6, were derived from paganism. Jeremiah would, of course, have to separate himself from such practices.

Verses 10-13 illustrate the falsity of the people's confession of sin in chapter 14. For they here do not even know what sins they are guilty of—even though they have committed terrible idolatry worse than their ancestors! So punishment is certainly coming—they will be taken away to another land where they will learn through painful experience what it really means to be subject to paganism and cut off from the true God (16:13).

Verses 14-15 (repeated in 23:7-8) offer a glimmer of hope about the future. God will bring Israel back in a second Exodus (compare Isaiah 11:11). This is speaking not of the Jewish return from Babylonian captivity in ancient times, but of the return of all Israel from captivity at the end of this age. This should be clear from the fact that the Jewish return from Babylonian exile never overshadowed the Mosaic Exodus from Egypt—as God said this return would.

In the next verse, Jeremiah 16:16, God seems to return to the theme of immediate punishment, as hunting and fishing are elsewhere used as metaphors for captivity by enemies (compare Ezekiel 12:13; Amos 4:2; Habakkuk 1:15; Micah 7:2). Yet perhaps God is actually using similar imagery to describe the bringing back of His people mentioned in the previous verse. *Jamieson, Fausset & Brown's Commentary* states: "It is remarkable, the same image is used in a good sense of the Jews' restoration, implying that just as their enemies were employed by God to take them in hand for destruction, so the same [i.e., hunters and fishers] shall be employed for their restoration. (Ezek. 47:9, 10). So spiritually... [God's ministers are "fishers of men"], employed by God to be heralds of

salvation, ‘catching men’ for life (Matt. 4:19; Luke 5:10; Acts 2:41; 4:4...II Cor. 12:16)” (note on Jeremiah 16:16).

But before any future regathering, God’s people are to receive “double” for their sins (verse 18). It is not clear exactly what is meant here. It may refer to the fact that God expects more from those to whom He gives special gifts so that Israel and Judah are to receive a more severe judgment than the rest of the nations (compare Luke 12:47-48; James 3:1). Some suggest that “double” is idiomatic for “fully” or “amply.” Others maintain that the double punishment actually refers to two periods of punishment, the ancient captivity and the one to come later—just prior to the ultimate restoration promised in the preceding verses.

The point of verses 19-21 is also not exactly clear. These seem to refer to the time of Christ’s return, when the relationship between God and man is restored and all nations on earth come to know God and worship Him (compare Isaiah 2:1-4; 11:9). The word “gentiles” in verse 19 of Jeremiah 16 actually means “nations” and, in that sense, could include Israel and Judah. So the point may be the happy ending of Israel’s future return, followed by all nations. However, the point may also be that while God’s people have filled His land with foreign idols and are rejected (verse 18), many foreigners would come to forsake their pagan past and embrace the true God—that is, during the Church age (from apostolic times until Christ’s return). This would serve as a point of shame against God’s own people (see Romans 11:11). Either way, we can still be thankful for the happy ending promised in verses 14-15 of Jeremiah 16 and throughout Scripture.

The Deceitful Heart of Man; Hallow the Sabbath (Jeremiah 17)

June 27

Rather than the law of God, rebellious idolatry—including pagan offering and *asherah* worship—is ingrained in the heart, the inner character, of the people of Judah, being passed down from one generation to the next (17:1-2). This is much like the sin of modern Israelite nations. Christmas trees and other pagan traditions are clung to so strongly as to be considered part of the very heart of the people—again, passed down through the generations.

For the people’s rebellion, God will give their enemies the wealth of His “mountain [Jerusalem] in the field [of the nation of Judah]” and of all their “high places” (worship centers) in the land (verse 3). Indeed, even the people themselves will be given to their enemies—deported to a foreign land (verse 4). God’s anger will burn “forever”—that is, against the sin as long as the sin persists.

God then contrasts trust in man with trust in God. In verse 5, two different Hebrew words are translated “man”: “Cursed is the man [the person] who trusts in man [mankind].” The Jews should have realized this regarding their national and religious leaders. And we must understand this today. This does not mean we cannot place any trust in other human beings. But our ultimate faith and trust must not be in other people—or ourselves. Consider that God Himself gives human beings to guide and teach us. But He cautions that our allegiance must be to Him and His Word first. “We ought to obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). In fact, Scripture contains many warnings about false teachers who will rise up, some even within the fellowship of the true Church (20:29; 2 Peter 2:1-4). And God makes it clear that people will not be excused if they choose to follow what a man says above what God says. Human beings have no authority to change any of God’s directives. Those who rely ultimately on other people or themselves are inevitably cursed.

Those who place faith and trust in God, on the other hand, are blessed. They are compared to fruitful trees, as in Psalm 1:3. They do not need to fear times of physical drought—as Judah was experiencing when Jeremiah prophesied—because the Almighty God is there to sustain them. He will ensure their fruitfulness on a physical level and, more importantly, on a spiritual level—granting them abundant eternal life in the end.

Failure to discern this is a problem of the heart—a person’s inner thoughts and feelings. God declares that the heart is *deceitful*—the original Hebrew word here coming from the same root as the name Jacob (the designation for unconverted Israel)—and “desperately wicked” (Jeremiah 7:9). For the latter expression, some margins have “incurably sick.” It is like a mental illness: “Truly the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil; madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead” (Ecclesiastes 9:3). Romans 8:7 tells us that “the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be.” Clearly, the human mind needs spiritual healing, which God ultimately will bring (see Jeremiah 31:33).

Lest any think that the heart is so deceitful that even God can’t see what it’s about, God assures us that He is quite aware of it and, knowing to what degree each person is culpable, is able to deliver just recompense to everyone (17:10).

The discussion then moves from those who trust in human beings to those who trust in wealth apart from right living. A “nest egg” won’t ultimately save anyone (verse 11). God is our only real source of hope (verse 12).

Those who depart from the Lord, “the fountain of living waters,” shall be “written in the earth” (verse 13). This apparently refers to being written in sand, which signifies no permanence at all—as opposed to being “written in heaven” (Luke 10:20) in the “book of life” (Revelation 13:8; 20:12, 15). Perhaps Jeremiah 17:13 explains why Jesus, after declaring Himself the source of living waters (John 7:37-38) and being rejected as such by the religious leaders of His day (verses 45-53), “wrote on the ground” when these religious leaders came to entrap Him the next morning (8:1-9).

Jeremiah prays for his own spiritual healing (Jeremiah 17:14). He knows that his message will provoke further scorn, beyond what he has already suffered. In verse 15, he declares that his persecutors are essentially inviting the day of doom in their mocking. In verse 16, Jeremiah points out that he himself has not desired the coming of that day. He has taken no joy in pronouncing judgment on the people—certainly not on the nation as a whole. However, he does ask for vindication—that he would be protected (verse 17) and that his persecutors would suffer the judgment they themselves called for (verse 18), the “double destruction” here being what God had already foretold (see 16:18).

The remainder of chapter 17 is devoted to God’s admonition about keeping the Sabbath holy. In verses 19 and 20, Jeremiah addresses the “kings” of Judah. It may be that Jehoiakim’s son Jehoiachin (Jeconiah) was a coregent with his father at this time (a possibility we will later give more attention to). The people, be they kings or commoners, are told to stop violating the Sabbath—to stop bearing burdens and doing work on God’s Holy Day (verses 21-22). This should be understood within the teachings of Jesus Christ. He explained that it was acceptable and within the keeping of the Sabbath to take care of emergencies, to visit the sick and to carry one’s bedroll on the Sabbath (Luke 13:15; 14:5; Mark 3:4). Indeed, He spoke against the extreme limitations the Pharisees placed on the Sabbath and on all of God’s laws (Matthew 23:4).

But there are clearly things we should *not* be doing on the Sabbath, as the Fourth Commandment and Isaiah 58:13 make clear. The burdens Jeremiah spoke of referred to the typical errands of the people—for instance, lugging wares home from the market. And the work the people were doing referred to their regular business or household responsibilities. This should all have ceased so as to observe God’s holy time—from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset. Sadly, Israel and Judah both had a terrible record when it came to keeping God’s Sabbath. Ezekiel 20 makes it clear that the two main sins of Israel in the past were idolatry and Sabbath breaking—and that they had been severely judged for these. Now their continued violation of the Sabbath would be met with judgment again (see Ezekiel 22:8, 14-16, 26, 31).

The Sabbath was very important. Besides being enjoined in one of the Ten Commandments, God had given the Sabbath as a special sign between Him and His people (Exodus 31:12-17). It identified Him as the true God, the Creator. If the people had continued in its faithful observance, perhaps they would have continued to worship the Creator rather than elements of creation as the pagan world around them did.

In verse 25 of Jeremiah 17, God states that even at this last moment He could change His mind and stay the punishment against Judah—allowing Jerusalem to remain standing and the line of David to continue to rule from it—if they would just start hallowing the Sabbath. Of course, this would have required keeping it properly from the heart—not the hypocritical way in which the people engaged in various ritual practices. But they would not. Nor will the nations of Israel do so today. Thus, punishment was coming in Jeremiah’s day—and it is likewise coming in the not-too-distant future. The warning of destruction with which the chapter ends is essentially a quote from the prophets Hosea and Amos—concerning ancient *and* future calamity (see Hosea 8:14; Amos 1:4-2:5).

With such strong declarations from God about the Sabbath, it is utterly foolhardy to think and teach, as many do today, that the Sabbath can be changed to Sunday or that it no longer matters. It obviously mattered a great deal to God—and still does. It should likewise matter to us. (To learn more, send for or download our free booklet *Sunset to Sunset: God’s Sabbath Rest*.)

Introduction to Habakkuk (Habakkuk 1–2)

June 28

Habakkuk, whose name appears to mean “Embraced”—that is, it is typically concluded, *by God*—may have served as part of the temple music service at the time of his writing (see Habakkuk 3:19). The inscription in the Greek Septuagint to Bel and the Dragon, an apocryphal book in which

Habakkuk is mentioned, says he was a Levite, which would fit with such musical service (*Jamieson, Fausset & Brown's Commentary*, introductory notes on Habakkuk).

In his prophecy, Habakkuk decries the wickedness of the Jewish society around him, and God warns that punishment is soon going to come from the Chaldeans—the ruling class of Babylon. The prophet's "reference to the Babylonians indicates that they had already become an independent and terrifying presence, a state of affairs which surely presupposes the accession of Nabopolassar to Babylonian kingship in 626 (1:6-11)" (Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, p. 455). That is, Nabopolassar must already have been on the throne and advancing against Assyrian power. As we have seen, his forces, along with others, finally sacked Nineveh in 612 B.C. and thereupon began a mop-up operation to stamp out pockets of Assyrian resistance. In 609 a residual Assyrian force was defeated at Haran, but Assyria's ally Egypt gained control over Judah and Syria upon the death of Josiah. Four years afterward, in 605 B.C.—as we will see more about later—the Babylonian forces under Nabopolassar's son Nebuchadnezzar crushed the last Assyrian holdouts and their Egyptian allies at Carchemish on the Euphrates. Egypt retreated and Judah came under Babylonian dominion.

For this reason, Habakkuk's book being no later than "605 is virtually certain since the judgment upon Judah appears to be totally in the future. On the other hand, Judah is in such a perilous state—injustice abounds and there is no redress—that one can hardly envision Josiah in power any longer. The description of moral and civil anarchy fits very well the early years of Jehoiakim (608-605) just before the evils of Judah brought divine intervention in the form of Nebuchadnezzar" (p. 455). A date of "somewhere around 607 or 606 B.C." seems most likely (p. 455, footnote).

Habakkuk is disturbed at the rampant sin around him—yet he is disturbed still further at the agents of punishment God is going to use to deal with that sin. "Some people believe that human beings should never question the ways of God. They may even feel that it borders on sin to ask God, 'Why?' But the book of Habakkuk counters that idea. It is filled with a prophet's perplexing questions—and the Lord's penetrating answers. God never seems to reproach his servant for asking two basic questions: Why does the Lord seem not to respond (Hb 1.2-4) to the injustice and violence that Habakkuk sees around him?; How can God use the vicious and idolatrous Babylonians (1.12-17) to judge his people?" ("Questioning God," *Word in Life Bible*, sidebar on 1:2).

As in Psalm 73, "this problem has troubled believers in one form or another from the beginning. Why does God permit the wicked to succeed in this world? Why doesn't He act, so that the good rather than the wicked prosper? The answers we find in Habakkuk show us that the wicked do not succeed—and that no one, good or bad, can avoid the disciplining hand of God. There are moral and theological questions raised by sin's presence, in our own lives and in the ways of the wicked. Perhaps the best and most satisfying answers to be found in Scripture are revealed here in this small, but vital, Old Testament book" (*Bible Reader's Companion*, introductory notes on Habakkuk).

It should be noted that while the book of Habakkuk was a message to the people of his day, it well applies to our time too. Indeed, while the terrible societal problems the prophet mentions at the outset no doubt applied to what he himself witnessed in seventh-century-B.C. Judah, it is interesting that the nation of Judah is not actually named. Thus, it could also apply to *all* of Israel in the *end* time—which, as is clear from other prophecies, will suffer at the hands of a modern revival of Babylon. Notice Habakkuk 2:3 regarding Babylon's fall: "For the vision is yet for an appointed time; but at the end it will speak..." While this could have applied to ancient Babylon, the fall of which occurred nearly 70 years later, it seems more applicable to events much farther off in time. The "day of trouble" here (3:16) is the time of the fall of Babylon—and the *ultimate* day of trouble, which will accomplish the *ultimate* fall of Babylon, is the future Day of the Lord, immediately preceding the time of Jesus Christ's return. Finally, the clearest indication of all that this is a prophecy of the last days is the mention of Christ's future reign over all nations (2:14).

Habakkuk's Questions; Chaldean Invasion (Habakkuk 1–2)

June 28 Cont'd

The book begins with Habakkuk's first question. He asks God about the violence, lack of justice, and lawlessness he sees (1:2-4). He does not state where these problems are occurring, but "when these terms are used in the O[ld] T[estament] without reference to some specific foreign enemy, they typically characterize conditions among God's people" (*Bible Reader's Companion*, note on verse 3). Indeed, it is likely that this is what Habakkuk witnessed in the society of Judah in his day. However, his words "Why do *You* show me...and *cause me to see*...?" may also indicate that these were visions God gave him of the future—of our day.

Verse 4 says, "Therefore the law is powerless." This can be viewed in one of two ways. For one, all the law that God gave is powerless to itself properly direct one's conduct. It is up to each person's

choice and will whether or not he or she will obey God. The apostle James later described how someone could look at God's instructions and ignore them (James 1:22-25). Yet, while a true principle, that may not be Habakkuk's actual point here. The NIV renders his words, "Therefore the law is paralyzed." The implication seems to be that the legal *system*—the *administration* of law as given in the Law of Moses—is supposed to function so that the innocent are vindicated and the guilty are punished. But when witnesses and those who *run* the system are given over to wrong values and behavior, the law—again, the legal *system*—is prevented from functioning as it should. That was true when Habakkuk wrote—and it is sadly true today (considering that numerous elements of modern justice systems in the free world derive from Mosaic precepts).

In the face of such rampant evil and corruption, Habakkuk essentially asks God, "Why don't You *do something* about all this? When are You going to act?"

God responds in verses 5-11. He has an "astounding" plan underway to punish His people. God says this will happen "in your days" (verse 5). But it is not clear exactly whom God is speaking to here. It could be Habakkuk. But God says, "...which you would not believe, though it were told you" (same verse). While this could perhaps mean that it was too horrible for any person to really grasp even if he thought he did, it seems more likely to refer to a faithless rejection of God's message. Since Habakkuk himself does believe God, as the rest of the book shows, the message would appear to be directed at God's faithless people—God speaking *through* Habakkuk but *to* them. Thus, the "your days" would be *their* days. It likely did apply to the Jews of the prophet's time. But it could also be addressed to all Israel of *our* day.

In responding, God lays out the terrible punishment that is coming. The *instruments* of punishment will be the Chaldeans, a terribly fierce people (verses 6-11). During earlier days of Assyrian rule, these people had moved southeast from the area of Armenia down into Babylonia. The emerging Neo-Babylonian Empire was thus a mixture of earlier Babylonians and the Chaldeans—the Chaldeans actually making up the ruling class. Babylon was currently ruled by the Chaldean king Nabopolassar, who led the overthrow of Assyria. His son and soon-to-be successor Nebuchadnezzar would soon visit destruction on Judah—an obvious fulfillment of this prophecy. But it was also a prototype fulfillment of a greater fulfillment to come in the end time. As explained earlier in the Bible Reading Program, many of the descendants of the Babylonians—original and Chaldean—later ended up in Italy and other areas of southern Europe (see highlights for Isaiah 13:1-14:2). In the last days, they and the modern Assyrians of north-central Europe will together form a final revival of the Roman Empire that the Bible refers to as Babylon (see Revelation 17-18). This final Babylon—a significant portion of its population actually being Chaldean—certainly fits the description given in Habakkuk's prophecy. This coming empire will be used to invade and destroy end-time Israel and Judah and take those who are left of them into captivity.

The translation of Habakkuk 1:11 is not certain. This rendering makes sense: "Then they sweep on like the wind and are gone [on to some new conquest], these men whose power is their god" (Today's English Version).

This brings Habakkuk to his second question. He is glad that God is going to take action on his initial complaint—and that God will deliver the righteous in the land. But he is confused as to why God would use the wicked Babylonians to bring judgment. He basically asks God, "How can you, the Holy God, use an evil, treacherous people for correcting your nation? The Babylonians' sins are worse!" (compare verses 12-13). Habakkuk wants to know why God would allow it to appear "that mankind is like fish in the sea, with no moral governor supervising human affairs. How can God permit the wicked to prosper and thus raise questions, not only about His moral governance of the universe, but about His very existence?" (*Bible Reader's Companion*, note on verses 13-17). Habakkuk reasons with God this way: "With the Babylonians allowed to continue conquering other nations, they're not learning to worship *You*. They're worshipping their tools of conquest. So why do You let them enjoy the fruit of their conquests and keep devouring other nations?" (compare verses 15-17).

Habakkuk then recommits himself to the responsibility God has given him to serve as a watchman and relate what he sees and hears to others. He is most interested to hear what God has to say in response to what he's just said (2:1). Indeed, his wording almost makes it look like he is braced for impact—knowing that he has made some pretty bold statements. But he is in no way antagonistic toward God. In fact, he deeply wants God to set Him straight (same verse).

The Just Shall Live by Faith; Woes for the Wicked (Habakkuk 1–2) June 28 Cont'd

The rest of chapter 2 is God's answer. God tells Habakkuk to write it "in large legible characters... upon tables—boxwood tables covered with wax, on which national affairs were engraved with an iron pen, and then hung up in public, at the prophets' own houses, or at the temple, that those who passed might read them" (*Jamieson, Fausset & Brown's Commentary*, note on verse 2). "We might paraphrase the meaning here by saying 'Write it on a billboard, so large a running man might read it.' What God is about to reveal to the prophet is important, and everyone [not just Habakkuk] needs to understand the Lord's response" (*Bible Reader's Companion*, note on verse 2).

In verse 3, God is basically saying, "Look, what I'm about to tell you isn't going to happen overnight. It's going to take time for the full measure of these words to be demonstrated—indeed, that won't happen in an ultimate sense until the end of the age. But just wait—you'll eventually see that it's just as I'm saying." The New Testament book of Hebrews, likely written by the apostle Paul, quotes this verse as applying to the return of Christ, who will bring with Him the full measure of reward to the righteous and of punishment to the wicked (10:37).

Returning to Habakkuk 2, God's explanation then begins. "The proud" of verse 4 refers to the Babylonians, those exulting in great conquests, as is clear from verses 5 and 8. "His soul is not upright in him" could simply mean "His life is not straight," that is, his path of life is crooked and twisted—cursed. On the other hand, "the just shall live by his faith." In contrast to the cursed path of the wicked, the righteous have a *blessed* life—a happy and hopeful life guided by faith. This doesn't mean nothing bad ever happens to them. But by faith they know that God's way is right and will ultimately bring great reward; and this causes them to *live* the right way and experience true blessings thereby—ultimately life eternal. Verse 4 is quoted in Hebrews 10:38, just after the Hebrews quote previously mentioned, to show that faith gives us endurance to ultimately be saved (see verses 35-39). Paul also quoted Habakkuk 2:4 in relating the fact that we as Christians must live through believing the gospel message Christ brought—as it is the way to eternal salvation (see Romans 1:16-17). And in another context he used the same verse to show that justification—being right with God—comes through faith (Galatians 3:11).

Continuing in Habakkuk 2, God then runs through the cursed life of the proud such as Babylon. "The Lord shows Habakkuk that He does *not* tolerate the treacherous. Even as the wicked appear to triumph, God is in fact at work judging them! Their success is superficial, for the wicked are never satisfied (vv. 4-5). Their mistreatment of others creates enemies (vv. 6-8). They are driven to build 'secure' retreats which will never protect them (vv. 9-11), for they have no future (vv. 12-14). Coming disgrace is certain (vv. 15-17), for they have no place to turn for guidance or help (vv. 18-20). When we understand what is going on within the heart of the wicked, and when we understand that forces their wicked acts set in motion will surely destroy them, we realize that God does not tolerate them. At the height of their success He is in the process of judging them. Severely" (*Bible Reader's Companion*, chapter 2 summary).

In verse 5, the transgression appears to begin with wine. "Love of wine often begets a proud contempt of divine things, as in Belshazzar's case, which was the immediate cause of the fall of Babylon (Dan. 5:2-4, 30; cf. Prov. 20:1; 30:9; 31:5)" (*JFB Commentary*, note on verse 5). However, the wine here is most likely figurative—expressive of intoxication over former success. It is also possible that it relates to false ideology, as Revelation 17:2 mentions the "wine" of Babylon's immorality. This is what leads them into their false pursuits. In any case, whatever they have is not enough. They are never satisfied (Habakkuk 2:5; drawing imagery from Proverbs 27:20). "What a terrible judgment this is. To have everything you want—except satisfaction" (*Bible Reader's Companion*, note on Habakkuk 2:4-5).

Verse 6 introduces a taunting song or poem: "The 'derisive song' here begins [with the word 'woe'], and continues to the end of the chapter. It is a symmetrical whole, and consists of five stanzas.... Each stanza has its own subject, and all except the last begin with 'woe'; and all have a closing verse introduced with 'for,' 'because,' or 'but'" (*JFB*, note on verse 6).

In the first stanza (verses 6-8), God condemns Babylon's aggression, thievery and bloodshed. He states that the conquered peoples who've been stolen from will rise up and demand what is theirs—and seek vengeance over the harm they've been done (verses 7-8). In the second stanza (verses 9-11), the taunt is over their covetousness and attempt to secure themselves through wealth. In verse 10, Babylon has conquered many peoples to build its "house" or empire but this will come back on its head—for various parts of the "house" will call for rebellion and others will join in (verse 11).

In the third stanza (verses 12-14), the concern is over building an empire through bloodshed and lawlessness. The fact of the matter is that all their efforts are going into something that will ultimately be burned to the ground (verse 13). In verse 14 God reiterates His wonderful millennial prophecy from Isaiah 11:9. “God intends to fill the earth with the knowledge of the Lord, not with monuments to murderers. Whatever the wicked accomplish will crumble, and the wicked person himself will be forgotten” (*Bible Reader’s Companion*, note on Habakkuk 2:12-14).

The fourth stanza (verses 15-17) describes the inhumanity of the evil Babylonian system, which seeks to make others drunk in order to molest them. Ancient Babylon’s captives suffered a condition comparable to drunkenness—swooning, humiliation and utter incapacitation. And this prophecy certainly ties to Revelation 17, where Babylon, the great false church of the end time, is described: “Come, I will show you the judgment of the great harlot who sits on many waters, with whom the kings of the earth committed fornication, and the inhabitants of the earth were made drunk with the wine of her fornication” (verses 1-2). This system is pictured with “a golden cup full of abominations and the filthiness of her fornication” (verse 4). Horrifyingly, it is drunk with the blood of God’s saints (verse 6). God says he has a new cup for this system to drink (Habakkuk 2:16)—one of retribution (verse 17). Babylon itself will be attacked and defiled and ultimately revealed as uncircumcised—despite its claim to being the spiritually circumcised church of God. The “Lebanon” of verse 17 most likely refers to Jerusalem (see again the highlights on Jeremiah 22:10-17). What Babylon has done to God’s people will be done to Babylon in return.

The fifth stanza (verses 18-20) condemns the idolatry of Babylon. Even today, the system of worship descended from ancient Babylon still venerates idolatrous images. In contrast to lifeless idols, God is very much alive in His holy temple in heaven—from where He sees everything and hears the constant din of billions of false prayers to false concepts of divinity. God orders everyone to just “shut up” (see verse 20)—for judgment is about to fall (compare Zephaniah 1:7; Zechariah 2:13).

The Psalm of Habakkuk (Habakkuk 3)

June 29

Habakkuk 3 is a prayer of Habakkuk arranged as a psalm. Observe, for instance, the musical term *Selah* in verses 3, 9 and 13 (which may denote a musical rest or interlude) and the liturgical note at the end of verse 19, “To the Chief Musician,” which occurs in the heading of 55 psalms, and “With my stringed instruments,” which essentially appears in the heading of several psalms. In verse 1, *Shigionoth* is apparently the plural of *Shiggaion*, which occurs in the heading of Psalm 7. “The word *shiggayon* comes from *shagah*, ‘to wander,’ a wandering song” (*Adam Clarke’s Commentary*, note on Psalm 7; see note on Habakkuk 3:1). It is “apparently an indication of the musical setting to be employed for this poem. It may derive from a verbal root meaning ‘to reel’ or ‘to err,’ and if so points to some irregular rhythmic mode. At all events, as when such words occur in Psalm titles, it points to the use of this hymn in Temple worship” (*New Bible Commentary*, note on verse 1).

Having heard the details of God’s coming judgment, Habakkuk is sobered and states his concern (verse 2)—apparently for his own people but perhaps also for the rest of mankind, even including the Babylonians. While he asks that God revive His mighty works of old “in these years” (same verse, Tanakh)—that He would act soon to set things right—He pleads with God to exercise mercy in the dealing out of His judgment.

Habakkuk then reviews some of God’s awesome works of the past: His appearance in great power and might at Mount Sinai and His judgments through the wilderness wanderings (verses 3-7), His division of the Red Sea to save His people and destroy the Egyptians and perhaps His division of the Jordan River so the Israelites could invade Canaan (verses 8-10), His judgment on other nations when He intervened for Israel in battle (verses 11-15). “These poetic descriptions are intended to pull away the veil of space and time and look beyond the material universe to sense God’s elemental power unleashed in judgment.... The specific incidents in which God’s anger flared are only hinted at.... What we are to realize is that the historical events, as terrible as they are...pale when compared to the burning anger of God which the material universe currently conceals. How awful it will be for those who one day experience that anger face-to-face” (*Bible Reader’s Companion*, note on verses 3-15).

The prophet trembles at the prospect of people having to face the unleashed power of the Creator (verse 16). But he then states that he will stand through whatever may come—making him an example to others of living faith (verses 17-19). Habakkuk “now trembles and melts with fear as he seems to hear the on-coming march of...God. The end of the verse [i.e., 16] seems full of paradox. How can he *tremble* and *totter* and at the same time quietly wait with an apparently assured calm? [Continuing in verses] 17-18 His assurance is born of the living faith which these verses so

beautifully express. Though everything which, humanly speaking, supports life may fail, yet he can now *rejoice in the Lord*. Personal faith is the practical answer to life's discontents. The contemplation of the history of God with His people, that all His deeds are 'for the salvation of thy people' (v. 13), now leads the prophet to rejoice *in the God of my salvation*. [Concluding in verse] 19 Thus Habakkuk has discovered the answer to his initial questioning, and his deep contentment with the answer is expressed in the testimony that *he makes my feet like hinds' feet*. He feels as if he is 'walking on air,' so light-hearted and sure-footed is he. Not even the most trying *high places* (cf. Dt. 32:13) through which life's path may lead can daunt the man of faith" (*New Bible Commentary*, notes on verses 16-18).

Let us all keep this focus as we face the difficult times ahead. For beyond them lie better days than mankind has ever seen.

The Battle of Carchemish (Jeremiah 46:1-12)

June 30

Jeremiah 46:1 introduces a section of prophecies against other nations (Jeremiah 46–51), starting with Egypt. Though grouped together, these various prophecies were actually delivered at different times, as some of them are clearly dated. Jeremiah 46 contains two prophecies against Egypt, but we are reading only the first one, relating to the battle of Carchemish. (The second prophecy appears to have been given in a later context.)

Recall that in 609 B.C., just after the death of Josiah, Babylonian-led forces under King Nabopolassar "repelled the Assyrians and their Egyptian allies [under Pharaoh Necho] who attempted to recapture Haran, and drove them west across the Euphrates River. For the next three years the Babylonians were preoccupied with the task of dealing with Urartu [Armenia] in order to open trade routes and secure the northern frontiers. [It was during this time that Syria and Judah became Egyptian-controlled territories, Jehoiakim of Judah serving as a vassal king under Necho.] At last Nabopolassar turned to the only remaining Assyrian stronghold, Carchemish, and in 605 defeated Assyria once and for all and forced Egypt to withdraw from north Syria. This major blow at Carchemish was struck not by Nabopolassar personally, but by his young son and commander in chief, Nebuchadnezzar [who would very shortly become king of Babylon]. Not satisfied with the defeat of Neco and his Egyptian hosts, the energetic prince pursued them across the Euphrates and all the way to Hamath" (Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel*, p. 450).

This is the historical context of the events described in the first prophecy of Jeremiah 46. It appears to have been recorded here after the fact (compare verse 2) but originally spoken or written by Jeremiah at the very time the battle of Carchemish was being engaged (compare verses 3-10). Perhaps God gave the prophet a vision of what was actually occurring far away.

Until 1956, the "battle of Carchemish" rested entirely on biblical evidence, although Greek records indicated a major struggle. Then, in 1956, J.D. Wiseman discovered a Babylonian tablet that gave details of the battle, confirming the Biblical account. "In [Leonard] Woolley's excavations at Carchemish a large private house was examined and produced finds bearing on these times. Bronze figurines of Egyptian gods...[and] clay seals...bearing the name of Necho himself came to light, thus giving mute evidence of the presence of the Egyptians there" (Emil Kraeling, *Rand McNally Bible Atlas*, 1956, p. 312).

Verses 3-4 show the proud, well-armed force of Necho coming forward only to turn and flee in verse 5. In verse 6, God orders pursuit by the Babylonians of the fleeing force. Verses 7-10 then recap the scene. Egypt's army surges forward like a flooding river (verses 7-8). "The figure is appropriate in addressing Egyptians, as the Nile, their great river, yearly overspreads their lands with a turbid, muddy flood. So their army, swelling with arrogance, shall overspread the region south of Euphrates; but it, like the Nile, shall retreat as fast as it advanced" (*Jamieson, Fausset & Brown's Commentary*, note on verse 7). Verse 9 mentions foreign mercenary forces serving in the Egyptian army.

Verse 10 declares that the Egyptian defeat is God's vengeance—perhaps for the death of Josiah. The "day of the LORD" reference here is also interesting to consider. While it applied to the immediate situation of Necho's defeat, perhaps it also referred to events far in the future. We know from other prophecies that Egypt, Ethiopia and Libya of the end time will be devastated by an invading force from the north, the final successor of ancient Babylon (see Daniel 11:40-43).

In verses 11-12 of Jeremiah 46, the Egyptian army is told to go to Gilead for its famous healing balm. Perhaps this was telling the Egyptians to retreat south (where Gilead was in relation to Carchemish) and nurse their wounds, as they actually did in a way, fleeing south to Hamath, their Syrian headquarters. But there was no cure for them as God was behind their defeat. The Egyptian

forces were unable to hold out at Hamath and again fled south. The reference to the balm of Gilead is similar to the one in Jeremiah 8:22, where God uses it as an illustration to His own people that there is no healing for those who rebel against Him. Certainly God is no respecter of persons, so the Egyptians would suffer the same humiliation that Judah had. And so will the enemies of God's people in the end time.

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