

LIVING WATER  
Jeremiah 2: 4 - 13

August 28, 2016

We have not talked about Jeremiah very much before and it is no wonder because it is a very complicated story, one that not even the Biblical historians can seem to get straight. It seems that it is difficult to know Jeremiah's exact line of descent though, really, for our purposes, it doesn't matter too much. What matters is that he was a prophet living in a time of intense turmoil and difficulty, that he spoke during the last years of the 7th century BC (610 - 600) and the first years of the sixth century BC (until sometime after 586). This was the time during which the power of the Babylonian Empire became more and more threatening to Judah culminating in the siege of Jerusalem in 598-597. Desperate and unsuccessful attempts by the people of Judah to free themselves and to ally themselves with Egypt followed and eventually many, including a reluctant Jeremiah, escaped into Egypt. In his writings Jeremiah relies on the theme of the covenant between God and the people of Judah and Jerusalem, and he sees it as one that can be broken because of the people's persistent apostasy. He casts the people as unfaithful wives and rebellious children, making judgement virtually inevitable, at least in Old Testament terms. As much as that is so, however, anguish and anger is everywhere in God as spoken by the prophet, Jeremiah.

In our passage that we read today, God says that the ancestors, whom he brought out of exodus in Egypt, did not worship false gods even though

they had to travel through terrible times. Their faithfulness was a witness to the faithfulness of God who delivered his people from oppression. Their experience of the wilderness is described in the harshest of terms, “in a land of deserts and pits, in a land of drought and deep darkness”, yet their faith held firm.

Eventually God brought the people to a land greater ease, “a plentiful land to eat its fruits and its good things.” Once they got there, however, the relative luxury of their existence seems to have made them forget to whom they should be grateful, and God complains, “but when you entered (the new lands) you defiled my land and made my heritage an abomination.” And eventually he goes on to complain that “my people... have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.”

There we are - the people have forsaken the fountain of living water! How familiar does that sound to us this week here in America, dotted with water tragedies. Flooded in southern Louisiana and afire in southern California because of drought. And we are not is a dissimilar situation from the the people of ancient Israel. Living water rains, runs, flows and swirls. It washes away impurity, transports nutrients, constitutes leaf and stem, blood and bone. Where water flows, life abounds. Where water stagnates, disease takes hold. Where there is no water, life cannot even begin. As today, so in ancient times, the climate of Israel was defined by a rainy season (winter) and a dry season (summer). If one did not live by living water, such as a spring, in the summer, life could be hard. Israel's Iron Age was a time of technical innovation making use of terracing and iron plow=points to facilitate agricultural intensification and geographical

expansion. They were also finding it possible to move into highland areas previously uninhabitable because of the use of cisterns. In Israel's central highlands, settlers hewed bell shaped cisterns from bedrock in order to collect and store surplus water from the rainy winter for use during the arid summer. The cistern's bell shape, with a narrow opening and wide well, protected the water within from contamination and evaporation. In places where the bedrock was formed predominantly from chalk, the chalk formed a natural seal when wet, further minimizing water loss. Elsewhere, cisterns could be sealed with a plaster compound made from slaked lime to prevent water from seeping out into the bedrock.\*

So here is the technology, the idolatry that God is railing against. God is saying that he is the true and living water and that the cisterns, once cracked, can hold nothing, are false idols. What is needed is the protection, the worship of the true and living water, that without that, all the cisterns in the world will give them nothing. And, of course that is true, and we know it well.

What have we done with our own water? The God of Jeremiah would (or is) surely having a tantrum. We've dammed our rivers, put levees along their banks, cities on the edges of rivers, oceans and lakes. We've let sewage and pollutants meander into every bit of water available. The boats and ships that we have created have often spewed gas, oil and garbage into the bodies of water that they've been lucky enough to wander about upon. The technologies upon which we have built our cities and our modes of transportation and our factories have for the longest time ignored the water (and the air too) that has surrounded us and upon which we have

depended for our lives. We have so literally done exactly what Jeremiah has told his people that God has said in this piece of the Old Testament. We have “forsaken the living water” which is what God says that he is, in favor of all the things that we found that we could make, the machines and buildings, and, of course the treasure, the money that came with it. We have forsaken that living water in favor of the fascination, perhaps even the idolatry of our own creativity.

This rant in Jeremiah is about idolatry, for though God has rescued his people and brought them out of slavery in Egypt, through the wilderness and into the land of plenty, even so they ignore him and turn to celebrate other gods and false idols of their own creation, as symbolized by these cisterns that are not the living water which is God. This is a metaphor it seems for not looking for the true God, and often it is said in this passage, mournfully “They did not say, ‘where is the Lord?’”

It happens so often when I read these scriptural passages that I find them fitting perfectly to situations we are in today. Of course, I am looking for these parallels, but how wonderful it is to see something from the 7th century BC about water technology being the comeuppance of mankind, and that being a warning from a prophet of God. And here we are, 27 centuries later still investing in technologies that often foster disastrous results, often because we think that they are good, that they are the right thing to do. Sometimes if we had just left the river alone and not raised that levee, if we had not built that extra housing development, dug that one more mine, perhaps we would have avoided disaster. But we thought we

were doing it all for good, for the advancement of humankind - maybe. Maybe a little bit for greed and ego too.

But Jeremiah is telling us to look beyond what humans can create to what was there before, to respect the origins, for if not, there will be trouble as we have seen in the past two weeks - forest fires and floods and more I am sure. The cisterns of which Jeremiah speaks can only be false idols if we worship them - the important thing to remember is that it is the water inside them that is to be revered. It is that which we live on, that which keeps us and the planet alive and healthy, juicy and replenished. If we can find ways to aid in maintaining that condition, so much the better, but so often what we do just gets in the way. Rather ask, "Where is the Lord?" and that way we will be seeking the original condition of things, how the living water ran.

Let us pray: Lord, help us to keep in our mind and our heart the reverence for the true order of things, knowing that it is the living water upon which we depend, which you have given us, and which is the source of life.

Amen

\*Callaway, Joseph A., "A New Perspective on the Hill Country Settlement of Canaan in Iron Age I,"