

At the Potter's House

Jeremiah's Second Symbolic Action

18: 1-17

DIG: What does Jeremiah see in the potter's house? How does the nature of the clay determine the quality of the pot and what it's used for? Are God's plans set in "concrete" or "wet clay?" How much does the LORD mold people, and how much do people mold themselves (Romans 9:19-23)? What point is YHVH trying to make about the conditional nature of His decrees (oaths) and announcements? How does the nature of the clay determine if the potter can use it? Why do the people continually ignore Jeremiah? What sense does the prophet try to make of their stubbornness?

REFLECT: What universal pattern in the way ADONAI deals with people is seen in these verses? In what ways is this application of the message of the potter and the clay directed at you? Have the promises to Isra'el been transferred to the Church? If Isra'el could sin and lose her salvation, can you lose your salvation by sinning?

605 BC during the eleven-year reign of Jehoiakim

The one main point to Jeremiah's second symbolic action (what might be called a parable in action) is that ADONAI is sovereign in all things. He will do to Isra'el, just as the potter does to the clay.

"It is indeed by analogy that I believe the mind makes its richest movements, and it is by analogy that I believe the mind makes its deepest use of what it has understood; or at any rate I believe this to be an appropriate way of looking at the labor of the mind in a society, like ours, without a fixed character, and operating under a revelation which turns out to have been imperfectly understood. It is through analogy, if at all, that the falcon can again hear the falconer, that things can come together again, and that again the center can hold."

R. P. Blackmur, *The Lion and the Honeycomb* ¹⁷⁴

The indictment: Yirmeyahu was always attentive and sensitive to God's direction and he tells us: This is the word that came to Jeremiah from ADONAI (18:1). God's task, through Jeremiah, was this: How can I get these people to take Me seriously, right where they are? How can I get them to see that I am working, right now, silently and invisibly, but surely and eternally, in their lives and in their history? How can I get them to see the connections between what they are doing now and who they will be in ten years - in twenty

years? How can **I** get them to see the continuities between what **I** did in Abraham and Moses and David and what they are now? How can **I** get them out of their tedious egos into my glorious will here and now?

Go down to the potter's house, and there I will give you My message (18:2). The metaphor of **the potter** and **the clay** leads us to expect an unmistakable claim of **YHWH's** sovereignty. **He** said: **Go down** to the grocery store, **go down** to the computer store, **go down** to the car dealership. **Go** where the necessary, everyday work is taking place. Today, **God** would have probably sent **His prophet** to a gas station. In seventh-century **Isra'el** **the potter's house** was a fixture in every community. **The potter** was a craftsman and everyone knew where **he** lived. **His** craft was familiar to everyone, whose work was necessary for the maintenance of everyday life. **Pottery** made it possible for communities to develop.

So I went down to the potter's house and I saw him working at the wheel, literally the two stones (18:3). **The apparatus consisted of two circular stones; the lower was worked by the feet and connected with the upper stone, which supported the clay, by a vertical axis. The upper stone rotated when pressure was applied to the pedal.** **Jeremiah** was obedient.

The prophet watched **the potter** at work, sitting at **the wheel** with a formless lump of **clay** on it. **He** turned **the wheel** and with skilled fingers shaped **the clay**. A little pressure here, more there, and a **pot** began to rise out of the shapeless lump. It is rather common in the Scriptures to use the example of **the potter and the clay** to teach spiritual truths (**Job 10:9 and 33:6, Psalm 2:9; Isaiah 19:16, 45:9, 64:8; Romans 9:20-23; Revelation 2:27**). The primary point, the main spiritual truth that **God** teaches with this symbolic action is **His** sovereignty. But the secondary point is the longsuffering of **ADONAI**.

But, in the heart of the parable, **the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands**. An experienced potter makes few mistakes, and in this case we are talking about **the divine Potter**, who makes no mistakes. But if **the clay** is imperfect, **the potter's** "hands are tied." That point was well illustrated in **Chapter 17**. **He** knew about the **marred** vessels - men and women with impurities and blemishes that resist the shaping hand of **the Potter**. **The prophet** rubbed shoulders daily with people who were not useful: imperfections made their lives leak, holding neither wine nor water; a failure of proportion made their lives wobble or tip, unstable and undependable. But **Yirmeyahu** had other words for it . . . sin, rebellion, self-will, wandering. But **he** never had such a striking image for it.

Jeremiah continued to observe. What would **the potter** do now? Kick **the wheel** and go off and sulk? Throw **the clay** at the wall and go to the market and buy another **pot**? Neither. **Subsequently, the potter shattered his pot and once again (shuwv) formed the marred**

clay into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him (18:4). The potter kneads and presses, pushes and pulls. As long as the clay was soft he could mold it into anything he wanted. If it didn't come out as he wanted it to, remolding it was possible. The creative work starts all over again, patiently and skillfully. YHVH doesn't give up. God doesn't throw away soft hearts. Storms are the triumph of His art. But if the clay became hard (as Y'hudah had become) it couldn't be useful any longer, the thing the potter could do was shatter it. Ultimately, the final verdict rested with the potter.

The symbolism is now spelled out. YHVH is the Potter. Then the word of the LORD came to me. Hope and warning joined hand with His message, saying: Can I not do with you, Isra'el, as this potter does? declares ADONAI. Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in My hand, Yisra'el (18:5-6). Therefore, the interpretation of the potter and the clay was national.

In order to clarify and emphasize the point that the character of the clay determines what the potter can do with it, two illustrations are given . . . the first positive and the second negative. On the one hand, if at any time (Hebrew: *rega*, meaning *suddenly*) I suddenly announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and, on the other hand, if that nation I warned turns (*shuwb*) from their evil, then I will relent (Hebrew: *nacham*) and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned (see the commentary on *Jonah Ax - The Ninevites Believed God*). These are perhaps the best passages in all the TaNaKh concerning the problem often raised about the nature of God. That is to say, how is it possible for a changeless God, to change His mind? Isn't God someone who never changes? Has God's nature changed? No! God's nature never changes. He is always holy, loving, kind, merciful, just . . . God's attitude changes when the attitude of the people changes. God mercifully responds to the people's change of heart so that He no longer needs to send the promised discipline, because they have already changed. YHVH is sovereign and His plans change according to the people's heart changes. (18:7-8).

Unfortunately, various English versions of the Bible translate the Hebrew verb *nacham* as "repent," and this, quite naturally, creates difficulties for many readers. Is it possible for ADONAI to repent? They say to themselves, "I thought only sinners need to repent." However, the term repent conveys the idea of a change of behavior from worse to better, the Hebrew verb *niham* refers rather to a decision to act otherwise, and does not necessarily imply that the first action is inferior to the second.¹⁷⁵ The English verb *relent* conveys a better meaning of the Hebrew. Furthermore, as *Jeremiah 18:8* makes clear, prophetic pronouncements of judgment were not absolute, but conditional.

But the opposite is also true. **And if at another time** (Hebrew: *rega*) **I suddenly announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in My sight and does not obey Me, then I will reconsider that good I had intended to do for it (18:9-10).** No ominous prediction is set in concrete dooming us. No rosy promise is license to lazy indifference. **The LORD** has the same kind of control over us as **the potter** has over **the clay**. **The clay** can frustrate **the potter's** intension and cause **him** to change it: as the quality of **the clay** determines what **the potter** can do with it, so the quality of a **people** determines what **God** can do with **them**.¹⁷⁶ In other words, **His** nature does not change, but **the people** to whom **He** had made an announcement have changed.

In **Numbers 23:19** Moshe said that **YHVH** is not man that **He** should repent, in the sense of changing **His** mind. But **the LORD's** response to a changed condition in the conduct of mankind has always followed certain eternal principles. **ADONAI** does act differently toward mankind when they turn from disobedience to obedience. And because **Ha'Shem** has always been consistent with those principles, in reality, there has been no actual change of mind on **God's** part. It only appears that way from our point of view.

So under what conditions does **ADONAI** retract a statement or deviate from a course of action? Under what conditions does He refuse to do so? In the TaNaKh not all statements of intention are the same. Some are **decrees** or **oaths** that are unconditional and bind **the LORD** to **His** stated course of action. In each case **God's** refusal to retract a statement refers or applies directly to a specific decree identified in the context - **His** blessing of **Isra'el** in accordance with the Abrahamic Covenant (**Numbers 23:19**), **His** rejection of disobedient Sha'ul (**First Samuel 15:29**), **His** oath to make the Davidic king a royal-priesthood (**Psalm 110:4**), and **His** decision to judge Judah (**Jeremiah 4:28; Ezekiel 24:14; Zechariah 8:14**). Each passage has clear contextual indicators that the decree is unconditional. The statement that **Ha'Shem** will not change **His** mind, made in tandem with a synonymous expression, formally marks the divine proclamation as a decree or oath.

Others, which may be labeled **announcements**, retain a conditional element and do not necessarily bind **YHVH** to a stated course of action (**Exodus 32-12-14; Amos 7:3-6; Jeremiah 15:6, 18:8 and 10, 26:3, 13 and 19; Jonah 3:4b**). These verses clearly show that **YHVH** can and often does relent and retract **His** announcements as the result of human repentance and change of heart. So does **God** change **His** mind? It all depends on us.¹⁷⁷

Now therefore say to the people of Judah and those living in Jerusalem, this is what the LORD says: Look! I am preparing a disaster for you and devising a plan against you. So turn (**shuwb**) from your evil ways of spiritual adultery, each one of you, and reform [turn around, or repent (**shuwb**)] your ways and your actions. But what was Israel's decision regarding God's warning? They all replied, "It's no use (or it's too late). They had already told Jeremiah that in 2:25. It was like they were saying: We have chosen our own path. Each one will continue to follow our own plans; we will all follow the stubbornness of our evil hearts (18:11-12 also see Judges 21:25). The clay now can take no action free of the potter.

Judah's plan is a plan of stubbornness that refuses the reality of ADONAI's sovereignty. Such a refusal ends in death. Eventually the potter will have to remold it. As the potter shapes the clay, so YHVH shapes a death sentence for Judah.

The sentence: Isra'el was found in a shocking situation. God was asking: **Inquire among the Gentile nations, who has ever heard the things Isra'el was guilty of?** Building on His legal case already made in 2:9-13, He declares that even though the Gentile nations had continually practiced idolatry, none of them had exchanged their gods for another. Assyria always followed their own gods; Egypt was always loyal to her own gods . . . and they were not even gods to begin with! But Isra'el, who at one time had worshiped the one true God had exchanged the LORD for meaningless idols. He concludes that **a most horrible thing has been done by Virgin Isra'el (18:13).**

As a result, Isra'el had shown herself to be inconsistent, compared to the consistency of nature. Does the cold water of the mountains fail to make its way down into the valley below? No. **Do its cool waters** (because it comes from **the snow of the Lebanon Mountains** and Mount Hermon) **ever dry up from their rocky slopes** like many other waters in Isra'el (18:14)? No! The point is that nature always finds its own way and can be depended upon. Isra'el, however, goes her own unnatural way and cannot be depended upon. So Israel's unnatural ways are pointed out. The poem moves from nature to human behavior.

As a result, the *application* was personal. Forgetting YHVH reduces the Land to vulnerability and the people to deep humiliation. **Yet My people have forgotten Me** (in a passive way); **they burn incense to worthless idols** (in an active way), **which made them stumble in their ways, in the ancient paths. They made them walk in byways, on roads not built up (18:15).**

Future generations will **shake their heads** that any **people** could ever have done such a thing to **themselves**. Their Land will be an object of horror and of lasting scorn; all who pass by will be appalled and will shake their heads. **This is the inevitable result of abandoning the paths ordained by God**. The judgment itself is eventual dispersion. **Like a wind from the east, I will scatter them before their enemies; I will show them My back and not My face in the day of their disaster (18:16-17)**. These verses are talking about **near historical** discipline, not **far eschatological** abandonment. The promises to Yisra'el have *not* been transferred to the Church. Replacement theology is a false system. Our salvation cannot be lost (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Ms - The Eternal Security of the Believer**), and Isra'el's national salvation cannot be lost because we know that **all the righteous of the TaNaKh** at the end of the Great Tribulation **will be saved** (see the commentary on **Revelation Ev - The Basis for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ**).

This is one of **Jeremiah's** most powerful sermons. The image captured the attention of people of faith everywhere. Not the least of the reasons for its effectiveness is that **Yirmeyahu** experienced it before **he** preached it. For no act of imagination, prophetic or artistic, is powerful if it does not come from within. And this one had been bothering **the prophet** for a long time.

The first word that **Jeremiah** heard from **Ha'Shem** was: **Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you (1:5)**. The verb **formed** is *yatzar*. Then, as **Yirmeyahu** was preparing to set an image before the people by which they could understand themselves in their relation to their **God**, **he** stood in **the house** of the *yotzer*, **the potter**. The word by which **the priest from Anathoth** first learned to understand **his** own life, *yatzar*, was the word that was then being used to let the people understand their lives. **God shaped Jeremiah; God is shaping the people. God is the Potter (a yotzer) working at His wheel of Yirmeyahu the lump of clay; He forms (yatzar) them. The prophet preached to the people what he had actually lived himself. He** had been on that **potter's wheel** from before **his** birth.

No word would mean more to **Yirmeyahu** than this one. **Formed** by **ADONAI**. **Jeremiah** experienced **his** life as the created work of **God**. **He** was not a random accumulation of cells; loving, skilled hands formed **him**. **He** wasn't a potentiality of material just waiting for the lucky time when **he** could, by asserting **his** will make something of **his** life; **he** was already made something by **YHVH**, formed for **His** purposes. It is the same for you and I. For us it means being thrown on **the potter's wheel** and shaped, every area of our lives, into something useful and beautiful. And when we are not useful or beautiful we are reshaped. Painful . . . but worth it.¹⁷⁸