

The Covenant is Broken

11: 1-17

DIG: When did God and Isra'el make the terms of this covenant, especially those dealing with cursed is the man (Deuteronomy 27:15-26)? What happened in the reign of Josiah to renew such interest in the covenant (Second Kings 22:8-13, 23:1-3)? What did YHVH promise to do for Isra'el? What was their land of milk and honey (Exodus 3:8)? What was their part of the agreement? How are the people of Judah responding to Josiah's and Jeremiah's call (11:9-13)? Again, Yirmeyahu is forbidden to pray for Judah (7:16). Why (see First John 5:16-17)? What is the point of the covenant when Isra'el never keeps it? What curses are coming if she doesn't obey (Deuteronomy 28:15-68)? What is Judah doing to try to win the LORD's favor (11:15, 7:10-11, 21-24)? Can anything change ADONAI's mind at this point (11:11 and 14)? Is that fair?

REFLECT: Think of one promise that you have kept for a long time and another promise that you broke. How do you feel about the broken promise? Why is it important to you to keep your promises? When did YHVH and Isra'el make the terms of this covenant? Is it ever too late with ADONAI for a believer? Is God the God of second chances? Does that mean the LORD will never discipline us for our sin? Does Ha'Shem's patience ever run out for your country?

During the reign of Josiah

Exhortation to obey the covenant: These verses are an initial summons to the prophet to articulate the covenant and its demands. This is the word that came to Jeremiah from ADONAI. Listen to the words of this covenant which YHVH made with Isra'el when they left Egypt, and tell them to the people of Judah and to those who live in Jerusalem (11:1-2). Initially, the covenant was the scroll of Deuteronomy that was discovered when good king Josiah had the Temple renovated (see Ai - Josiah Ruled For 31 Years from 640 to 609 BC). Once the scroll of Deuteronomy had been made public, Jeremiah began his ministry by calling the people to obey it. Deuteronomy is the culmination of the Torah and it repeats many of the commandments already found in Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers. So the covenant here ultimately points to Mt. Sinai. This was done, not merely for repetition, but the 365 prohibitions and 248 commandments were put into a covenantal agreement (following the standard covenant system of the ancient world between a king and his subjects). These king-vassal covenants contained specific conditions, requirements for obedience.

The seriousness of this **covenant** and its required **obedience** is clear in the warning of the next verse. The one who violates it is **cursed**. Tell them that this is what the **LORD, the God of Isra'el**, says: **Cursed is the one who does not obey the words of this covenant (11:3)**. **A very forceful opening to the address made necessary by the rebellion of the people**. This verse is mentioned four times in the scroll of **Deuteronomy (Deuteronomy 11:28; 27:15-26, 28:15-19 and 29:20-22)**.

The words of this covenant that **I commanded your ancestors when I brought them out of Egypt, out of the iron-smelting furnace (11:4a)**. The phrase: **out of Egypt, out of the iron-smelting furnace** is used only three times in the TaNaKh, each time at a critical juncture. It is found in **Deuteronomy 4:20, First Kings 8:51** and here. **Judah and Jerusalem** are required to listen (**Exodus 19:5-9; Deuteronomy 6:4 and 15:5**). **ADONAI** continued: **Obey Me and do everything I command you, and you will be My people and I will be your God**. But listening is not simply an auditory response, but requires obedient action. **Then I will fulfill the oath I swore to your ancestors, to give them a land flowing with milk and honey . . . and the land you possess today (11:4b-5)**.

Past disobedience to the covenant: The **LORD** said to me: **Proclaim all these words in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem**. So **Yirmeyahu** proclaimed: **Listen to the words of this covenant and follow them**. There had been past disobedience by the descendants of the present generation. **From the time I brought your ancestors up from Egypt until today, I warned them persistently, saying, "obey Me."** This was the message of all the prophets preceding **Jeremiah**. **But the problem was that their ancestors did not listen or pay attention; instead, they followed the stubbornness of their evil hearts (Numbers 14)**. **So I brought on them all the curses of the covenant I had commanded them to follow but that they did not keep (11:6-8)**. There was drought and lack of prosperity. **They did not get the production and joy out of the land in which they lived**.

Present disobedience to the covenant: Although **King Josiah** forced outer conformity to the covenant; his reform did not penetrate the hearts of the people in any lasting way. After **Josiah** died the people returned to their idolatrous ways. **Then ADONAI** said to me: **There is a conspiracy among the people of Judah and those who live in Jerusalem to abandon the covenant (11:9)**. **The idolatry had become so widespread that it was though all the people had deliberately conspired to renounce their allegiance to God**.

Then the details of their conspiracy are revealed. Instead of heeding the words of **Jeremiah** they have returned (**shuwb**) to the sins of their ancestors, who refused to listen to **God's** words. Six times the word **listen** is used in this brief message, always in the sense of **obey**. **They have followed other gods to serve them**. Both the northern kingdom of **Isra'el** and the southern kingdom of **Judah** have broken the covenant I made with

their ancestors (11:10). They refused to listen, they served other gods, and broke the covenant. Now as a result, YHVH will not listen. Y'hudah's deliberate decision to follow after idols assured her doom.

Therefore this is what the LORD says: I will bring on them a disaster they cannot escape. Although they cry out to Me, I will not listen to them. Although "the gates of tears are never shut" (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Berakhot 32b), that is only true when the tears express true repentance. The towns of Judah and the people of Jerusalem will to and cry out to the gods to whom they burn incense, but by then it will be too late to avoid judgment and their idols of wood and stone will not help them at all when disaster strikes (11:11-12).

Then He returned to the indictment, this time in direct address. You, Judah, have as many gods as you have towns and the altars you have set up to burn incense to that shameful god Ba'al are as many as the streets of Jerusalem (11:13). This shift from the third person to the second person makes best sense in view of the readers in exile. Those sitting captive in Babylon might be tempted to distance themselves from the indictment of the preceding verses, but this verse brings it home to them personally. This infidelity was not someone else's problem . . . it's yours! They would not be able to escape into the proverb, the fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge (31:30) and charge YHVH with unfairness.

Jeremiah was ordered by ADONAI not to pray for his people because they were under judgment (7:16, 11:14 and 14:11). The LORD recognized that much, if not all, of Jeremiah's report to the people would fall on deaf ears and hearts. God said: Do not pray for this people or offer any plea or petition for them, because of the perversion of the covenant I will not listen when they call to Me in the time of their distress (11:14). I certainly will not accept any of your prayers, Jeremiah, on their behalf.

Why would it be necessary or important for Ha'Shem to prohibit intercession? Couldn't God just ignore whatever prayers Yirmeyahu happened to offer? One possible reason is that the command seeks to bring the prophet into harmony with God's will for the situation. After all, YHVH had determined that judgment was inevitable; therefore, Jeremiah should speak and act accordingly. Prohibiting intercession was one way of doing that. It would not be good to have the Potter at odds with the clay, especially because the Eternal One takes our prayers very seriously when charting the future.

At the same time, one recalls a comparable instruction that ADONAI gave to Moshe in the wake of the golden calf debacle (see the commentary on Exodus 6s - Now Leave Me Alone So That My Anger May Burn Against Your People): Leave Me alone! But Moses didn't

leave God alone, and it made a great deal of difference. Might the repeated instruction to Yirmeyahu be comparably understood? What if Jeremiah had prayed? Who knows? The repetition of the prohibition over the course several chapters (7:16, 11:14, 14:11, 15:1), however, suggests that the situation was quite different from that of the time of Moshe. The tsunami of sin in Y'udah's life had risen to the point where prayers were useless. Her heart was too hard; her judgment was inevitable.

The absence of intercessory prayer by Yirmeyahu also gave the readers in exile another factor to consider regarding the "why?" of the fall of Yerushalayim. The fault could not be laid at the feet of the prophet, as if to say, "If only Jeremiah had interceded on our behalf, this would not have happened!" The LORD here makes clear that He commanded His messenger not to pray for them and, to reinforce the point, God even refused to listen to their prayers.⁸¹

The perversion of the covenant: What is My beloved (a term of endearment applied to the wife of YHVH) doing in My Temple as she, with many others, works out her vile schemes (Ezeki'el 8:1-18)? But because of all her adulteries, she really has no business in the Temple of ADONAI. Can consecrated meat avert your punishment? The external demands of the Torah were perverted because they had no inward reality. It is when you are doing evil that you are happy. God called you an olive tree, beautiful, full of leaves and good fruit. But now because of the coming judgment, with the roar of a mighty storm the LORD set it on fire, and its branches are broken (11:15-16).

This rebellious people had forfeited their right to approach God, and no ritual activity would compensate. Access to the throne of life was denied. The olive tree was then only a dead tree ready for burning. ADONAI-Tzva'ot, who planted you, has decreed evil (Hebrew: *rah*) for you. This is a prophetic perfect, meaning a verb tense that describes a future event as being so certain to happen that it is referred to in past tense as if it already happened. Why? Because the people of both Yisra'el and Y'udah have done evil (Hebrew: *rah*) and aroused My anger by burning incense to Ba'al (11:16-17). Twice in these verses Jeremiah uses the Hebrew word *rah* for evil in two different senses: in the case of Yisra'el, evil in the sense of *sin* . . . in the case of God, evil in the sense of *calamity*. In effect, Y'udah committed *sin*, so God pronounced *calamity*.

Like us, Judah's relationship with God sustained her. That decisive relationship was about to be nullified. When it went, everything went. Y'udah would abandon her Partner and so would be dangerously exposed to the Gentile nations. On the covenant relation guaranteed a stream of blessing. Without it, like us, she would be in acute jeopardy.