

A Linen Loincloth

Jeremiah's Fifth Symbolic Action

13: 1-11

DIG: What physical demonstration did God require of Jeremiah as a lesson to the people? What images do you see in this parable? Why a linen loincloth? Why did he need to hide it? Why did it need to be completely useless? What does the parable mean? Why does the LORD use an object lesson?

REFLECT: Have there been times in your life when YHVH used actions to speak louder than words? What happened? How did the message get through? Jeremiah obeyed ADONAI instantly, without questioning. How willing are you to go along with things that you don't understand? Do you need to see how things will turn out before making a step? We try to convey God's message through words and deeds. Which is easier for you? In what ways might one without the other confuse people? How would you share Ha'Shem's message more clearly?

598 BC during the three-month reign of Jehoiachin

**The one main point to the fifth symbolic action
(what might be called a parable in action)
is that Isra'el had become as useless to God as a rotten loincloth.**

The narrative is characterized by two parts - **the action** and its **interpretation**.

The action: This is what the LORD said to Yirmeyahu: **Go and buy a linen loincloth (not a sash) and put it around your waist (13:1a)**. This is similar to 19:1, where Jeremiah is told to **go and buy a clay jar from a potter**. This was a common undergarment like a loincloth that men wore around the hips reaching midway to the thighs. The word that Jeremiah uses for loincloth is used only six other times in the Bible, but Jeremiah uses it eight times. This linen loincloth was a symbol of the priestly calling (**Leviticus 16:4**). The common man, however, would have been intimately familiar with the fit and purpose of a loincloth, making the symbolism of this passage accessible to the whole Israelite community.

But do not let it touch water (13:1b). If it were worn properly the loincloth would last a long time, but if misused it becomes ruined and completely useless. I always imagine Jeremiah making a production out of the purchase, spending most of the afternoon bargaining with the shopkeeper (not in itself an unusual practice in the Near East) so that a

lot of people would know about the purchase. **So I bought a loincloth, as ADONAI directed, and put it around my waist (13:2).** This symbolized Judah's closeness and intimacy with YHVH. The word spread fast. "What is Yirmeyahu buying that fine linen loincloth for? What special event is coming up? What was he invited to that we weren't?"

Then the word of the LORD came to me a second time saying: **Take the loincloth you bought and are wearing around your waist, and go now to Perath and hide it there in a crevice in the rocks. Jeremiah made a show of wadding up this beautiful piece of clothing and sticking it in a rock crevice to keep it safe until a later time. So Yirmeyahu went and hid it at Perath, as ADONAI told him to do (13:3-5).**

Some have felt that Yirmeyahu walked to the Euphrates River, a round trip journey of about 700 miles, to bury this loincloth. Walking that distance twice would have taken three or four months. But the point of this symbolic action was that the people could see him perform it. But nobody was going to travel 700 miles to see Jeremiah bury a linen loincloth! The more likely scenario was that the prophet traveled to the village of Perath (usually translated Euphrates as in 51:63) about five miles northeast of Yerushalayim in the territory of the tribe of Benjamin (Joshua 18:21 and 23). A deep wadi in this area fits the description of the place with rocks and crevices. In Hebrew the spelling for to Perath and to Euphrates are identical (Hebrew: *peratah*). By using the location so close to home, the people were able to observe Jeremiah's symbolic action.²⁴²

Many days later the LORD said to me: **Go now back to the Perath and get the loincloth I told you to hide there. So I went to Perath and dug up the loincloth, as if to wear it for a special occasion, and took it from the place where I had hidden it, but (surprise, surprise) now it was ruined and completely useless (13:6-7). Jerusalem as a useless vine (Ezekiel 15:1-8). It was rotten and destroyed because of the exposure to the elements and insects.**

The interpretation: God interprets this for us so we won't miss the point. Then the word of ADONAI came to me. This is what the LORD says: **In the same way I will ruin the pride of Judah and the great pride of Jerusalem. These wicked people, who refuse to listen to My words, who follow stubbornness of their hearts and go after other gods to serve and worship them, will be like this loincloth - completely useless. For as a loincloth is bound around the waist, so I bound all the people of Isra'el and all the people of Judah to Me, declares the LORD, to be My people for My renown and praise and honor. But they have not listened and are totally corrupted (12:8-11). Just as the loincloth was ruined by the water, YHVH will ruin the pride of Y'hudah by means of Babylon.**

The people got the message: Isra'el was the loincloth that God wanted to wear, but she wasn't ready yet to be used for His purposes. She wanted to live an ordinary life first, so she wadded herself up and stuffed herself into the secure routines, separating herself from what God had at great cost purchased her for. But when the day comes it will turn out that she is good for nothing. The beautiful moral life that she set aside for a more convenient day will turn out, when she picks it up, to be mildewed and worthless.²⁴³