



Jeremiah 6.¹⁻⁶— Meditation

the prophetic voice

¹Seek refuge, you children of Binyamin,
outside Y^crûšalāyim.

In T^cqôa' sound the alarm,
and over Bêyt-haḱerem raise a smoke signal
because something bad menaces out of the north,
a tremendous disruption.

²To an attractive and beguiling woman
have I likened the daughter of Şiyyôn.

³They come to her, shepherds and their flocks.
They pitch their tents against and all around her.
They bring disaster with their power.

the attacker's voice

⁴"Engage her in holy war.

Arise and attack at high noon.

Unfortunate for us that the day passes away,
that evening shadows stretch out.

⁵Arise and attack at night.

Let us destroy their strongholds" (author's translation).

It is common for Jeremiah to report his oracles as if they were conversations. For example, in Jeremiah 5, the prophet records Yahweh's request that he conduct a search for any righteous among Jerusalem's citizenry (5.¹⁻²), Jeremiah's report concerning the results of his search (5.³⁻⁵), and Yahweh's response to Jeremiah's report (5.⁶⁻³¹). The entire 14th and 15th chapters can be read as a back and forth between Jeremiah and Yahweh.¹ Chapter 6 can be similarly structured and understood, with different voices heard.

¹ 14.²⁻⁶ Yahweh reveals an inspired lamentation with Jeremiah
14.⁷⁻⁹ Jeremiah responds to Yahweh as Judah's advocate
14.¹⁰⁻¹² Yahweh replies to Jeremiah, informs him not to advocate for Judah
14.¹³ Jeremiah replies to Yahweh, justifying his advocacy
14.¹⁴⁻¹⁶ Yahweh replies to Jeremiah
14.¹⁷⁻¹⁸ Yahweh shares another lamentation
14.¹⁹⁻²² Jeremiah responds to Yahweh, again as Judah's advocate
15.¹⁻⁹ Yahweh again tells Jeremiah to cease his advocacy; reiterates Judah's sins and punishment
15.¹⁰ Jeremiah responds to Yahweh by bemoaning his life
15.¹¹⁻¹⁴ Yahweh replies to Jeremiah
15.¹⁵⁻¹⁸ Jeremiah responds to Yahweh by bemoaning his life
15.¹⁹⁻²¹ Yahweh replies to Jeremiah, promising his support for Jeremiah

- 6.¹⁻³ The voice of Jeremiah or Yahweh.
- 6.⁴⁻⁵ The voice of an attacking army.
- 6.⁶⁻⁹ The voice of Yahweh
- 6.¹⁰⁻¹¹ The voice of Jeremiah
- 6.¹²⁻²³ The voice of Yahweh
- 6.²⁴⁻²⁶ The voice of Jeremiah (representing the people)
- 6.²⁷⁻³⁰ The voice of Yahweh

In this reading, then, we hear the voice of Jeremiah/ Yahweh and the voice of the attacking army. With the opening prophetic voice in verses 1-3, we return to a theme that was introduced in the second of Jeremiah's recorded visions that accompanied his call. In that vision (1.¹³), Jeremiah saw a boiling pot of water that was tipped over so that its scalding contents flowed south into Judah. The image is shocking, as one is forced to consider the horror of boiling water scalding human flesh. With the vision's accompanying interpretation (1.¹⁴⁻¹⁶), we learn that this scalding water is a metaphor for the destruction Judah will experience when the aggressive and threatening Babylonian army comes swooping down out of the north.

In today's reading, the army, having marched south to Jerusalem, has arrived. Cities further south—T^eqôa' and Bêyt-haḱerem being two mentioned—are to raise the alarm, presumably in hopes of avoiding Jerusalem's fate. The alarm signals the need for citizens to leave fortified locations, including Jerusalem. Their preparations against the Babylonians will prove to be vain. Indeed, Judah's defenses and population will be as helpless as an attractive woman in the grasp of her rapist. The refugees will likely do as so many had done before them and go out into the mountainous and other secluded regions to hide from the army and its plundering destruction.

With a flare for the dramatic, and likening the Babylonian invaders to shepherds, Jeremiah allows the enemy to speak. Their voice, found in verses 4 and 5, dashes all hopes that the population might be delivered.

The invaders are committed to their cause. It is holy war in which they are engaged. Their attack is relentless. They attack all day. Their zealotry in battle leaves them disappointed to see the approach of evening. They do not wish to stop. They meet success at every turn. So, as night falls, they continue to fight. They will fight all night if they must. They will not stop until they have reached their goal of complete victory.

The Babylonian victory, of course, entails the utter destruction of Judah and the complete disruption of Judean life as it had existed for hundreds of years, just as Jeremiah warned. Yes, Judah's citizens will feel as though someone poured scalding hot water over their heads, leaving the body politic to die in excruciating pain.

It is little wonder that Jeremiah was unpopular. No nation wants to hear that its end is near; that its enemy will be jubilant in its defeat of the nation. Rather than give heed to his calls for justice and equity, Judah continued its unjust ways. But time proved Jeremiah to have seen the nature of the needed societal reforms clearly and to have discerned Judah's undoing accurately if it refused to reform.

The nation's injustices, its refusal to reform, and the disruption that came to society as a result are a warning to all who read the inspired work Jeremiah left for posterity. Here's hoping that we today, so similar in our societal injustices and stubborn refusal to reform, wake up and feel the heat of the roiling and boiling water before the pot gets tipped over leaving the life we all cherish dead and dying from burns that cannot be healed.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: april 23, 2024)