


Hope and hopelessness in Jeremiah 2:1–13: An interpretive understanding to help deal with COVID-19

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This article is an analysis of Jeremiah 2:1–13, to consider the passage's contribution to the overall theological message of building a framework of hope within the seemingly hopeless coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. This will be achieved by first establishing the method of approach in which the historical and literary context of the passage is analysed. This methodology is expected to inform the reading of the text, so as to generate rational and emotional arguments to arrive at the key message that Jeremiah 2 expresses in the midst of the current hopeless global context. This study aims to underscore that hope is always accessible despite extreme circumstances, both in biblical societies (Jr 2) and in the midst of a pandemic.

Keywords: Jeremiah 2; hope; COVID-19; hopelessness; exegesis.

Introduction

Historically, Jeremiah 2 is one of the 'earliest prophecies' of Jeremiah spoken during the reign of Josiah (1:4; 3:6). Jeremiah ministered in Judah from the 13th year (Jr 25:3) of Josiah¹ to Zedekiah (597–587 BC), 'the last king of Judah before its fall at the hands of the Babylonians' (Holladay 1986:5). Jeremiah 3:6 and 36:2 trace both the spoken and written ministries of Jeremiah back to Josiah's reign². However, this article will focus on the book of Jeremiah, with the conviction that it was compiled after his death, and the addressees were 'the exile community in Babylon' (Stulman 2005:6). If the intended audience had taken heed of the prophet's words earlier, the exile could have been circumvented. Thus, the important question of how people take hold of *hope* affects our understanding of Jeremiah 2:1–13, as the prophet was calling those living in exile to be hopeful once more (Pietersen & Human 2021:11). The context of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic is materially different – varying levels of lockdown have been enforced across the globe, economies have faltered and societies have declined. Yet the same feeling of *hopelessness* pervades the world now as it did in Jeremiah's time, particularly with reference to the poor and the disenfranchised.

With the aim of imparting hope, I will do an exegetical study of the texts of Jeremiah 2:1–13, starting with how the methodology and the structure aid the historical context for Israel's sense of *hopelessness*. I will then focus on the sections that highlight how Jeremiah challenges the Israelites who gave into their *hopeless* state as captives in exile (Allen 2008:212). Thereafter, through a short discussion of the effects of the COVID-19 outbreak, I hope to highlight the potential *hopeful* outcomes of a pandemic that so far has filled most with doom.

Methodology

To explore these themes, the literary-theological approach will be employed as a methodology that will enable this research to illuminate the message of *hope*. The literary approach will help to appreciate the passage as a logical unit with unity and progression as described by Goldingay (2007) when he posits 'Narrative progression provides a more organic and observable unity to the text' (Goldingay 2007:137). This kind of analysis will explore the poetic genre of the passage and help to make sense of the text as a whole in spite of the arbitrary arrangement of the book. This is unlike the 'archaeological approach' that does not regard 'the structure and unity', which is acknowledged in this article.

1. Perhaps 627 BC, since Josiah's reign began in 640 and ended in 609 BC.

2. There are different views on the date of Jeremiah's ministry commencement and its relations to the Josianic reforms, but that is outside the discussion of this paper.

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Jeremiah's structure of *hope* in a *hopeless* context

Jeremiah 2:1–13 falls within the first section of Jeremiah 1–24 (Bright 1965:xxi). It is narrowly located within the verses that run from 2:1 to 6:30. Stulman (2005:45) divides the passage into two small sections with dual images of YHWH as the offended husband of Israel (2:1–4:4) and (4:5–6:30) as a picture of 'divine love turning into rage after repeated infidelities'.

Jeremiah 2:1–13 is not a standalone passage; it is woven into the Jeremiah corpus using the narrative formula³: 'The word of the Lord that came to me, saying ...'. This formula connects the passage to the previous chapter about the commissioning of Jeremiah as a prophet where, in the English Standard Version (ESV), it appears three times (in 1:4, 11 and 13). The phrase or formula appears 23 times in the whole book and is used to delineate 'new episodes within the storyline' (Shead 2018:45). Jeremiah 2:1–13 can further be broken into two main sections (vv. 2–4 and vv. 5–13), separated by a messenger formula: 'thus says the LORD'. It has three oracles (2:1–3; 4–9 10–13): The passage has three introductory verses: 2:1–2a, 4–5a and 9.

This poetic piece consists of 'parallelism' (Watson 2001:260), in which each successive line extends the thought of the first by supplying further details. For instance, in verse 6b, the five middle lines each describe the wilderness in a new way.

The final task of this research will be to frame the discussion from a theological perspective to assess its significance and its ability to inspire hope in the era of COVID-19. Thompson (1980:160) proposes that Jeremiah 2 'consists of a literary arrangement of several originally independent segments brought together to serve a theological purpose'. The historical setting and literary layout of Jeremiah 2:1–13 hugely inform its theological interpretation as we think of the exiles and God's purposes for them (Wessels 2020:1). The necessity of a theological reading of the passage is obvious as we consider the 'messenger formula': 'thus says the LORD' (verses 2 and 5) and the constant refrain: 'declares the LORD' (verses 3, 9 and 12) identifying the words of the passage as the LORD's (Claassens 2019:3).

Yahweh's hidden agenda of *hope* for Israel – Exegetical reflections

The passage begins with a divine reflection on Israel's covenant faithfulness in her early days (Fischer 2019:4). This section is introduced in 2:1 with a narrative formula: 'The word of the LORD came to me, saying, "Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem ..."' It is followed by a structural marker, 'thus says the LORD', which introduces the speech. Verses 2b–3 are two stanzas with four bicolons. In verse 2b, the speaker is the LORD ('I & Me'). The first two bicolons of verse 2b present a beautiful picture of the marriage between

the LORD and Israel. Israel is said to have been devoted in her youth to the LORD and as a bride, she loved her husband.⁴ The last part of verse 2 describes the extent of Israel's faithfulness to the LORD when she followed her husband in the wilderness, a land not sown. Israel at this time totally trusted the LORD as her provider. Three important words – 'devotion', 'love' and 'following' – describe Israel's early days, underlining her covenant faithfulness, commitment and loyalty. Lundbom (1999:253) rightly says, 'The time in question is the "honeymoon"'.

Verse 3a switches to the speaker and he presents God's perspective on Israel in those days; Israel was holy and the first fruits of God's harvest. The idea of 'holy' and 'first fruits' to the LORD is reminiscent of Aaron's priestly clothing (Ex 28:36), which had a headband made of pure gold, upon which was an inscription: 'Holiness to the LORD'. With it, Aaron consecrated himself to the LORD and made himself holy. 'All who ate her incurred guilt' invokes the image of the forbidden tree in the Garden of Eden and reminds us how much God protected Israel. These verses are also reminiscent of Ephesians 5, a woman who is submissive and loyal to her husband and a husband who out of love sanctifies, provides for and protects his wife. These two stanzas are marked by the refrain: 'declares the LORD'.

Verses 4–8 are a plea from the LORD about Israel's unjustifiable desertion of YHWH as her husband. Verses 4–5a serve as a transition and set the scene for the next section, just as did verses 1–2a. The formula, 'Thus says the LORD', is used again to indicate the beginning of another oracle, and the audience is identified as the house of Jacob and all the clans of Judah, while in verse 2 it was merely Jerusalem.

Verses 5b–8 have four stanzas. Verse 5b is a rhetorical question with two bicolons: 'What fault did your fathers find in Me; that they went far from Me and they went after worthlessness and became worthless?'

The implied answer to the first line is 'nothing', as anticipated by the second line that can be rephrased to: 'Why then did they forsake me?' The second bicolon states Israel's alternative to following 'worthlessness' instead of Yahweh, and its aftermath: 'became worthless'. Here is Israel's shift from devotion, love, following Yahweh, holiness and value to the first fruits of following after worthlessness⁵ and becoming worthless, having no value. The last bicolon of verse 5 resounds with the truth of Psalm 115:8, which Beale (2008) rightly sums up as: 'We become what we worship'.

Verse 6 is a longer unit with alliteration (Watson 2001:269). It answers the question of how Israel's fathers forsook the

4. Lundbom (1999:252) argues that the terms for devotion and love used in this verse are strong covenantal terms.

5. The New King James Version (NKJV) is more direct: it refers to Israel following idols and becoming idolaters: the well-known Baal is what was worshipped. O'Connor (2011:370) says, 'Baal means lords or husbands'. In other words, Israel abandoned YHWH, her husband, and instead married Baal.

3. There seems to be a narrative formula that controls the passage, that is: 'The word of the LORD came to me (Jeremiah), saying ...' is used to introduce new episodes within the main storyline of the narrative (Shead 2018:45).

LORD. It presents what was expected of them when they came into the Promised Land: they should have sought the LORD. Furthermore, it explains the importance of remaining faithful by recounting the story of the LORD's goodness, starting from Israel's exodus from Egypt to the wilderness. Whereas in other passages, much emphasis is put on Exodus as a benchmark, this passage (verses 2 and 6 in particular) highlights the LORD's faithfulness as he led them through the wilderness, preserving Israel despite her harsh circumstances. A full account of the wilderness in this passage consists of the following:

- הָלַךְ וְקָרְאָתָם בְּאָזְנֵי יְרוּשָׁלַם לְאָמֵר יְהוָה, וְכָרְתִי לָךְ חֶסֶד נְעוּרֶיךָ, אֶהְבֵּת בְּלוֹלֵתֶיךָ--לְכֶתֶךָ אֶחָרִי בְּמִדְבָּר, בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא זְרוּעָה.

The above description invokes Genesis 1:1, when the earth was 'formless and void', but God's Spirit hovered over it – so Israel, in a land of 'nothingness', was covered by God's faithfulness. Verse 7 shifts the focus from 'your fathers' to 'you'⁶, and it has two bicolons. While the wilderness has been emphasised in verse 6, verse 7 is 'the centre of the poem and climax' (Lundbom 1999:260). 'I brought you into a plentiful land' completes the idea of verse 6, so that we have the LORD as the one who *brought them out, led them through and brought them in*. The first bicolon (verse 7a) draws a contrast between the 'nothingness' of the wilderness that YHWH led them through and the 'plentifulness' of the land to which they eventually came. How ironic that in the wilderness, Israel trusted and loved her LORD, while in the land of plenty, Israel became nothing. They defiled God's land and heritage, making it an abomination.

Verse 8 is a stanza with a bicolon and tricolon; it focuses on the monarchy by listing the entire leadership structure of Israel responsible for the nation's apostasy. Once again, we hear echoes from verse 6 of God's expectations of the Israelites:

- הַכֹּהֲנִים, לֹא אָמְרוּ אֵיהָ יְהוָה, וְתִפְשִׁי הַתּוֹרָה לֹא יָדְעוּנִי, וְהָרָעִים פָּשְׁעוּ בִּי: וְהַנָּבִיאִים נִבְּאוּ בִבְעֵל, וְאַחֲרָי לֹא-יִזְעֻלוּ הָלָכּוּ

Verse 9 is a bicolon with two functions: like verses 1–2a and 4–5a, it concludes the section (4–8), offering a verdict on the issues raised and again concluding with the refrain: 'thus says the Lord'. It also introduces the next section as it arouses the reader's anticipation to hear what charges YHWH is going to level against Israel. While the reader may have expected swift punishment as promised in 1:15, here we have only delayed retribution: the story is not over yet. God is not willing to punish right away; he is a long-suffering God.

The law states that at the testimony of two or more witnesses, a person can be condemned and put to death (Dt 17:6). In this

last section, God brings his two witnesses, the lands of Cyprus and Kedar (v. 10) and the heavens (v. 12), and so Israel is pronounced guilty. Verse 10 is a tricolon, in which God asks to search among the nations of Cyprus and Kedar, which represent the earth, to see whether what Israel has done can be repeated among the Gentiles.

Verse 11 is a rhetorical question that asks the envoys of verse 10 if their search has revealed the possibility of a nation ever relinquishing their gods, even if they are just idols; 'no' is the implied answer. The second bicolon implies that Israel has done the impossible and emphasises the unprofitability of her choice. The image of exchanging God's glory for idols retrospectively recalls the golden calf event (Ex 32) and prospectively reminds us of Romans 1:18–32. Verse 12 ushers in the second witness, the heavens, which are called upon to be appalled, shocked and utterly desolate (ESV) at Israel's stupidity – again comes the refrain 'declares the LORD'. Here YHWH's wrath is justified, as Israel is found guilty of a sin that not even the Gentiles have thought to commit. Both the earth/Cyprus/Kedar and the heavens have witnessed Israel's guilt. Is YHWH then going to put Israel to death? Again, his justice is delayed. Instead of unleashing judgement, verse 13 only summarises the message of the whole passage: Israel has forsaken YHWH, the fountain of living water and hewn her own cisterns that can hold no water.

Jeremiah's message of *hope* in challenging times

On an emotional level, the reader of Jeremiah 2 is swayed to and fro from the tension inherent in this passage. Does God love his people or want to punish them? Should they *hope* or despair? Similarly, during the pandemic caused by COVID-19, our emotions have fluctuated from one extreme to another, from *hope* that the vaccine will bring the pandemic to an end, to despair, that normality will never return. On one level, we experience the LORD's 'love and grief' as a betrayed husband in Jeremiah 2; on the other, we see the LORD's reluctance to punish Israel in spite of her infidelity, which exacerbates the prevailing mood of *hopelessness*. O'Connor (2011:35) rightly observes that the story is presented as a 'metaphor of a broken family' that has moved from love (vv. 2–3) to hate (vv. 4–13). The Lord is the offended husband; Israel and her children are guilty of deserting their husband-Father. The passage creates a sense of guilt and shame at Israel's foolishness, emphasised in the repetition of her choice as 'worthless' (v. 5), 'does not profit' (vv. 8, 11) and 'cannot hold water'. If Israel divorces YHWH, she is bound to be exploited by her enemies, so much so that devouring Israel shifts from being an offense (Jr 2:3) to being the norm (Jr 50:7).

On a rational level, the passage progressively presents a narrative of the life of Israel from Egypt through the wilderness to the Promised Land. It juxtaposes Israel's inability to remain faithful to the terms of the LORD's covenant with his steadfast love.

6. I am suggesting that a shift from vs. 6 'your fathers' to 'you' in vs. 7 may have significance in the identification of the fathers as those who were led by God in the wilderness and were told they would not enter Canaan while the 'you' refers to the generation of those who entered the land. If this be true, then I would differ from Lundbom (1999:258) who argues that the fathers were those who entered the land with Joshua; hence their unfaithfulness is traced back to their entry into the land while if my observation is granted, it would mean their unfaithfulness is traced back to the wilderness journey even before the entry into Canaan that can be verified from Exodus 32 and Numbers 14.

Chapter 2 contributes to Jeremiah's 'doctrine of the word of God' (Shead 2018:21), as indicated in the messenger formula, 'thus says the LORD', and the constant refrain, 'oracle of the LORD'. Shead (2018:44) rightly observes that the phrase 'declares the LORD' 'simply adds emphasis to a divine word'. However, Lundbom (1999:250) goes further to identify the unusual appearance of 'two formulas for a single oracle' in this passage. In other words, the redundant use of the formula is meant to highlight that YHWH is Himself the speaker.

This passage blazes a trail by outlining important themes expounded in the rest of the book, such as idolatry, the corporate nature of Judah's sin that dates back to their forefathers, as well as Judah's leadership crisis. Without any use of the language of repentance, this passage lays the groundwork for the message of returning to the LORD that follows in Jeremiah 3 and continues through the rest of the book (Biddle 2004:3). If Jeremiah's preaching did not elicit a repentant response in his first audience (Römer 2009:171), it certainly did in his second: the exiles to whom the book was addressed as they faced despair and *hopelessness*.

More importantly, the theme of *hope* and *hopelessness* from Jeremiah 2 speaks to the disarray and sense of isolation experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. What began in China in December 2019 rapidly spread to the rest of the world, resulting in South Africa moving into hard lockdown at the end of March 2020. The resultant economic crisis precipitated a loss of income for many, with whole industries that formerly provided employment, such as hospitality and tourism, taking the severe strain. As the economy contracted, social and economic disparities widened. This sense of *hopelessness* and desperation erupted into full-blown violence in July 2021, as Zuma supporters took to looting shops in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng shortly after his arrest and incarceration.

In response to the pandemic, the World Council of Churches response team prepared a document called *COVID-19 and Poverty* (WCC 2020). Its purpose was to assist people in dealing with poverty and the *hopeless* situations they faced (Kabongo 2020:2). The document recognises the applicability of Jeremiah 2:1–13 and starts with an excerpt from verses 5 to 8: 'What fault did your fathers find in Me; that they went far from Me and they went after worthlessness and became worthless?' It speaks directly to the sense of despair in dark, uncertain times and urges that believers instead return to the 'spring of living water' (v. 13) who is able to restore *hope*.

Conclusion

This article explored how deeply entrenched Israel's *hopelessness* was in the time of Jeremiah and links it with the current feelings of despair during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the contexts differ, there are some commonalities, including a sense of social decline and uncertainty about the future. Certainly, during the lockdown in South Africa, many

have felt the physical, emotional and psychological effects that the restrictions have brought.

A decade ago, the global economy was prospering. However, as COVID-19 has spread over the past year and a half, it has devastated countries in its wake, both from a health and from an economic point of view. This has led to a global climate of *hopelessness*. This study aimed to illuminate the historical and literary context of the Jeremianic return to *hope* (Pietersen & Human 2021:1) and to point with confidence to YHWH, who remains in control and is a constant source of *hope* in a *hopeless* world. While many may fear being infected and dying of COVID-19, those of faith should be able to reflect positively on the biblical context of Jeremiah 2 and grab hold of its message of *hope*.

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D.P. is the sole author of this research article.

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Data availability

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