

# Exegetical Notes on Jeremiah 31:10-13

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The reading from the Old Testament which is assigned to the First Sunday after Christmas in Series C of Lutheran Worship consists in four verses of the thirty-first chapter of the Book of Jeremiah, namely verses 10-13. (The exegesis of these verses below is, to avoid misunderstanding, in no way designed to promote the use in the main service of the week of the three-year series provided in Lutheran Worship nor of any other modern selections from the gospels and epistles in such a context. This exegete, on the contrary, would continue to urge, on various grounds, fidelity to the pericopal tradition inherited from the ancient church by the church of the reformation and modified only slightly by the Blessed Reformer of the Church, if one is speaking specifically of the gospels and epistles to be read in the main (eucharistic) service of the week. No comparable series of readings, on the other hand, from the Old Testament was either handed down from the ancient church or bestowed on us by the Blessed Reformer; nor, indeed, is there such a program of readings from the New Testament to be used in all the possible additional offices of any given week. In such cases, therefore, even such a traditionalist as this exegete is able, with consistency, to make use of any pericope drawn from the region of Holy Scripture desired.)

## **HISTORICAL AND LITERARY SETTING**

Jeremiah ben-Hilkiah was a priest who was a native of the small town of Anathoth, some six miles northeast of the capital city of Jerusalem. We know more of his life and personality than of any writing prophet of the Old Testament other than Moses (as is noted in the author's *The Prophetic Books of the Babylonian Exile and the Persian Empire*). The prophetic ministry of Jeremiah spanned some seven decades which were closely intertwined with the resurgence and then the ascendancy of city of Babylon, now in the control of the Chaldeans. For Jeremiah received his call to the prophetic office, already in adolescence, in 627 B.C. as the Assyrian Empire was just beginning to crumble. The final edition of the Book of Jeremiah appeared around 560 B.C. as the culmination of several previous editions which Jeremiah had published in Judah and Egypt and as the distillation of a prophetic ministry which had spanned at least sixty-seven years (*ibid.*)

A distinct and originally separate section of the Book of Jeremiah is the "Book of Consolation" which some, even Theodore Laetsch, erroneously extend to Jeremiah 33. In actuality, however, the Book of Consolations consists specifically in the thirtieth and thirty-first of the chapters of the Book of Jeremiah as we have come to number them since medieval times. The Book of Consolation, then, concentrates on prophecy of the Messiah and the new testament without the admixture of any reference to the return from the Babylonian Exile, as so many commentators imagine.

The "book" was originally written as a separate scroll, not for public proclamation, but for the personal consolation of Jeremiah himself and his fellow-believers. Such is the explicit witness of its second verse: "Write thee" -- which is to say, "for thyself" -- "all the words that I have spoken unto thee in a book" (Jeremiah 30:2).

The Book of Consolation, then, came into being between the second and third editions of the Book of Jeremiah, which is to say between 604 and 586 B.C. For Jeremiah composed his second edition following the destruction, in December of 604, of his first edition by King Jehoiakim as it was being read aloud to him by Baruch, the prophet's secretary (36: 9-32). The third edition, on the other hand, of the Book of Jeremiah emerged in 586 B.C. following the destruction of Jerusalem by the army of Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon (1:3). During these same eighteen years or so intervening between his second and third editions, Jeremiah not only uttered and reiterated many prophecies orally, but also reduced to writing at least two instances of revelation in addition to the Book of Consolation. Thus, the Letter to the Jews in Babylonia now found in the twenty-ninth of his chapters (verses 4-23) was presumably dispatched already in 597 B.C., within the same year as the deportation of King Jehoiachin and many others of high standing in March of 597 (29:2). Several years subsequently, in 593 B.C., a copy of the so-called Book of Babylon, which comprises the chapters now enumerated as 50 and 51 of the Book of Jeremiah, was likewise transmitted to the capital of the empire (considering the reference to the fourth year of Zedekiah in 51: 59-61a).

The chapters of Jeremiah, aside from the epistolary 29, which precede the Book of Consolation speak of events as late as 593 B.C., including (1.) the gathering in Jerusalem of envoys of powers promoting opposition to the Babylonian Empire and (2.) the death of the false prophet Hananiah in October of the aforesaid year (Jeremiah 28: 1-17). The chapters, on the other hand, which follow the "book" speak of the rebellion of King Zedekiah in 589 followed by the beginning of the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem on 15 January of 588 B.C. (Jeremiah 34:7). Apparently, therefore, the scroll first bearing the words now comprising chapters 30-31 of Jeremiah was penned around the year 590 B.C., well into the reign of the weakling Zedekiah as the last of the kings of Judah. The imminence, therefore, of the destruction of Jerusalem and the deportation of the people of Judah to Babylonia was very plain to Jeremiah when he received the consoling promises contained within these chapters.

The Book of Consolation falls into two main divisions following the three introductory verses. These two units may be distinguished as the "Sleeping Revelation" and the "Waking Revelation" respectively on the basis of the verse bisecting them: "Upon this I awaked and beheld, and my sleep was sweet unto me" (Jeremiah 31: 26).

The portion containing the verses currently under study consists in an introductory verse and six subsequent sections which are clearly distinguished one from another by the recurring clause *ko amar YHWH* ("thus has the LORD said"). The following outline of the Book of Consolation thus emerges with special emphasis on chapters 30:4-31:25 of the Book of Jeremiah:

1. The Introduction (30: 1-3)
2. The Sleeping Revelation (30:4-31:25)
  1. The Introduction (30:4)
  2. The Six Oracles (30:5-31:25)

1. The First Oracle (30: 5-11)
  2. The Second Oracle (30: 12-17)
  3. The Third Oracle (30:18-31:1)
  4. The Fourth Oracle (31: 2-6)
  5. The Fifth Oracle (31: 7-14)
    1. The Oneness of the Catholic Church (verses 7-9)
    2. The Holiness of the Catholic Church (verses 10- 14)
  6. The Sixth Oracle (31:15)
  7. The Seventh Oracle (31: 16-22)
  8. The Eighth Oracle (31: 23-25)
3. The Waking Revelation (31: 26-40)

The connection is, to be sure, so close between the sixth and seventh of the oracles distinguished above (on the formal grounds previously stated) that the seventh can be understood correctly only in conjunction with the verse preceding it.

This connection, nevertheless, being stipulated, each of the eight oracles are so related to the general thesis of the Book of Consolation as to provide thereto some specific elaboration and, indeed, in the case of those oracles beginning with *ki*, an elaboration which is explanatory in some way. The main thesis itself is a promise by the Messiah, in figurative terms, to accomplish the salvation of a *ecclesia catholica* of Gentiles as well as Jews: "I will reverse the imprisonment of My people Israel and Judah, the LORD hath said, and I will cause them to return to the land that I gave to their fathers, and they shall inherit it" (Jeremiah 30:4, following the Authorized Version except in rendering the introductory formula and the forms of 'mr and yrsh).

The *ki*, then, which introduces the Fifth Oracle of the Book of Consolation harks back to the general thesis of the opusculum by of explanation. For the oracle following the conjunction (31: 7-14) now explains more specifically the release from prison and the return and inheritance of "Israel and Judah" which are promised in the initial proposition of the theme (Jeremiah 30:3). The Fifth Oracle itself falls into halves which are dramatically bisected by the summons beginning verse 10: *shim'u dbar-YHWH*("Hear ye the word of the LORD"). The four verses, then, which are the object of study here comprise the majority of the subsection so introduced (four of the total five verses).

The first half of Oracle 5, consisting in verses 7-9, expounds more the nature of the return and inheritance promised in the thesis, while the second half (verses 10-14), with which we are concerned here and now, elaborates more the release from prison which is there intended. There is an overlapping explication in both halves of the oracle of the nature of the "Israel and Judah" predicted in the thesis, which is to say the church catholic composed of both Jews and Gentiles. In the terms, therefore, of the Nicene Creed, the two halves of the oracle may be described as they are in the outline of the Book of Consolation provided above, as concentrating (although by no means exclusively) on the catholica ecclesia as una in verses 7-9 and then on its nature as sancta in the verses before us now.

## **A LITERAL TRANSLATION AND COMMENTS**

10. Hear ye the word of the LORD, O nations, And so make ye known in the coastlands off a distance, And so say ye: He who scatters Israel will gather him as one shepherding his flock.

The "LORD" represents, by the use of four capital letters, the Divine Name in the Hebrew, YHWH, which is applied exclusively to the One True God. As His personal name, the tetragrammeton emphasizes the personal intervention of the Holy Trinity in human history. By virtue, simultaneously, of its meaning (as explained in Exodus 6), the Divine Name reminds us of the unique self-existence of the One True God and its immediate corollary of everlasting omnipotence. The LORD, specifically, who has spoken the verses quoted here by the Prophet Jeremiah is, presumably, the Second Person of the Triune God, who was promised to become the Messiah by the assumption of a human nature. For He is not only the usual spokesman of Holy Trinity to those outside the Godhead, but is also the one elsewhere described (and, indeed, commissioned by God the Father) as the Shepherd of the flock of God.

In the first verse of the oracle before us the Messiah has assumed the title of the Head of the Nations, so as to indicate precisely the addition, so central to the verses now before us, of Gentiles to the original Jews in the church of the new testament. Specific reference, indeed, to the Messiah appears already in the First Oracle of the Book of Consolation, where He is called the King of His people and, by eponymous usage, "David" <sup>^x</sup> in this case, specifically, giving a progenitor's name to the chief scion of his line <sup>^x</sup> in Jeremiah 30:9. He has likewise already received the title of the "Ruler" of Israel in the Third Oracle of the book (Jeremiah 30:21) as He had years before in the prophecy of Micah 5 (1 MT; 2 EV).

The phrase "and so" before "make ye known" in the translation above indicates the waw which conjoins the hiphil imperative plural of ngd to the preceding qal imperative plural of shm<sup>^N</sup> ("hear ye"). (In the second imperative of the verse, as is usual in the hiphil of pe-nun verbs, the initial nun of the root has been assimilated to the medial letter, in this case gimel; the hiphil and its passive in the hophal are the only binyanim of ngd to be found in the Hebrew Bible [BDB, 616b- 617a].) The same phrase before "say ye" reflects, likewise, the waw which connects haggiydhu ("make ye known"), in turn, with the qal imperative plural of 'mr. In both cases, then, "and so" is intended to indicate the idiomatic use of the standard conjunction connecting two imperatives to indicate a logical consequence which is desired by the speaker.

The idea, then, in the first half of verse 10 here is that the Messiah desires people of all nations to make His word known to the ends of the earth and assures them that its proclamation by them will necessarily follow from hearing His word themselves. If people are themselves regenerated and strengthened by the gospel of the saving work of the Messiah, they will also share the gospel of messianic salvation with all others possible.

The 'iyyim are, originally at least, coasts as seen from a "mariner's standpoint" on his ship still at sea [BDB, 15b-16a]. To take the gospel to the 'iyyim is to go beyond the shores of Israel on the Mediterranean Sea and, indeed, beyond all the coasts of the continental land-mass (Eurasia and Africa) at the center of which lies the homeland of the Messiah. Here, in other words, the 'iyyim include not only the inhabitants of innumerable "islands" (as the word is frequently translated imprecisely [BDB, 16a]), but also the denizens of the remaining continents of the world separated by the seas from His homeland.

The verb *zrh* occurs nine times in the *qal*, four times with its basic meaning of "scatter" and five times with the significance of "winnow" derived therefrom [BDB, 279b, in 279b- 280a]. The passive of the basic sense occurs twice in the *niphal* [BDB, 279b]. The *piel*, however, is the most common *binyan* of the verb, serving in all but one case as the intensive of the *qal* (the one exception being its use as "winnow" in Psalm 139:2) [BDB, 280a]. The two instances of the *pual* provide the passive of this significance [BDB, 280a]. The *piel* is applied especially to the dispersal of peoples [BDB, 280a].

The dispersion of which *zrh* is employed to speak here is the separation of men from God which necessarily results from the incompatibility of the sinfulness of men and the holiness of God. The gathering of Israel, conversely, described by the *piel* imperfect of *qbtz*, is the congregation of people of all nations into the church of the new testament through the proclamation of the gospel and the creation of faith in the hearts of its hearers. Both the scattering of men from the presence of God and the gathering of men back to Him are the work of God Himself, the one flowing from His uncompromising holiness and the second from His unfathomable mercy.

The Messiah promises to gather people from all the "nations" in all regions of the world into His one "flock" which the *una catholica ecclesia* ("one catholic church"). His gathering is achieved, of course, through the proclamation of His gospel and the creation thereby of faith in Him. He uses the same gospel, with the sacraments in which He attaches thereto some visible means, to "keep" His flock safe from all its would-be predators.

11. For the LORD has ransomed Jacob, And He has redeemed him from a hand of one stronger than he.

The one stronger than we from whose power the Lord has redeemed us is the archdemon Satan, as our Lord Himself asserts in Luke 11 (verses 21-22) and His apostle reiterates in Hebrew 2 (verses 14-15). The devil is much stronger than we, not so much by virtue of his supernatural powers, as by reason of the fall of man into sin. For we thereby made ourselves his slaves instead of the servants of God.

Both of the verbs in this verse have something to do with redemption, which is to say buying something or someone back. The distinctive nuance, on the one hand, of "ransom" adheres to the initial verb, *pdh* [BDB, 804]. The redemption, on the other hand, of which *g'l* speaks is, although varied in form, distinctively the action of a kinsman [BDB, 145a-b]. The theme of this verse is stated more eloquently nowhere outside the canon than in the explanation of the Second Article of the Creed by the Blessed Reformer of the Church: "I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death" (Small Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther, II: 2).

Contextual consistency requires us to understand the same terms in the same way, if at all possible, through the whole course of a given message from God unless a transition in significance be clearly indicated. Here, therefore, in verse 11, the name "Jacob" refers, as such, to the Jews, who are called "Jacob" in accord with the same eponymous usage by which "Israel" refers so commonly to the physical descendants of Jacob-Israel in historical references of the Old Testament. For such is clearly the scope of the term in the first verse of the oracle before us, which urges firstly the proclamation of the messianic gospel to the Jews and then its proclamation, through the Jews, to the Gentiles.

Here, as often in the prophecies of the messianic church, the term "Jacob" serves usefully to denominate specifically the Jewish believers within the total sphere of the New Israel, which includes, as well, the believing Gentiles who have now been joined to the original Jewish believers in the Messiah. The redemption, however, of which this verse speaks applies equally to the Gentiles as to the Jews, even as the joy predicated of Gentile believers in the ensuing verse appertains equally to the Jews in the church. By giving, poetically, the Jews a reason to rejoice and attributing the resulting joy to the Gentiles, Jeremiah is, then, effectively ascribing all the blessings of God to all the members of the church in common, regardless of ethnic origin. 1

2. And they shall come And they shall cry forth with ringing joy on the height of Zion <sup>^</sup>× As they shall stream unto the goodness of the LORD <sup>^</sup>× Over grain and over new wine and over fresh oil and over sons of flock and herd; And their soul shall be like a watered garden, Nor will they languish any more again.

Natives of all the nations of the world come to the Messiah through faith in His saving work and rejoice therein in the midst of His new people, who are often called "Zion" by virtue both of the foundation of the church of the new testament in Jerusalem and of His special presence therein like unto (although far surpassing) His special presence on Mount Zion in the church of the Old Testament. The "goodness" of the Lord to which the believers stream is above all, necessarily, the self-sacrifice of the Messiah which provides a ransom adequate to redeem all mankind from the wrath of God and the demands of the devil. Agricultural and pastoral metaphors are used here, as so frequently in the prophecies of the messianic era, to symbolize the spiritual bounty of the church of the new testament. The figurative nature of this language is made placed beyond any shadow of doubt in this verse by, firstly, depicting believers as people streaming to the Lord and then, secondly, by likening the souls of such believers to well-watered gardens. To say that such people will "languish" no more assume the continual presence of the

Lord in the midst of His people always empowering them, through His means of grace, to accomplish all which He would have them do, including the evangelization of the world.

All four verbs in this verse are plural in form, as is also the pronominal suffix on *nephesh* ("their soul"). The most natural identification of the subjects of these verbs and the referents of the related suffix is, in the absence of any contrary evidence, the preceding plural noun. In this case, then, the "coastlands" and "nations" of verse 10 are the subjects and referents of the plurals in verse 12.

The phrase "they shall cry forth with ringing joy" in the translation above renders the third common plural of the piel perfect of *rnn*, which has "give a ringing cry" as its primary meaning (BDB, 943a, in 943a-b). With but three exceptions (Lamentations 2:19 and Proverbs 1:20 and 8:3), the connotation of the verb is uniformly indicative of joy [BDB, 943a-b]. Such is, certainly, the connotation of the form in this verse. The usual coloring, for one thing, has already been confirmed in this oracle by the use of the noun *simchah* as the adverbial accusative of the imperative of *rnn* in verse 7.

Here in verse 12, moreover, the binyan of the verb is the piel, rather than more common *qal* which commences the oracle before us, in verse 7. The intensification of *rnn* (both formally and conceptually) in the piel appears among the prophets only in Jeremiah (here and in chapter 51) and in Isaiah (in chapters 26, 35, and 52: 8-9). Otherwise this binyan of the verb occurs only in the psalms of the Old Testament. In the Psalter itself examples can be found in Psalms 5, 20, 33, 51, 59, 63, 67, 71, 84, 89, 90, 92, 95, 96, 98 (twice), 132 (twice), 145, and 149; while 1 Chronicles 16:33 stands in parallel to Psalm 96:12. Joy <sup>^x</sup> indeed, "exultation" <sup>^x</sup> especially in praise of the Lord, is the uniform connotation of the piel of *rnn* by virtue of the intensification of the root previously mentioned [BDB, 943a-b].

13. Then will an unmarried woman be glad in dance, and young men and old men together; For I will turn their mourning to joy; Yea, I will comfort them and gladden them out of their sorrow.

The previous verse contains agricultural and pastoral metaphors of the spiritual bounty in which the church of the new testament would rejoice. Verse 13 now draws imagery from the social life of the Near East to describe the resulting joy itself. The reference is to the kind of dancing which would take place in the celebration of a bountiful harvest in Israel. The dancers were, of course, divided by sex, rather than forming couples. The men and women danced in separate rows or circles or whatever without ever touching any members of the opposite sex. The "joy" of the church of the new testament rests squarely on the gospel which comforts and, indeed, gladdens us with the saving work of the Messiah on behalf of all sinners. His gospel thereby brings us out of the "sorrow" and, indeed, the "mourning" which we rightly feel when the horrible sins which we have committed are exposed and condemned by the law of God and when we realize the terrible punishments which we deserve.

A *bthulah* is always an unmarried woman of some kind, regardless of age. Brown-Driver-Briggs becomes excessively specific, however, in defining the word as "one living apart in her father's house as a virgin" unless the phrase "as a virgin" is intended to imply no more than "in

the manner of a virgin" in traditional practice [BDB, 143b, in 143b-144a]. The adverb "apart" in this definition presumably refers to a life apart from any sexual partner [BDB, 143b]. The feminine noun does not, in any case, denote "virgin" in nearly so distinctive a way as does <sup>^</sup>Ṛalmah, which is, therefore, the word which Isaiah employs to speak of the virgin mother of the Incarnate God Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14).

Of all the words denotative or connotative of joy here in the Book of Consolation, the most general is the verb smch used twice here in verse 13, although in differing binyanim. The verb smch occurs 154 times in the Old Testament, of which 126 are in the qal, one in the hiphil, and the remaining times in the piel [BDB, 970a-b]. Here the second word in the verse is the third feminine singular of the qal imperfect ("will be glad"), while the second from the end is the first common singular of the piel perfect with a third masculine plural suffix indicating the objects of the action of the prophetic perfect ("I will gladden them" being more emphatic than would be the precise rendition of a corresponding imperfect as "I shall gladden them").

Although Brown-Driver-Briggs gives "rejoice" the prime billing in defining the smch, "be glad" is immediately attached thereto [BDB, 970a]. After noting such concepts as "take pleasure in" and "exult" in the use of the qal, "cause to rejoice, gladden" is given as the meaning of the piel and hiphil [BDB, 970b]. The feminine noun simchah is broad enough to encompass, not only true joy, but also such forms of gladness as "mirth" and "gaiety" and, indeed, "pleasure" even of foolish and malicious varieties [BDB, 970b]. The rendition, therefore, of smch as "be glad" and of simchah as "gladness" allows a maximum of consistency in dealing with these words themselves and provides a nuance of differentiation from the root gil and its derivatives.