

## **“Better is someone upright who has no idols...”: Introducing the Letter of Jeremiah**

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### **Letters in Jewish and Christian Tradition**

Like so many people during this Covid-19 pandemic, my friend Carol has been really missing seeing her grandchildren. She decided, therefore, to write each of them a personal letter every few weeks, so that they would have a reminder of her constant love for them that felt a little more solid and lasting than a phone call. She was inspired to do this by her own memories of occasional letters sent to her during her childhood by her father, whose work regularly took him away from home for long periods. She read and re-read each of these short notes for many years, and still treasures the memory of the tangible connection with her father that they afforded her as a girl.

Her story of what letters have meant to her and her family in different circumstances has given me a fresh appreciation of the New Testament epistles - of their value to the communities who first received them, and of the depth of concern and longing that Paul and the other apostles felt for the members of the churches they founded (e.g. Philippians 1.8). It is little wonder, then, that letters make up such a substantial part of the New Testament, that they continued to be widely sent by church fathers like Clement and Ignatius, and that this means of communication is still employed by bishops and popes to the present day. Pope Francis has written two Apostolic Letters on the Scriptures in the last couple of years, for example: *Aperuit Illis and Sacrae Scripturae Affectus*. These celebrate the 1,600 anniversary (on 30<sup>th</sup> September 2020) of the death of St Jerome, himself a great letter writer.

Just as my friend Carol followed her father's example, so the New Testament letters have their own precursors. There are letters embedded in the Hebrew bible (e.g. 2 Samuel 11.15; 1 Kings 21.8-10; 2 Kings 10.1-7; 2 Chronicles 2.11-16; 21.12-15; Ezra 4.7-5.17; 7.11-26; Nehemiah 6.6-7; Esther 8.3-14; Jeremiah 29.1-29; Daniel 6.25-27), in the Apocrypha (e.g. 1 Maccabees 12.1-23; 2 Maccabees 1.1-29), and in other surviving but non-canonical early Jewish works, such as *The Letter of Aristeas*, *2 Baruch* (77.1-87.1) and *4 Baruch* (6.13-7.36). All the evidence suggests, then, that letters were an important and often authoritative form of communication between Jews in Palestine and the various cities of the Graeco-Roman Empire. They were written to promote community cohesion and identity, and include both religious teaching and ethical exhortation. The Letters of James and 1 Peter in particular follow the model of these Jewish Diaspora communications, and are even addressed “to the exiles of the Dispersion” (1 Peter 1.1; cf. James 1.1.) rather than to a specific individual.

### **The Letter of Jeremiah**

The Letter of Jeremiah offers a particularly close parallel to the New Testament epistles. Preserved among the collection of deuterocanonical writings, it consists of only seventy-two verses. It has been somewhat neglected within the churches and by scholars, yet it speaks to issues which continue to exercise believers today. It also illustrates the creativity with which ancient Jewish interpreters re-used and adapted their sacred scriptures. It presents itself as a composition by the prophet Jeremiah to the large group of Israelites who are about to be deported to Babylon after the victories of King Nebuchadnezzar in the mid-sixth century BCE (cf. 2 Kings 24.10-25.12). It is really addressed, however, to communities of Jews living three or four hundred years later, in the second century BCE, who still find themselves in exile far away from Israel. Its author drew inspiration from the earlier oracles of Jeremiah (see especially Jeremiah 10.1-16; cf. Jeremiah 44.1-30), and updated and reshaped them to speak afresh to the needs of his own generation.

## Idolatry

The Letter of Jeremiah has an over-riding main theme: an impassioned appeal to its recipients to avoid the worship of idols, which was obviously perceived as a great temptation for them (vv. 4-6). The gentile deities are ridiculed throughout the text as lifeless and powerless. Humour and irony is cleverly used to highlight the uselessness of these wooden statues: they may be dressed up like kings in rich purple robes, for example, but they have to have their faces wiped like babies (vv. 11-13), and although they may carry symbols of might and authority like an axe or a sceptre (v. 14), they have to be hidden away by their priests in times of danger (v. 48). The author's repeated refrain is that these idols are not living gods and so are not to be feared (vv. 16, 23, 29, 40, 44, 51-52, 56, 64, 69). Similar language is found throughout the prophetic and wisdom literature (e.g. Psalms 115.3-8; 135.15-18; Isaiah 40.18-20; 41.7; 44.9-20; 46.5-7; Habakkuk 2.18-19; Wisdom 13.10-19). This scriptural understanding of idolatry as a foolish and shameful practice influenced the thought of the early Christians, as is evident particularly in Paul's Letter to the Romans (Romans 1.18-32).

## Social Justice

The Letter of Jeremiah stands out among these other scriptural examples of anti-idol polemic, however, for the way it connects right worship with righteous living (e.g. v. 73). The demands of the covenant for social justice are emphasised, such as the requirements of generosity to the poor (v. 28; cf. e.g. Deuteronomy 15.7-11), and concern for widows and orphans (vv. 36-38; cf. e.g. Exodus 22.22-23). The New Testament writer James echoes this same understanding of real faith:

“Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for widows and orphans in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (James 1.27).

In particular, the author of the Letter of Jeremiah strongly condemns the gentile priestly class of his time for their deceptive practices and greedy promotion of their own gain (vv. 10-11, 28, 33). The text continues to speak, then, to the ongoing challenges of holding religious leaders and institutions to account for their actions, and of ensuring that religious practice is not divorced from daily living.

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The Prophet Jeremiah,  
Fresco, Sistine Chapel

Michelangelo Buonarroti.

1511.