

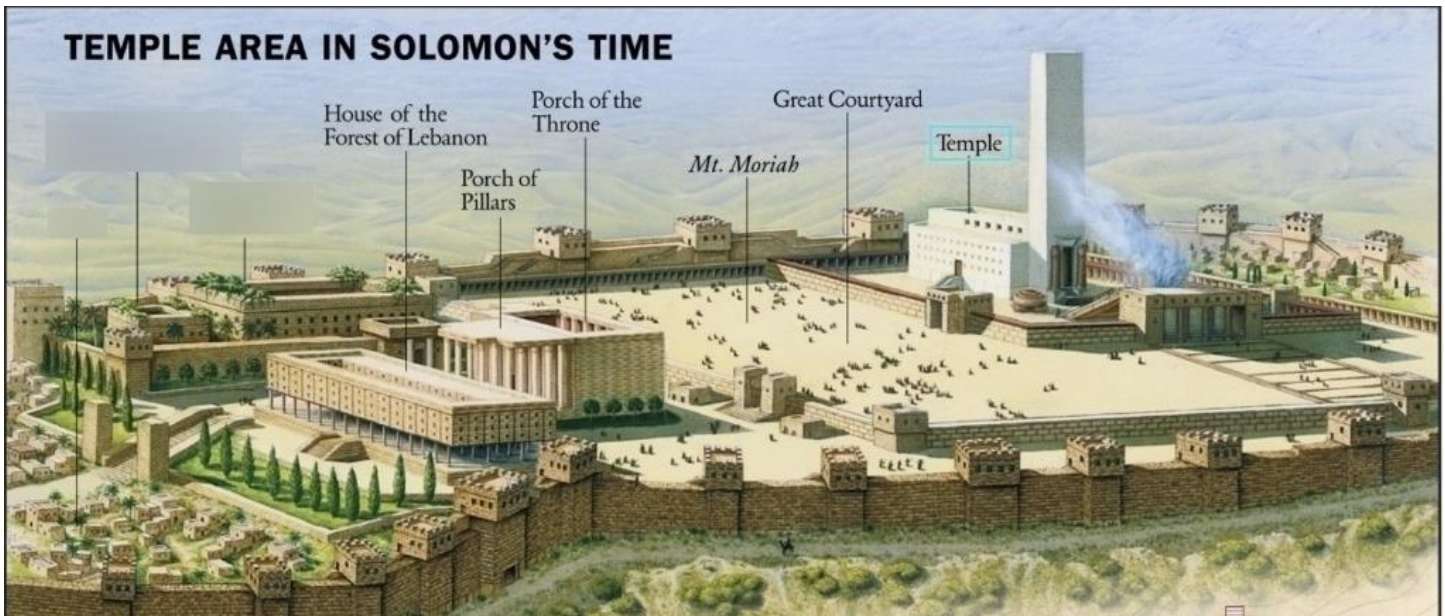
Jeremiah 6

Read Jeremiah 6:1-8: We are familiar with the many prophecies about the invasions of Jerusalem. All of these prophecies convey a sense of loss of life and surrounding collateral damage. This chapter opens with the inhabitants of nearby regions of Benjamin becoming aware of an invasion that is approaching Jerusalem. Benjamin was right there on the outskirts of Judah. Historically, the surrounding residents would run to the safety of the city walls. In this case, Jerusalem's fate is sealed. It is better to run away from Jerusalem.

We should look at what was really lost when Jerusalem was invaded. It was similar to Sodom and Gomorrah; which were once the most green and attractive places to live and work. After their judgement they became a wasteland. It might add perspective to consider what Jerusalem was like before all of these judgements. We currently describe the prevalent Jerusalem stone on a hill reflecting in the sunset as something beautiful. It really does not compare to what Jerusalem once was.

Once Upon a Time There Was a Beautiful Forest

Jerusalem was originally in a thick forest of Lebanese cedars. The house of Solomon was called *The Palace of the Forest*, because the area was heavily forested. His castle was next to the temple complex.



It took 100,000 lumberjacks cutting down Lebanese cedars for 55 years to build this complex. Lebanese cedar was the best wood to use for multiple applications. These beautiful trees are famous for their usefulness. Lebanese cedar (*Cedrus libani*) trees were highly sought after as an excellent source of timber for ancient woodworking. The wood's high quality, pleasant scent and resistance to both rot and insects made it a popular building material for temples, palaces and seagoing vessels. Even the Lebanese national flag features their famous trees.



Only small preserves were set up by the Roman emperor Hadrian to save the last of these



impressive trees from complete deforestation.



God's judgements were like stripping a person of a beautiful garment. The Romans and Turks all denuded the land to build siegeworks and harvest timber, until Israel became a barren wasteland.

An Uninhabited Ugly Wasteland or a Barrier to Outsider Colonization?

Today Jerusalem is nothing like what it once was; but it is also not as bad as it became after her judgements. It has rebounded significantly since 1948.

Mark Twain partook in a tour of the holy land in the 1800s. Throughout his book Innocents Abroad, Twain explicitly states that *the area was desolate and devoid of inhabitants*. Twain observed, “There is not a solitary village throughout its whole extent – not for 30 miles in either direction. There are two or three small clusters of Bedouin tents, but not a single permanent habitation. One may ride 10 miles, hereabouts, and not see 10 human beings. ”He continues, “Of all the lands there are for *dismal scenery*, I think Palestine must be the prince... Can the curse of the Deity beautify a land? “*Palestine sits in sackcloth and ashes*. Over it broods the spell of a curse that has *withered its fields* and fettered its energies. ”Twain was not alone in his poor impression of the land of milk and honey. Historians and travelers alike made similarly dreary observations over the centuries.

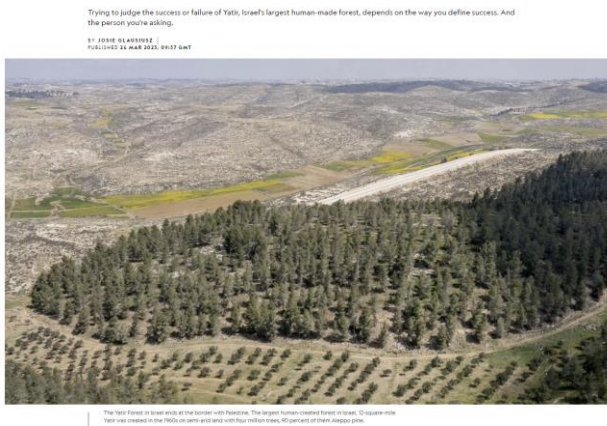
Six hundred years before Twain’s visit, another famous visitor was struck by Jerusalem’s desolation. Rabbi Moses ben Nachman, known as Nachmanides (1194-1270), fled Christian Spain for the Land of Israel. After a long and perilous journey, Nachmanides arrived at the Port of Acre before traveling to Jerusalem in 1267, where *he couldn’t even find nine other Jews to pray with*. He wrote to his son, “*Many are Israel’s forsaken places, and great is the desecration. The more sacred the place, the greater the devastation it has suffered. Jerusalem is the most desolate place of all.*”

We see a little of God’s genius here. There was an upside to the utter destruction of Israel. Nobody else wanted it. It became a malaria-infested wasteland that was dangerous and unhealthy to live in. It remained so until the Jews began returning. Before World War I, for several centuries, Palestine had been a part of the Ottoman Empire. Palestine was so severely saturated in malaria, it was either uninhabitable in many areas or otherwise very thinly populated. Palestine was described by an officer with Allenby’s army as “one of the most highly malarious countries in the world” (Austen 1919). The disease had decimated the population to the point that Mark Twain in 1867 wrote on his visit to Palestine, “A desolation is here that not even imagination can grace with the pomp of life and action... We never saw a human being on the whole route” (Twain 1869).

It appeared to be worthless real estate. Nevertheless, the sage, whose Torah commentary is still studied, had an altogether surprising interpretation of the desolation he encountered. He saw it as a blessing in disguise. Commenting on a verse in Leviticus that describes the curses that will befall the land of Israel, Nachmanides wrote that the devastation “constitutes a good tiding, proclaiming that during all our exiles, our land will not accept our enemies... Since the time that we left it, [the land] has not accepted any nation or people, and they all try to settle it... This is a great proof and assurance to us.” The Jews were committed to drain the swamps and re-forest Israel. Having productive farmland could have never been foreseen.



Today the Jews have been replanting millions of trees to restore their land. They have the largest manmade forest, called the Yatir Forest.



Burning Bridges and Rescue Plans

Read Jeremiah 6:9-30: Amidst this terrible destruction of a gorgeous, forested jewel of a city and nation, God still allowed them to *exit stage left*. The prophets told the inhabitants of Jerusalem to just give into the Babylonians, and live a good life in Babylon...and then come back 70 years later. The false prophets told them to hang in there, and they would prevail against Babylon. The result was that the people literally starved themselves for no reason. God is speaking into his public address system, but the people are tone deaf to God's voice.

God told the Jews to set their slaves free and they would be free themselves to live in peace in Babylon; but they refused. God held out his hand to get them out of harm's way. They pushed him away. This really made God upset.

“Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: ‘Go and speak to Zedekiah king of Judah and tell him, ‘Thus says the LORD: ‘Behold, I will give this city into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall burn it with fire.’³ And you shall not escape from his hand, but shall surely be taken and delivered into his hand; your eyes shall see the eyes of the king of Babylon, he shall speak with

you face to face, and you shall go to Babylon.’ ” ’ ⁴ Yet hear the word of the LORD, O Zedekiah king of Judah! Thus says the LORD concerning you: ‘You shall not die by the sword. ⁵ You shall die in peace; as in the ceremonies of your fathers, the former kings who were before you, so they shall burn incense for you and lament for you, saying, “Alas, lord!” For I have pronounced the word, says the LORD.’ ” ⁶ Then Jeremiah the prophet spoke all these words to Zedekiah king of Judah in Jerusalem, ⁷ when the king of Babylon’s army fought against Jerusalem and all the cities of Judah that were left, against Lachish and Azekah; for only these fortified cities remained of the cities of Judah. ⁸ This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD, after King Zedekiah had made a covenant with all the people who were at Jerusalem to proclaim liberty to them: ⁹ that every man should set free his male and female slave—a Hebrew man or woman—that no one should keep a Jewish brother in bondage. ¹⁰ Now when all the princes and all the people, who had entered into the covenant, heard that everyone should set free his male and female slaves, that no one should keep them in bondage anymore, they obeyed and let them go. ¹¹ But afterward they changed their minds and made the male and female slaves return, whom they had set free, and brought them into subjection as male and female slaves. (Jeremiah 34)

God is gracious. He gives us gifts to make good use of. The Jews have completely ignored God. How do you deal with someone who just refuses to listen to reason? Do you let them kill themselves with bad decisions? Any latitude or respite God gave them was used to make bad decisions and get into even more trouble. Even an unbeliever can see the error of his ways at some point. That is why God allows poetic justice take place; so that people reap what they sow until it hurts to bad to keep doing it.

They are just taking and misusing the gifts of God. The people are so bent on acquiring more and more. They have become a nation of spoiled brats. He tries to correct them, but they are not having it. Jeremiah is telling them to review history for a minute and recount what the proper and the improper responses to this situation historically have been.

Once they refused God’s rescue plan they had no choice but face their own created circumstances. That is what the horrific writings in Lamentations are all about. Starving overexposed women looked like dehydrated jackals. The dehydration is beyond severe. Their skin has cooked from malnutrition.





How the gold has become dim! How changed the fine gold! The stones of the sanctuary are scattered At the head of every street. ² The precious sons of Zion, Valuable as fine gold, How they are regarded as clay pots, The work of the hands of the potter! Even the jackals present their breasts To nurse their young; But the daughter of my people is cruel, Like ostriches in the wilderness. ⁴ The tongue of the infant clings To the roof of its mouth for thirst; The young children ask for bread, But no one breaks it for them. ⁵ Those who ate delicacies Are desolate in the streets; Those who were brought up in scarlet Embrace ash heaps. ⁶ The punishment of the iniquity of the daughter of my people Is greater than the punishment of the sin of Sodom, Which was overthrown in a moment, With no hand to help her! ⁷ Her Nazirites were brighter than snow And whiter than milk; They were more ruddy in body than rubies, Like sapphire in their appearance. ⁸ Now their appearance is blacker than soot; They go unrecognized in the streets; their skin clings to their bones, It has become as dry as wood. ⁹ Those slain by the sword are better off Than those who die of hunger; For these pine away, Stricken for lack of the fruits of the field. ¹⁰ The hands of the compassionate women Have cooked their own children; They became food for them In the destruction of the daughter of my people. (Lamentations 4)

Babylon is coming and they won't be stopped. Some go through the motions of repentance; but it is not accompanied with changes in their lifestyle or dependency on God. It is just a mindless hypocritical religious format. Now Jeremiah asks why they are bothering to still make prayer incense for the temple? Pretend prayers and mock holy days are not the solution. God is not a good luck charm or genie who responds to a formula. God has to get these screwed up people to somehow pray. He is setting stumbling blocks out for them, so that they cannot succeed in anything.

Like a metallurgist, God keeps heating the metal as the impurities float up and are scraped off.