

# False Religion is Worthless

## 7: 1-15

**DIG:** How did Jehoiakim come to be king? What kind of a king was he? Why do you think the prophet went to the Temple to proclaim this message? Who would hear it? What kind of reception do you think he received? How can Judah remain in the Land? What kind of crimes had the people committed? Why did the people assume that their security was assured? What had they done to the Temple? What happened a century earlier that made them feel safe? What happened to the Tabernacle at Shiloh? What happened to the northern kingdom of Isra'el? What lessons did ADONAI want Judah to learn from that?

**REFLECT:** Where are you in your spiritual journey: (a) in Egypt? (b) going forward? (c) going backward? (d) at the Temple gate? (e) in the most holy place? Do people in your messianic synagogue or church substitute being religious for being obedient? Do you? How can you make sure you're not fooling yourself? What does God have to do to get the attention of people today? What message does He want to send to you? Are you listening? How were Jeremiah's words fulfilled in Christ's day? What would the weeping prophet and Yeshua say about what goes on in messianic synagogues and churches today? In what way is your place of worship "doing business?" Who are the "paying customers?" What is the "product?"

### 609/608 BC early in the reign of Jehoiakim

Today Jesus has many who love His heavenly Kingdom, but few who carry His cross; many who yearn for comfort, few who long for distress. Plenty of people He finds to share His feat, few to share His fast. Everyone desires to take part in His rejoicing, but few are willing to suffer anything for His sake. There are many that follow Christ as far as the breaking of bread, few as far as drinking the cup of suffering; many that revere His miracles, few that follow Him in the humiliation of His cross.

Thomas a Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ* <sup>113</sup>

**Jeremiah 26:1** gives the date of the Temple Sermon (see **Cb** - **Jeremiah's Temple Sermon**) as the beginning of the reign of Jehoiakim. Here the word **beginning** means *the year of ascension* before the first New Year's Day, at which the "first" year of the king was reckoned. The new year evidently began in the spring (March or April), so the **beginning** of **Jehoiakim's** reign would have begun the previous fall of 609 BC. A likely occasion would have been the festival of Sukkot, during the "high holy days" at the end of September or the beginning of October, when **Yirmeyahu** would have addressed the crowds coming to worship (**7:2** and **26:2**).

This is the word that came to Jeremiah from YHVH. Stand at the gate of ADONAI's house (or the Eastern Gate) and there proclaim this message: Hear the word of the LORD, all you people of Judah who come through these gates to worship the Lord (7:1-2). Although Yirmeyahu spoke at Solomon's Temple, which would later be destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC, a comparable comparison could be made to Herod's Temple that was rebuilt after the Babylonian Exile. This sermon is pointed toward those who were coming to the Temple to "worship," but were, in reality, just going through the motions. They weren't really serious. It was merely external conformity.

Yirmeyahu's message that day was simple and direct. Here is what ADONAI-Tzva'ot, the God of Isra'el, says: Reform your ways and your actions (First John 1:9), literally, "Make your ways and your ways good" (7:3a), with the implication that this would be better than evil ways (26:3). And I will let you live in this place (7:3b). God did not value buildings over obedience. His protection would remain only if the people would change their ways. But the people assumed that they were guaranteed security because of the existence of the Temple and their lifestyle didn't matter. This is called the "inviolability of the Temple" because they believed that God would never allow His Temple to be "violated" because He made His dwelling place there among the people. They did not take the curses of Deuteronomy seriously enough. They did not realize that the Shekinah glory of God had already left the Temple (Ezekiel Chapters 10 and 11).

Do not trust in deceptive words and say: This is the Temple of ADONAI, the Temple of ADONAI, the Temple of ADONAI (7:4). The false prophets maintained that the presence of the Temple of the Lord guaranteed the safety of Jerusalem. This is called the inviolability of the Temple because the deluded priests, national leaders and the people thought that YHVH would never violate it. They used this repetitious formula as a good-luck charm and thought they could do no wrong because of it.

How plausible it was for the people to cling to the notion that the Temple in Tziyon was the ultimate sanctuary from disaster? They recalled when the Assyrian army had Jerusalem surrounded in 701 BC and Hezekiah went to the Temple to pray for deliverance (see the commentary on Isaiah Gu - Hezekiah Spread the Letter Before the LORD). As a result ADONAI-Tzva'ot said that He would save the City (see the commentary on Isaiah Gv - I Will Save This City for My Sake and for the Sake of David My Servant). And that very same night the Temple, Jerusalem and Judah were delivered (see the commentary on Isaiah Gw - Then the Angel of the LORD Put To Death a Hundred and Eighty Five Thousand Men in the Assyrian Camp).

Then in 622 BC good King Josiah centralized the worship of YHVH in the Temple at Zion; this also must have reinforced the conviction of the permanent place of the Temple in God's plan. The people must have felt, "We have done our part for ADONAI, now ADONAI will do His part for us." So a superstition developed that the Temple was indestructible. While other cities in the Land might collapse, Jerusalem and the Temple never would. Thus, the Temple was perceived as a good luck charm.

The slogan: This is the Temple of ADONAI, the Temple of ADONAI, the Temple of ADONAI, may not only reflect the people's trust in the inviolability of the Temple, but also betray their urge to mask their deep uneasiness. This may parallel what happened in the summer of 1940, soon after the beginning of World War II. Paris fell to the German armies, something that had not happened even in the worst days of the Franco-Prussian War or World War I. And then the Battle of Britain began in the air. At that point those in the United States began to see stickers in the windows of cars reading, "There will always be an England," a slogan that conveyed both faith and fear. So perhaps in Yerushalayim in 609 BC the sentiment was similar. "There will always be a Temple." This is the Temple of God.<sup>114</sup>

YHVH is not interested in outward legalistic worship that is not matched by inward holiness. Therefore, Jeremiah listed three examples to illustrate the change God wanted. The first two related to actions toward fellow Israelites, and the third related to actions toward ADONAI.<sup>115</sup> The abandonment of the first two leads to the abandonment of the third. If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly (7:5),

1. If you do not oppress the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow

2. And do not shed innocent blood by miscarriage of justice, in this place,

3. And if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, then I will let you live in this place, in the Land I gave your ancestors forever and ever (7:6-7). In other words, guaranteed assurance only comes through obedience. They had consistently disobeyed the Torah. They were worshiping idols and other gods. But, in reality, there could be no shared allegiance. When they came to the Temple they merely made the worship of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob just one of many options. Today we call this pluralism. But it is just the same old syncretism of Jeremiah's day.

Syncretism means that there are many paths to God. New age believers welcome Islam, Buddhism, Mormonism, Hinduism, or Shintoism (for example), as part of their religious pantheon. They view the different religions like spokes of a wheel. The hub of the wheel is God and the spokes are the different religions leading to Him. But syncretism wasn't true in Jeremiah's day and it's not true today.

But look, you are trusting in deceptive words (the Temple of ADONAI, the Temple of ADONAI, the Temple of ADONAI in 7:4) that are worthless (7:8). It is wrong to think that God protects people just because of the religious things they do. Just because we're reading the Bible, praying and fellowshiping with other believers doesn't mean that the LORD is somehow obligated to do something for us. He cannot be manipulated. The purpose of those external activities is to develop our relationship with Him and to help us live differently than those in the world around us.<sup>116</sup>

Then Jeremiah got specific with his accusation: Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Ba'al and follow other gods you have not known, and then come and stand before Me in this House, which bears My Name, and say: We are safe through the mere fact of our presence in the Temple - safe to do all these detestable things (7:9-10)? They assumed forgiveness just because they showed up at the Temple. The tragic result was that the Temple had become a den of robbers.

The outside is a lot easier to reform than the inside. Going to the right church and saying the right words is a lot easier than working out a life of justice and love among the people you work and live with. Showing up at shul once a week and saying a hearty Amen is a lot easier than engaging in a life of daily prayer and Scripture meditation that develops into concern for poverty and injustice, hunger and war. In other words, "Just because you sit in the garage doesn't make you a car." Six hundred and fifty years later Yeshua used Yirmeyahu's text in His "spring house-cleaning" (see the commentary on [The Life of Christ Iv - Jesus Entered the Temple Area and Drove Out All Who Were Buying and Selling](#)).

A robber's den is a secure place to hide between forays into the countryside to pillage the weak and unprotected travelers. After these raids for plunder the robbers go back to the cave where they are safe. That is exactly the prophet's accusation. It was as if he was saying, "You have found a safe place, have you? This nice, clean Temple. You spend all week out in the world doing whatever you want to do, taking advantage of others. Exploiting the weak, curing the person who isn't pliable to your plans, and, then you retreat to this place where everything is in order and protected and right. And you think your sinful behavior is excused and I haven't noticed." But I have been watching! declares the LORD (7:11).

Are the people who do this deliberately trying to pull the wool over the eyes of their neighbors and fake God into blessing them? Some are, but for most I don't think so. I don't think they are trying to get by with anything. I think they have lived for so long on the basis of outward appearances that they have no feel for inward reality. I think the Israelites during Jeremiah's ministry were so impressed with the success of the reform that they thought that was all there was to it. We live in a culture where image is everything and substance is nothing. We live in a culture where a new beginning is far more attractive than a long follow-through. Images are important. Beginnings are important. But an image without substance is a lie. A beginning without a continuation is a lie.

**Jeremiah** attempted to shock **the people** to recognize this obvious but avoided truth by sending **them** on a field trip to **Shiloh**. With a last twist of the knife, **YHVH** suggests: **Go now to the place of Shiloh where I first made a dwelling for My Name, and see what I did to it because of the wickedness of My people Isra'el (7:12)**. **Shiloh** was one of the most famous holy places in Jewish history. Located at the center of the country, it had been the earliest focus for worship and meeting in **Isra'el**. When **Joshua** brought **the people** into the Land after their deliverance from Egypt and forty years of wilderness wandering, **Shiloh** was where they assembled, set up the Tabernacle (see the commentary on **Exodus Ex - The Courtyard and the Gate of the Tabernacle**) and divided up the Land among the twelve tribes. The revered ark of the Covenant was kept at **Shiloh**.

Then why was **Shiloh** destroyed? **Because of the wickedness of God's people**. They had taken **the ark of the Covenant** into battle against **the Philistines**. That was obedience. But **they** made a mistake when they made **the ark** a good luck charm. After all, they reasoned, we carried **the ark** around Jericho and the walls came tumbling down. The same thing will happen to **the Philistines**. But they misinterpreted **the ark** as a good luck charm and were defeated (**First Samuel 4:3-11**).

The great prophet **Samuel** spoke **his** word of counsel at **Shiloh**. **Shiloh** was a magnificent beginning. **Shiloh** was a glorious image. But all **Shiloh** was then was a few piles of rocks in a field of weeds, as every traveler from Galilee to Jerusalem could see. **Shiloh** was the right place; at **Shiloh** the right words were spoken. But when the right place no longer pointed people to **God** and when the right words no longer expressed love and faith, **Shiloh** was destroyed . . . it never again became a sanctuary for **the Israelites**.

There is no account in **First Samuel** of the burning of **Shiloh** (was that even too painful to be remembered?), and there is only one other passage in the TaNaKh that even indirectly indicates what had happened. We read in **Psalm 78:60**: **ADONAI abandoned the tabernacle at Shiloh, the tent He had made where He could live among the people**. The same thing was happening during **Jeremiah's** day, **the Temple** had become a good luck charm. So what happened to **Shiloh** could happen to **the Temple** and Jerusalem for the same reason.

**While you were doing all these things (mentioned in verses 9-10) declares ADONAI, I spoke to you persistently, but you did not listen; I called you, but you did not answer (7:13)**. If it could happen to **Shiloh**, it could happen to any other place where **people** gather to worship **ADONAI**. It is not enough to be in the right place; it is not enough to say the right words; it is never enough until we are walking with **God** twenty-four hours a day everywhere we go, with everything we say an expression of love and faith.<sup>117</sup>

So if **the wickedness of the people** of Eli's day brought destruction to the Tabernacle, what would happen to the people of **Yirmeyahu's** day who had **done all these things**? Both **Jeremiah** and **the prophets** before him had warned them. But **the people** did not listen.

The typical secular treaty of the time contained a brief historical resume of past relations between the parties, with particular emphasis on the activities that the great king had undertaken for the welfare of the vassal. In gratitude for this, the vassal accepted the treaty stipulations, promising future obedience in gratitude for past favors.

In a far more complete and wonderful way **YHVH** once delivered **His** people from the bondage in Egypt. That was the supreme reason for **Isra'el's** response to **Him**. At Sinai the people responded: **We will do everything the LORD has said (Exodus 19:8)**. But the descendents of that first generation had so completely forgotten the saving acts of **Ha'Shem** that there was no motivation to obey them. Although **Yirmeyahu** and **the prophets** had reminded each generation, they were met with flinty faces, deaf ears and stubborn wills.<sup>118</sup>

Therefore, what I did to Shiloh I will now do to the house that bears My Name, the Temple you trust in, the place I gave you and your ancestors. I will thrust you from My presence, just as I did all your fellow Israelites, the people of Ephraim (7:14-15). What happened to the northern kingdom of Isra'el can happen to the southern kingdom of Judah. **ADONAI** used the Jerusalem Temple so long as the people adhered to **God's Covenant with Moshe** (see Af - **Covenants of the TaNaKh**), but **He** did not need the structure. Indeed, **Ha'Shem** was capable of burning down the Temple in the City of David as the burning down of the tabernacle at Shiloh. But, the people would certainly wonder, what the "gospel according to **Isaiah** (see above)?" the good news that the **Sacred City** was inviolable? The answer that **Jeremiah** would give is that **YHVH** is not bound by either decision: **He can revoke it**. Just as the decision in **Isaiah's** day was to save **Yerushalayim**, now the **LORD** can decide to destroy the **Daughter of Zion (6:2)**. But that decision would not be carried out if **Isra'el** would change her ways as the Ninevites did (see the commentary on **Jonah Az - Jonah's Anger at the LORD's Mercy: A God who relents in sending calamity**).

This unrestrained **God**, a **God** not bound by any habits or past behavior, must have been horrifying to those worshipping in **Jerusalem**, especially the religious establishment of **Tziyon**, bound as they were to the religious establishment of the tradition of the elders, bound as they were to the careful adherence to the habits and procedures of the past.<sup>119</sup>

When I talk to people who come to me in preparation for marriage I often say, "Weddings are easy; marriages are difficult." The couple wants to plan a wedding; I want to plan a marriage. They want to know where the bridesmaids will stand; I want to develop a plan for forgiveness. They want to discuss the music of the wedding; I want to talk about the emotions of marriage. I can do a wedding in twenty minutes with my eyes shut; a marriage takes year after year of alert, wide-eyed attention.

Weddings are important. They are beautiful; they are impressive; they are emotional; sometimes they are expensive. We weep at weddings and we laugh at weddings. We take care to be at the right place at the right time and say the right words. Where people stand is important. The way people dress is significant. Every detail - this flower, that candle - is memorable. All the same, weddings are easy.

But marriages are complex and difficult. In marriage we work out in every detail of life the promises and commitments spoken at the wedding. In marriage we develop the long and rich life of faithful love that the wedding announces. The event of the wedding without the life of marriage doesn't amount to much. It hardly matters if the man and woman dress up in their wedding clothes and re-enact the ceremony every anniversary and say, "I'm married, I'm married, I'm married" if there is no daily love shared, if there is no continuing tenderness, no attentive listening, no sacrificial giving, no creative blessing.

Josiah's reform was like a wedding; **Jeremiah's** concern was with the marriage. It was a great achievement to repudiate Manasseh and establish the people in covenant with their **God**; but it was a lifelong career to embrace **ADONAI's** love and walk in **His** ways. The people celebrated Josiah's reform; but they ignored **Jeremiah's** preaching.<sup>120</sup>