

Jeremiah 2:4–9a, 13 (NRSV)

⁴Hear the word of the LORD, O house of Jacob, and all the families of the house of Israel. ⁵Thus says the LORD:

What wrong did your ancestors find in me
that they went far from me,
and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves?

⁶ They did not say, “Where is the LORD
who brought us up from the land of Egypt,
who led us in the wilderness,
in a land of deserts and pits,
in a land of drought and deep darkness,
in a land that no one passes through,
where no one lives?”

⁷ I brought you into a plentiful land
to eat its fruits and its good things.
But when you entered you defiled my land,
and made my heritage an abomination.

⁸ The priests did not say, “Where is the LORD?”
Those who handle the law did not know me;
the rulers transgressed against me;
the prophets prophesied by Baal,
and went after things that do not profit.

⁹ Therefore once more I accuse you, . . .

¹³ for my people have committed two evils:
they have forsaken me,
the fountain of living water,
and dug out cisterns for themselves,
cracked cisterns
that can hold no water.

Here’s a hard question for us. How often do we forsake God, believing that we can do just fine on our own? Don’t answer too quickly.

After the mad rush from Egypt, the Hebrew slaves made way their across the desolate Sinai wilderness, whining and moaning the whole time. Was this wasteland what God had saved them for? Were they to die out in this seemingly godforsaken desert? But God provided for them despite their ungratefulness and soon they arrived at Mt. Sinai where God gave them his Law. It was on two tablets: the first setting out concrete expressions of what it means to truly love God and the second setting forth what it means to truly love others. [For more on this story, see the page four textbox.]

Sadly . . . beyond words sadly . . . things quickly went downhill. Even while Moses was up on the mountain getting the Law from God, the people encamped below began to fret and worry that they had been abandoned. In their fickle faithlessness they even fashioned an idol of a god, a golden calf, and gave it credit for saving them from Pharaoh.

For the rabbis, the teachers of Israel, this abandonment of the LORD God for a golden calf was the most profound story of sin in all the Torah. It was equivalent to the way

Christians view the fall of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. For the Jews, it shaped all that followed in the story of God and his people.

The rabbis' view of the golden calf story is easy to understand. God is about to enter into a serious and all-encompassing covenant with this extended family of Abraham, a covenant by which all the world is to be brought into a right and good relationship with

God's Marriage

About 750BC, the Israelites had turned away from God yet again, as they had so many times before. This time, God brought forward a prophet named Hosea, who would use the most startling language and word-pictures to describe the relationship between God and his people.

In a nutshell, by chasing after other gods, the people were committing adultery against the LORD God. The covenantal relationship between God and God's people is cast as a marriage. God is the spouse who is being cheated on! God is angry. God is hurt. The Hebrew in the book of Hosea is R-rated at times. Yet God does not abandon the covenant.

Instead, God says, "And now, here's what I'm going to do: I'm going to start all over again. I'm taking her out to the wilderness where we had our first date, and I'll court her. I'll give her bouquets of roses. I'll turn Heartbreak Valley into Acres of Hope. She'll respond like she did as a young girl, those days when she was fresh out of Egypt." (Hosea 2:14-15, from *The Message* paraphrase).

Could there be a more strikingly personal image of the relationship between God and his people? Centuries later, the prophet Malachi would write, "So look to yourselves, and do not let anyone be faithless to the wife of his youth" (2:15b).

Here we see again that (1) marriage is the union of a man and a woman, (2) marriage is a gift created and given by God, and (3) God uses our marriages as a metaphor for God's covenantal relationship with his people – with you and with me. Thus, we shouldn't be surprised that the prophet Jeremiah uses this powerful metaphor as well.

God. And even while God is setting out the terms of this covenant, the people leave God looking like a jilted bride, left at the altar for a flashier, golden rival. Not surprisingly, God's reaction was to tell his runaway bride to forget it; there would be no covenant, no marriage. The people could proceed on their way but it would be without God. Moses intervenes, however, and persuades God to press on with the people, to enter into the covenant, and to lead the people to the Promised Land.

And God does so. The Israelites become God's "wife" in one of the most sweeping and important metaphors in the Bible. God and his Bride. It would prove to be a very rocky marriage.

"What have I done wrong"

God may have gotten his bride back to the altar, but time and again they prove to be a faithless spouse, chasing after other gods, committing adultery in the context of their covenant with God.

In 750BC, God dramatically confronts the people's idolatry through the prophet Hosea (see the text box on this page). Yet again, God demonstrates his seemingly endless willingness to forgive and embrace his people anew, to put the past behind them.

More than a century later, the prophet Jeremiah comes to the people with this plaintive and poignant question from the Lord God: "What did your ancestors find wrong with me?" (2:5).

This is the question asked in God's law, Deuteronomy 24:1 (see the page three text box on divorce in the OT). A husband can dismiss a wife he finds objectionable. Now, God wants to know what the people have found objectionable in him. What has God done to them anything other than love them, protect them, provide for them, and relentlessly pursue them through a long string of affairs with various deities and idols?

Driving home his point, God directs his

question to those who should know him best, those whose lives are dedicated to the LORD's service, the priests of God. They too have gone chasing after other gods; "they have prophesied by Baal," the chief deity of the Canaanite pantheon.

Two evils

The people have committed two evils. First, the people have forsaken God. Not forgotten God, but forsaken him. They have chosen deities and idols created by man, rather than embrace the covenant relationship with the God who is. This is not really the same problem that has befallen many in our time. They have simply forgotten God entirely, imagining that there is no God who created them.

The Israelites have forsaken God for other deities of the cultures around them. There weren't any atheists or agnostics at the time. But whether one has forgotten about God or simply chosen gods of man's making, the mistake leads to the same place – we strive to "dig out our own cisterns," to make our own way through life. We strive for self-sufficiency in a world that we mistakenly imagine we can control.

A cistern is a reservoir made to hold water, typically rain water. In ancient Palestine, water was scarce and cisterns were dug and lined so that they could hold precious rain water. The hole was dug and a limestone plaster was used to line the walls and bottom. But cracks would allow the water to seep out, just like a crack in a swimming pool.

Jeremiah's metaphor is obvious. The people of God have convinced themselves that they can do just fine with some idols that don't exist. Elijah had powerfully demonstrated the truth that Baal was non-existent more than 200 years earlier on the slopes of Mt. Carmel (1 Kings 18). And still, the people trusted and worshipped this vaporous deity rather than trust the God-Who-Is, the LORD who had made a covenant with them. In whom is our deepest trust and reliance placed? Ourselves or the God who made us?

Divorce in the OT¹

Prior to the fall [in Genesis 3], man and woman had enjoyed a relationship of equality as co-sharers in the divine image (1:27) and as partners in the divine mandate to exercise dominion over creation (v 28). After the fall, man became ruler over woman, and woman became subject to man (3:16).

As a result of these new conditions, man assumed rights of disposition over woman that he did not possess prior to the fall. The "one flesh" relation was violated when the right of rulership opened the way for the male ruler to multiply the number of his female subjects. This disparity between male and female resulted in the practice of polygamy (Gn 4:19; 16:3; 29:30) and of serial monogamy, which required the termination of each successive marriage by an act of divorce (Dt 24:1-4). Thus, the emergence of the practice of divorce appeared as the inevitable consequence of the principle of male rulership. Neither rulership nor divorce was part of God's original design for the marriage relationship. The Mosaic regulation on divorce was a concession made by God to the fallen condition of mankind (Mt 19:8). Characteristically, the option of divorce was a right available only to the male rulers. As subjects of their male rulers, wives became the victims of divorce. Men could divorce their wives; women could not divorce their husbands.

As unfair as it may seem, the Deuteronomic provisions for divorce were actually intended to offer a modicum of protection for its female victims. A husband had to justify a divorce action against his wife by citing something indecent about her. He was to give his divorced wife a bill of divorce that accounted for her marriage to him (Dt 24:1). Moreover, a divorced husband was forbidden to remarry his ex-wife after her subsequent marriage, since his original divorce was viewed as a defilement of her (v 4).

Although the Mosaic dispositions on divorce were granted as a divine concession to Israel's hardness of heart, the OT emphatically states that God hates divorce (Mal 2:16). The right of divorce was grudgingly granted as an accommodation to the principle of male rulership that had resulted from the fall. But God's original design, reflected in the "one flesh" marital relation, remained the standard for the union of man and woman in marriage.

1. from the *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*. 2001.

The Story of the Exodus

When the book of Exodus opens, Abraham's descendants (through Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's twelve sons) have been enslaved in Egypt for several hundred years. Sometime around 1500–1300 BC, Moses is born, raised in the Pharaoh's house, murders an Egyptian who was beating a fellow Hebrew, and disappears into the desert. There, he marries and tends to his flocks.

One day, he sees a bush that is burning but is not consumed by the fire. When he investigates, Moses is confronted by God who tells Moses that God is going to save the Hebrews. It is in this meeting that God reveals his name to Moses, YHWH, which means "I am" or "I am who I am" (Exodus 3:1-6).

Moses resists and offers up some reasons why he isn't the right guy, but God persists. Eventually, Moses, with the help of his brother, returns to Egypt to confront the Pharaoh and demand freedom for the Hebrews. As you'd expect, the Pharaoh resists, so God sends plague after plague upon Egypt. In the end, Pharaoh relents only when God sends death to strike all the first-born of Egypt. However, the death passes over the homes of the Hebrews who have marked their doorways with the blood of a lamb.

After this final plague, Pharaoh lets the Hebrews go, but then changes his mind and chases after them. God parts the Red Sea (or "sea of reeds") to let the Hebrews pass, but the Egyptian army is drowned when they follow the Hebrews into the parted waters.

God leads the Hebrews into the desert and after a few months they arrive at Mt. Sinai where God gives Moses the Ten Commandments and the instructions for building God's tabernacle, the place where God will dwell with his people. God also instructs the people on a system of priests and sacrifices that will mark them out as God's people. All this, despite the people's fashioning and worshiping of a golden calf while Moses is on the mountain with God.

Though the plagues in the Exodus story capture people's imagination, the heart of the story is the encounter between God and his people at Mt. Sinai. There, Moses climbs the mountain to appear before God, who reminds the people of what God has done for them and then proposes a covenant with the Israelites: "If you will obey me and keep my covenant, you will be my special treasure" (see Exodus 19:1-6). When Moses returns from the mountain, the leaders of the people meet and agree to accept the covenant, "to do everything Yahweh asks of us." After everything God had done for them, the Israelites' willingness to accept God's covenant shouldn't surprise us. Sadly neither will their failure to keep it.

After the people accept the covenant with God, the most amazing thing happens. God tells Moses that he will come to the people in a cloud of smoke so they can hear the audible voice of God! God is going to spell out clearly the terms of the covenant Israel has accepted so that all can hear. Thus, Moses assembles the people at the base of the mountain where God, in smoke and fire and announced by the blowing of a ram's horn, addresses his people.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What is the distinction between denying God, forgetting God, and forsaking God? My dictionary defines "forsake" in this way: "to renounce or turn away from entirely <friends have *forsaken* her> <*forsook* the theater for politics>." Do you think that we ever forsake God? Is it possible that we do it unconsciously; we just let it happen? What would be some signs of a Christian who has forsaken God in practice though not in word?
2. God asks the simple question of his people: What have I done wrong? There are many people in our world who seem to think that God has done much wrong. On my shelves is Hitchen's recent book, *God Is Not Great*. Admittedly, I suppose that Hitchens' denies God's existence entirely, but he still seems to think that if God exists, he has done some terrible and very wrong things. Why do you think that so many people believe God has done something wrong? In your own experience, what does God get blamed for? Is the blame just or unjust? In what ways might our own understanding of God contribute to the idea that God does wrong?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

My recommendation on reading through Jeremiah is to read it in Eugene Peterson's paraphrase, *The Message*. If you don't have a copy, you can read it for free at www.youversion.com

Monday, Jeremiah 1:1-9 The call of Jeremiah	Tuesday, Jeremiah 2:1 3:5 Israel's infidelity
Wednesday, Jeremiah 3:6 – 4:4 Repentance and return	Thursday, Jeremiah 4:5-31 Disaster threatens Israel
Friday, Jeremiah 5:1-31 Why has God done all these things to us?	Weekly Joys and Concerns

