

“In those days Judah will be saved
and Israel shall dwell in confidence”.

Thus announces the prophet Jeremiah, speaking in the name of the Lord God.

Jeremiah lived in turbulent times. The Babylonians were the new Empire on the block, and in the way of all ancient Empires they sought expansion and crushed all the little kingdoms in their way. Judah and Jerusalem were now in their way, and Nebuchadrezzar was a mighty warrior and the head of a massive army. A hundred and ten years earlier Jerusalem had been threatened by another mighty army, that of the Assyrians under Sennacherib. The records differ as to what happened. The Biblical story is that the Lord God sent an avenging angel to smite the Assyrians in their tents and they fled. The Greek historian Heroditus tells a story about Sennacherib's army being rendered useless when thousands of mice chewed through their bow strings. The annals of the Assyrians themselves records Sennacherib shutting up Hezekiah the king “like a caged bird” and massive tribute being paid by the people of Judah in order to save the city's destruction. Henceforth Judah was a vassal to the great Empire, until the Assyrians were themselves defeated by the Babylonian forces.

In that earlier invasion which saw Jerusalem brought to its trembling knees, Assyria had swept kingdoms and nations off the face of the earth, including Israel, the northern Kingdom whose capital was Samaria.

Israel and Judah are not two names for the same nation or people; though the one gives its name to the modern state and the other identifies the people who were given the right to live there, the Jews. Let me explain.

David, the great king, united the twelve tribes as a single kingdom and made Jerusalem his capital city. It had a certain neutrality, not being part of the territory of any of the twelve tribes, though it was close to the territory, allocated to the tribe of Judah, of which David was a member. The twelve tribes were named after the sons of Jacob; Judah being the fourth of his children born of the un-loved Leah; and Judah, though fourth in line, was the heir to the promise given to Abraham concerning descendants as many of the stars of heaven and the land of Canaan given to those descendants for all time.

Jacob, having lived many years in Haran, in northern Mesopotamia, the land from which Abram journeyed, returned to Canaan to face, so he thought, the wrath of his brother Esau, whose first-born blessing he had gained by deceit. At the ford of the Jabbock River Jacob wrestled with an unknown figure until dawn and was given a new name, Israel, meaning one who has striven with God and survived. Henceforth,

the sons of Jacob would collectively be called after this new name.

David united the tribes but the unity was short-lived. After the death of Solomon, proverbially wise but actually not very wise at all, the kingdom split. Ten tribes in the north ceded from Judah and Benjamin in the south. Benjamin was tiny and the new southern kingdom took the name of the dominant partner and was known as Judah. The northern Kingdom adopted the name Israel. They fought and bickered down the centuries. Neither was well ruled according to the biblical writers as they did not worship the Lord God as they should. But the northern kingdom had a powerful dynasty following the long and successful reign of Omri, which the Bible dismisses in a line. Elijah and Elisha clashed with the successors of Omri.

Then Assyria came to power and the King of Israel defied them and his nation was crushed. Samaria its fine capital was razed and the people deported. Some fled to the south and found a new home in Judah, but the ten tribes of the north were lost to history forever. True to its policy of divide and rule, Assyria not only deported the Israelites they imported others into their lands. These interlopers intermarried with those few who remained and the mixed raced people became the Samaritans. They maintained allegiance to Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, but worshipped the Lord God on their holy mountain, Mt Gerasim, and were despised by the Jews, as the remaining people of Judah came to be known.

So when Jeremiah is speaking on behalf of God, Israel is no more, vanished from history more than a century before and Judah is under dire threat from the Babylonians and Nebuchadrezzar will raze the city and its Temple and deport its people to Babylon. They would have followed their cousins into oblivion, but that the Babylonians did not import foreign peoples. The land was left as a wasteland; and thus a generation later when the Persians had supplanted the Babylonians, and Cyrus, King of Persia, allowed Judeans to return, there was a land to return to.

The promise made by God through the prophet that Judah will be saved and Israel dwell in confidence must have struck Jeremiah's contemporaries as total madness. Israel was no more and Judah was under dire threat and obliteration beckoned. But God remained true to his Word. While the suffering was considerable, and hope all but annihilated, Judah was restored and Israel re-established. The deportees returning from exile gave us the precious gift of the sacred Scriptures which they had adapted and developed in the crucible of their suffering.

Our world is in crisis. It is a more dangerous place for more people, ourselves included, than it has been for several generations. The might powers again glare at each other. Instability and tremors terrify. It does seem that the apocalypse is pending. We need to maintain hold of the prophets assurances. For God remains faithful to his Word; and all things are possible with God.