

## Idolatry and the Peril of the Nation: Reading Jeremiah 2 in an African Context

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*This article focuses on a theological interpretation of Jeremiah 2:4–8 in light of the African context. This passage is typical of many in Jeremiah where the Lord laments Israel's turn away from the Lord to serve idols. Jeremiah offers a diagnosis of what went wrong with Israel, and I seek to understand how that diagnosis might provide a key for understanding Africa's own postcolonial situation. The article examines Israel and African Christianity in parallel: the historical context, the abandonment and banalization of God in contemporary times, and the resulting failed leadership that the prophetic imagination is called to address on the basis of Jeremiah's prophecy.*

### *Translation*

4. Hear the word of Yahweh, house of Jacob, and all the families of the house of Israel. 5. Thus says Yahweh: What evil did your fathers find in me, that they walked away from me, and went after vanity, and became vain in the process? 6. And they did not say, "Where is Yahweh? Who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who guided us in the wilderness, in a land of dryness and utter darkness, in a land through which no one passes, and (where) no one settles?" 7. I brought you into a fertile land, to eat its fruit and its good produce; but when you went in, you defiled my land and changed my heritage

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into an abomination. 8. The priests did not say, “Where is Yahweh?” Those who handle the Torah did not know me. The shepherds rebelled against me, and the prophets prophesied by Baal; they walked after things that do not profit.

### *Historical and Literary Contexts*

Jeremiah 2 belongs to the “the foe from the north” unit (chapters 2–6) of the book. The general theme that runs through these five chapters is Judah’s unfaithfulness and Yahweh’s judgment to punish his people through an enemy coming from the north. Chapter 2 opens the section with the description of Yahweh’s accusation against Judah because of its evil. The prophet identifies this evil as idolatry.

The prophecy in chapter 2 must have been uttered at the beginning of Jeremiah’s ministry, more specifically, before Josiah’s reformation (622 BC). Thus the mention of idolatry may reflect, in part, Judah’s vassal status to a foreign power (Assyria).<sup>1</sup> John Thompson recognizes that chapter 2 consists of a literary arrangement of several originally independent segments dealing with the same theme and brought together to serve a theological purpose.<sup>2</sup> The literary unity of verses 4–13 can be distinguished from other units in the chapter by the person who is addressed: in verses 1–3 as well as in 14–19 the person of address is second person feminine singular, whereas in verses 4–13 the second person masculine plural is employed. Thompson also rightly points out that in the context of the whole chapter, verses 4–13 form a bridge between the statement of Israel’s early devotion to Yahweh (vv. 1–3) and the description of her present state of bondage to Assyria (vv. 14–19). This gives a clear sequence of the chapter: Israel’s early devotion (vv. 1–3), Israel’s apostasy (vv. 4–13), and the tragic results of this apostasy (vv. 14–19).<sup>3</sup> Because of space limitations this study will only deal with the section about apostasy in verses 4–6 and 8.

The study of Jeremiah 2 is very important for us in Africa, for it shows how Israel started well with Yahweh only to end in apostasy. It

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Craigie, P. H. Kelly, and J. F. Drinkard, *Jeremiah 1–25*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, Tex.: Word Books, 1991), 28.

<sup>2</sup> John A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 1980), 160.

<sup>3</sup> Thompson, *Jeremiah*, 167.

is easy for a country to slowly but surely abandon its primary vision of justice, unity, love, and progress.. In most of our African countries, the anthems composed during the time of independence contain such a primary vision: the need for building a better nation on the basis of unity, justice, and love, and sometimes even prayer to God to bless the nation. Some of the first constitutions after independence contain such a primary vision as well. But when the country abandons its vision and embraces vanity, it finally destroys the whole nation with its people. As I read this text and seek to discover what went wrong in Judah between Yahweh and his beloved people, I will also be reading my African story and try to understand what is going on in the continent.

*History Matters (v. 4)*

When we go to the hospital for the first time, doctors always start with questions about our medical history. They carefully take detailed notes of what we tell them in order to construct a correct picture of the state of our health. They are taught that our health is heavily influenced by the past: places where we lived, our families, the kind of activities we were involved in, past behaviors, and past experiences are all important information that can help to explain our present health conditions. It is the same with our society at large. History helps us to understand our present situation. If we carefully listen to it, we will be able to clearly understand most of the problems we are currently facing. This was true for Israel as it is for us in Africa today.

In Jeremiah 2:4, the prophet takes his contemporaries back to their past, to the history of Israel, to help them understand the root of the problem they were facing. This telling of Israel's history by the prophet starts with an invitation to hear. History must be rightly taught and correctly heard. If we delight in hearing pseudohistory, it will also teach us false values.

Thus, the passage we are studying opens in verse 4 with an appeal to the house of Jacob and the families of the house of Israel *to hear the word of Yahweh*. This word of God in chapter 2 is mainly the reminder of Israel's history. Some commentators have questioned the authenticity of this verse simply because they could not understand what is going on in the passage. They dismiss it because it refers to the house or the tribe of Israel, which no longer existed during the time of the prophet Jeremiah. Thus, Holladay thinks that verse

4 originally introduced Jeremiah's word to the northern tribe since the expression "household of Israel" was the designation of the tribal league at the time of Judges (1 Sam. 7:2, 3) and of the kingship of Saul and David (2 Sam. 1:12; 6:5). Moreover, the household of Jacob is a poetic synonym (Amos 3:13) functioning as a reminder of Israel's election.<sup>4</sup> Another commentator, Thompson, argues that this oracle might have been spoken at a covenant festival during which the people of Judah (not the Northern Kingdom) would have been addressed as representing "all the tribes of the house of Israel."<sup>5</sup>

My understanding of the passage is different from these two authors. It seems that Jeremiah is here using his prophetic imagination to remind his audience about the whole history of Israel (not only Judah), a history of constant failure and delusion. In this sense, we do not need to see it as either addressed to the Northern Kingdom (contra Holladay) or to a particular Judean festival (contra Thompson). It might be that the prophet simply wanted to show to his audience where the root of their failure was to be found. I see the passage as showing a continuity of history: though the Northern Kingdom no longer existed, the prophet saw the need to show his contemporaries that their own situation is linked to that of their fathers (v. 5), or that their present state of apostasy really began with their fathers, at the very beginning of their history with Yahweh. In the same way, the question with which Yahweh opens his case against Judah in verse 5 relates to the beginnings of the history of Israel as a whole, not only Judah. According to Jeremiah, history is a good teacher to tell us why we find ourselves in a particular situation. This is true for every single society. Cicero acknowledges the same truth in his often-quoted trope: *historia magistra vitae* (history is the teacher of life).

This is important for us in that how we choose to live both socially and spiritually in our own days will have an impact on the generations to come. We are shaped by the society in which we are born, and no matter what we do, it is extremely difficult to break free from it. It is unfortunate that very often we concentrate too much on the present, on our immediate interest, and never think about the consequence of our actions on the generations to come. If one thinks, for example, of the many blessings Yahweh bestowed on Israel in the past, it becomes

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<sup>4</sup> William Holladay, *Jeremiah I: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah Chapters 1–25*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress Press, 1986), 85.

<sup>5</sup> Thompson, *Jeremiah*, 167.

distressing to consider the many ways Israel showed its ingratitude. It is also distressing to think of how life in Africa mostly means suffering and death, even though it is a continent teeming with riches. It is even more painful to realize that the media footage of Africa shown in the West is generally of people dying from hunger, heavily armed child soldiers, malnourished children with voluminous bellies, abandoned corpses, and so on. The Western image of Africa is of a doomed continent destroyed by war, crimes, corruption, HIV/AIDS, refugees, and people fleeing their own land. But how do we explain this disaster? How did we get there? Why are we so paralyzed and unable to change the situation? How can Jeremiah help us understand it? My argument is that, like in the book of Jeremiah, there is no better way to understand our situation in Africa apart from our past, recent, and distant history.

Thus, Basil Davidson links the current crisis in Africa's social and political institutions with the denial of its past. Colonization made African history a *tabula rasa*, destroying what had sustained life on the continent for centuries, and creating its own artificial continent. This completely stripped Africa of its history and tradition, destroyed the harmony that already existed, and left African people totally disorganized and destabilized. It taught Africans that in order to be civilized, they must cease to be Africans and adopt Western style of life and organization. Unfortunately, Africans never became true Europeans but ceased to be true Africans.

On the spiritual side, it is important to be reminded that in traditional Africa, religion explained and regulated the entire life of individuals and societies. Values could not be divorced from religion; spiritual and physical dimensions of our world could be distinguished but not separated. In traditional Africa, people planted and harvested in their farm with their religion. It was in their bedroom and their celebrations; it regulated their meetings, burial ceremonies, weddings, conflict resolutions, and so on. Ethics could not be conceived apart from religion. Nothing could be given natural explanation without appealing to the supernatural. This spirituality does have its weaknesses. For example, it can kill the spirit of initiative and innovation because everything is in God's hand. However, colonialism destroyed Africa spiritually by bringing in some of the worst elements of Western philosophies and humanism, which taught that everything, including human beings, can be given natural explanation without appealing to the supernatural. The undiscerning adoption by some Africans of these

philosophies and their resulting moral relativism has been devastating both for individuals and society. The consequence is that people think they can do without God. They can steal, kill, and tell lies because religion and God means very little. They might need God and religion only for circumstances of pain and need. Henceforth, God has not only been privatized but isolated, manipulated, weakened, and silenced. Can this explain why we have some people who profess Christianity but are corrupt politicians, unfaithful government officials, and dubious businessmen and women? Africa's church growth has been phenomenal, but this spiritual confusion shows the superficiality of our faith on the continent and the urgent need to rethink African Christianity.

*Yahweh Abandoned by His People (v. 5)*

Verse 5 starts with an important rhetorical question: "What evil did your fathers find in me, that they went far from me?" The word here translated by "evil" or "fault" is *'evel*. When used as a verb, it means to act wrongly or unjustly. It is evil in an ethical, moral sense. Its antonym is *tsadik* (good behavior, righteousness, covenantal kindness, justice). The implication of such a question is that some moral failure in Yahweh might have forced the Israelites to depart from him. In the immediate context of verses 1–3, which describe the relationship between Yahweh and Israel as between a husband and his wife, and in the context of the whole Old Testament, this passage reminds one of Deuteronomy 24:1, which speaks of a man divorcing his wife when he finds some indecency in her. In Israel, the wife was not allowed to divorce her husband, but in this text, Israel as Yahweh's wife decided to do so against nature. This is a pathetic story of Yahweh and his beloved people.

In addition, theologically, the wicked actions depicted by the word *'evel* in relation to Yahweh have absolutely no part in the character of God (Deut. 32:4; Job 34:10). One then understands Yahweh's shock in this passage at Israel's rejection. It makes Yahweh look like an evil person and someone who is unable to care for the needs of his people. Therefore, Israel's accusation against Yahweh as seen in the rhetorical question touches the very character of God. Nonetheless, though the prophet does not attempt to immediately respond to this allegation, it is clear that there was no fault in Yahweh. The fathers are the ones to be blamed, because they were the ones who *walked*

*away* from Yahweh their God and led the whole nation in rebellion against him.

To “walk away” (from God) comes from the verb *rachaq*, which means “to be or become distant, remote, be removed or remove oneself, withdraw, make distant, walk away, go far away.” Many commentators understand the expression “walked away from me [Yahweh]” as going after Yahweh’s rivals or after other gods (idols) in order to serve them.<sup>6</sup> This is contrasted with walking after Yahweh in verse 2 of this chapter, where it is said that Israel followed Yahweh in the desert during the time of love.

The heart of Judah’s problem is thus expressed in one single verb: *rachaq*. This walking away from Yahweh has significant social implications. It is also to walk away from the center of life, of true power, of true vision for the well-being of the community. It leads to a loss of direction for the future and a distancing from the source of human worth. This distancing from God also means a sense of autonomy from Yahweh, a revolt from his commandments, an unwillingness to obey his law, a deviation from godly principles, and a loss of initial vision in relationship with his transcendence. It is this loss of worth that creates disintegration in human reasoning and leads to the spiritual death of the leadership (represented by the fathers in v. 5) and the entire nation.

Once a leader abandons the source of true power, leadership becomes dysfunctional and brings only death, corruption, poverty, and suffering. This is because the owner of true power, life, and social justice and order has been done away with. This is the problem reflected in the entire book of Jeremiah. We know from our experience in Africa that such leadership lacks self-confidence; it is like an empty vessel since it has no other greater power and example to imitate. Instead it trusts in pseudoexperts like false prophets, soothsayers, praise singers, renowned witch doctors, magicians, powerful diviners, and even some religious leaders who have lost direction like them.

When God is done away with, something or someone else is put in God’s place: either a person (personality cult, dictatorship, and so on) or a system or doctrine (like communism, socialism, capitalism, Mobutism, or Nkrumaism). In one way or another, this might have

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<sup>6</sup> Thompson, *Jeremiah*, 167. He notes the fact that in secular treaties of the day, a rebel vassal who went after some other ruler was understood to have renounced allegiance to his overlord. This is probably what the accusation meant in this passage.

been the problem of the people of Judah when they distanced themselves from Yahweh. This might also shed light on the current situation in most of African countries where it seems that people are walking in darkness: the darkness of war, hatred, ignorance, poverty, corruption, and tribalism. In both Israel and Africa, this darkness symbolizes the loss of direction.

Though throughout its history, Israel had flirted with idolatry (Jer. 3:23; 11:12; 44:17–25, and so on), this specific passage does not tell us how exactly the people of Judah went after idols. These details will come in the following pages of the prophetic book. Therefore, Jeremiah 2 functions here as a hypotext, that is, a text that serves as the source or the summary from which the entire book of Jeremiah will be built. However, we know that idolatry can take several forms: it can be open in the sense of seeking help from other supernatural forces through magic, witchcraft, or divination (1 Sam. 28:1–25), or hidden in the sense of replacing God in our life and desire with other things (materialism, power, and so on). For Uchenna B. Okeja, the dominant forms of this idolatry in Africa are clearly witchcraft and magic. He paints a horrifying picture of these modern idolatrous practices by African people, Christians and non-Christians alike:

The manifestation of the phenomena of magic and witchcraft in contemporary Africa is so endemic that one can, without risking any ambivalence, say that it is pathological. In the schools, market place, church, government and other offices, streams, rivers, homes, forests, the floor of the stock exchange market, newspapers, bridges, government houses, state and federal houses of assembly, senate house, football stadium and even at the presidency, etc., the feeling, reports or affirmation of the manifestation of these phenomenal is commonplace. There is, in short, so much belief, fear and purposeful recourse to the phenomena of witchcraft and magic in Africa, or at least in the part I am conversant with.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Uchenna B. Okeja, "Magic in an African Context," in Scott E. Hendrix and Timothy J. Shannon, ed., *Magic and the Supernatural* (Oxford, U.K.: Inter-disciplinary Press, 2012), 104, at <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/14117/1/MagicandtheSupernaturalmagic1ever101232012.pdf>.



This description is probably exaggerated and may vary from one place to another. However, it shows the dark side of African faith and helps to explain why the continent is lagging behind in terms of development, human rights, and social justice. Erich Leistner confirms this when he says, “The fact that witchcraft and sorcery is not about to be ‘modernized’ is underlined by the reality of African elite—professors, other academics, theologians, ministers, state presidents, professionals, living by it.”<sup>8</sup> These are the leaders like the “fathers” of the book of Jeremiah. Peter Geshiere acknowledges the strong connection between African politics and witchcraft by arguing that “it is especially this version of sorcery/witchcraft as an accumulative force that prevails in more modern forms of politics.”<sup>9</sup>

Jeremiah 2:5 states that the fathers walked after *hevel*. *Hevel* means “vapor” (Isa. 57:13; Prov. 13:11; 21:6; and Ps. 144:4), in the sense of “vanity, nothingness, nonsense, incomprehensibility, deceit, senselessness, worthlessness, or unprofitableness.” Whatever the correct meaning of this verse might be, it is clear that there is a close association between *vanity* and *idols* in this passage. For Yahweh, idols are vanity because they have turned Judah away from her primary vision, from her initial relationship with God, and from the mission that was assigned to her. Judah lost her value and her identity, and became a useless community for Yahweh. People pursuing vanity or who have become vanities get nowhere. No wonder that most African dictators end their life miserably in exile or in prisons, like Idi Amin of Uganda, Mobutu of Zaire (DR Congo), Mubarak of Egypt, Blaise Compaore of Burkina Faso, Jean-Bedel-Bokasa of Central African Republic.

The worthlessness here is not to be understood in abstract terms. It is very much expressed in concrete situations like social injustice, corruption, poverty, suffering, division, fear, and uncertainty. In Jeremiah, there is a strong relationship between knowledge of God and social justice on the one hand, and idolatry, war, and exile on the other as far as national and community life is concerned (5:1–9, 27–28; 7:5–7; 9:23–24; 21:12–14; 22:1–5, 13, 16–17; 23:5–6). Consequently, idolatrous practices in Judah threatened not only the missiological function of the nation by obscuring the worship of Yahweh, the true

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<sup>8</sup> Erich Leistner, “Witchcraft and African Development,” *African Security Review*, March, 2014, [www.researchgate.net/publication/263332101](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/263332101).

<sup>9</sup> Peter Geshiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft*, trans. Peter Geshiere and Janet Roitman (Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia, 1997).

and living God, and by skewing the just social shape of the nation, but also threatened the very life of Judah as a nation.

From this analysis, it might be right to state that the true problem between Yahweh and the people of God (as described in v. 5) is that there came a time when Israelites became remote in their relationship with God, then started pursuing after useless things and gods. As a result, they themselves became *hevel*, that is, useless or worthless. This reminds one of Hosea 9:10: one becomes like what he or she worships.

### *Banalization of God (v. 6)*

Verse 6 elaborates by pointing out that the failure of the Israelites was a consequence of the loss of spiritual memory, an abandonment of their history with Yahweh, that is, the abandonment of primary vision. More specifically, the prophet accuses them of not asking the question, “Where is Yahweh?” This question is repeated twice in verses 6 and 8, and therefore shows its importance in the whole passage. The question “Where is Yahweh?” is used with two participles: *hama’aleh* (hiphil participle masculine singular of *’alah*, with the meaning “to bring up”—for example, from Egypt) and *hamôliyk* (hiphil participle masculine singular of *halak*, which means “to lead, to bring in”). With clear reference to Egypt and Canaan, the question invokes a constant possibility of Yahweh’s acts of rescue in the promised land, where Yahweh “brought in” the people of Israel after “bringing them up” from Egypt. In this sense, the question “Where is Yahweh?” can be understood as what was supposed to be a constant call or cry of Israelites to Yahweh for help during a time of need and crisis, like the ones in the desert when they were coming from Egypt, and in the land when they were threatened by enemies.

To continue with this same idea, the question can also be taken as an accusation that Judah had grown accustomed to God: they were so at ease that God was taken for granted and ignored. Yahweh was no longer the center of Judah’s life, and he was not called upon during the time of danger. Instead, people chose to go after idols, which are ironically implied to be more helpful than Yahweh. Thus, the issue at stake in Judah, according to this text, was the question of Yahweh’s effectiveness in directing the life of the entire community, and the awareness of the people that Yahweh was present in daily activities, whether the people were following him or not. It is important to see

how the lack of asking the question “Where is Yahweh?” is here linked with the issue of going far from Yahweh, that is, after idols.

Yahweh wanted to retain a close relationship with the people so that they would keep calling on him during their time of need. To call upon or to cry to Yahweh was a central construction and practice in Israel’s faith. In Exodus 2:23–25 and 1 Samuel 7:8, Yahweh decided to act as an answer to his people’s cry. To cry or call to somebody for help is a sign of friendship, recognition of superiority, and confidence. This confidence must be rooted in concrete historical facts that have proved the effectiveness of the one upon whom people are calling. For this reason, the question “Where is Yahweh?” is linked with some important historical and theological events that characterize the deity from whom Israelites have distanced themselves.

First, Yahweh reminds the people how he brought them up from the land of Egypt. The book of Exodus relates how a perishing people was turned into a flourishing multitude that prospered under the most difficult political, environmental, religious, military, economic, and social conditions in Egypt under Pharaoh.

Second, the deliverance from Egypt is associated with Yahweh’s guidance through the hardship in the wilderness. In other words, without Yahweh, the people of Israel could not have been freed from their slavery. Even if someone else could have delivered them, it would have been impossible for the Israelites to reach the promised land by themselves because of the wilderness.

To come to the point, the desert through which Yahweh’s gentle and sure guidance took the Israelites was a threatening place, a place that was hostile to the life of human beings. Yahweh had demonstrated his power and his effectiveness by taking the people safely through it. What is being underlined here is not simply the fact of crossing the desert and entering the promised land, but the danger the people faced and the impossibility of the entire journey without the strong hand of the Lord. This should have created confidence in the people that Yahweh was someone totally dependable. Also, this should have remained perpetually written in the memory of the Israelites. Faith is not a simple theory to be recited, it is not just a question of words or concepts, but the awareness a people have of their concrete past and present situation.

One then understands why, in this verse, the desert crossing serves as the basis for the present generation’s condemnation. It is the people’s ingratitude to Yahweh’s care through many miraculous

interventions that constitutes the basis for their judgment. This is clearly a crisis of memory. The real nature of this crisis does not so much consist in the denial of God, but in the *banalization* of Yahweh. The people of Judah never forgot that Yahweh exists, but the issue is that at one point, God was not very useful for them. They might have thought that Yahweh was not effective, not delivering what people needed. These might have been genuine needs; as the time went by, people had new needs in the land, and they wanted God to respond to them. Verse 8 below will help us to understand that the leaders failed to help people cope with the new situation because they did not care about their needs.

*Failed Leadership (v. 8)*

Verse 8 elaborates on this defilement by describing why things went wrong. Here the prophet names four groups of people who are accused of being the cause of evil in Israel. It is important to note that all four are leaders of the nation.

The first group is the priests. Jeremiah accuses them of not having said, “Where is Yahweh?” In Israel, the priests had a huge responsibility of representing the people before God. They also provided general instructions and specific guidance for the nation. They were supposed to instruct Israel in the way of Yahweh so that the whole nation would remain holy, that is, distinct from all other nations, and thus become a testimony to Yahweh’s distinctiveness to those nations. It is for this reason that Exodus 19:6 states that Israel as a nation was “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” In other words, the holy nation or the priestly people had the responsibility of mediating the knowledge and the blessing of Yahweh to other people (compare with Exod. 15:11–17; 19:5–6; Lev. 20:22–26), and the priests had that enormous obligation of turning the whole nation into a kingdom of priests. In this way, the failure of the priests would actually be the failure of the entire nation to know Yahweh and to make him known to the nations.

Yet priests frequently failed in their responsibility. For example, Aaron is reported to have participated in the making of the golden calf (Exod. 32); Micah’s priest decided to disobey for prestige and prosperity (Judg. 18:19–21); Eli and his family were judged because of inconsistent character and the wickedness of his sons (1 Sam. 1–2). In Ezra 10:18, the priests were blamed for marrying foreign women.

Finally, in Malachi priests are blamed for abuse of their sacrificial privileges (1:7–8), and failure to instruct the people in the proper ritual behavior (2:7–8).

It is important to note that the accusation against the priests in this passage is not for what they did not do, but for what they did not say. The priests neglected or forgot to tell the story, that is, to remind the community of the faithfulness and uniqueness of Yahweh, and of their responsibilities as a kingdom of priests. Further still, it is important to tell a story, but more importantly, to tell *the right story*. This rightly recalls Malachi 2:7, which states, “For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and men should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts.”

In Africa, we know the danger of telling the wrong stories. Wrong stories can lead to death. These are stories of tribalism, hatred, child witches, and so on. Stories that tell us that we are Hutus against the Tutsis (Burundi, Rwanda), Lendu against Hema (DR Congo), Dinka against Nuer (South Soudan), black against white (South Africa), Kikuyu against Luo (Kenya), Dyula against Baoulé (Ivory Coast). All this ends up in confrontations, hatred, and bloodshed. Tribes and ethnic identities do exist, but they are not in themselves conflictual, just as individuals are not intrinsically in conflict simply because of their ethnic identities. Ethnicities become a problem because of wrong stories (such as external circumstances and manipulation by politicians).

The second group to be accused is the guardians of the law—the intellectual leadership of Judah. They are the teachers, the biblical scholars. These were probably the Levites, particularly the group entrusted with the business of interpretation and religious education. For this very reason, the Levites were dispersed to what is known as the Levitical cities (Num. 35:1–8), where they lived so that they could watch over the community and give right instructions about God’s way of living. The prophet accuses them of not knowing Yahweh. These were the very people whose assignment was to study God’s word and rightly interpret it to the people. Levites knew God’s word well, but they did not know Yahweh in a personal and intimate way. They were well versed in their scholarship, but that scholarship did not bring them closer to the living God. It is possible to know a lot about Yahweh without obeying Yahweh. This leads to telling a lifeless story about Yahweh and brings damages to the community’s life and hope. Christian erudition is supposed to lead to the source of truth (God) and enlighten our minds to know and obey God. Christian

scholarship should not remain a private activity for our promotion but a ministry for God's glory.

The third group is the shepherds, or political leaders. These were national leaders responsible for the government and the welfare of the people. The prophet accuses them of being engaged in rebellion against Yahweh. The sentence "The shepherds rebelled against me" is to be understood in both its covenantal and political nuances. The duty of the shepherds was to take care of the people, and it mattered a lot how they fulfilled this obligation. What is at stake in this passage is the issue of allegiance. The rebellion of political leaders against Yahweh in this passage might mean they refused to acknowledge Yahweh's sovereignty and ruled the nation without any consideration for him and his law. This is an indication that political leaders had lost confidence in Yahweh and had been trying to lead the nation by their own management skills in political and social affairs.

The question "Where is Yahweh?" shows that for Jeremiah, it was not secular skills or techniques that mattered, but petition: trustful asking from and crying to God during the time of national need, and prayer for wisdom. This is the secret of true leadership. Sadly, the royal system in Judah had led the country far from this trust in the Lord and had convinced the citizens that trusting in other gods would prove more helpful for the well-being of the nation than calling upon Yahweh. Unfortunately, this is the common practice of leadership, especially in Africa. In at least one of his public speeches, President Mobutu declared that for the security of Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), his country, he was ready to enter into a pact with Satan. Mobutu was courageous enough to openly declare what is a common practice for most of our leaders. Unfortunately, we have also heard about many church leaders who became involved in occult practices for fame and success.

The last group being pointed out as the cause of Israel's moral and spiritual failure is the prophets. Prophets were first and foremost preachers of the revelation and the word of God (Isa. 1:1; 2:1; Jer. 18:18; 27:18; Ezek. 7:26). This word came to them (Jer. 1:2, 4; 2:1, and so on), was with them (Hab. 2:1), was spoken to them by Yahweh (Jer. 46:13), and enabled them to speak in the name of the Lord (Deut. 18:20). Almost all true prophets in Israel addressed their messages primarily to the kings, the shepherds of the community.

In general, the content of these messages was either a call to return to the covenant obligation or judgment and punishment because

of the leaders' failure to follow Yahweh's word. However, there were also false prophets who were particularly active in the decades prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC, and whose source of inspiration was a surrogate revelation. False prophets might bear the greatest responsibility for the country's disaster. According to Ezekiel (13:19), most people in Judah listened to them more than to the true ones, and followed their falsehood since their prophecy was what people and their leaders wanted to hear (see Ezek. 13:10, 16; Jer. 5:30–31; 6:14; 8:11; 23:17; Mic. 2:7; 3:5–8, 11). The general content of the message of these false prophets was that Yahweh would never forsake Jerusalem, his own holy city, and that consequently, people were forever secure despite all the evil they were doing. In terms of this passage, people were secure despite their "walking away" from Yahweh (Jer. 6:13–15; Mic. 3:5–12). In the same way, it seems that many people did not like the prophecies of true prophets like Jeremiah, because they persistently showed people that destruction was sure if the nation did not repent (Isa. 28:9, 10; Jer. 6:10; 26:9; 29:24–28; Hos. 9:8; Amos 7:12, 16; Mic. 2:6–11; 3:5).

The last line in verse 8 is climatic. It summarizes the nature of the evil committed by the four groups who have just been indicted. The passage states that these leaders (political, intellectual, religious, and prophetic) walked after things that do not profit. I have already noted that the verb "to walk after" means to serve, and to walk after any other person or thing apart from Yahweh means to go after idols. These four groups of leaders might have created a system, a "network" that favored them, but destroyed the nation. This makes a nice link with our own situation in Africa: very often political and religious leaders would work together to protect one another. They would collaborate not to benefit the citizens, but to maintain their own interest. One can hardly imagine the success of some dictators in maintaining themselves in power for so long without the support (implicit or explicit) of other influential groups in the nation who also seek their own benefit. These four groups constitute the elite of Judah and they bear the responsibility of the destruction of the nation.

### *Conclusion*

The central message of the book of Jeremiah is a call to repentance and the announcement of judgment because of the failure to repent, a promise of exile, and the announcement of the restoration.

But before God issues this call, God tries to reason with the people to help them think about what went wrong in their relationship. Yahweh takes them back in their history and recalls the past relationship between the two parties. In this investigation, Yahweh starts by asking a central question: “What evil did your fathers find in me?” This is a surprising question coming from the sovereign God. It also signals that things have gotten to a very dangerous point. The question opens the door to the real problem with Judah: idolatry. The people got tired with God. At one point, Yahweh was no longer needed; God was not the center of their life and interest. People wanted “autonomy” from Yahweh. Nobody asked the question, “Where is Yahweh?” They took God for granted and decided to follow futile idols and became futile themselves. Like two sides of a coin, these two evils—sin of omission (forgetting God) and commission (walking after idols)—form the basis of Yahweh’s accusations. Four groups of leaders are accused of being responsible for this crisis: priests, teachers, prophets, and politicians. These were corrupted leaders who failed to care for the people, to listen to their needs and challenges, and to help them remain close to God. They could not help the people because they themselves were active in their rebellion.

While reading this portion of Jeremiah 2, I was also trying to understand what is wrong with Africa, why the continent is in such a mess. A short look at our recent history helped to understand both current social and political backwardness, and the spiritual struggle on the continent. The passage also reminds us of the importance for telling true stories of God, stories of love, peace, unity, and vision for a bright future.