

**Rebuilding on the Ruins: Biblical Precedent in Jeremiah 30:18–31:14
for Christian Engagement in Social Redevelopment**

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The disconnect between middle-class and affluent American church ministries and the condition of urban poor communities is troubling to see. While the sociological principle that “like” groups attract “like” individuals remains true in church settings, one would think that the people of God would be able to rise above usual patterns of social stratification. Unfortunately, this is not always so. To be sure, it is right to seek our particular assignments from the Lord. On the other hand, if we look closely at Jesus’ example of gathering to himself the socially disadvantaged (among others) and the directives of the Law and the Prophets to care for the poor, why do many individual churches consist primarily of one social class? Should not the church reflect the socially inclusive Kingdom of God? If given a clearer theological vision of God’s intent for restoring devastated people and places, would more Christians engage in rebuilding impoverished communities?

Perhaps it is not for lack of desire or assent with the Scriptures that Christians fail to engage in social rebuilding but rather a lack of theological conviction that would drive us to engagement. Jeremiah’s vision of the rebuilding of Jerusalem, and by association, all Israel, speaks volumes about God’s vision for rebuilding what was once ruined. This paper attempts to outline a precedent from Jeremiah’s perspective for engagement in urban reconstruction physically, socially, and spiritually. By looking closely at Jeremiah 30:18–31:14, we seek to answer the question: what biblical model does the church have in this passage for engaging in rebuilding impoverished or socially devastated communities?

Exegesis

To a people devastated by violence and the effects of deportation, Jeremiah's book is a tragic yet beautiful poetic retelling of the nation's internal and external traumas from their punishment for breaking Yahweh's covenant. In it, Jeremiah attempts to find divine purpose in the tragedies that occurred. Even as the larger book speaks of God's uprooting the nation and meting out her punishment, Jeremiah 30-33 is "a book within a book" and is named "The Little Book of Consolation" by scholars for its hopeful and comforting message. Jeremiah paints a vision of a "past and future . . . both united in God. The future world of joy, salvation, and beauty will interrupt the present weariness and despair without causal explanation."¹ In the midst of darkness and oppressive memories, Jeremiah's "book within a book" breaks out with a song of hope and restoration for those returning to rebuild.

A people traumatized by painful memories of horrific violence, sudden destruction of homes and the Temple, and the death of loved ones strain to find words to describe the impact on their psyche. Apart from words to tell a people's story, healing cannot come, and hope cannot rise.² Jeremiah provides this for God's people, frequently in symbolic form. Having found words to express the trauma, people are empowered "to come to grips with it, grieve it, and understand how God was present through its many manifestations."³ Only then can God's people begin to think about starting over, rebuilding, and making room for a hopeful future. Jeremiah's words open the door to hope.

Jeremiah 30:18–21: The passage begins with the promise of restoration

¹ Kathleen M. O'Connor, "Building Hope Upon the Ruins in Jeremiah," in *The Bible and The American Future*, ed. Robert Jewett, Wayne L Alloway and John G Lacey (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2009), 12.

² Kathleen M. O'Connor, "Rekindling Life, Igniting Hope," *Journal for Preachers*, 2021, 30-34.

³ O'Connor, "Rekindling," 31.

and rebuilding of the devastated places of the demolished city of Jerusalem:

Thus says the Lord: “I am going to restore the fortunes of the tents of Jacob,
and have compassion on his dwellings; the city shall be rebuilt upon its mound,
and the citadel set on its rightful site.” (30:18, NASB)

The Hebrew word for “mound” (or “ruins” in the NIV) is *tel*, such as in the modern city of Tel Aviv or ancient Tel Assar in 2 Kings 19:12, and it refers to new cities that were built upon the ruins of previous settlements.⁴ God’s compassion for his people will move him to rebuild a new city from that which was destroyed; there will be a complete reversal of a devastating trend.

This will be a physical rebuilding and a restoration of joy and honor as well. Not only will Solomon’s Temple be rebuilt, but we read of a citadel (“palace” in the NIV) being rebuilt, referring to a king who will take his rightful place. Instead of the degrading and diminishing of God’s people, their numbers will now grow, as will their “esteem of the nations as the Lord honors them.”⁵ Prosperity will be returned to all of Israel in the political, socio-economic, and spiritual senses when God’s covenant relationship with his people is renewed.

Jeremiah 30:21-22: Judah will have a new king, and he will be a native from among them, not a foreign plant. Furthermore, he will have a priestly ministry and identity, as indicated in the phrase, “Who is he who will devote himself to be close to me?” The rhetorical question emphasizes that only God could choose this priestly king and not by someone’s own initiative. Priests were chosen by virtue of their lineage. From a New Testament perspective, this reflects the apparent reign of the Messiah, who will serve in the order of Melchizedek as both priest and king!⁶ Thus, it will be obvious

⁴Frank E. Gaebelien, et al., *Isaiah - Ezekiel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 564.

⁵ Gaebelien, *Isaiah - Ezekiel*, 564.

⁶ Hebrews 5:6.

to the nations that Israel is indeed the people of God.⁷

The essential feature in God's restoration of Israel is the renewal of the covenant. God re-establishes the familial covenant with his people, "the ultimate goal of the divine activity of judgment and redemption."⁸ Reversal of the usual declaration of God's relationship with Israel, such as in 31:1, emphasizes God's intent for his people in verse 22: "And you shall be my people, and I will be your God."

Jeremiah 30:23-24: This is a work that only God can do. Now the punishment of God's enemies will begin, but not because Israel has experienced a heart change or is not guilty. God's activity to punish the wicked and rebuild his people will begin because the LORD has declared that her punishment is finished. Walter Brueggemann writes about a change in God's attitude: "The indignant One has become the compassionate One."⁹ Israel will receive the healing of the LORD and will see her oppressors no more.

Jeremiah 31:1-6: Just as chapter 30 dealt with Jerusalem and Judah, now 31:1 adds the promises of Judah to "all the clans of Israel." The timing of this points to an undesignated period in the future. When juxtaposed with the priestly king language of 30:21 and the imagery that follows in chapter 31, the vision again appears to be for a Messianic age.

God's concern is to give rest to all his people. Just as he carried them when they escaped their captors in Egypt, so he will carry them on their journey home and bring them into a place of bounty once again. "The LORD appeared to us in the past . . ." The people had a collective memory of God's love, grace, and comfort of them in the wilderness.¹⁰ God's love for his people is constant; he is just as attracted to them at their return from

⁷ Gaebelein, *Isaiah - Ezekiel*, 564.

⁸ Leander E. Keck, *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Volume IV* (Abingdon Press, 2015), 808.

⁹ Keck, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, 808.

¹⁰ Gaebelein, *Isaiah - Ezekiel*, 566.

exile as when he called them out of Egypt!

Yahweh describes his covenantal love for Israel in marital terms: “I have loved you with an everlasting love.” He had not forgotten his covenant toward her. The verb *ahaba* [loved] and noun *hesed* [loving-kindness] recall Yahweh’s eternal faithfulness and divine initiative. He is the same God who betrothed them to himself before they went into exile.

In contrast to mourning the tragedies of her exile, those in Israel will rejoice with dancing and tambourines as they return. Her rejoicing directly responds to Yahweh’s goodness and faithfulness, not to some self-effort. It recalls Miriam’s leading Israel in celebration after they were delivered from Egypt’s army by moving unscathed through the Red Sea.

The rebuilding and replanting found throughout the book is reiterated in 31:5 and includes more than just metaphorical restoration; homes and vineyards will literally be rebuilt in previously devastated places! The city will be rebuilt on its ruins. The curses for rebellion and sin outlined in the Law will be nullified and reversed when Yahweh replants his people in their own land.¹¹ God had delivered and planted before in Joshua’s day, and he will do it again!

The watchmen in verse 6 cry out for those living in the hills of Ephraim to go up to Jerusalem, as it will be established once again as the locus of God’s activity. No longer will those living in the North find alternative objects of worship on the high places. God’s people will seek to worship in the prescribed way, and according to Jeremiah 31:33, he will write his law eternally on their hearts. This recalls Isaiah’s vision of all nations going up to the city to be taught and to walk in the light of the Lord’s presence, as described in Isaiah 2:2-5. More than just Israel and Judah will be desirous to worship when he replants Jerusalem; the nations will come to worship!

Jeremiah 31:7-9: The rejected ones and the weakest of nations are now called “the foremost of nations,” as God answered their cry of “LORD, save us!” Even those left of the northern tribes, who were nearly wiped out, will

¹¹Keck, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, 809.

be welcomed back as God renews his eternal covenant and bestows honor on them. The weak and vulnerable and those pregnant—the ones too weak to travel—will lead the throng, not the strong, and they will experience joy on the journey! This symbolizes the reality of hope and emphasizes Yahweh's desire and initiative to liberate the weak, oppressed, and needy and infuse them with new life.

“Ephraim is my firstborn.” Ephraim, the younger of Joseph's sons, was elevated to the cherished place of firstborn by divine choice, and he will be honored as God's special child again, along with all who return to God with weeping.¹² Israel may have stumbled when led away to judgment,¹³ but in returning to the Lord, they will be upheld by Yahweh's own arm. “The breach of many centuries will at last be healed.”¹⁴ God's care for his people is lavish.

Jeremiah 31:10-14: The surrounding nations will be caught up as witnesses and participants in Jerusalem's renewal. “The nations among whom the exiles are scattered are recruited as the messengers of the good news . . . God announces redemption and deliverance, providing for all the physical needs of the people.”¹⁵ A continuous banquet will commence. The provision referenced here is for the present, although it points to the renewal of all things. “The Lord's redemption of Israel will constitute a new creation, a renewal of God's provision for life.”¹⁶

Theological Implications

One of the central questions that arises out of Jeremiah's “Book of Consolation” is whether the vision presented is specific to post-exilic Jerusalem at one time in history, or if the theological vision is inclusive of any devastated

¹² Keck, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, 809.

¹³ Jeremiah 6:21.

¹⁴ Gaebelien, *Isaiah - Ezekiel*, 564.

¹⁵ Keck, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, 810.

¹⁶ Keck, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, 810.

people desiring to return to the Lord? Can we apply Jeremiah's vision for Jerusalem and all of Israel to the social issues of today? If the vision spans more than one time, the Scripture carries literal and figurative meanings.

To correctly apply a single passage of Scripture, we must look to the whole of Scripture to illuminate its meaning. The prophets Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Amos all use rebuilding as a theme for a spiritual return to Yahweh. According to Benjamin Merkle, these concepts can be taken figuratively.¹⁷ There are specific references to rebuilding the city in certain places, which did happen, but some of the other descriptive language can be taken as figurative and Christological in interpretation. Graeme Goldsworthy insists that prophecies should not be taken literally if that means looking for their precise fulfillment. For the New Testament writers, "The interpretation of the Old Testament is not 'literal' but Christological."¹⁸ The language in Jeremiah's Book of Consolation seems Israel-centric. Yet, through its message, God extends a welcome to all who are willing to receive it, as shown in the person of Christ and the Spirit's outpouring on the day of Pentecost.

With Jesus's incarnation, the reign of the priestly King began. All of the prophecies given to the Old Testament writers are fulfilled in Jesus. Prophecies spoken at a specific time for a specific people (Israel) also include those Christ has redeemed (future disciples). The feast in the Kingdom of God, which Jesus preached about in Luke 14:12-23 and Matthew 22:1-10, is now and will also be at the renewal of all things under Christ's eternal reign.

The imagery used in Jeremiah 30:18-31:14 gives us a picture of God's heart for restoring any devastated people and the places where they live. The images in 31:8-9 that speak of strengthening the weak and vulnerable declare the inclusive nature of God for the weak and the weary, who are

¹⁷ Benjamin L. Merkle, "Old Testament Restoration Prophecies Regarding the Nation of Israel: Literal or Symbolic?" *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 14, no. 1 (2010): 17.

¹⁸ Merkle, "Old Testament Restoration," 18.

given an equal place at the feast.¹⁹ In the synagogue of his hometown, Jesus, quoting Isaiah 61, declared himself to be the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, anointed to preach good news to the poor and to set prisoners free.²⁰ Jesus' invitation to "Come to me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest"²¹ harkens to the images of rest in Jeremiah's "Little Book" that Yahweh desires for his people. Indeed, God desires to restore anyone who looks to Jesus for help and salvation.

Even the nations will witness the hope and renewal that Yahweh demonstrates to those devastated by war or calamity. God's action toward future Israel—the Church—was evidenced, typified, and modeled in Jerusalem's rebuilding when his people came home from exile! The multiple layers of this prophetic vision extend to the Gentiles reconciled to God by faith.

Applications for Contemporary Urban Ministry

Today's urban centers are a fusion of peoples laden with the effects of economic disparity, illness, displacement, missed opportunity, inequities, isolation, loss, transition, helplessness, and trauma. Jeremiah might use the Hebrew word *te'* (mound or ruins) to describe such a setting. Government policies and monetary assistance will never meet the soul-spirit needs for the restoration of persons and the communities in which they live. Jeremiah's consolation of Israel points to God's purposes of rebuilding and restoring seen in all of creation, communities, and individual lives.

According to Fletcher Tink, the church is present in places where the government is ineffective in bringing change.²² Churches can extend the entrance to community life where infrastructure fails to connect. When the church serves as a loving, welcoming community where we point people to

¹⁹ See Luke 14:21.

²⁰ See Luke 4:18-19.

²¹ Matthew 11:28-30 (NASB).

²² Lecture notes on lecture by Dr. Fletcher Tink, 06/08/21.

Christ to satisfy their deepest unmet needs, individuals prepared to rebuild their lives will be nurtured and supported, even when rebuilding is messy at first. If we take Jeremiah's vision seriously, we will act as though God can restore those we view as most unlikely to be transformed. They are the showcase of God's desire to honor those who were once disdained.²³ We earn the right to collaborate by humbly entering into a loving relationship with those seeking transformation. Those often seen as the most impoverished in spirit and resources are the ones God performs his best handiwork in!

Rebuilding individual lives is one vital aspect of an inclusive Christian community. According to Jeremiah's vision, the restoration of communities can also include rebuilding physical spaces. "I will restore the fortunes of Jacob's tents and have compassion *on his dwellings*" (italics mine). In a contemporary context, "dwellings" may include homes, parks, yards, playgrounds, streets, and the buildings that occupy them. Through collaboration and collective redistribution of resources, especially from the people of the community being transformed themselves, residents will take pride in their homes and neighborhoods. As physical transformation is combined with relational and spiritual transformation, new attitudes and habits have room to grow. "I will satisfy the priests with abundance, and my people will be filled with my bounty," declares the LORD."²⁴

Finally, rebuilding on the ruins can take place through the church's advocacy for the economically and spiritually poor. Jeremiah 31:11 declares, "For the Lord has ransomed Jacob and redeemed him from the hand of him who was stronger than he." Those impoverished economically or relationally need advocates to stand with them in their distress against the inequities of powerlessness. This is true of the American poor, especially immigrant and refugee populations. Those who have grown up in privileged homes and neighborhoods are truly the powerful in the USA. Arriving in a new land impoverished in soul and spirit (and often in linguistic and legal

²³ See Jeremiah 30:19.

²⁴ Jeremiah 31:14 (NASB).

aid), refugees and immigrants are similar to babies needing to be nursed and taught how to walk. Since we have been appointed by Jesus himself to “bring good news to the humble” and to “bind up the brokenhearted,” God wants us to be ready to partner with him to offer welcome, rebuild homes, and be “restorers of the streets in which to dwell.”²⁵ May his vision bring conviction to our hearts, and may he open our eyes to the opportunities to join his work of restoration, reconstruction, and rebuilding on the ruins!

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²⁵ Isaiah 61:1; 58:12 (NASB).