

Jeremiah 3:1

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

They say, If a man put away his wife, and she go from him, and become another man's, shall he return unto her again? shall not that land be greatly polluted? but thou hast played the harlot with many lovers; yet return again to me, saith the LORD.

Analysis

This verse opens Jeremiah 3 with a hypothetical legal case based on Deuteronomy 24:1-4, which forbade a divorced woman who remarried from returning to her first husband. The Hebrew construction 'they say' (לֵאמֹר, *lā'āmr*) introduces a well-known principle. God applies this law metaphorically to Israel's spiritual adultery through idolatry—she has 'played the harlot with many lovers' (*zānît rē‘îm rabbîm*, *זָנִית רַעִים בָּרִים*). Yet remarkably, God invites return: 'yet return again to me, saith the LORD.' This demonstrates grace transcending legal requirements. The rhetorical question 'shall not that land be greatly polluted?' uses the Hebrew *hānōp* *tahānap*, emphasizing severe defilement. Theologically, this reveals God's covenant love (*hesed*) surpasses human divorce laws, anticipating the gospel's radical forgiveness and Christ's work reconciling unfaithful people to God.

Historical Context

Jeremiah ministered during Judah's final decades before Babylonian exile (627-586 BC). Chapter 3 addresses both Northern Israel (already exiled by Assyria in 722 BC) and Judah. The divorce metaphor reflects ancient Near Eastern marriage customs where adultery justified divorce. Israel's 'lovers' were Canaanite gods—Baal, Asherah, and others—worshiped at high places throughout the land. Despite

Josiah's reforms (622 BC) removing many idolatrous sites, popular religion remained syncretistic. The pollution language reflects covenant theology: idolatry defiled the land, requiring purification through judgment (Leviticus 18:24-28). God's invitation to return despite legal impossibility demonstrated extraordinary grace.

Related Passages

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

Study Questions

1. How does God's willingness to receive back His spiritually adulterous people challenge our understanding of forgiveness and restoration?
2. What 'lovers' compete for your devotion and loyalty that God is calling you to abandon in returning fully to Him?

Interlinear Text

מְאֹת וָיְלָכֵה אֲשֶׁר אֶת לְאִישׁ וְשָׁלַח הַיְלָדָה לְאִמָּה
They say H2005 put away H7971 If a man H376 his wife H853 and she go H853
H559 H1980 H1980

וְשִׁבְתָּה לְאִישׁ אֶחָד וְשִׁבְתָּה
If a man from him and become another shall he return unto her again
H1961 H376 H312 H7725

בְּהַיָּה בְּאֶצְבָּע בְּלֹא עַד אֶל יָמָן
be greatly be greatly shall not that land
H413 H5750 H3808 H2610 H2610 H776 H1931

כִּי יְמִינְךָ רַע יְמִינְךָ בְּבִנְךָ
but thou hast played the harlot lovers with many
H859 H2181 H7453 H7227

וְשִׁבְתָּה נָאָמֵן אֶל יְהֹוָה:
shall he return unto her again to me saith the LORD
H7725 H413 H5002 H3068

Additional Cross-References

Ezekiel 16:26 (Parallel theme): Thou hast also committed fornication with the Egyptians thy neighbours, great of flesh; and hast increased thy whoredoms, to provoke me to anger.

Jeremiah 2:20 (Parallel theme): For of old time I have broken thy yoke, and burst thy bands; and thou saidst, I will not transgress; when upon every high hill and under every green tree thou wanderest, playing the harlot.

Jeremiah 4:1 (References Lord): If thou wilt return, O Israel, saith the LORD, return unto me: and if thou wilt put away thine abominations out of my sight, then shalt thou not remove.

Zechariah 1:3 (References Lord): Therefore say thou unto them, Thus saith the LORD of hosts; Turn ye unto me, saith the LORD of hosts, and I will turn unto you, saith the LORD of hosts.

Ezekiel 33:11 (References Lord): Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?

Hosea 1:2 (References Lord): The beginning of the word of the LORD by Hosea. And the LORD said to Hosea, Go, take unto thee a wife of whoredoms and children of whoredoms: for the land hath committed great whoredom, departing from the LORD.

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