

# Homiletics Analysis: Jeremiah 2

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## Content & Intent

### This Text — Content

Jeremiah 2 opens the first major prophetic address in the book, constituting God's covenant lawsuit (*rîb*) against Israel. The LORD begins by recalling the honeymoon period of the Exodus and wilderness wandering — a time when Israel followed the LORD through an uncultivated land, when she was holy, when the firstfruits of the harvest belonged to Him (vv. 1–3). From that remembered fidelity, the LORD pivots to devastating accusation: Israel's fathers departed from Him, went after worthless idols, and became worthless themselves (v. 5). The priests, shepherds, prophets, and rulers — every category of leadership — all transgressed together (v. 8). God calls the heavens to be appalled at what Israel has done: they have exchanged their Glory for something that does not profit (v. 11).

The central accusation is articulated in two images (v. 13): Israel has committed two evils — forsaking the fountain of living waters, and hewing out broken cisterns that can hold no water. The chapter then catalogues Israel's futile attempts to find security apart from the LORD: alliance with Egypt and Assyria (v. 18), thoroughgoing contamination by Baal worship (vv. 20–25), the grotesque image of saying to a tree “You are my father” and to a stone “You gave me birth” (v. 27). Israel's shame is compounded by their shamelessness — they refuse to be ashamed, they say “I am innocent,” they have worn out God's patience with denial (vv. 23–25, 35). The chapter closes with Israel's guilt firmly established and their coming judgment grounded in that guilt: their own apostasy will discipline them (v. 19).

### This Text — Intent

God is seeking to accomplish several things through this chapter simultaneously, but they converge on a single effect: He wants Israel to *feel* the horror of what she has done by seeing it as He sees it. The cosmic absurdity of trading the living God for broken cisterns is meant to produce not merely intellectual acknowledgment of guilt but something more visceral — the shame that should arise when a people realizes they have abandoned their only source of life and buried themselves in substitutes. The catalog of accusations is not punitive at this point but diagnostic — God is laying bare the root beneath the surface behaviors. Before any call to return (which comes in chapter 3), there must be a genuine reckoning with the depth of the departure. God intends this passage to strip Israel of its excuses, neutralize its self-justifications, and leave it without defense before the covenant LORD it has betrayed.

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**Subject Sentence:** God files His covenant lawsuit against Israel’s comprehensive, inexcusable apostasy.

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**Primary Claim:** The living God exposes the breathtaking irrationality of idolatry — trading the inexhaustible fountain of His presence for cracked cisterns that cannot hold what they promise — so that His people will feel the full weight of what they have abandoned and the emptiness of every substitute they have chosen.

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## Interpretive Evaluation

### The Covenant Lawsuit (*Rîb*) Structure

Reformed and most evangelical interpreters recognize Jeremiah 2 as deploying the ancient Near Eastern covenant lawsuit form (*rîb*), in which the LORD acts as both plaintiff and judge summoning Israel to hear the charges against them. This is not disputed among serious exegetes, but its implications are sometimes underdrawn. The *rîb* form means that what follows is not merely God venting displeasure — it is a formal legal proceeding with the Mosaic covenant as the governing document. Israel knew the terms; the charges are specific violations of those terms. This covenantal framing must control the preaching of this passage: the issue is not generalized spiritual decline but covenantal faithlessness — broken fidelity to a known LORD who had done known things.

Some broadly evangelical and charismatic readings treat this chapter primarily as a call to emotional revival — the “brokenness” and “return to first love” emphasis — drawing on the affective language of verses 2–3 (the devotion of youth, the love as a bride). This reading is partially right: the passage does invoke affective categories and God does call for relational restoration. But reducing the chapter to an emotional appeal misses its forensic and cognitive weight. The indictment is rational as much as affective — God argues the case, summons witnesses (the nations, v. 10), and demonstrates the absurdity of Israel’s choices by comparison and by consequence. The Reformed reading holds together the legal and the relational: the covenant is not merely a legal instrument but a marriage covenant, and its violation is both a crime and an adultery.

### The “Broken Cisterns” Metaphor (v. 13)

Some interpreters — particularly within the spirituality/devotional tradition — apply this verse almost exclusively to spiritual dryness in the individual believer’s life, treating “broken cisterns” as a general category for anything that fails to satisfy spiritually. This application is not wrong, but the exegetical ground of the metaphor is more specific: the broken cisterns are Israel’s idols and foreign alliances — the concrete substitutes Israel chose in place of the LORD. The metaphor indicts specific, named departures, not merely a vague spiritual condition. Applying it too broadly risks losing the passage’s precision: God is not saying “earthly things disappoint” (a semi-Platonic reading) but rather “the

specific things you chose to replace Me with are broken at their foundation and will drain out everything you pour into them.”

### The Arminian/Wesleyan Reading of Human Responsibility

Wesleyan and Arminian readers rightly emphasize the human responsibility dimension of this chapter — Israel chose, Israel forsook, Israel said “I will not serve” (v. 20). The text is unambiguous that these are genuine moral choices for which Israel is genuinely culpable. Reformed exposition should not soften this by importing a deterministic gloss onto the text’s own language. The Arminian reading *acknowledges* something the text insists upon: the apostasy is Israel’s own doing, and the guilt is real. Where the Arminian reading overreaches is in using this chapter as a platform for free-will anthropology — the passage is not a treatise on human freedom but a lawsuit whose force depends precisely on the fact that Israel knew better, had experienced better, and chose differently anyway. Responsibility is assumed; the passage’s primary concern is not whether Israel could have done otherwise but what Israel actually did.

### Reformed Verdict

The Reformed reading of Jeremiah 2 is governed by three commitments: (1) the covenantal framework — this is a *rîb*, not a revivalist appeal or a generic call to spiritual renewal; (2) the specificity of the accusation — idolatry and foreign alliances are named, not merely implied; (3) the theological logic of verse 13 — the broken cisterns metaphor is the hermeneutical heart of the chapter, and its force is that idolatry is not merely sinful but *irrational*, a violation of basic spiritual logic that every Israelite should have recognized. Exposition that stays within this framework will honor both the forensic weight and the relational grief that God brings to this lawsuit.

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## Key Canonical Support

- **Deuteronomy 32:15–18** — The Song of Moses anticipates exactly this trajectory: Jeshurun grew fat and kicked, forsook the God who made him, and provoked Him to jealousy with foreign gods and demons. Jeremiah 2 enacts what Moses predicted; the covenantal warning has now become covenantal charge.
- **Hosea 2:1–13** — God’s lawsuit against Israel in Hosea uses the identical marital-covenant framework: Israel has gone after her lovers, forgotten the LORD who gave her grain and wine and oil. Hosea and Jeremiah share the *rîb* structure, but Jeremiah strips away Hosea’s immediate movement toward restoration, letting the indictment stand without relief — this is the appropriate sequence before chapter 3’s call to return.
- **Isaiah 1:2–4** — “I reared children and they have rebelled against me... Israel does not know, my people do not consider.” The same accusation of senseless apostasy

from a known God appears in the opening of Isaiah; both prophets are working the same theological vein within the covenant lawsuit tradition.

- **John 4:10–14** — Jesus’ offer of “living water” to the Samaritan woman directly invokes the imagery of Jeremiah 2:13, now fulfilled in His own person. Jesus is the fountain of living water Israel was meant to treasure; His self-identification clarifies both what Israel forsook and what the new covenant provides. Canonical support does not merely illustrate; here it fulfills.
- **Romans 1:21–25** — Paul’s diagnosis of Gentile idolatry (“exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images”) mirrors Jeremiah 2:11 (“they have exchanged their glory for that which does not profit”). Paul’s point — that idolatry is a universal human pattern rooted in willful suppression of known truth — expands Jeremiah’s covenantal indictment into a description of the human condition, confirming that what Israel did was not an anomaly but a paradigmatic expression of fallen humanity’s deepest tendency.

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**Aim:** To lay bare the full irrationality and tragedy of trading the living God for substitutes that cannot hold, so that the reader feels the weight of every false fountain they have dug and is left without defense before the God they have forsaken.

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## Content Table

| Verse(s) | Content                                                                                                                    | Notes                                                                                                      |
|----------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1–2      | The LORD commands Jeremiah to proclaim in Jerusalem’s hearing                                                              | Sets the scene: this is a public, formal declaration — not private counsel                                 |
| 2–3      | Recall of Israel’s early devotion: the love of her youth, the wilderness following, her holiness as firstfruits            | God establishes the baseline fidelity before cataloguing the departure; the contrast drives the indictment |
| 4–5      | The fathers went after worthless idols and became worthless themselves                                                     | The verb <i>hābhal</i> (became vain/worthless) — the idol shapes its worshiper into its own image          |
| 6–7      | The fathers did not ask “Where is the LORD?” who brought them through the wilderness; they entered the land and defiled it | The accusation is not merely action but amnesia — they stopped remembering and stopped asking              |

| Verse(s) | Content                                                                                                                                                                               | Notes                                                                                                                                           |
|----------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 8        | Four categories of leadership failed: priests, handlers of the Torah, rulers, prophets — all transgressed                                                                             | Comprehensive failure at every leadership level; no one remained faithful                                                                       |
| 9–11     | The LORD's lawsuit ( <i>rîb</i> ) formally invoked; Israel's exchange is unique — no nation has exchanged its gods (even false ones) for another; Israel alone abandoned the True God | The nations' (even pagan) loyalty to their worthless gods indicts Israel who abandoned a worthy one                                             |
| 12–13    | The heavens are summoned to be appalled; the two evils named: forsaking the fountain of living waters; hewing broken cisterns                                                         | The hermeneutical center of the chapter; the double-evil framing is crucial — not merely choosing wrong but abandoning right                    |
| 14–16    | Israel is not a slave by birth — why then is she plundered? Egypt (Noph and Tahpanhes) has shaved her head                                                                            | Rhetorical questions expose the consequence of the apostasy; the foreign alliances meant to provide security become the source of humiliation   |
| 17–19    | Israel's own apostasy will discipline her; she has abandoned the LORD her God; she will know the bitterness of her forsaking                                                          | The wickedness and backsliding will themselves be the teacher; discipline is built into the logic of idolatry                                   |
| 20–22    | Israel has broken the yoke, refuses to serve; plays the whore under every tree; cannot wash away the stain of iniquity                                                                | The metaphor of the stubborn animal and the harlot; moral contamination is deep-dyed, not surface soil                                          |
| 23–25    | Israel claims "I am not defiled" even while her tracks are visible; she is like a wild donkey in heat pursuing lovers; told herself she cannot resist                                 | Self-deception and shamelessness compound the apostasy; the addiction language ("I have loved strangers, and after them I will go") is striking |
| 26–28    | Israel is shamed as a thief when caught; they say to wood and stone "You gave                                                                                                         | The grotesque inversion: the creature calls the idol parent, yet when the idol                                                                  |

| Verse(s) | Content                                                                                                                                                                        | Notes                                                                                                 |
|----------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|          | me birth” — yet in time of trouble they will cry to the LORD                                                                                                                   | fails, they run to the LORD they denied                                                               |
| 29–30    | Israel contends with God but has only multiplied transgression; discipline has not reformed them — the sword devoured the prophets                                             | The futility of Israel’s self-defense; discipline has been applied and ignored                        |
| 31–32    | God asks: have I been a wilderness to Israel? Why has My people said “I am free”? A bride does not forget her ornaments — yet Israel has forgotten God for days without number | The incongruity is extended: Israel forgot what no one forgets — the most basic relational attachment |
| 33–35    | Israel is skilled in pursuing lovers; even the innocent poor have been slain; Israel says “I am innocent” — God says He will judge them                                        | The apostasy has produced moral callousness and violence; guilt is compounded by denial               |
| 36–37    | Israel will be shamed by Egypt as by Assyria; the LORD has rejected those in whom Israel trusted; they will not prosper                                                        | The futility of the foreign alliances is confirmed; every substitute will fail                        |

## Divisions Table

| Division | Verses | Label                                                    |
|----------|--------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| 1        | 1–3    | The Remembered Faithfulness: What Israel Once Was        |
| 2        | 4–8    | The Comprehensive Departure: Leaders and People Together |
| 3        | 9–13   | The Cosmic Indictment: Heaven Appalled at the Exchange   |
| 4        | 14–19  | The Self-Made Consequences: Apostasy Disciplines Itself  |
| 5        | 20–28  | The Anatomy of Denial: Shamelessness and Self-Deception  |
| 6        | 29–37  | The Verdict: Guilt Established, Excuses Exhausted        |

## Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

**Subject Sentence:** God files His covenant lawsuit against Israel's comprehensive, inexcusable apostasy.

**Primary Claim:** The living God exposes the breathtaking irrationality of idolatry — trading the inexhaustible fountain of His presence for cracked cisterns that cannot hold what they promise — so that His people will feel the full weight of what they have abandoned and the emptiness of every substitute they have chosen.

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## Applications (Five)

**1. Recognize the two evils as a single package, not two separate mistakes.** Verse 13 identifies two evils, but they are bound together: you cannot forsake the fountain without immediately beginning to dig your own cistern. No one exits the living God into a vacuum — every departure from Him is simultaneously a turning *toward* something else. The application is diagnostic: where you feel dry, ask not only “what have I been neglecting?” but “what have I been digging?” The broken cistern you are laboring over is always a sign that a fountain has been abandoned. Name both halves of your own two evils — the forsaking and the substitution — because until both are named, only half the problem is addressed.

**2. Feel the absurdity — not just the guilt.** The passage does not merely tell Israel she has sinned; it calls the heavens to be *appalled*. God wants a response of stunned disbelief at the sheer irrationality of what has happened. The application is affective: before moving to repentance or resolution, sit with the absurdity of what idolatry actually is. You have been pouring yourself into something with a crack in the bottom. Everything you have invested — time, energy, emotional weight, hope — has been draining out the whole time. The appropriate response to this is not merely “I should do better” but the kind of sick recognition that comes when you finally see what you have been doing. Preach to yourself the same question God asks the heavens: “Can this be? *This* is what I traded the fountain for?”

**3. Audit your leadership — the comprehensive failure of verse 8 is a warning, not just a historical report.** Priests, Torah-handlers, rulers, prophets — every person charged with guiding others toward the LORD had departed from Him. The application to those in teaching, pastoral, or parenting roles is direct: the failure of a community to know God is almost always downstream from the failure of its leaders to know God first. The question for leaders is not “am I fulfilling my functional responsibilities?” but “am I leading people toward the living fountain or modeling a life built on sophisticated cisterns?” Competent religious function divorced from genuine knowledge of God is precisely what verse 8 indicts.

**4. Stop defending yourself before God with the language of innocence.** Three times in this chapter Israel claims “I am not defiled,” “I am innocent,” “I have not sinned” (vv. 23, 25, 35). Each claim is made even as God points to the visible evidence of the contrary. The application is searching: the most dangerous form of apostasy is not the dramatic public departure but the quiet accumulation of self-justifying narratives about why your particular broken cistern doesn’t really count. Innocence-language before God is the last defense of a soul that has not yet been broken. The question is not whether you have good reasons for every choice you have made — you probably do — but whether those reasons will hold in the covenant lawsuit God is bringing against the same instinct in you.

**5. Let the memory of what God has actually been to you fuel the horror of what you have traded away.** The indictment of Jeremiah 2 begins with memory (vv. 2–7) — not because God wants Israel to feel sentimental but because the contrast between what He was to them and what they chose instead is meant to produce grief. The application is worshipful: rehearse what God has actually been to you — specific instances of provision, rescue, presence, covenant faithfulness. Then look honestly at what you have been turning toward instead. The distance between those two things is your own version of verses 2–13. The goal is not guilt management but honest grief that leads to genuine returning — which is exactly where Jeremiah chapter 3 goes after chapter 2 has done its work.

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## Theological Importance

**Theological Importance:** Jeremiah 2 is one of the most theologically concentrated passages in the prophetic corpus on the nature of idolatry and the nature of God. It establishes with precision that idolatry is not primarily an aesthetic or cultural failure but a *rational* failure — an exchange of what is real for what is not, of what sustains for what drains. The “fountain of living waters” image carries enormous theological weight: it attributes to the LORD an inexhaustible, self-renewing sufficiency — He does not run dry, does not crack, does not need to be maintained or replenished. Against this, all idols are shown to be inherently defective not by comparison but by nature: they cannot hold what is poured into them. The chapter also establishes that God’s relationship to Israel is not merely transactional or legal but covenantal and even marital — the grief in His voice (especially vv. 31–32) is not the cold displeasure of a violated contract but the wounded love of a husband whose bride has forgotten him. Both dimensions — the rational absurdity and the relational grief — are necessary for a full theological account of what sin against God actually is.

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## Reformed Theological Significance

**Reformed Theological Significance:** This chapter functions as a foundational text for the Reformed understanding of idolatry as the universal human condition — Calvin’s *sensus divinitatis* and the suppression of it (which Paul systematizes in Romans 1) finds its

prophetic expression here. Jeremiah 2 demonstrates that idolatry is not a primitive mistake made by those who do not know better; it is made by people who knew the living God, experienced His provision, and still preferred their own constructed substitutes. This is a direct refutation of any anthropology that locates the problem in ignorance rather than in the will's hostility to God. The passage also grounds the Reformed insistence on grace-motivated obedience: the call to return (coming in chapter 3) will be meaningful only if the depth of the departure established here has been fully reckoned with. You cannot preach the gospel into a soul that still believes its cisterns are mostly functional. Jeremiah 2 does the necessary work of demolishing that illusion — and in doing so, it prepares the ground for the new covenant promise of chapter 31, where God will give His people a new heart precisely because the old heart has shown itself incapable of holding what it needs.

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## Main Takeaway

The God who brought you through the wilderness, who has been a fountain that never runs dry, is watching you pour your life into something with a crack in the bottom — and He wants you to see it as clearly as He does. Every substitute you have chosen, every alliance you have trusted, every thing you have called “father” and “mother” in place of Him has been draining out the whole time. The heavens are appalled. Stop defending the cistern. Come back to the fountain.

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## Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Reducing the passage to a call for emotional revival without its forensic weight.** The language of verses 2–3 (“devotion of your youth,” “love as a bride”) invites a purely sentimental reading — a “return to your first love” message that calls for renewed feeling without the uncomfortable work of the *rîb* that follows. The chapter’s structure resists this: God does not linger in the tenderness of verses 2–3 but moves immediately and formally into the lawsuit. Preaching that stays in verses 2–3 and gestures warmly toward renewal without working through the indictment has done Israel’s job for her — it has claimed “I am innocent” before the charges are even read.
- **Applying “broken cisterns” too broadly as a generic warning against earthly satisfactions.** The broken cisterns of verse 13 are *specific*: idols, foreign alliances, political trust in Egypt and Assyria. The metaphor’s preaching power comes from its specificity — these particular things that Israel chose as particular replacements for the particular God who had done particular things for them. Preaching that uses “broken cisterns” as a metaphor for general spiritual dissatisfaction with life loses the accusatory precision the text carries. The question the passage presses is not “are you satisfied?” but “what have you specifically chosen instead of the LORD, and why do you still believe it can hold water?”

- **Moralizing the catalogue of sins rather than tracing them to the root exchange.** Verses 20–37 contain a long catalogue of specific behaviors — the yoke-breaking, the harlotry, the killing of the poor, the foreign alliances. It is possible to preach through this catalogue as a list of moral failures to be corrected. This misses what the chapter is doing: each item in the catalogue is a *downstream expression* of the upstream exchange in verse 13. The preaching question for every item is not “stop doing this” but “what does this tell you about which fountain you have forsaken and which cistern you are depending on?” Behavioral application without idol-diagnosis produces the very shame-without-repentance dynamic the chapter already depicts in Israel.
- **Soft-pedaling the comprehensive leadership indictment of verse 8.** Verse 8 names the priests, the Torah-handlers, the rulers, and the prophets — all four categories of covenant leadership — as having abandoned the LORD. This is an uncomfortable verse to preach, especially to a congregation that includes leaders, teachers, and pastors. The temptation is to treat it as a historical note about ancient Israel’s dysfunction rather than as a structural warning about leadership’s unique culpability in a community’s spiritual departure. The verse should be preached with its full weight — and with the self-examining force it carries for anyone in a position of spiritual influence.
- **Skipping the chapter because it is “all law and no gospel.”** Jeremiah 2 has no explicit gospel resolution — the call to return comes in chapter 3, the new covenant promise in chapter 31. A preacher who feels the need to resolve every passage with an explicit gospel application will be tempted either to rush to chapter 3 or to import redemptive language the text does not provide. The Reformed homiletical discipline here is to let the law do its work. Jeremiah 2’s function in the canon is preparatory — it establishes the depth of the problem that only the new covenant can solve. Preaching it faithfully means resisting the premature comfort of resolution and letting the indictment land fully, trusting that the gospel will be more meaningful to a hearer who has genuinely sat with the question: “What have I exchanged my Glory for?”
- **Missing the compassion beneath the accusation.** Conversely, preaching Jeremiah 2 as pure denunciation — God as prosecuting attorney with no affective dimension — misses the grief in the text. The question of verse 31 (“Have I been a wilderness to Israel? Have I been a land of darkness?”) and the stunned incomprehension of verse 32 (“Can a virgin forget her ornaments? Can a bride forget her attire? Yet my people have forgotten me days without number”) carry a wounded quality that is not prosecutorial but relational. God is not coldly reading charges — He is a husband who cannot understand how He could have been forgotten. Preaching that captures only the legal force without this affective grief produces a hard, accusatory sermon rather than one that breaks open.