ISRAEL'S "TWO EVILS" IN JEREMIAH II 13

The modern critical commentaries are all in agreement concerning the meaning of Jer. ii 13 1). Jeremiah, it is argued, is drawing an analogy from the difficulties surrounding the finding of water during the hot Palestinian summer. Israel initially had access to a fountain (mêtôr) of "living water", but he forsook this pure water for the stagnant water of cisterns (bôrôt). Israel's situation deteriorates even further when he discovers that his cisterns are cracked and can hold no water. This analogy is seen as representing Israel's relationship with Yahweh. Israel has deserted his God, who like the fountain gives life, and worshipped the Baals (cisterns). Moreover, Jeremiah claims that these Baals are as useless as broken cisterns: they cannot give life.

When this imagery is compared with the two other instances where it occurs in the Old Testament, however, certain shortcomings of the above interpretation become apparent. In Prov. v 15-18 a father warns his son:

Drink water from your own cistern,
the streams which flow from your own well.
Should your springs be dispersed outside,
channels of water in the street?
Let them be for yourself alone,
and not for strangers with you.
Let your fountain be blessed,
and take your pleasure with the wife of your youth
(W. McKane's translation).

In this passage the terms "cistern" (mibôrekâ), "well" (bôerekâ), and "fountain" (mêtôrekâ) are all euphemisms for "wife" 2). Similarly, McKane (p. 319), following G. Boström, argues that the expressions "springs" (ma'yônôtekô) and "channels of water" (palôgî-mâyim) refer to the man's sperm. Thus, the passage instructs the young man that his wife is the only person with whom he should have sexual relations. He must not copulate with other women.

Cant. iv 12, 15 uses similar imagery with a similar euphemistic meaning: 3)

A garden locked is my sister bride,
a pool locked, a fountain sealed.
A garden fountain,
a well of living water,
and flowing water from Lebanon.

In this passage the bridegroom, admiring the beauty of his wife, describes her as a pool (gāl), a fountain (ma'ān), flowing water (wēnōqēlim), and a well of living water (bē'ēr mayim hayyim).

Given the above euphemistic usages, Jeremiah's prophecy appears in a new and different light. When Jeremiah accuses Israel of forsaking Yahweh, “the fountain of living waters” (meqôr mayim bayyim), he is accusing Israel of deserting his wife and true love. Similarly, when the prophet charges Israel with making cisterns for himself, he implies that Israel is having intimate relations with other women, they being the Baals. When Jeremiah proclaims that these cisterns (Baals) can hold no water, he is suggesting that they do not and cannot function as objects of love.

This euphemistic interpretation of Jer. ii 13 is well suited to its context. In ii 2 Yahweh reminisces of a time when Israel was faithful to their marriage: “I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride...” Similarly, in ii 24 Israel is pictured as a female ass who is in heat and searching for a male. Her lust is of such a magnitude that she cannot be controlled until her month 4). Again using the imagery of marriage, in ii 32 Jeremiah questions:

Can a maiden forget her ornaments,
or a bride her attire?
Yet my people have forgotten me
days without number.

In a second accusation in the verse immediately following, Jeremiah portrays Israel as a lustful woman: “How well you direct your course to seek lovers! Therefore even to wicked women you have taught your ways”. In iii 1-5 Jeremiah becomes even more explicit:

If a man divorces his wife
and she goes from him
and becomes another man’s wife,
will he return to her?
Would not that land be greatly polluted?
You have played the harlot with many lovers;