

A Yoke on the Neck: Vastation for the Sake of Good
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The work on *Heaven & Hell* describes a sequence of steps, after death, in the world of spirits, through which we will progress on our way to heaven, if heaven is what our eternal home will be. There is the first state of outward or external things, a kind of recognizable continuation of life in the natural world. (HH 491-498) The second state is where the focus moves to inward things, where we are led to see the thoughts and intentions that we have made part of our lives actually. In this second state of internals, it becomes plain whether we have led a life that leads to hell or to heaven. (HH 499-511)

The third state is called the “state of instruction” and is only for those on their way to heaven (because those entering hell, it is said, “cannot be taught”). (HH 512-519) It is under the heading of this third state of preparatory instruction that an additional element is described, needed by some in their being-made-ready for life in heaven. This element is called “vastation” from the Latin *vastatio*, a laying waste or a desolation. A newer translation of *Heaven & Hell* calls it a “shattering experience”.

We’re taught the following in the *Arcana Coelestia* about the need for vastation:

...after death there cling to a person, and there are in their memories, everything of their thought in the world, [everything] of their intention, [everything] of their will, [everything] of their speech, and [everything] of their action, for nothing is obliterated. ... And this being so, it must needs be that there cling to them things foul and filthy, and also evil and false, from their life in the world... (AC 7122)

“...there cling to them things foul & filthy, evil & false”. This description is not the indictment of an obviously evil person. Rather, it is a matter-of-fact statement of what it is for all of us to pass into the spiritual world from out of this flawed and often disordered natural world. Even if at heart we are truly good people, still the likelihood is that “things foul & filthy, evil & false” will be clinging to us. Fortunately, in the Lord’s mercy and providence, these things can be separated from a heaven-bound person, separated thoroughly & completely. This is the eternally beneficial “laying waste” of vastation a person undergoes in the world of spirits.

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Jeremiah of Anathoth, in Benjamin, served the Lord as a prophet in Jerusalem during the reign of the last five kings of Judah, up to and including the time Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians broke through the city walls, burned the temple and carried away captive most of the tribe of Judah. Like other prophets, Jeremiah is known for delivering, by turns, words that were harsh in their judgment and hopeful in their encouragement.

In addition to the words of Jeremiah, though, there are also several narrative sections of his prophecy, stories of his interactions and confrontations with the kings and the people of Judah and Jerusalem. Maybe more than any other prophet, we see Jeremiah, out among the people, exhorting them to turn to the Lord. “Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem,” the Lord said to Jeremiah, “See now and know... if there is anyone who executes judgment, who seeks the truth.” (Jeremiah 5:1)

Jeremiah had been called by the Lord as a prophet during the reign of King Josiah, which was a brief time of reformation in what otherwise was decades of horrific descent into wickedness & often unspeakable evils. There was one episode from the streets of Jerusalem when the Lord sent Jeremiah down to a potter's shop, to watch the potter at work. (Jeremiah 18) As Jeremiah watched, the potter mishandled the clay and a defect was introduced into the vessel he was making. So, as any potter would, he took the same clay and started over. The Lord then sent Jeremiah to the people with this message: "...as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel! ... Return now every one from his evil way, and make your ways and your doings good." (*ibid.* vv.6,11) The merciful God was offering His people still another chance... and their reply? "There is no hope: but we will walk after our own thoughts, and we will, everyone, do the imagination of their evil heart." (*ibid.* v.12) It wasn't hopeless; the Lord said that it wasn't hopeless; but the people had decided that it was and within about a generation the kingdom of Judah fell and Jerusalem and the temple were overrun by a conquering enemy.

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Before the end, though, there were other instructions that the Lord gave to Jeremiah, all for the purpose of giving the people every chance to turn back to His, the Lord's, will. In another account, the Lord commanded Jeremiah to make bonds & yokes and to put them on his neck, symbolic of the yoke of Babylonian dominion that (the Lord also said) the Judean kingdom should willingly put themselves under. And this symbolic gesture came with a warning: "...it shall be, that the nation and kingdom which will not serve Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, and which will not put its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon, that nation I will punish," says the LORD, 'with the sword, the famine, and the pestilence...'" (Jer. 27:8) This is the account we read in Jeremiah, chapter 27.

In chapter 28, we see the following episode where another prophet, Hananiah, made a prophecy of his own about the yoke of the Babylonian king and punctuated that prophecy by taking the wooden yoke off of Jeremiah's neck and smashing it on the ground. Jeremiah had earlier prophesied that the Babylonian captivity would last seventy years before the people of Judah would be allowed to return to their homeland; Hananiah said it would be only two. But Hananiah's prophecy was a false prophecy and, far from being good news, it only made things worse. The Lord sent Jeremiah to say to Hananiah: "You have broken the yokes of wood, but you have made in their place yokes of iron." (Jer. 28:13)

The Lord had led & protected with special care the ancestors of the people of Judah for at least a thousand years. Over & over, He had given them victories over seemingly unconquerable enemies. Why was the Lord now, in these last days, insisting that they surrender to the Babylonians and put themselves under the yoke of servitude to the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar?

The answer to this question brings us back to the subject of vastation. Vastation, as we have described it, is a state that is undergone by an individual who is being prepared for a life in heaven. What was happening in the time of Jeremiah was a vastation of the whole country. Not just one individual, but the kingdom of Judah and in a sense the land itself was being vastated in the oppression, conquest and captivity at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar. (based on AE 1029:16)

The vastation happening at that time & place was a vastation, a desolation, of the goods and truths of religion and the kings & people of Judah were doing it to themselves. Because they had the Law of the Lord and because the temple still stood at the center of their capital city Jerusalem, everything needed to make the goods & truths of religion actual in the world was in place. But going back hundreds of

years, at least to the time of Solomon, those goods & truths had been perverted more & more as detestable practices were added to their worship and life.

This was the vastation happening for them at that time and it is the specific reason why Jeremiah was commanded to wear the symbolic yoke on his neck. The neck represents the communication and joining together of things higher and things lower; the things of heaven, for example, communicating and joined together with things of the world. So putting a yoke on the neck represents the disruption of that communication. Because they had the Word and the Divinely designed temple, the people of Judah had everything they needed to serve as a kind of “neck” between heaven and the world. Instead, because of their evil practices, any goodness & truth with them was being laid waste, and to represent that that was happening, Jeremiah wore a yoke on his neck. (based on AC 3542)



This is an account of vastation from long ago. What light might an understanding of this historical case shed on our understanding of the vastation any of us on the road to heaven will likely undergo before we are prepared fully for a heavenly state? To conclude, we will briefly examine four principles of vastation which are illustrated in this story of Jeremiah.

Although we’ve so far emphasized the usefulness of vastation, in preparing a person for heaven or in preventing grievous profanations in the Holy Land, vastation in itself can be a difficult and not-at-all-pleasant experience, as the sometimes brutal stories of Babylonian conquest and captivity illustrate. *Heaven & Hell* describes our vastations in preparation for heaven taking place in what is called “the lower earth, where some suffer severely.” (HH 513) We also find words used in the *Arcana Coelestia* like these: “inward pain” (AC 1109); “despair” (AC 2694); “torment” (AC 699); “fear” (AC 4942). There’s also a description of some in a state of vastation obsessively chopping wood in a futile effort to earn a place in heaven on their own; maybe not the depths of misery, but certainly not joyful either. (AC 1110)

But total suffering on our part is not required when going through the vastation of evil & falsity. There is this teaching:

There are some who are very willing to be vastated and thus get rid of the false principles which they have brought with them from the world... [They] are kept by the Lord in the hope of deliverance, and in the thought of the end in view, which is that they may be amended and prepared to receive heavenly happiness. (AC 1107)

This articulates the first two of the four principles of vastation to be seen in the Jeremiah story: one is that vastation, while probably always a struggle, can also be an experience containing hope and even the expectation of joy. The other principle is that our own willingness to undergo vastation is the difference-making variable that will determine its quality as a human experience. How insistently do we hold on to attitudes & opinions, to preferences & prejudices that we probably know are not part of a heavenly life? The answer to that question is an indication of how vastation will go for us in the world of spirits.

We can also see this willingness (or lack of willingness) in the stories of Jeremiah... after he went to the potter’s shop, the people showed themselves unwilling to turn back to the Lord and insisted on their own way: “we will walk after our own thoughts.” The unwillingness also shows up in the actions of the prophet Hananiah. When Hananiah predicted that the Babylonian exile would last only 2 years instead of Jeremiah’s predicted 70, it’s as if he was saying that things were only 2.8% as bad as they were in Jeremiah’s version. And to prove his (ultimately false) point, Hananiah took it upon himself to take the

wooden yoke off of Jeremiah's neck and smash it on the ground; it's as if he were saying, "Look, I broke it... it's not a big deal. We don't need to consider our part in the trouble we are in... it's a small matter and Jehovah will fix it soon."

Considering this episode, we might ask ourselves: Are there things in our own lives that we should be willing to take 100% seriously as harmful to heavenly life, that we instead give ourselves a deep discount on? And recall the Lord's words through Jeremiah to Hananiah after he had broken the yoke: "You have broken the yokes of wood, but you have made in their place yokes of iron."

Going back to when the Lord first commanded Jeremiah to wear his yoke, the Lord also had warned about false prophets like Hananiah. "Thus says Jehovah: 'Do not listen to the words of your prophets who prophesy to you, saying, "Behold, the vessels of Jehovah's house will now shortly be brought back from Babylon"; for they prophesy a lie to you.'" (Jeremiah 27: 16) This points to the third of the four principles, that we need astuteness & clear-eyed honesty in the way we identify evils within ourselves. A cheery story about our own thoughts & intentions might be the easiest to believe, but that doesn't make it the correct story. We do want to believe good news; even Jeremiah's first words after Hananiah's prophecy were these: "Amen! Jehovah do so; Jehovah perform the words which you have prophesied." It's certainly okay to hope that the rosier picture is the true one, but Jeremiah also modeled for us an appropriate level of skepticism: "As for the prophet who prophesies of peace," he said to Hananiah, "when the word of the prophet comes to pass, [then] the prophet will be known as one whom Jehovah has truly sent." A story in our own favor will always sound good, but an honest appraisal requires evidence.

First principle: vastation can be a hopeful experience; second principle: our own willingness to let go of what clings to us directly affects the experience; third principle: we need to be honest with ourselves about our own spiritual state. The fourth principle, on which point we will close, is to keep in mind that vastation is something done for our benefit (for our life in heaven!) under the mercy & providence of the Lord.

The first time Babylon is mentioned in Jeremiah's prophecy is in Chapter 20 where the Lord says: "I will give all Judah into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall carry them captive to Babylon and slay them with the sword." (Jeremiah 20: 4) An intimidating picture, maybe in the same way that the general idea of vastation can be intimidating to us. But then, by the time of the story of Jeremiah's yoke, note carefully what it means and what the result is to willingly come under the yoke of Babylon: "Bring your necks under the yoke of the king of Babylon," the Lord told them, "and serve him and his people, and live!" (Jeremiah 27: 12)

The sign of a yoke on the neck was a sign of the vastation of good & truth happening at that time in Judah, a sign of the grave damage being done to the goodness & truth the Lord desired to be established in the world. But for those who actually did willingly take on that figurative yoke of servitude to the king of Babylon, the promise the Lord made to them is that they would live... and this promise is seen to be borne out in the text. The one Judean king, Jehoiachin, who did surrender was eventually released and treated well in Babylon by the successor to Nebuchadnezzar. The captivity was seventy years and not the falsely prophesied two, but the end did come and the opportunity to return to Judah and to rebuild the temple and Jerusalem was given to those who had been carried away captive.

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How it all happened is not the way anyone would have preferred... and over the course of the history of Israel and Judah, this particular outcome was not the only necessary one. But by the time Jeremiah had become a prophet of the Lord, the way of the yoke on the neck had become the Lord's way for the people of Judah, not to punish them but to let them live, to protect & preserve any goodness & truth that still may have been with them. There was nothing pleasant about the oppression of Judah at the hands of the Babylonians. Neither is the state of vastation in the world of spirits (or vastation-like states we might experience in this world) provided for our short-term comfort. But the Lord is with us... and maybe we can realize that any heaviness in the yoke that we carry is from ourselves. The way that leads to heaven can be difficult; any- and everything that goes against the life of heaven must be separated from us, one way or another... and that can be difficult.

But we always have the option to be a new lump of clay that our Divine Potter can start over with. We always have the option to replace our own yoke of wood or iron with the Lord's yoke. "It is evident," we read in *Heaven & Hell*, "that to enter upon the way to heaven is not so difficult as many believe. The sole difficulty lies in being able to resist the love of self and the love the world, and to prevent their becoming dominant; for this is the source of all evils. That this is not so difficult as is believed is meant by these words of the Lord, 'Learn of Me, for I am meek and lowly of heart, and ye shall find rest to your souls; for My yoke is easy and My burden is light.'" (HH 359)