



## A SCIENCE & RELIGION COMMENTARY

# JEREMIAH 4:22-28

*Rolf Bouma is the Pastor for Academic Ministries at the Campus Chapel in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and teaches environmental ethics and public policy at the University of Michigan. He holds advanced degrees in law and in systematic theology, with thesis work in biotechnology and a theology of nature. He has also served as a pastor to congregations.*

"My people are fools; they do not know me. They are senseless children; they have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil; they know not how to do good." I looked at the earth, and it was formless and empty; and at the heavens, and their light was gone. I looked at the mountains, and they were quaking; all the hills were swaying. I looked, and there were no people; every bird in the sky had flown away. I looked, and the fruitful land was a desert; all its towns lay in ruins before the LORD, before his fierce anger. This is what the LORD says: "The whole land will be ruined, though I will not destroy it completely. Therefore the earth will mourn and the heavens above grow dark, because I have spoken and will not relent, I have decided and will not turn back."

---

When the prophet Jeremiah searches for language to describe the consequences of human folly, he turns to the language of Genesis 1. Jeremiah 4 is about de-creation, or what happens when the world falls apart.

The reverse parallels to the creation account of Genesis 1 are striking. Most notably, this is the only passage outside Genesis 1:2 where the phrase 'formless and empty' (Hebrew *tohu wabohu*) appears (the words also appear in Isaiah 34:11, but not as a phrase). Light is nowhere to be seen. The birds have vanished. The foundations of the mountains shake. Even the image of bearers of God, human beings, are no more. God's creative work in establishing the earth's order is undone. It is as if the six days of creation have run in reverse.

Jeremiah 4 is notable for connecting human folly and disobedience with effects in the natural order. Old Testament scholar Bernard Anderson (*Creation in the Old Testament*) has called it the prophetic

text for the environmental crisis. Folly makes its mark in the real world. There is a close parallel in Leviticus 25-26 where the effects of disobedience make themselves known in the natural order.