

What does ‘throw it to the potter’ signify?

Some say it is a proverbial phrase like, ‘Throw it to the dogs.’ Others remind us that the potter for the temple had his shop nearby in the Valley of Hinnom, because the best clay for his work was to be found there.

The Valley of Hinnom was a polluted place for Jews. It was once used for idolatry (2 Kings 23:10) and it was said that the corpses of criminals, animals and refuse of all kinds were burnt there. The name came to be used as a synonym for ‘hell’. It is called ‘Gehenna’ in the Gospels. Therefore it was a suitable place to throw an insulting amount of money.

Jeremiah had spoken a great deal about potters. In chapter 18 he had visited a potter’s house and God had told him that Israel was like clay in the hands of the potter: ‘O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?’ (Jeremiah 18:6). In chapter 19 he was sent to buy a clay jar from a potter and God spoke to him about coming judgement upon Israel. Where was the potter? In the ‘valley of Ben Hinnom’ (Jeremiah 19:6). And in chapter 32 Jeremiah was instructed to buy a field at Anathoth just as Nebuchadnezzar was about to invade the land as a token that one day God’s people would again inhabit the land.

The payment to the Messiah of thirty pieces of silver and his throwing it down *in the house of the Lord* to the potter, together with Jeremiah’s prophecy, reminds us of the sad events towards the end of Jesus’ life on earth, when Judas Iscariot betrayed him. What was the payment that Judas received? Thirty pieces of silver (Matthew 26:15). What did Judas do when he realized how much he had sinned? He tried to return the money to the chief priests, but they refused to have it back. So what did Judas do with the

money? He threw it down *in the temple* and went and hanged himself (Matthew 27:5). What did the chief priests do with the money? They could not put it in the temple treasury because it was blood money, so they decided to use the money to buy a field to bury strangers in. What was that field? It was ‘the potter’s field’, the Field of Blood (Matthew 27:7–8). Everything concerning the Messiah was fulfilled to the letter!

Matthew said that this was the prophecy of Jeremiah which had been fulfilled (Matthew 27:9). Bible critics pounce on this and say that it is a mistake to say these were words of Jeremiah when, in fact, Zechariah prophesied this. It may be that Matthew attributed these words to Jeremiah because the prophets were all bound together in one scroll, and Jeremiah, as one of the major prophets, was the first book on the scroll. However, it may be that Matthew was referring to the field that Jeremiah purchased in chapter 32 of his prophecy.¹

¹ Michael Bentley, *Building for God’s Glory: Haggai and Zechariah Simply Explained*, Welwyn Commentary Series (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 1989), 194—195.

Who Breaks the Covenant?

Breaking this staff makes a unique claim in the OT—the Mosaic covenant is broken from God’s side. Elsewhere this covenant is said to be broken from the people’s side (e.g. Jer. 31:32; Ezek. 44:7; although it is contemplated as being broken by God in Ezek. 14:21). The difficulty is that Yahweh himself promised never to break this covenant (cf. Lev. 26:44; Judg. 2:1). How can this be reconciled? While the Mosaic covenant is said to be broken by God, the people still suffer its curses, including destruction of the cities of the land and scattering of the survivors among the nations (cf. Deut. 28:45–68), so in this sense the Mosaic covenant, though broken, is still active in some sense. Furthermore, the Mosaic covenant itself anticipates restoration after exile upon repentance and a new work of Yahweh where he will circumcise the hearts of his people (Deut. 30:1–10, esp. v. 6). Indeed, this hope for restoration upon repentance is fundamental to the book of Zechariah (cf. 1:1–6). The best way to resolve this dilemma of Yahweh’s breaking the covenant is to see elements of both continuity and discontinuity between the Mosaic covenant and the new covenant.

The continuity is found in Yahweh’s commitment to his people. This is essentially what it means when Yahweh earlier promises never to break the Mosaic covenant. While the people prove unable to live under its terms to the extent that it is finally broken, not only from the people’s side, but from Yahweh’s side, he remains firmly committed to his people and will establish the aims of the Mosaic covenant, namely a relationship where they will be his people and he will be their God. However, this relationship will be established on different grounds. Meyers and Meyers (1993: 269) capture it well: ‘The new covenant will be the same as the old one but will be constructed in such a way that the peo-

ple will no longer be able to violate its terms. It will be written on the hearts of the people.' That is, Yahweh will enable his people to do what they could not do for themselves—to obey its stipulations (cf. Jer. 31:31–34; Ezek. 16:60; 36:26–27).²

² Anthony R. Petterson, *Haggai, Zechariah & Malachi*, ed. David W. Baker and Gordon J. Wenham, vol. 25, Apollos Old Testament Commentary (Nottingham, England; Downers Grove, IL: Apollos; InterVarsity Press, 2015), 248–249.