

Jeremiah 22: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Jeremiah chapter 22 For if you will indeed obey this word, then there shall enter the gates of this house kings who sit on the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses, they and their servants and their people.

But if you will not obey these words, I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that this house shall become a desolation. For thus says the Lord concerning the house of the king of Judah, You are like Gilead to me, like the summit of Lebanon, yet surely I will make you a desert, an uninhabited city.

I will prepare destroyers against you, each with his weapons, and they shall cut down your choicest cedars and cast them into the fire. And many nations will pass by this city, and every man will say to his neighbor, Why has the Lord dealt thus with this great city?

And they will answer, Because they have forsaken the covenant of the Lord their God, and worshipped other gods and served them. Weep not for him who is dead, nor grieve for him, but weep bitterly for him who goes away, for he shall return no more to see his native land.

For thus says the Lord concerning Shalom, the son of Josiah, king of Judah, who reigned instead of Josiah his father, and who went away from this place. He shall return here no more, but in the place where they have carried him captive, there shall he die, and he shall never see this land again.

[1 : 51] Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice, who makes his neighbors serve him for nothing, and does not give him his wages, who says, I will build myself a great house with spacious upper rooms, who cuts out windows for it, panelling it with cedar, and painting it with vermilion.

Do you think you are a king because you compete in cedar? Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy. Then it was well.

Is not this to know me? declares the Lord. But you have eyes and heart only for your dishonest gain, for shedding innocent blood, and for practicing oppression and violence.

Therefore thus says the Lord concerning Jehoiakim, the son of Josiah, king of Judah, They shall not lament for him, saying, Ah, my brother, or Ah, sister. They shall not lament for him, saying, Ah, Lord, or Ah, his majesty.

With the burial of a donkey he shall be buried, dragged and dumped beyond the gates of Jerusalem. Go up to Lebanon and cry out, and lift up your voice in Bashan.

[3 : 00] Cry out from Abiram, for all your lovers are destroyed. I spoke to you in your prosperity, but you said, I will not listen. This has been your way from your youth, that you have not obeyed my voice.

The wind shall shepherd all your shepherds, and your lovers shall go into captivity. Then you will be ashamed and confounded because of all your evil. O inhabitant of Lebanon, nested among the cedars, how you will be pitied when pangs come upon you, pain as of a woman in labour.

As I live, declares the Lord, though Caniah the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, with a signet ring on my right hand, yet I would tear you off, and give you into the hand of those who seek your life, into the hand of those of whom you are afraid, even into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and into the hand of the Chaldeans.

I will hurl you, and the mother who bore you, into another country, where you were not born, and there you shall die. But to the land to which they will long to return, there they shall not return.

Is this man, Caniah, a despised, broken pot, a vessel no one cares for? Why are he and his children hurled and cast into a land that they do not know? O land, land, land, hear the word of the Lord.

[4 : 17] Thus says the Lord, Write this man down as childless, a man who shall not succeed in his days, for none of his offspring shall succeed in sitting on the throne of David, and ruling again in Judah.

Jeremiah chapters 21 to 23 are largely addressed to the kings of Judah. The specific king in view at the beginning of chapter 22 isn't stated. It is possible that this is in the early reign of Jehoiakim, around the time of the temple oracles of chapter 7.

The statement at the beginning of this chapter is delivered at the house of the king of Judah, to a wider audience of those associated with the king's house. The king's palace was one of the buildings in the wider temple complex.

The king's house was associated with the lord's house, as the king was the lord's son. Perhaps Jeremiah's words were delivered in the context of a feast. The challenge concerning justice and righteousness in verse 3 echoes verse 12 of the preceding chapter.

O house of David, thus says the Lord, execute justice in the morning, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed, lest my wrath go forth like fire, and burn with none to quench it because of your evil deeds.

[5 : 29] The delivering of righteousness and justice was central to the task of the king. The king was the shepherd of the people, and he was charged with the task of delivering righteous judgment and redeeming them from their enemies.

We can derive some sense of the task of the king from Ezekiel's portrayal of the false shepherds in Ezekiel chapter 34 verses 1 to 6. The word of the Lord came to me.

Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy and say to them, even to the shepherds. Thus says the Lord God, Our shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves, should not shepherds feed the sheep?

You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them.

So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill.

[6 : 35] My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them. The resident alien, the fatherless and the widow, and those who are innocent, are particularly singled out here.

The king must protect such people from predation and injustice, and he will be judged by how he performs this task. Verses 4-5 present two different possibilities.

If the king is faithful and obeys this word, then the house of David is going to be established. The house of the king of Judah is going to be occupied, it's going to be glorious, and God is going to bless them and their people.

However, if they do not obey the words, then the house of the king of Judah is going to be rendered desolate. In verses 6-7 we see that this possibility has already been closed.

They have been unfaithful, and as a result, even though they might be the most verdant and elevated places, God is going to bring them down, and he's going to render them desolate. The great city, and all that they trust in, is going to be brought down.

[7 : 34] Again, there is the image here of a forest being cut down. Solomon had built up the houses of the king with the choicest cedar from Lebanon, and now those cedars are going to be cut down like a great deforestation.

Verses 8-9 present the result of this. Reading verses 3-5, we would get the impression that this is a consequence of their failure to do justice and righteousness, their failure to be concerned for the weak and the oppressed of the land.

Whereas in verses 8-9, there is a different focus. The indictment here focuses upon their forsaking of the covenant of the Lord their God, and their going after other gods. This should be instructive for us.

Ethical and theological concerns go hand in hand. The most fundamental ethical concern must be, who do we worship? As the Psalms and the prophets make plain on several occasions, people become like the gods that they worship.

If they worship false and cruel idols, their social values and conduct will reflect that fact. If they worship the true and living God who is concerned for the oppressed, the needy, the isolated, and the foreigner, then their social practice should exhibit a similar concern.

[8 : 42] The verses that follow in the chapter address a number of different specific kings and their situations. Verses 10-12 speak to the situation of Shalom, or Jehoahaz.

The historical background for this section is found in 2 Kings 23, verses 29-34. In his days Pharaoh Necho king of Egypt went up to the king of Assyria to the river Euphrates.

King Jeziah went to meet him, and Pharaoh Necho killed him at Megiddo as soon as he saw him. And his servants carried him dead in a chariot from Megiddo, and brought him to Jerusalem, and buried him in his own tomb.

And the people of the land took Jehoahaz the son of Jeziah, and anointed him, and made him king in his father's place. Jehoahaz was 23 years old when he began to reign, and he reigned three months in Jerusalem.

His mother's name was Hamutel, the daughter of Jeremiah of Libna. And he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, according to all that his fathers had done. And Pharaoh Necho put him in bonds at Riblah, in the land of Hamath, that he might not reign in Jerusalem.

[9 : 44] And laid on the land a tribute of a hundred talents of silver, and a talent of gold. And Pharaoh Necho made Eliakim the son of Jeziah, king in the place of Jeziah his father, and changed his name to Jehoiakim.

But he took Jehoahaz away, and he came to Egypt and died there. The prophecy of Jeremiah here teaches that Jeziah's fate is less severe than the fate of his son Jehoahaz.

As we see in 2 Chronicles 35, verse 25, Jeremiah mourned the death of Jeziah, but the fate of Jehoahaz his son is far more severe. His fate is worse than his father's death.

Verses 13 to 19 address the situation of the successor of Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim. Jehoiakim was another son of the righteous Jeziah, but he has contrasted with his father here.

Jeziah sought justice and righteousness, but his son Jehoiakim has a very different understanding of kingship. For Jehoiakim, kingship is self-aggrandizement. It's conspicuous wealth and luxury.

[10 : 43] To the mind of Jehoiakim, being a king is about living in a cedar-paneled palace, surrounded by the riches and the finery of his office. Jeziah, by contrast, understanding the true nature of the Davidic covenant, knew that royalty was to be expressed in the doing of justice.

This finds stark expression in verse 16. He judged the cause of the poor and needy. Then it was well. Is not this to know me? declares the Lord. Judah's royalty was never to be like the royalty of the other nations, defined purely by luxury and might.

Rather, the true Davidic king was marked out by the fact that he knew the Lord, and he exhibited the Lord's character and justice in his treatment of the people, taking concern for the poor and the needy.

Verses 10 to 12 concerned the death and departure of kings, Jeziah and his son Jehoahaz. Here, however, there is a prophecy of non-burial and of a lack of lamentation.

People will not lament the death of Jehoiakim. His body will be ignobly and unceremoniously deposited outside of Jerusalem. Determining the manner in which this was fulfilled requires a bit of coordination of different passages.

[11 : 51] In 2 Kings chapter 24 verse 10, it appears that Nebuchadnezzar came after the death of Jehoiakim. In 2 Chronicles chapter 36 verses 5 to 6, we might get a different picture.

Jehoiakim was 25 years old when he began to reign, and he reigned 11 years in Jerusalem. He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord his God. Against him came up Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and bound him in chains to take him to Babylon.

Some have suggested that this might have been an earlier attack of Nebuchadnezzar. Others have suggested that Jehoiakim died as he was being taken away. Others have suggested that Jehoiakim was the victim of a coup.

And yet others that this is not literally fulfilled, but that Jeremiah is declaring the spiritual and prophetic truth of the character of Jehoiakim's death. Elsewhere in the book of Jeremiah, we find similar pronouncements in chapter 36 verse 30.

Whatever the actual historical events that occurred, Jehoiakim's judgment, and the great dishonor of it, stands in the very starkest of contrasts with the pride that characterizes his reign.

[13 : 03] The man who seeks to build up his kingdom by injustice and oppression, will end up unlamented, his body being disposed of like that of a donkey. Jerusalem is instructed to go to all the extremities of the land, to Lebanon in the north, to Bashan in the northeast, and to Abarim in the southeast.

These will all be sites where she announces and laments her terrible fate. All the land will be able to hear, and her fate is the consequence of her failure to listen to the Lord and his voice.

The Lord declares, The wind shall shepherd all your shepherds. As Hetty Lalleman notes, this verse plays upon the sounds of the word for wind, shepherd, and evil, all of which have very similar sounds.

The same fate that will befall her shepherds, her priests, her kings, will also befall her lovers. The nations and the gods that she looked to will also be rendered desolate and taken off into captivity, and their fate would in part be a result of her own sin.

Jerusalem here is described as the inhabitant of Lebanon, nested among the cedars. The great buildings of Jerusalem, the palace, the royal houses, and also the temple, were built from cedars of Lebanon.

[14 : 13] Indeed, one of the houses was called the house of the forest of Lebanon. By speaking of Jerusalem and her kings as dwelling in Lebanon, perhaps the Lord is expressing something of the way in which they have become foreign through their sin.

So far in this chapter concerning the kings of Judah, Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiakim, Jehoiakim's son, and now Jehoiakim are mentioned. Jehoiakim, also known as Keniah or Jeconiah, is the son of Jehoiakim and the grandson of Jehoiakim.

He reigns for the briefest span of time before he is removed to Babylon, for only three months. At the end of the book of 2 Kings and also the end of this book of Jeremiah, Jehoiakim is mentioned in the house of evil Meridah, king of Babylon, being released from prison and raised up to sit at the king's table.

Here, however, the message concerning Keniah is far less positive. Even though all of the hopes of Judah might be riding upon this man, a man who represents the continuing hope of the monarchy, the Lord will still cut him off.

Even if Keniah were the signet ring on God's right hand, expressing his authority and his identity, he would still cast him off. He is doomed to failure. The Davidic dynasty that he represents will not be re-established in his days.

[15 : 26] None of his children will reign in his place, and he and his mother will never return to the land. The imagery of broken and discarded pottery is used again in verse 28. With this condemnation of Keniah, the series of judgments against successive kings of Judah comes to an end.

In the verses that follow in chapter 23, we'll hear about a righteous counterpart to the false kings of the land. A question to consider, how can we fill out the relationship between idolatry and oppression and injustice towards the weak?