

Jeremiah 32: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Jeremiah chapter 32. The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord in the tenth year of Zedekiah king of Judah, which was the eighteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar. At that time the army of the king of Babylon was besieging Jerusalem, and Jeremiah the prophet was shut up in the court of the guard that was in the palace of the king of Judah. For Zedekiah king of Judah had imprisoned him, saying, Why do you prophesy and say, Thus says the Lord, Behold, I am giving this city into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall capture it. Zedekiah king of Judah shall not escape out of the hand of the Chaldeans, but shall surely be given into the hand of the king of Babylon, and shall speak with him face to face, and see him eye to eye. And he shall take Zedekiah to Babylon, and there he shall remain until I visit him, declares the Lord. Though you fight against the Chaldeans, you shall not succeed. Jeremiah said, The word of the Lord came to me. Behold, Hanumel, the son of Shalom, your uncle, will come to you and say, Buy my field that is at Anathoth, for the right of redemption by purchase is yours. Then Hanumel, my cousin, came to me in the court of the guard, in accordance with the word of the Lord, and said to me, Buy my field that is at Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, for the right of possession and redemption is yours. Buy it for yourself. Then I knew that this was the word of the Lord. And I bought the field at Anathoth from Hanumel, my cousin, and weighed out the money to him, seventeen shekels of silver. I signed the deed, sealed it, got witnesses, and weighed the money on scales. Then I took the sealed deed of purchase, containing the terms and conditions and the open copy, and I gave the deed of purchase to Beirut, the son of Noriah, son of Messiah, in the presence of Hanumel, my cousin, in the presence of the witnesses who signed the deed of purchase, and in the presence of all the Judeans who were sitting in the court of the guard. I charged Beirut in their presence, saying, Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Take these deeds, both this sealed deed of purchase and this open deed, and put them in an earthenware vessel, that they may last for a long time. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land. After I had given the deed of purchase to Beirut, the son of Noriah,

I prayed to the Lord, saying, Our Lord God, it is you who have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you. You show steadfast love to thousands, but you repay the guilt of fathers to their children after them. O great and mighty God, whose name is the Lord of hosts, great in counsel and mighty in deed, whose eyes are open to all the ways of the children of man, rewarding each one according to his ways and according to the fruit of his deeds. You have shown signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, and to this day in Israel and among all mankind, and have made a name for yourself as at this day. You brought your people Israel out of the land of Egypt with signs and wonders, with a strong hand, an outstretched arm, and with great terror. And you gave them this land which you swore to their fathers to give them, a land flowing with milk and honey, and they entered and took possession of it. But they did not obey your voice or walk in your law. They did nothing of all you commanded them to do.

Therefore you have made all this disaster come upon them. Behold, the siege mounds have come up to the city to take it, and because of sword and famine and pestilence, the city is given into the hand of the Chaldeans who are fighting against it.

What you spoke has come to pass, and behold, you see it. Yet you, O Lord God, have said to me, buy the field for money, and get witnesses, though the city is given into the hand of the Chaldeans. The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah, Behold, I am the Lord, the God of all flesh. Is anything too hard for me? Therefore thus says the Lord, Behold, I am giving this city into the hand of the Chaldeans, and into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and he shall capture it. The Chaldeans who are fighting against this city shall come and set this city on fire, and burn it with the houses on whose roofs offerings have been made to Baal, and drink offerings have been poured

out to other gods, to provoke me to anger. For the children of Israel and the children of Judah have done nothing but evil in my sight from their youth. The children of Israel have done nothing but provoke me to anger by the work of their hands, declares the Lord. This city has aroused my anger and wrath from the day it was built to this day, so that I will remove it from my sight, because of all the evil of the children of Israel and the children of Judah that they did to provoke me to anger, their kings and their officials, their priests and their prophets, the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

They have turned to me their back and not their face, and though I have taught them persistently, they have not listened to receive instruction. They set up their abominations in the house that is called by my name to defile it. They built the high places of Baal in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to offer up their sons and daughters to Molech. Though I did not command them, nor did it enter into my mind that they should do this abomination to cause Judah to sin. Now therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning this city of which you say it is given into the hand of the king of Babylon by sword, by famine and by pestilence. Behold, I will gather them from all the countries to which I drove them in my anger and my wrath and in great indignation. I will bring them back to this place, and I will make them dwell in safety, and they shall be my people, and I will be their God. I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them. I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them, and I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me. I will rejoice in doing them good, and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness, with all my heart and all my soul. For thus says the Lord, just as I have brought all this great disaster upon this people, so I will bring upon them all the good that I promised them. Fields shall be bought in this land, of which you are saying, It is a desolation, without man or beast. It is given into the hand of the Chaldeans. Fields shall be bought for money, and deeds shall be signed and sealed and witnessed in the land of Benjamin, in the places about Jerusalem, and in the cities of Judah, in the cities of the hill country, in the cities of the Shephelah, and in the cities of the Negev. For I will restore their fortunes, declares the Lord. Jeremiah chapters 32 and 33 were likely added to the original material of

[6 : 41] Jeremiah's book of consolation, in chapters 30 to 31. They develop the theme of the Lord's restoration of his people, of his building and planting his people after the dislocation of captivity. There will be a return. Life in the land will be restored, and the people will flourish.

The broken covenant will be renewed. God will dwell with his people once more. The material of the book of Jeremiah is not ordered chronologically more generally. The material of this chapter comes from the last years of Zedekiah, just before Judah fell. The events of this chapter occurred at the same time as the events described in chapters 37 to 38, during which time Jeremiah was shut up in the court of the guard. As Jack Lumbum notes, the conclusion of this chapter neatly parallels the concluding oracles of the preceding chapter, which ended with an oracle on the new covenant in verses 31 to 34, followed by an oracle on the rebuilding of Jerusalem in verses 38 to 40. This chapter ends with an oracle on the eternal covenant in verses 36 to 41, and an oracle on the purchase of the land in Benjamin and Judah in verses 42 to 44. While chronologically divided, the material of this chapter is closely thematically united with that of the preceding chapters. Like the rest of the book of Jeremiah, thematic ordering generally takes precedence over chronological ordering. Perhaps the detachment of the material of the book from its immediate chronological ordering and context is an indication of the power of the promises and warnings of Jeremiah to speak across various different times. The power of Jeremiah's words are not restricted to the immediate context to which they were first addressed. The chapter begins with another symbolic action that Jeremiah is instructed to perform. At the heart of the chapter is a prayer of Jeremiah to the Lord, which is followed by the Lord's response. The context for Jeremiah's prophecies here is given at the start of the chapter. Jerusalem is being besieged and Jeremiah himself is imprisoned. Jerusalem is surrounded and Jeremiah is surrounded, and only the latter will ultimately prevail. We should here recall the words given at Jeremiah's call in chapter 1 verses 15 to 19.

For behold, I am calling all the tribes of the kingdoms of the north, declares the Lord, and they shall come, and every one shall set his throne at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem, against all its walls all around, and against all the cities of Judah. And I will declare my judgments against them, for all their evil in forsaking me. They have made offerings to other gods and worshipped the works of their own hands. But you dress yourself for work, arise, and say to them everything that I

command you.

Do not be dismayed by them, lest I dismay you before them. And I, behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls, against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests, and the people of the land. They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, declares the Lord, to deliver you. The passage explains why he was imprisoned.

It's a result of Zedekiah's objections to his prophecies. And Zedekiah here repeats all of Jeremiah's prophecies concerning him verbatim. He bears testimony against himself. Whether this is what the king actually said, or whether the prophecy is put in his mouth by the writer is not clear.

[10:08] Either way, the fact that within the text it is from Zedekiah's own mouth that we hear the judgment against him has a strong element of irony to it. Jeremiah has announced to Zedekiah that he will see the king of Babylon face to face. He will be brought before him. This actually comes to pass in chapter 39 verse 5. But the army of the Chaldeans pursued them and overtook Zedekiah in the plains of Jericho. And when they had taken him, they brought him up to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon at Ribla in the land of Hamath. And he passed sentence on him. According to the word of Jeremiah, Zedekiah would be taken as captive to Babylon, and he would remain there until the Lord visited him. The meaning of this visitation from the Lord is not clear. Perhaps it's a reference to some further judgment, perhaps his death, or perhaps there's some element of grace being anticipated here. The Lord can visit both in judgment and in blessing. Later in the book, we'll have indications that Zedekiah's punishment will be mitigated by the time of his death. John Goldingay writes, The restoration and the returning of which Jeremiah speaks needs to be both external, material and physical, and internal, moral and relational, and Yahweh's compassion will ensure both. As a sign of this, the Lord instructs Jeremiah to buy a field from his cousin Hanamel, declaring Hanamel's offer of the sale beforehand as a confirmatory sign to Jeremiah. Jeremiah has the right of redemption of the field by custom, presumably as one of the nearest relatives, ensuring that the land would be kept within the family. This law is given in Leviticus chapter 25 verses 24 to 25.

And in all the country you possess, you shall allow a redemption of the land. If your brother becomes poor and sells part of his property, then his nearest redeemer shall come and redeem what his brother has sold. Jeremiah was a member of a priestly family from Anathoth. Although the priests did not receive land with the other tribes, they were granted certain cities and their pasture lands. In Joshua chapter 21 verse 17, Anathoth in Benjamin was one of the cities given to Aaron and his descendants, with its surrounding pasture lands. As Jerusalem is surrounded by the Babylonian army, Hanamel has presumably fled there from Anathoth. Neither he nor Jeremiah have any access to the field at this point. He is possibly desperately in search of money to buy food and other things to survive the siege, and selling the field is one of the few options left open to him. Although Jeremiah is imprisoned, he seems to be allowed enough freedom to receive guests, to engage in business transactions, and to have access to his scribe Beruk. The transaction is performed in the presence of signatories to the deed of purchase, and other witnesses in the court of the guard. The deed was written in duplicate, the sealed part secured against tampering with the seal, and the open copy accessible for reference. The deed is then committed to the charge of Beruk, who is instructed in the presence of the witnesses by the word of the Lord through Jeremiah. Beruk is to place the sealed and open deeds and put them in a protective vessel, to ensure that they would be preserved for a long time. This was a common way of preserving important documents. Most famously, the Dead Sea Scrolls, from before the writing of the New Testament, were preserved to the present day in such a manner. A significant transaction for a plot of land should remind us of the story of Abraham. Abraham bought a burial plot for Sarah in Genesis chapter 23 from the Hittites.

In that case, the cave and field of Machpelah were anticipatory possessions in the promised land. They functioned as a stake in the territory that the Lord would later give into their hand. Even when they were living in Egypt, in the land of Goshen, Jacob was still buried there, waiting for the day when all of his sons would return. Here something similar is going on.

A significant sale of land occurs as a symbol of the awaited return after the captivity that will follow the siege. Jeremiah may not yet enter into possession of the land, but his near kin would be able to claim possession of it using the deed upon their return. All of this is a sign given by the Lord that there will be a new dawn after the dark night of exile. Life will return to the now beleaguered city. Jeremiah's prayer that follows begins with a transitional statement from the purchase of the field

and ends with a reference back to the Lord's instruction to perform the purchase in the presence of witnesses. The prayer itself opens with a doxological statement concerning God as the creator of all things, and it connects God's creation with his redemption. This is something that we find elsewhere in scripture. For instance, in Isaiah chapter 45 verses 12 to 13, I made the earth and created man on it. It was my hands that stretched out the heavens and commanded all their host. I have stirred him up in righteousness, and I will make all his ways level.

[14 : 55] He shall build my city and set my exiles free, not for price or reward, says the Lord of hosts. There are similar connections of redemption and creation in places earlier in the book of Jeremiah, in chapter 27 verses 5 to 7 for instance.

It is I who by my great power and my outstretched arm have made the earth, with the men and animals that are on the earth, and I give it to whomever it seems right to me. Now I have given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, my servant, and I have given him also the beasts of the field to serve him. All the nations shall serve him and his son and his grandson, until the time of his own land comes. Their many nations and great kings shall make him their slave.

The connection between redemption and creation is seen in the way that the language of Exodus is used of God's creative work. He acts by his great power and his outstretched arm. This language, familiar from the story of the Exodus, is used again in verse 21 in that connection.

The work of God in creation is evidence of his power in redemption. He is also the God who judges. Jeremiah here alludes to the great statement of God's judgment in Exodus chapter 20 verses 5 to 6. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. Both Israel and Judah suffer on account of sins that can be traced down the line of their generations. The punishment of the sins of the fathers is visited upon the children, but this is also because the children have continued in the ways of their fathers and not repented.

[16 : 38] God demonstrated his power in the past in bringing Israel out of Egypt and into the promised land. The language that is used here is again reminiscent of the language that we find elsewhere in scripture.

For instance, in Deuteronomy chapter 6 verses 22 to 23, And the Lord showed signs and wonders, great and grievous, against Egypt and against Pharaoh and all his household before our eyes. And he brought us out from there, that he might bring us in and give us the land that he swore to give to our fathers. Despite all of the mighty deeds that the Lord graciously performed on their behalf, and the great gift that he gave them in the land and in his presence, the people failed to heed him. They rejected him and turned away from his word.

Consequently, in his righteousness, the Lord has brought disaster upon them. The surrounding armies of the Babylonians, promised beforehand back in chapter 1, are evidence that the Lord's word has taken effect. Jeremiah ends the prayer with amazement. Something more than the Lord's might is indicated in the sign that he has given him earlier in the chapter. Despite the imminent doom of the people, the Lord has given him a sign that they will be restored, even after such a terrible defeat that is imminent. Verse 17 read, Our Lord God, it is you who have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you. Verse 7 frames the verses that follow as the Lord's answer to this. Behold, I am the Lord, the God of all flesh.

Is anything too hard for me? The language in both verses recalls the statement of the Lord back in Genesis chapter 18 verse 14. Is anything too hard for the Lord? At the appointed time I will return to you about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son. The Lord will enact his judgment upon the city through the Chaldeans. He will burn the places that have been given over to idolatry.

They will be judged on account of their refusal to heed the word of the Lord and their stubborn resistance to it on account of their idolatries and their abominations. However, the very same city that was so utterly destroyed would one day be restored. The Lord will later revive the now doomed people, bring them back from the grave of exile, reassembling their scattered bones, covering them with flesh, placing them back on their feet, and putting his spirit within them, so that their hearts are finally set towards him. He will establish an enduring covenant with them, ensuring that they will not forsake him by placing his fear within their hearts. As their hearts will be set towards him, so his heart will be set toward them. With all of his heart and soul he will establish them. Even though he is

now uprooting and casting them away, he will delight to establish and plant them in the future. As Walter Brueggemann notes, there are four key claims that were constitutive of the faith that was to carry the Jews through the experience of exile. First, the covenant formula, they shall be my people and I will be their God. It expressed the solidarity between the Lord and Israel and the confidence that it would one day be restored. Second, the confidence that the Lord would deal with his people's heart problem, according to the promises of Deuteronomy, placing a new disposition within them towards him. Third, the promise of an eternal covenant held out the hope of a new situation that would not merely introduce a new iteration of the old tragic cycle of grace immediately followed by rebellion. The Lord himself would ensure that the cycle was broken and the covenant would endure. [20 : 06] Fourth and finally, there was the assurance that God would act in his faithfulness to re-establish his people and to do good to them. The chapter ends with verses that reinforce the point of the entire chapter and stress the scale of the reversal that's going to occur. The disaster is juxtaposed with the restoration. The Lord's future restoration of his people is just as sure as their destruction at the hand of the Babylonians that are currently surrounding them. The sign of all of this will be the fact that in the very land that has been condemned to desolation, fields will be bought and sold, the normal patterns of life will return, and people will be settled once more. Individuals buying and selling parcels of land is an expression of Israel's more general possession of the land once more. This will be the case not merely in some parts of the land, but throughout it. In the land of Benjamin, in places like Anathoth, where Jeremiah is buying his field, in places about Jerusalem and in the other urban centres of Judah, in the cities of the hill country, in the places in the lowlands and the Sheffala, and in the cities in the south and the Negev, throughout the land in all of its different parts, peace and security would one day be known again.

A question to consider. There is a significant story of a purchase of a field in the Gospel of Matthew and the Book of Acts. What is the field, and how might reading the story of that field alongside the Book of Jeremiah shed light upon what's happening there?