

Jeremiah 34: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Jeremiah chapter 34. The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord were Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and all his army, and all the kingdoms of the earth under his dominion, and all the peoples were fighting against Jerusalem and all of its cities.

Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, Go and speak to Zedekiah king of Judah, and say to him, Thus says the Lord, Behold, I am giving this city into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall burn it with fire.

You shall not escape from his hand, but shall surely be captured and delivered into his hand. You shall see the king of Babylon eye to eye, and speak with him face to face, and you shall go to Babylon.

Yet hear the word of the Lord, O Zedekiah king of Judah. Thus says the Lord concerning you, You shall not die by the sword, you shall die in peace. And as spices were burned for your fathers, the former kings who were before you, so people shall burn spices for you, and lament for you, saying, Alas, Lord, for I have spoken the word, declares the Lord.

Then Jeremiah the prophet spoke all these words to Zedekiah king of Judah in Jerusalem, when the army of the king of Babylon was fighting against Jerusalem, and against all the cities of Judah that were left, Lachish and Ezekiah, for these were the only fortified cities of Judah that remained.

[1 : 15] The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord, after King Zedekiah had made a covenant with all the people in Jerusalem, to make a proclamation of liberty to them, that everyone should set free his Hebrew slaves, male and female, so that no one should enslave a Jew, his brother.

And they obeyed, all the officials and all the people who had entered into the covenant, that everyone would set free his slave, male or female, so that they would not be enslaved again. They obeyed and set them free. But afterward they turned around and took back the male and female slaves they had set free, and brought them into subjection as slaves.

The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah from the Lord. Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, I myself made a covenant with your fathers when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, saying, At the end of seven years each of you must set free the fellow Hebrew who has been sold to you, and has served you six years.

You must set him free from your service. But your fathers did not listen to me, or incline their ears to me. You recently repented, and did what was right in my eyes, by proclaiming liberty, each to his neighbour, and you made a covenant before me in the house that is called by my name.

But then you turned around and profaned my name, when each of you took back his male and female slaves, whom you had set free according to their desire, and you brought them into subjection to be your slaves.

[2 : 36] Therefore, thus says the Lord, you have not obeyed me by proclaiming liberty, every one to his brother and to his neighbour. Behold, I proclaim to you liberty to the sword, to pestilence and to famine, declares the Lord.

I will make you a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth, and the men who transgressed my covenant, and did not keep the terms of the covenant that they made before me. I will make them like the calf that they cut in two, and passed between its parts, the officials of Judah, the officials of Jerusalem, the eunuchs, the priests, and all the people of the land who passed between the parts of the calf.

And I will give them into the hand of their enemies, and into the hand of those who seek their lives. Their dead bodies shall be food for the birds of the air, and the beasts of the earth.

And Zedekiah king of Judah and his officials, I will give into the hand of their enemies, and into the hand of those who seek their lives, into the hand of the army of the king of Babylon, which has

withdrawn from you.

Jeremiah chapter 34 opens with a word of judgment from the Lord through Jeremiah to Zedekiah the king of Judah.

[3 : 54] Similar expressions of judgment to this can be found in chapter 21 verses 1-7, 37 verses 3-10, and chapter 38 verses 14-28, parallels that Walter Brueggemann observes.

The prophecy dates from the period of the siege of Jerusalem, before its final downfall.

Nebuchadnezzar and his armies and all of his allies surround the city. Only a few fortified cities remain alongside Jerusalem in the land.

Almost all of the land has fallen into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar. Jeremiah's message is not encouraging. The city of Jerusalem will also be given into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he will destroy it.

And king Zedekiah won't escape. He will see the king of Babylon eye to eye, and speak to him face to face. Indeed, the king of Babylon will be the last thing that he sees. His eyes are put out in chapter 39 verse 7, and he is taken away captive to Babylon.

In contrast to Jehoiakim, there is some mitigation of Zedekiah's judgment. While he will die in captivity, he will die in peace, and he will be given a proper burial. People will mourn his passing.

[4 : 58] Alongside Jerusalem, Lachish and Ezekiah are the only fortified cities that are left in the land. We have archaeological support for some of the history here. In the Lachish letters in the British Museum, which on broken pieces of pottery, have messages that were sent to the commander of the garrison at Lachish, telling him that someone is watching for the signals from Lachish, but they cannot see any from Ezekiah.

Perhaps by that point, Ezekiah had already fallen. From verse 8 to the end of the chapter, we have an example of infidelity, and this contrasts with an example of fidelity in the Rechabites in the following chapter.

While the chapters are chronologically divided, and chapter 35 dates from a much earlier period, they are thematically united, and there is a juxtaposition between these two accounts.

The law of the release of slaves in the seventh year does not seem to have been well observed. On the fiftieth year, in the year of Jubilee, there was a more general release, but this does not seem to have been widely practiced either.

In verse 8, we learn that Zedekiah had made a solemn covenant with all of the people in Jerusalem, and had proclaimed a more general release. The exact character of the release that Zedekiah proclaimed here is not entirely clear, and scholars debate it.

[6 : 06] Some think that since the release of slaves had not been more generally practiced, that this was a more general release to make up for its numb practice earlier. Others have suggested that it was only re-initiating the practice of Deuteronomy chapter 15, and that it was not a more general release at a single time.

Yet others have suggested that it was a year of Jubilee, and yet others that it was not related to the laws of the Pentateuch. Given the allusion back to Deuteronomy later on, this seems unlikely.

Nor does Zedekiah's covenant seem to involve an ending of slavery altogether. The background for this is found in places like Deuteronomy chapter 15, verses 12-15. If your brother, a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you, he shall serve you six years, and in the seventh year you shall let him go free from you.

And when you let him go free from you, you shall not let him go empty-handed. You shall furnish him liberally out of your flock, out of your threshing floor, and out of your winepress. As the Lord your God has blessed you, you shall give to him.

You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you. Therefore I command you this today. The motivation for Zedekiah's covenant has also been debated.

[7 : 16] Perhaps during the siege, when the fields are no longer accessible, the slaves are not useful out there, and so they are needed to fight. So setting them free makes more sense. Others have suggested a far more selfish motivation.

As the slaves aren't able to work for their masters during the siege, the slaves want to give up responsibility to care for them. Setting them free is a way of removing the safety net that they were responsible to provide.

However, if this were the case, it would seem that this would be part of what the Lord would condemn them for. However, it is not mentioned in the condemnation. Another possibility, more realistic, is that they think that this will curry favour with the Lord.

The Babylonians are surrounding the city, and they believe that if they release their slaves, the Lord may have favour upon them, and remove the Babylonians from them. When the Babylonians do lift the siege for a period of time, when the Egyptians temporarily appear to be a threat, they might feel that their move has worked out, and so they want to have their slaves back.

The Lord now condemns them for reneging on the covenant. In doing so, the Lord rehearses the commandment they were supposed to obey in releasing their slaves, and this section is introduced by a statement that the Lord himself made a covenant with their fathers.

[8 : 27] The earlier verses spoke of Zedekiah making a covenant with the people, and here the Lord makes a covenant with the fathers. Zedekiah and his people released Hebrews from slavery, and the Lord released them from slavery, out of Egypt.

The commandment that he gave the people concerning their slaves was intended to continue what he had done for them. They had been granted a great Sabbath of release, and so on the Sabbath years and on the year of Jubilee, they were supposed to grant a Sabbath release for those working for them.

When they failed to do this, they became more like Egypt than the people that they were called to be. The contrast between the action of Zedekiah and his people, and the action of the Lord, the one who set free the captives and kept his covenant, should be clearly apparent here.

Their initial action in releasing their slaves is commended. They did what was right in the eyes of the Lord. The fact that they are commended in such a fashion suggests that their action was not driven purely or primarily by cynical motives.

Rather, they were really seeking to please the Lord, perhaps to gain favour with him, but in a way that was not inappropriate. However, there is a tragic symmetry in verses 15 and 16.

[9 : 35] They recently turned and did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, and then in verse 16, they turned and profaned his name. The Lord will deliver them to a poetic justice, just as they had disobeyed the Lord in not properly proclaiming liberty.

So the Lord will proclaim to them liberty to the sword, to pestilence and to famine. They had not truly released their servants, so they will be released to their fate. In making the covenant, or cutting the covenant, they had enacted what seems to have been a self-maledictory oath.

Walking between parts of an animal that had been cut in two, they were proclaiming upon themselves the curse that the same should happen to them if they failed to keep the covenant. This form of covenant ceremony might remind us of the covenant the Lord made with Abraham back in Genesis chapter 15.

As a result of their sin, they would be given into the hand of their enemies, and their dead bodies, like the dead body of the calf, would be left as food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth.

At this point, the king of Babylon seems to have withdrawn. He's gone off to fight the Egyptians. This seems to have been what spurred the people to take their slaves back again. However, the king of Babylon is going to come back.

[10 : 45] He will take the city of Jerusalem and burn it with fire, and all the cities of Judah will be made a desolation. In failing to grant liberty to their slaves, Israel was negating the reality of the Lord's liberation of them that should have been the foundation of their national life.

As they failed to live as an exodus-given, an exodus-giving people, they will be sent away into exile. A question to consider.

Where else in Scripture do we find significant references to the Sabbath year or the year of Jubilee in the connection with the release of slaves?