

Jeremiah 35: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Jeremiah chapter 35. The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord in the days of Jehoiakim, the son of Josiah, king of Judah. Go to the house of the Rechabites and speak with them, and bring them to the house of the Lord, into one of the chambers, then offer them wine to drink.

So I took Jeazaniah, the son of Jeremiah, son of Hebazaniah, and his brothers and all his sons, and the whole house of the Rechabites. I brought them to the house of the Lord, into the chamber of the sons of Hanan, the son of Igdaliah, the man of God, which was near the chamber of the officials, above the chamber of Maaseah, the son of Shalom, keeper of the threshold.

Then I set before the Rechabites pitchers full of wine and cups, and I said to them, Drink wine. But they answered, We will drink no wine, for Jonadab, the son of Rechab, our father, commanded us, You shall not drink wine, neither you nor your sons, for ever.

You shall not build a house, you shall not sow seed, you shall not plant or have a vineyard, but you shall live in tents all your days, that you may live many days in the land where you sojourn.

We have obeyed the voice of Jonadab, the son of Rechab, our father, in all that he commanded us, to drink no wine all our days, ourselves, our wives, our sons, or our daughters, and not to build houses to dwell in. We have no vineyard, or field, or seed, but we have lived in tents, and have obeyed and done all that Jonadab our father commanded us. But when Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, came up against the land, we said, Come and let us go to Jerusalem for fear of the army of the Chaldeans and the army of the Syrians, so we are living in Jerusalem.

[1 : 38] Then the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Go and say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, Will you not receive instruction and listen to my words? declares the Lord.

The command that Jonadab, the son of Rechab, gave to his sons, to drink no wine, has been kept, and they drink none to this day, for they have obeyed their father's command. I have spoken to you persistently, but you have not listened to me. I have sent to you all my servants, the prophets, sending them persistently, saying, Turn now every one of you from his evil way, and amend your deeds, and do not go after other gods to serve them. And then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to you and your fathers. But you did not incline your ear or listen to me.

The sons of Jonadab, the son of Rechab, have kept the command that their father gave them, but this people has not obeyed me. Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of hosts, the God of Israel, Behold, I am bringing upon Judah and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, all the disaster that I have pronounced against them, because I have spoken to them, and they have not listened. I have called to them, and they have not answered.

But to the house of the Rechabites, Jeremiah said, Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Because you have obeyed the command of Jonadab your father, and kept all his precepts, and done all that he commanded you, therefore thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Jonadab the son of Rechab shall never lack a man to stand before me.

Although it dates from a period much earlier in the ministry of Jeremiah, from the period of the reign of King Jehoiakim, chapter 35 of Jeremiah should be juxtaposed with the chapter that precedes it.

[3 : 20] The people's breaking of the covenant of emancipation under Zedekiah should be contrasted with the way that the Rechabites kept the command of their father. The events of the chapter occurred during the days of King Jehoiakim, the son of Jeziel.

More specifically, in verse 11, we find that it was during a period when King Nebuchadnezzar came up against the land. Dating this can be a challenge, as Jeremiah was barred from the temple courts for a period of time. Yet we also have to relate it to a period in which Nebuchadnezzar was

threatening the land, and also was accompanied by the Syrians.

We have some reference to this back in 2 Kings chapter 24, verses 1-2. Although there seemed to have been raids back in 599-598 BC, Nebuchadnezzar does not seem to have come up against Jerusalem himself until the following year. It seems that either these events date from that later period, or from the earlier period, around 604 BC, a period when Jeremiah would still have had access to the temple courts.

Jeremiah is instructed by the Lord to go to the house of the Rechabites and speak to them, bring them to the house of the Lord, and offer them wine to drink. The house of the Rechabites is not a building, it's the family of the Rechabites.

From 1 Chronicles chapter 2 verse 55, we learn that the Rechabites were descendants of the Kenites. The Kenites were a people associated with Jethro, Moses' father-in-law. The Kenites, at least for some period of time, seemed to have continued a nomadic existence in the south of Judah in the Negev. The family of the Rechabites, however, seemed to have been in a different location.

[5 : 08] Jonadab, who's mentioned here, was a subject of the northern kingdom of Israel in the 9th century BC. Our encounter with him is in 2 Kings chapter 10 verse 15. And when he departed from there, he met Jehonadab the son of Rechab coming to meet him.

And he greeted him and said to him, Is your heart true to my heart as mine is to yours? And Jehonadab answered, It is. Jehu said, If it is, give me your hand. So he gave him his hand, and Jehu took him up with him into the chariot.

Jehonadab, or Jonadab, accompanies Jehu as he strikes down the remainder of the house of Ahab in the city of Samaria. Jeremiah is instructed by the Lord to present a test to the people of the house of the Rechabites. He gathers the whole of the household together in a side chamber of the house of the Lord, the chamber of the sons of Hanan, perhaps a place where they stored wine. Around the main temple structure, there was a large series of side chambers that would have been used for storage, for various events and feasts, as places for royal use, and for a number of other purposes. These side chambers were part of a structure with three stories that is described back in 1 Kings chapter 6 verses 5 to 6. He also built a structure against the wall of the house running around the walls of the house, both the nave and the inner sanctuary, and he made side chambers all around. The lower story was five cubits broad, the middle one was six cubits broad, and the third was seven cubits broad. For around the outside of the house, he made offsets on the wall in order that the supporting beams should not be inserted into the walls of the house. Jeremiah sets before the Rechabites pictures of wine and cups and tells them to drink wine. The response of the Rechabites is to refuse. Their ancestor Jonadab had committed them to a particular form of life. They would not drink wine, they would not build a house, they would not sow seed, they would not plant or have a vineyard, and they would live in tents all of their days. They had been committed to a semi-nomadic existence.

[7 : 01] Their presence in Jerusalem at this time is explained in verse 11 by the fact that Nebuchadnezzar has come up against the land. There is no reason to believe that while they are within Jerusalem, they are doing anything other than continuing the way that their father committed them to.

If they had not been doing so, it would be strange indeed for Jeremiah and the Lord to single them out as an example to Judah. Perhaps it is their noteworthy presence in the city, and the comments and discussions that they naturally would have provoked among the inhabitants, that makes them such fitting examples for Jeremiah's message. The Rechabites, as one, respond to Jeremiah. They recount the commandment of their ancestor Jonadab, and then they make a corresponding statement that expresses their observance of each one of his stipulations. The command observance pattern is encountered on a number of occasions in scripture, perhaps most notably in the description of the construction of the tabernacle at the end of the book of Exodus. The Lord gives the instructions of how everything needs to be made, and then in great detail we hear how each one of those instructions was obeyed.

The significance of the Rechabites' obedience to their father Jonadab is not to be found in any of the specific stipulations. It is not the case that people need to be abstinent from wine, even though this might remind us of the vow of the Nazarites, nor was there anything necessarily more holy in their observance of a semi-nomadic lifestyle. The importance is to contrast their filial piety and obedience of their father Jonadab with Israel's failure to obey the word of the Lord. Nevertheless, this passage does raise some interesting questions about the place that we should give to

extra-biblical customs that families and peoples and groups can adopt, customs that may be connected with their expression of their faith in some way. We might think here of monastic communities, or perhaps a more fitting comparison would be with a group like the Amish. Participants in such communities of discipline may find that they are strengthened in their own expression of faith within that structure. We might also find in such communities exemplars and models to which the church more broadly can look. This is certainly part of the role that the Rechabites seem to be playing here. While such observances should not be presumed to have some super-erogatory value, as if they earn people a special favour before God, or to bind the conscience in a way that usurps the prerogative that belongs to the word of God alone, it does not mean that they are without great value. After having presented this test to the Rechabites, Jeremiah is instructed to bring the word of the Lord to the people. Israel's whole identity as a people was supposed to be premised upon their commitment to hear the word of the Lord and to obey it, and they had failed in their most basic vocation as a people.

The Rechabites, by contrast, in their filial piety, presented a far greater commitment to obedience than Israel did in their relationship to their God. Jonadab had delivered this instruction to his family many years ago, and they seemed to have kept it for almost two centuries. By contrast, Israel is failing to obey the word that the Lord has delivered to them, not just at Sinai, but repeatedly through the prophets. Time after time, he sends the prophets to them. Persistently, he warns them of the consequences of not hearing, and holds out the promise of continued life in the land. The Rechabites obeyed the words of their father, but Israel, the firstborn son of the Lord, has disobeyed his word. The fifth commandment concerns such obedience, honour your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you, in Exodus chapter 20 verse 12. The failure of Judah and the people of Jerusalem to obey the word of the Lord meant that disaster would come upon them. They would be cut off from the land.

Their fate, however, is contrasted with that of the Rechabites. The house of the Rechabites is blessed on account of their obedience of the command of their father. Their scrupulous obedience of his commandments and honouring of his words means that they will live long in the land. Jonadab will never lack a man to stand before him. They receive the promised blessing of the fifth commandment. A question to consider. What are some of the benefits and the potential dangers of communities such as the Rechabites? What modern day examples can we think of that might be comparable to them and what lessons could we learn from them?