

Jeremiah 43: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Jeremiah chapter 43 So Johanan the son of Korea and all the commanders of the forces and all the people did not obey the voice of the Lord to remain in the land of Judah.

But Johanan the son of Korea and all the commanders of the forces took all the remnant of Judah who had returned to live in the land of Judah from all the nations to which they had been driven. The men, the women, the children, the princesses, and every person whom Nebuchadnezzar the captain of the guard had left with Gedaliah the son of Ahicham, son of Shaphan, also Jeremiah the prophet, and Baruch the son of Nuriah.

And they came into the land of Egypt, for they did not obey the voice of the Lord, and they arrived at Tapanes. Then the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah in Tapanes, Take in your hands large stones, and hide them in the mortar in the pavement that is at the entrance to Pharaoh's palace in Tapanes, in the sight of the men of Judah.

And say to them, Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Behold, I will send and take Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, my servant, and I will set his throne above these stones that I have hidden, and he will spread his royal canopy over them.

He shall come and strike the land of Egypt, giving over to the pestilence those who are doomed to the pestilence, to captivity those who are doomed to captivity, and to the sword those who are doomed to the sword.

[1 : 49] I shall kindle a fire in the temples of the gods of Egypt, and he shall burn them and carry them away captive. And he shall clean the land of Egypt, as a shepherd cleans his cloak of vermin, and he shall go away from there in peace.

He shall break the obelisks of Heliopolis, which is in the land of Egypt, and the temples of the gods of Egypt he shall burn with fire. In Jeremiah chapter 42, after the killing of Gedaliah by Ishmael the son of Nethaniah, with the support of Baalus the king of the Ammonites, Johanan and the remaining Judahite community planned to go into Egypt to escape the reprisals of the king of Babylon.

They had come to Jeremiah seeking an oracle from the Lord. They presumably were hoping for a favourable word of the Lord that encouraged their journey into Egypt, assuring them that the Lord would bless them in this.

However, Jeremiah's word was not encouraging. He told them to remain in the land and submit themselves to the king of Babylon. Even though they feared what he would do in response to the killing of Gedaliah, they should remain in the land, and they would be blessed if they did so.

The Lord himself would protect them from harm. However, by the end of chapter 42, it became clear that they were not going to heed the word of Jeremiah, and in chapter 43, they come out directly and call him a liar.

[3 : 03] The question behind all of this is, who is the bearer of Israel's destiny? Walter Brueggemann discusses the way that the relationship between the Babylonian exile community and the Egyptian exile community can be seen behind much of this text.

Israel is living in an ongoing story, and acting in terms of different understandings of the shape and the direction that it is taking. The prophecy of Jeremiah is a politically polarising word.

It weighs in on some of the most divisive questions of the time. How people see the story playing out. How they understand its shape. Earlier on, it was about foreign policy. It was about the way that Jerusalem and the temple played into the story.

For the early Jeremiah, he was attacking a particular ideology that suggested that, on account of the Lord's commitment to his temple and the house of David, there would be no ultimate threat to Jerusalem.

Jerusalem was not vulnerable to complete destruction, nor the people to deportation like the northern kingdom. Later on, he is polarising in regard to the war effort, as he tells the people to submit to the king of Babylon rather than fighting against him.

[4 : 06] And now his polarising word is about the direction that the fugitive community must take. Theology, the reading of history, the understanding of the future, and a determination of the direction that a community must take in its politics are all bound up in the story of the prophet.

One cannot address one element without implicating the others. There can be a cynical reading of Jeremiah's word, merely presenting it as masking vested interests in a pretense of divine authority. And this is clearly the way that the refugee community speak of it. They believe that Baruch is behind the word of Jeremiah. They had been hoping for a favourable word upon their venture, and when they received a negative one, they think that maybe there must be some vested interest, leading the prophet to speak expedient falsehoods for his particular cause.

We should always keep in mind how much the authoritative scripture speaks into and arises out of contested contexts, out of conflicts concerning the direction that the people of God must take, out of theological divergences that have to do with the reading of Israel's history, its destiny, and the way that God and the people play into that.

So much of the New Testament needs to be read in a similar way. The New Testament presents us with a particular understanding of how God has acted in history that has, beyond its obvious theological ramifications, deep political and sociological implications for its understanding of who the people of God really are and what direction they must take.

[5 : 32] The political import of such a word will always lend itself to cynical readings, to the suspicion that people are ventriloquising their political agenda into the mouth of God.

However, the Lord had demonstrated the truth of the word of the prophet Jeremiah on so many occasions to this point. The fact that they would reject it now is a sign not of an appropriate wariness, but of outright unbelief.

As verse 4 puts it, they did not obey the voice of the Lord. And Johanan and the leaders take Jeremiah, Beiruk, and all the other people who were left in the charge of Gedaliah, and go down towards Egypt.

Jeremiah and Beiruk, presumably both being taken down unwillingly, are now suffering further on account of the people's unbelief. The group arrive at the city of Tapanes, which is a border town about 12 miles west of what is now the Suez Canal.

It is not the capital of Egypt, but it is an important location. And Jeremiah is given the instruction by the Lord to perform a symbolic action once again. We should recall the symbolic actions that he has performed to this point.

[6 : 33] In chapter 19 verses 1 to 13, he was instructed to do a symbolic action with a broken pot. In chapter 27 verse 2, to perform a symbolic action with a yoke. And perhaps most notably in chapter 13 verses 1 to 7, to hide a loincloth.

That symbolic action is the most similar to this one, where Jeremiah is instructed to hide some large stones in the brick pavement that is at the entrance to the palace or the government building of Pharaoh in Tapanes.

As in the case of other symbolic actions, he must do this in the sight of witnesses, here in the sight of the men of the refugee community of Judah. With this he has given a word to them.

The stones that Jeremiah is laying are hidden stones that provide the foundation for a later laying out of the royal splendour of the king of Babylon when he arrives to enact the law's vengeance upon the land of Egypt.

The disaster that the refugees had sought to escape is going to pursue them and it's going to catch them up. The familiar triad of judgment is heard once more. He will give over to the pestilence those who are doomed to the pestilence, to captivity those who are doomed to captivity, and to the sword those who are doomed to the sword.

[7 : 42] The great symbols of Egypt's power and authority will be brought down. The gods will have their temples burned and their idols will be carried away from the land. The king of Babylon will shake out the land of Egypt like a shepherd delousing his garment.

The obelisks of Heliopolis will also be broken down. Egypt will be humiliated. This does not seem to involve a full invasion, but it will be a great humiliation of Egypt with many of the effects that a full invasion would have.

A further symbolic action will be performed at the end of the book in chapter 51 verses 61 to 64. And Jeremiah said to Saria, When you come to Babylon, see that you read all these words, and say, O Lord, you have said concerning this place that you will cut it off, so that nothing shall dwell in it, neither man nor beast, and it shall be desolate forever.

When you finish reading this book, tie a stone to it and cast it into the midst of the Euphrates, and say, Thus shall Babylon sink, to rise no more, because of the disaster that I am bringing upon her, and they shall become exhausted.

The book of Ezekiel also speaks of the coming judgment upon Egypt. Ezekiel chapter 29 verses 2 to 3. Son of man, set your face against Pharaoh king of Egypt, and prophesy against him and against all Egypt.

[8 : 57] Speak and say, Thus says the Lord God, Behold, I am against you, Pharaoh king of Egypt, the great dragon that lies in the midst of his streams, that says, My Nile is my own, I made it for myself.

This speaks of the sense of security that Egypt had. It was invulnerable to invasion. However, the Lord would bring his servant, the king of Babylon, upon it, and he would judge the Judahite community there.

Once again, in chapter 29 verses 19 to 20, Therefore thus says the Lord God, Behold, I will give the land of Egypt to Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and he shall carry off its wealth, and despoil it and plunder it, and it shall be the wages for his army.

I have given him the land of Egypt as his payment for which he labored, because they worked for me, declares the Lord God. Babylonian text fragments suggest that in 568, Nebuchadnezzar came up against Egypt.

While he did not take over the land, he did despoil it. The community that had rejected the word of the Lord, that had thought to continue the story in this way that the Lord had forbidden, ended up writing itself out.

[10 : 01] In chapter 28, verse 68 of the book of Deuteronomy, this was the final of the curses of the covenant, and the Lord will bring you back in ships to Egypt, a journey that I promised that you should never make again, and there you shall offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but there will be no buyer.

A question to consider. Reflecting upon the details of the symbolic action performed by Jeremiah, how might we discern some of its deepest significance?

