

Jeremiah 45: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Jeremiah chapter 45. The word that Jeremiah the prophet spoke to Beiruch the son of Neriah when he wrote these words in a book at the dictation of Jeremiah in the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Jeziel king of Judah.

Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, to you, O Beiruch. You said, Woe is me, for the Lord has added sorrow to my pain. I am weary with my groaning, and I find no rest. Thus shall you say to him, Thus says the Lord, Behold, what I have built I am breaking down, and what I have planted I am plucking up, that is, the whole land.

And do you seek great things for yourself? Seek them not, for behold, I am bringing disaster upon all flesh, declares the Lord. But I will give you your life as a prize of war in all places to which you may go.

Jeremiah chapter 45, a very short chapter, is a colophon. It is appended to the part of the book from chapter 36 to 44, known by some as the Beiruch document.

The colophon form gives us, as Jack Lumbum notes, the name of the scribe with his patronym, he is the son of Neriah. It gives us the source of the copy that was dictated by Jeremiah. It gives us the date, the fourth year of Jehoiakim, the reason for producing the copy, a curse and a blessing, and the catchword of sorrow that connects it with other parts of the book.

[1 : 21] We find a further colophon in chapter 51, verses 59 to 64, the word that Jeremiah the prophet commanded Saraiah, the son of Neriah, son of Mesiah, when he went with Zedekiah, king of Judah, to Babylon, in the fourth year of his reign.

Saraiah was the quartermaster. Jeremiah wrote in a book all the disaster that should come upon Babylon, all these words that are written concerning Babylon. And Jeremiah said to Saraiah, 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.

Thus far are the words of Jeremiah. The book of Jeremiah passed through a number of different stages before coming to us in its present form. The Septuagint is evidence of rather different forms that the book of Jeremiah circulated in.

Even within Jeremiah's own lifetime, when his ministry was still ongoing, there were initial editions of the book being produced, as we see in chapter 36, verses 1 to 8. In the fourth year of Jehoiakim, the son of Josiah, king of Judah, this word came to Jeremiah from the Lord.

[2 : 40] Take a scroll and write on it all the words that I have spoken to you against Israel and Judah and all the nations, from the day I spoke to you, from the days of Josiah until today. It may be that the house of Judah will hear all the disaster that I intend to do to them, so that every one may turn from his evil way, and that I may forgive their iniquity and their sin.

Then Jeremiah called Beiruk the son of Noriah, and Beiruk wrote on a scroll at the dictation of Jeremiah all the words of the Lord that he had spoken to him. And Jeremiah ordered Beiruk, saying, I am banned from going to the house of the Lord, so you are to go, and on a day of fasting in the hearing of all the people in the Lord's house, you shall read the words of the Lord from the scroll that you have written at my dictation.

You shall read them also in the hearing of all the men of Judah who come out of their cities. It may be that their plea for mercy will come before the Lord, and that every one will turn from his evil way, for great is the anger and wrath that the Lord has pronounced against his people.

And Beiruk the son of Noriah did all that Jeremiah the prophet ordered him about reading from the scroll the words of the Lord in the Lord's house. Beiruk is associated with Jeremiah back in the time of Jehoiakim.

As the preceding chapters show, his association continued down into the exile in Egypt, as Beiruk was taken with Jeremiah to that exile. Beiruk was also the brother of Sariah who is mentioned later on.

[3 : 59] Like the family of Shaphan, the sons of Noriah are important allies to Jeremiah. This chapter is dated back to 605 BC, to the fourth year of Jehoiakim, long before the post-586 BC period that the previous chapters recount.

Lumbum argues that it originally functioned to end the earlier form of the book, the production of which was described back in chapter 36. This earlier edition would have been chapters 1 to 20. In support of this position, Lumbum argues that the catchword of sorrow connects these verses with the final verse of chapters 1 to 20, verse 18 of chapter 20. Why did I come out from the womb to see toil and sorrow, and spend my days in shame?

Jeremiah ends chapters 1 to 20 with a lament that hearkens back to his call in chapter 1, and Beiruk's colophon records a very similar lament and connects his suffering with that of the prophets that he is working for.

Beiruk is a servant of this prophecy, and his personal destiny is entangled with it in complicated ways. Verse 4 also recalls the opening of the book. Thus shall you say to him, Thus says the Lord, Behold, what I have built I am breaking down, and what I have planted I am plucking up, that is, the whole land.

[5 : 13] The familiar set of terms here, build, break down, plant, pluck up, were introduced to us back in chapter 1, verses 9 to 10. Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth, and the Lord said to me, Behold, I have put my words in your mouth.

See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant. In its present situation, This brackets chapters 36 to 45 with references to Beiruk and his writing in the fourth year of Jehoiakim.

A number of scholars refer to the bracketed material as the Beiruk scroll or document on this account. It also connects by catchwords to the preceding chapter, in verses 27 and 30.

They connect with verse 5, and to the chapter that follows, which also mentions the fourth year of Jehoiakim. That year, as we have seen, was a year of critical importance for the region. It was that year that Nebuchadnezzar came on the scene as the king of Babylon, and defeated the Egyptians at Carchemish.

As Beiruk records the prophecies of Jeremiah in his scroll, we can imagine that he would have felt some sense of despair. His own life is entangled with that of his nation. He seems to be doomed to be engulfed by its terrible fate.

[6 : 27] All the personal ambitions that he might have held will come to naught. Will his children or his family survive the coming disaster? Will he leave anything behind? Or will he merely be scoured from the face of history, like the doomed people of Jerusalem?

When a nation is shattered, what becomes of the shards? We had another oracle given to a person in a similar situation in the case of Ebed-Melek. The Ethiopian eunuch who had protected and delivered Jeremiah had a personal oracle given to him in chapter 39, verses 15 to 18.

The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah while he was shut up in the court of the guard. Go and say to Ebed-Melek the Ethiopian, Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Behold, I will fulfil my words against this city for harm and not for good, and they shall be accomplished before you on that day.

But I will deliver you on that day, declares the Lord, and you shall not be given into the hand of the men of whom you are afraid. For I will surely save you, and you shall not fall by the sword, but you shall have your life as a prize of war, because you have put your trust in me, declares the Lord.

Beiruk seems to have expressed his complaint to Jeremiah, who then reported it to the Lord, and the Lord sent him with a word to Beiruk. Like Jeremiah was, Beiruk was troubled by the word that was delivered to the prophet.

[7 : 44] He feels keenly about the coming disaster upon the city, but also about his own place within it. The words of Beiruk's lament are similar to the words of Psalm 6 verse 7, My eye wastes away because of grief.

It grows weak because of all my foes. In responding to Beiruk, the Lord tells him once more that he is bringing this great upheaval upon the whole land. The whole land is going to be unsettled. In the midst of the disaster that's going to befall the nation, Beiruk needs to leave his personal ambitions to one side. He may have ambitions to rise to high status. As a member of the scribal caste, he might fancy that he could become an important figure within the regime. But the regime is going to be destroyed, and Jerusalem and Judah with it. Jerusalem and Judah are going to be totaled. The coming disaster is a general one, coming upon all flesh. What the Lord will give him is similar to what he promises to Jeremiah and Ebed-Milek. While warriors might want to get great spoils from a victory, Beiruk, like Jeremiah, is going to be part of a great defeat. And the only spoil that he can hope for is the spoil of his life. [8 : 47] Under the circumstances, that will be reward enough. A question to consider. In times of judgment and disaster, how can we learn from the Lord's words to Beiruk in this chapter how best to handle our personal ambitions?

