

Jeremiah 52: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Jeremiah chapter 52. Zedekiah was twenty-one years old when he became king, and he reigned eleven years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Hamutal, the daughter of Jeremiah of Libna, and he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, according to all that Jehoiakim had done.

For because of the anger of the Lord, it came to the point in Jerusalem and Judah that he cast them out from his presence. And Zedekiah rebelled against the king of Babylon, and in the ninth year of his reign, in the tenth month, on the tenth day of the month, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came with all his army against Jerusalem, and laid siege to it, and they built siege works all around it. So the city was besieged till the eleventh year of King Zedekiah. On the ninth day of the fourth month, the famine was so severe in the city that there was no food for the people of the land.

Then a breach was made in the city, and all the men of war fled and went out from the city by night, by the way of a gate between the two walls, by the king's garden, and the Chaldeans were around the city, and they went in the direction of the Araba. But the army of the Chaldeans pursued the king, and overtook Zedekiah in the plains of Jericho, and all his army was scattered from him. Then they captured the king, and brought him up to the king of Babylon at Riblah in the land of Hamath, and he passed sentence on him. The king of Babylon slaughtered the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes, and also slaughtered all the officials of Judah at Riblah. He put out the eyes of Zedekiah, and bound him in chains, and the king of Babylon took him to Babylon, and put him in prison till the day of his death. In the fifth month, on the tenth day of the month, that was the nineteenth year of King Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, the captain of the bodyguard, who served the king of Babylon, entered Jerusalem. And he burned the house of the Lord, and the king's house, and all the houses of Jerusalem, every great house he burnt down. And all the army of the Chaldeans, who were with the captain of the guard, broke down all the walls around Jerusalem. And Nebuchadnezzar, the captain of the guard, carried away captive some of the poorest of the people, and the rest of the people who were left in the city, and the deserters who had deserted to the king of Babylon, together with the rest of the artisans. But Nebuchadnezzar, the captain of the guard, left some of the poorest of the land, to be vinedressers and ploughmen. And the pillars of bronze that were in the house of the

Lord, and the stands in the bronze sea that were in the house of the Lord, the Chaldeans broke in pieces, and carried all the bronze to Babylon. And they took away the pots and the shovels, and the snuffers, and the basins, and the dishes for incense, and all the vessels of bronze used in the temple service, also the small bowls, and the firepans, and the basins, and the pots, and the lampstands, and the dishes for incense, and the bowls for drink offerings. What was of gold the captain of the guard took away as gold, and what was of silver as silver. As for the two pillars, the one sea, the twelve bronze bulls that were under the sea, and the stands which Solomon the king had made for the house of the Lord, the bronze of all these things was beyond weight. As for the pillars, the height of the one pillar was eighteen cubits, its circumference was twelve cubits, and its thickness was four fingers, and it was hollow. On it was a capital of bronze. The height of the one capital was five cubits, a network, and pomegranates, all of bronze, were around the capital, and the second pillar had the same with pomegranates. There were ninety-six pomegranates on the sides, all the pomegranates were a hundred upon the network all around. And the captain of the guard took Saria the chief priest, and Zephaniah the second priest, and the three keepers of the threshold. And from the city he took an officer, who had been in command of the men of war, and seven men of the king's council, who were found in the city, and the secretary of the commander of the army, who mustered the people of the land, and sixty men of the people of the land, who were found in the midst of the city. And Nebuchadnezzar the captain of the guard took them, and brought them to the king of

Babylon at Riblah. And the king of Babylon struck them down, and put them to death at Riblah in the land of Hamath. So Judah was taken into exile out of its land. This is the number of the people whom Nebuchadnezzar carried away captive in the seventh year, three thousand and twenty-three Judeans. In the eighteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar he carried away captive from Jerusalem, eight hundred and thirty-two persons. In the twenty-third year of Nebuchadnezzar, Nebuchadnezzar, the captain of the guard, carried away captive of the Judeans, seven hundred and forty-five persons. All the persons were four thousand six hundred. And in the thirty-seventh year of the exile of Jehoiachin, king of Judah, in the twelfth month, on the twenty-fifth day of the month, evil Merodach, king of Babylon, in the year that he began to reign, graciously freed Jehoiachin, king of Judah, and brought him out of prison. And he spoke kindly to him, and gave him a seat above the seats of the kings who were with him in Babylon. So Jehoiachin put off his prison garments. And every day of his life he dined regularly at the king's table. And for his allowance, a regular allowance was given him by the king, according to his daily needs, until the day of his death, as long as he lived. The book of Jeremiah concludes not with Jeremiah's final words, nor with the great prophecies against Babylon in chapters 50 to 51, but with the historical epilogue of chapter 52. The book of Jeremiah's prophecies conclude in chapter 51 verse 64, and what follows here is largely the text of 2 Kings chapter 24 verse 18 to chapter 25 verse 30, with a few variations and additions. A similar inclusion of material from the historical books into one of the prophetic books can be seen in chapters 36 to 39 of the book of Isaiah. Those chapters contain much of the material of 2 Kings chapters 18 to 20. The most major change from 2 Kings chapter 25 is the exclusion of its account of Gedaliah.

[6 : 08] Given the treatment of the history of the Judahites after the fall of the kingdom in chapters 40 to 43, it should not surprise us that it was excluded at this point. It might seem as if this is a case of a lazy cut and paste from another book, but even material that seems to be repeated in scripture, as several parts of Jeremiah are even within the book itself, are not detached from their new locations, or straightforward repetitions. In some cases, as in the verses at the end of chapter 50, the repeating of verses from another context is far from lazy cutting and pasting, functioning as a sort of subtle theological commentary, which attentive hearers should be able to pick up upon.

Jeremiah chapter 52 needs to be read in the wider context of the book of Jeremiah, where it has been thoughtfully placed. As we have noted at several points in studying the book of Jeremiah, in light both of internal features of the book and the evidence of the Septuagint version of the book, the book of Jeremiah underwent a series of additions and several reorderings of its material, before coming down to us in the form that we now have it in our Bibles. We might note the similarity between this chapter and the earlier account of chapter 39 to 40 verse 6, where the fall of Jerusalem is followed by the release of Jeremiah, much as the fall of Jerusalem is followed here by the release of Jehoiakim. In its current position, the material of chapter 52 highlights the way that Jeremiah's ministry was vindicated in his lifetime, the event with which it was largely concerned coming to pass as the enemy from the north came upon Jerusalem and destroyed it. This chapter also contains some unique material in the numbers of the exiles in verses 28 to 30. The material of this chapter likely dates from some time after 560 BC, over 25 years after the downfall of Jerusalem. Zedekiah, like Jehoiakim, reigned for 11 years before rebelling against Nebuchadnezzar. He repeats the error of his predecessor and suffers the same consequences. All of this was discussed in places like Ezekiel chapter 17 verses 11 to 21, which warned against looking to the Egyptians for an alliance against the Babylonians. Then the word of the Lord came to me, Say now to the rebellious house, Do you not know what these things mean? Tell them, Behold, the king of Babylon came to Jerusalem, and took her king and her princes, and brought them to him to Babylon. And he took one of the royal offspring, and made a covenant with him, putting him under oath, the chief men of the land he had taken away, that the kingdom might be humble and not lift itself up, and keep his covenant that it might stand. But he rebelled against him by sending his ambassadors to Egypt, that they might give him horses and a large army. Will he thrive? Can one escape who does such things? Can he break the covenant and yet escape? As I live, declares the Lord God, surely in the place where the king dwells, who made him king, whose oath he despised, and whose covenant with him he broke, in Babylon he shall die. Pharaoh with his mighty army and great company will not help him in war, when mounds are cast up, and siege walls built to cut off many lives.

He despised the oath in breaking the covenant, and behold, he gave his hand and did all these things. He shall not escape. Therefore thus says the Lord God, As I live, surely it is my oath, that he

despised, and my covenant that he broke. I will return it upon his head. I will spread my net over him, and he shall be taken in my snare, and I will bring him to Babylon, and enter into judgment with him there for the treachery he has committed against me. And all the pick of his troops shall fall by the sword, and the survivors shall be scattered to every wind, and you shall know that I am the Lord.

I have spoken. One of the strongest themes of Jeremiah's ministry was that the people of Judah ought to submit to the king of Babylon, that as they submitted to the Lord's hand in the king of Babylon, they would be preserved through judgment, and the time would come when they would be restored again. However, Zedekiah and the Judahites broke this word. In the ninth year of Zedekiah's reign, Nebuchadnezzar came up against Jerusalem in response to Zedekiah's rebellion against him.

[10:18] There is a sense of inevitability to the events that follow. After all of the forewarning, the actual judgment comes upon Judah as a sort of formality. Its fight is futile. The fate is already appointed for the nation. There is an inexorable movement from Nebuchadnezzar's setting up of the siege works to the final fall of the city of Jerusalem. Nothing can save Judah now. The disaster is in the process of unfolding, and nothing can arrest it. The siege begins in January of 588 BC, and it ends in July 586 BC. Over the 18 months of the siege, famine conditions become severe in the city. We should imagine a situation similar to that described in 2 Kings chapter 6, where people were buying donkeys' heads and doves' dung to eat, and even eating their own children. The city is finally breached, at which point Zedekiah and his warriors try to flee by night, at a place where the besieging army would be the thinnest. They flee east, but are pursued by the Chaldean army, which overtakes them in the plains of Jericho. Zedekiah's escape is short-lived. His army is scattered, and he is captured. He is brought north to Riblah, where Nebuchadnezzar is now based. And there his sons are killed before his eyes, and to ensure that this is the last thing that he will ever see, they put out his eyes. He is brought in chains to Babylon. With his sons killed, there is seemingly no hope of his restoration of his dynasty. He ends up in prison in Babylon, or in the Septuagint, the millhouse, subject to hard labour. We might hear think about the story of Samson, who also loses his eyes and is subject to hard labour. In the verses that follow, we are told the year of the reign of

Nebuchadnezzar in which Jerusalem fell. Now that Judah is being removed from the map, the marking of time moves from the regnal years of Judah's kings to the year of the reign of the kings of Babylon.

The entire temple complex, the house of the lord and the king's palace, is burned down, along with all of the other great buildings of the city. Solomon's temple, which had been at the heart of the life of the nation of Judah, is no more. As Jeremiah had taught the people so forcefully, they had wrongly trusted in the temple, treating it as if it were a sort of idol or talisman. But now it is removed from them. The walls of Jerusalem are broken down. The city is utterly humbled. Any remnant of its former grandeur is reduced to smouldering rubble. The smaller remnant of the elite and the artisans that had been left after the former deportation are removed. Only some of the poorest are left to work the land. At the start of the books of the kings, there was the assembling of the furniture of the temple, and in this chapter it is stripped from the house, item by item. It's a tragic mirroring of 1 Kings chapter 7 verses 15 to 45. The temple is divested of its treasures. The captain of the guard, Nebuchadnezzar, assembles a representative group of men of various high officers. They are then taken north, up to Nebuchadnezzar at Riblah, where they are put to death. Although many of the poorer people remain, Judah is now in exile, and has ceased to exist as a nation in its own right. There is no lengthy discussion of the reasons for Jerusalem's destruction here. As the final chapter of the book of Jeremiah, it is already entirely evident to the hearer. There are some added details within this list of the temple furnishings, some surprising variations from the account in 2 Kings chapter 25, but also in 1 Kings chapter 7, where the items are first described. Most particularly, in verse 23 we read,

There were 96 pomegranates on the sides. All the pomegranates were 100 upon the network all around. This is not a detail that we have elsewhere. Where we read of the pomegranates in 1 Kings chapter 7 verses 20 and 42, we are not given the number 96. Rather we read, The capitals were on the two pillars, and also above the rounded projection which was beside the latticework. There were 200 pomegranates in two rows all around, and so with the other capital, and also, and the 400 pomegranates for the two latticeworks, two rows of pomegranates for each latticework, to cover the two bowls of the capitals that were on the pillars. It is quite possible that this seemingly extraneous

detail is significant, and that the hearer is supposed to recognize some importance in this number 96. Further numbers follow this section, numbers that are not found in the account of 2 Kings. These are the deportation summaries from 597 BC, 586 BC, and 582 BC, from the first attack upon Jerusalem, from the downfall of Jerusalem, and then presumably a third time after the killing of Gedaliah. The numbers for the deportation here differ from those that we find in 2 Kings. 2 Kings chapter 24 verses 14 to 16 gives the numbers for the first deportation. He carried away all Jerusalem, and all the officials, and all the mighty men of valor, 10,000 captives, and all the craftsmen and the smiths. None remained except the poorest people of the land. And he carried away Jehoiakim to Babylon, the king's mother, the king's wives, his officials, and the chief men of the land he took into captivity from Jerusalem to Babylon. And the king of Babylon brought captive to Babylon all the men of valor, 7,000, and the craftsmen, and the metal workers, 1,000, all of them strong and fit for war. The discrepancies between the figures in these two accounts could be accounted for in various ways. Who exactly is being numbered? Is it including just the adult males in the account here? Are there certain classes of persons that are not being included? Where are the people being numbered? As they are being brought away from Jerusalem, or as they are arriving in Babylon, or as they are settled in Babylon? It's not entirely clear.

I would not be surprised if there is some significance to be seen in these numbers again. The book ends on a surprising note. There is a brief flicker of hope in the gloom of exile.

[16:13] 37 years into his exile, Jehoiakim, Zedekiah's nephew and predecessor on the throne of Judah, is released from prison. He is treated kindly by evil Merodach, and made to sit regularly at the king's table above the other captive kings in Babylon. He is also granted a regular allowance for his needs. Judah had been told that if they submitted to Babylon, they would enjoy peace.

In his book of comfort or consolation, Jeremiah had also told them that the time would come when the Lord would visit them. He would restore them to the land, and they would prosper there once more. Here, in the darkness of the grave of exile, there is the slightest stirring of the bones.

A question to consider. What similarities might we see between the story of the elevation of Jehoiakim from prison, to the story of Joseph in Genesis? What might we make of the resemblances between these two stories?