

Jeremiah 29: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Jeremiah chapter 29. These are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders of the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.

This was after King Jeconiah and the Queen Mother, the eunuchs, the officials of Judah and Jerusalem, the craftsmen, and the metal workers had departed from Jerusalem. The letter was sent by the hand of Elisa the son of Shaphan, and Gemariah the son of Hilkiah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to Babylon to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon.

It said, Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon, build houses and live in them. Plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters. Take wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters.

Multiply there and do not decrease, but seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, do not let your prophets and your diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name.

[1 : 1 8] I did not send them, declares the Lord. For thus says the Lord, when seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise, and bring you back to this place.

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me, and come and pray to me, and I will hear you.

You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord.

And I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile. Because you have said, The Lord has raised up prophets for us in Babylon, thus says the Lord concerning the king who sits on the throne of David, and concerning all the people who dwell in this city, your kinsmen who did not go out with you into exile.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, Behold, I am sending on them sword, famine and pestilence, and I will make them like vile figs that are so rotten they cannot be eaten.

[2 : 2 7] I will pursue them with sword, famine and pestilence, and will make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth, to be a curse, a terror, a hissing and a reproach among all the nations where I have driven them, because they did not pay attention to my words, declares the Lord, that I persistently sent to you by my servants the prophets.

But you would not listen, declares the Lord. Hear the word of the Lord, all you exiles, whom I sent away from Jerusalem to Babylon. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, concerning Ahab the son of Kaliah, and Zedekiah the son of Maaseah, who are prophesying a lie to you in my name.

Behold, I will deliver them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and he shall strike them down before your eyes. Because of them this curse shall be used by all the exiles from Judah in Babylon.

The Lord make you like Zedekiah and Ahab, whom the king of Babylon roasted in the fire, because they have done an outrageous thing in Israel. They have committed adultery with their neighbor's wives, and they have spoken in my name lying words that I did not command them.

I am the one who knows, and I am witness, declares the Lord. To Shemaiah of Nehalem you shall say, Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, You have sent letters in your name to all the people who are in Jerusalem, and to Zephaniah the son of Maaseah the priest, and to all the priests, saying, The Lord has made you priest instead of Jehoiada the priest, to have charge in the house of the Lord over every madman who prophesies, to put him in the stocks and neck irons.

[4 : 00] Now why have you not rebuked Jeremiah of Anathoth, who is prophesying to you? For he has sent to us in Babylon, saying, Your exile will be long. Build houses and live in them, and plant gardens and eat their produce.

Zephaniah the priest read this letter in the hearing of Jeremiah the prophet. Then the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah, Send to all the exiles, saying, Thus says the Lord concerning Shemaiah of Nehalem, Because Shemaiah had prophesied to you, when I did not send him, and has made you trust in a lie, therefore thus says the Lord, Behold, I will punish Shemaiah of Nehalem and his descendants.

He shall not have anyone living among this people, and he shall not see the good that I will do to my people, declares the Lord, for he has spoken rebellion against the Lord. Jeremiah chapter 29 contains two letters written on two separate occasions by Jeremiah to the Babylonian exiles.

The principal letter is addressed to the exiles more generally, and the second to a specific prophet among them, who opposed the word of Jeremiah. Jeremiah's first letter was addressed to the surviving elders of the exiles, the priests, the prophets, and all of the people among them, Some of the oldest generation of the exiles may have already died.

It refers to the surviving exiles here. And with their deaths, the Jewish exile community would increasingly be wondering about how to approach their lives in exile. Some prophets, both from Jerusalem and among their own number, have been reassuring them that their exile will be of short duration.

[5 : 31] Should they all be braced for return? Should they expect a longer exile? Is there any real hope of a return at all? These are the questions that Jeremiah addresses within his letter.

Earlier, when Jeremiah had been put on trial, Ahicham, the son of Shaphan, had intervened on his behalf to protect him from being put to death. In this chapter, another son of Shaphan, Elisa, carries Jeremiah's letter to the Judahite exiles.

Considering the friendship that Jeremiah seems to have had with the family of Shaphan, it's possible that this was sent informally, as something entrusted personally, rather than as part of the official business that Zedekiah has sent the men on.

Gemariah, Elisa's companion, may perhaps have been the son of the high priest who found the book of the law in the temple. The Judahite exiles in Babylon seem to have had some measure of freedom.

They don't seem to be prisoners of war, and maybe not even a slave population. Jeremiah's message is that they should settle into a longer term exile, recognising that the rest of their lives will be lived in Babylon.

[6 : 33] The language of building and planting is used here, albeit in a very surprising context. This language should be familiar to us from chapter 1, verses 9 and 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 this address to the Judahite exiles, the building and the planting is taking place in a foreign land.

They are building houses and living in them, planting gardens and eating their produce. The sort of activities that he recommends here are the sort of long-term life activities. Building houses, planting gardens, taking wives and starting families, taking wives for their sons and giving their daughters in marriage.

They must be prepared to settle down into life in Babylon. They are going to be there for several decades. To the extent that they expected an imminent return, they would be afraid of making these longer-term decisions.

You wouldn't start a family in Babylon if you thought you were going to return within a couple of years. They are instructed to prosper there, to multiply. The calling for them to be fruitful and multiply in a foreign land should remind us of the way that the Israelites multiplied in the days before the Exodus.

[7 : 49] Even in a foreign land, they can prosper and grow as a people. And with this recognition that they will be spending many years in exile in Babylon, their posture towards the land of their exile must change.

They must seek the welfare of the city. First of all, they should not rebel against it. They should also pray for its good and seek its well-being. They should commit themselves to being peaceful and upstanding participants in its civic life.

They need to recognize that they share in common with the Babylonians a common good, and they should serve that to the extent that they can. The instruction to pray for the good of the land of their exile would have been a difficult one for many of them to hear.

But yet, throughout the book of Jeremiah, the Lord reassures his people of his hand behind all of these events. The Lord is the one who has raised up Babylon. The Lord is the one who in time will destroy Babylon too.

By seeking the good of Babylonia during this period, the exiles of Judah are putting their fate in the hand of God, recognizing that he is the one who is sovereign over the empire that has taken them exiles.

[8 : 48] The city that's referenced here is likely not a particular city. The exiles are probably separated in several different locations. The Lord warns the exiles against listening to the prophets and diviners among them, who are giving them a false message of hope concerning their soon return.

The Lord has not sent them, and their message is not true. The reference to diviners here also suggests that pagan practices were still being practiced among the exiles, even after they had been thrown out of the land as a result of these sins.

While the false hope of these prophets was appealing, it was a very dangerous thing. Such messages could have inspired the Jews to revolt, and brought destruction upon the community more generally.

By contrast, the Lord's instruction to live peaceably until the time when he released them would secure the long-term well-being of the exile community. A time is set for the return from exile.

70 years will be completed for Babylon, and then the Lord will visit them. This need not necessarily be taken as a reference to the time when Jerusalem will be rebuilt, and people will start to return to the land.

[9 : 51] The reference may more be to the end of the reign of Babylon, as their empire is taken over, and the situation of Judah changes. While some of the exiles might have considered their position to be hopeless, the Lord still has good intentions for his people.

He has not abandoned them to their fate. If they will merely trust in the word of his prophet and follow his instruction, then a future of blessing awaits them. God's ultimate intent has always been for their good.

In time, he will reverse their fortunes. Throughout the book of Jeremiah, there are several references back to the book of Deuteronomy, and here I think we hear the language of Deuteronomy coming through again.

Deuteronomy chapter 4, verses 27 to 31. And the Lord will scatter you among the peoples, and you will be left few in number among the nations where the Lord will drive you. And there you will serve guards of wood and stone, the work of human hands, that neither see nor hear nor eat nor smell.

But from there you will seek the Lord your God, and you will find him, if you search after him with all your heart and with all your soul. When you are in tribulation, and all these things come upon you in the latter days, you will return to the Lord your God and obey his voice.

[11 : 02] For the Lord your God is a merciful God. He will not leave you or destroy you or forget the covenant with your fathers that he swore to them. The statements that the Lord makes to the Judahite exiles here are not just conditional ones.

The statement he makes is not, If you call upon me, but you will call upon me. Their repentance is promised, not just restoration conditional upon their repentance.

The Lord will turn their hearts back to himself. Once again, this will remind us of the words of Deuteronomy chapter 30, verses 1 to 6. And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the Lord your God has driven you, and return to the Lord your God, you and your children, and obey his voice in all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you, if your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven.

From there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there he will take you. And the Lord your God will bring you into the land that your fathers possessed, that you may possess it. And he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers.

And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live. Once again, the Lord cautions against false impressions for the outlook of Jerusalem and its people and rulers, false impressions that have been given through false prophets.

[12 : 35] There is an allusion back to chapter 24 here and the vision of the good and the bad figs. The people left in the city of Jerusalem are rotten figs, vile figs that cannot be eaten.

All that awaits them is sword, famine and pestilence, the consequence of being besieged by the empire of Babylon. Once again, the characteristic language of desolation is used.

I will pursue them with sword, famine and pestilence, and will make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth, to be a curse, a terror, a hissing and a reproach among all the nations where I have driven them.

This fate comes upon them because of their failure to heed the word of the Lord. The fundamental task of Israel was always to hear the word of the Lord. The Lord also pronounces judgment upon two particular false prophets among the people.

Ahab the son of Kaliah and Zedekiah the son of Maaseah are both prophesying falsely in his name. Presumably they are declaring an imminent release from exile. The Lord, however, will deliver these two false prophets into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and they will be executed by him, presumably for stirring up rebellion against him.

- [13 : 42] They will suffer a gruesome execution of being roasted in the fire. This will come upon them not just because of their false prophecies, but also because they are both guilty of the sin of adultery.

The Lord knows the secrets of men's heart. Both false prophecy and adultery carry the death penalty, and the Lord will bring this punishment upon these two false prophets by his word.

Confrontations with false prophets continue in the chapter. Shemaiah the son of Nehalem, one of the prophets who was among the exiles, has sent messages to the people in Jerusalem and to Zephaniah the priest to treat Jeremiah like a madman and lock him up in the stocks for his raving.

Referring back to Jeremiah's prophecy in the first letter that their exile would belong, that they should build houses and live in them and plant gardens and eat their produce, he charges them to rebuke Jeremiah and to dismiss him as a prophet.

He calls upon Zephaniah to execute his responsibility as a priest in this matter and not to let Jeremiah go. Zephaniah, however, does not carry it out but reads the letter to Jeremiah.

- [14 : 44] Jeremiah responds by declaring the Lord's judgment upon Shemaiah. The Lord will surely visit and bless his people, but Shemaiah and his offspring will be cut off.

They will not see any of the good that God has planned for his people. A question to consider. How might the Lord's instruction to the Judahite exiles instruct us in the way that we live in non-Christian societies?

In what ways might our situation be similar to that of the exiles in Babylon? In what ways might it be different?