

Jeremiah 44: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Jeremiah chapter 44. The word that came to Jeremiah concerning all the Judeans who lived in the land of Egypt, at Migdal, at Tapanes, at Memphis, and in the land of Pathros.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, You have seen all the disaster that I brought upon Jerusalem and upon all the cities of Judah. Behold, this day they are a desolation, and no one dwells in them, because of the evil that they committed, provoking me to anger, in that they went to make offerings and serve other gods that they knew not, neither they nor you nor your fathers.

Yet I persistently sent to you all my servants the prophets, saying, O do not do this abomination that I hate. But they did not listen or incline their ear to turn from their evil and make no offerings to other gods.

Therefore my wrath and my anger were poured out and kindled in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem, and they became a waste and a desolation, as at this day.

And now thus says the Lord God of hosts, the God of Israel, Why do you commit this great evil against yourselves, to cut off from you man and woman, infant and child, from the midst of Judah, leaving you no remnant?

[1 : 1 0] Why do you provoke me to anger with the works of your hands, making offerings to other gods in the land of Egypt, where you have come to live, so that you may be cut off and become a curse and a taunt among all the nations of the earth?

Have you forgotten the evil of your fathers, the evil of the kings of Judah, the evil of their wives, your own evil, and the evil of your wives, which they committed in the land of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem?

They have not humbled themselves even to this day, nor have they feared, nor walked in my law and my statutes that I set before you and before your fathers. Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Behold, I will set my face against you for harm, to cut off all Judah.

I will take the remnant of Judah who have set their faces to come to the land of Egypt to live, and they shall all be consumed. In the land of Egypt they shall fall, by the sword and by famine they shall be consumed.

From the least to the greatest they shall die by the sword and by famine, and they shall become an oath, a horror, a curse, and a taunt. I will punish those who dwell in the land of Egypt, as I have punished Jerusalem, with the sword, with famine, and with pestilence, so that none of the remnant of Judah who have come to live in the land of Egypt shall escape or survive or return to the land of Judah, to which they desire to return to dwell there.

[2 : 3 3] For they shall not return, except some fugitives. Then all the men who knew that their wives had made offerings to other gods, and all the women who stood by, a great assembly, all the people who lived in Pathros in the land of Egypt, answered Jeremiah, As for the word that you have spoken to us in the name of the Lord, we will not listen to you, but we will do everything that we have vowed, make offerings to the Queen of Heaven, and pour out drink offerings to her, as we did, both we and our fathers, our kings and our officials, in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem.

For then we had plenty of food, and prospered, and saw no disaster. But since we left off making offerings to the Queen of Heaven, and pouring out drink offerings to her, we have lacked everything, and have been consumed by the sword and by famine.

And the women said, When we made offerings to the Queen of Heaven, and poured out drink offerings to her, was it without our husband's approval that we made cakes for her, bearing her image, and poured out drink offerings to her?

Then Jeremiah said to all the people, men and women, all the people who had given him this answer, As for the offerings that you offered in the cities of Judah, and in the streets of Jerusalem, you and your fathers, your kings and your officials, and the people of the land, did not the Lord remember them? Did it not come into his mind?

The Lord could no longer bear your evil deeds, and the abominations that you committed. Therefore your land has become a desolation, and a waste, and a curse, without inhabitant, as it is this day.

[4 : 07] It is because you made offerings, and because you sinned against the Lord, and did not obey the voice of the Lord, or walk in his law, and in his statutes, and in his testimonies, that this disaster has happened to you, as at this day.

Jeremiah said to all the people, and all the women, Hear the word of the Lord, all you of Judah, who are in the land of Egypt. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, You and your wives have declared with your mouths, and have fulfilled it with your hands, saying, We will surely perform our vows that we have made, to make offerings to the Queen of Heaven, and to pour out drink offerings to her.

Then confirm your vows, and perform your vows. Therefore hear the word of the Lord, all you of Judah who dwell in the land of Egypt. Behold, I have sworn by my great name, says the Lord, That my name shall no more be invoked by the mouth of any man of Judah in all the land of Egypt, saying, As the Lord God lives.

Behold, I am watching over them for disaster, and not for good. All the men of Judah who are in the land of Egypt shall be consumed by the sword and by famine, until there is an end of them.

And those who escape the sword shall return from the land of Egypt to the land of Judah, few in number. And all the remnant of Judah, who came to the land of Egypt to live, shall know whose word will stand, mine or theirs.

[5 : 26] This shall be the sign to you, declares the Lord, that I will punish you in this place, in order that you may know that my words will surely stand against you for harm. Thus says the Lord, Behold, I will give Pharaoh Hophra, king of Egypt, into the hand of his enemies, and into the hand of those who seek his life, as I gave Zedekiah, king of Judah, into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, who was his enemy, and sought his life.

In Jeremiah chapter 43, against the word of the Lord through the prophet, Johanan and the rest of the Judahite company that survived the destruction of Jerusalem, and the insurrection of Ishmael the son of Nethanar against Gedaliah, had travelled down to the land of Egypt, and had settled at Tappanese.

Jeremiah and Baruch were brought down with them. And now in chapter 44, Jeremiah in Egypt, in his last known words, addresses the company of the people. Prior to the arrival of Johanan and his company in Egypt, there already seemed to have been Jews who have taken refuge in the land.

In Jeremiah chapter 24, verse 8, we read of some of these. But thus says the Lord, Like the bad figs that are so bad they cannot be eaten, so will I treat Zedekiah, the king of Judah, his officials, the remnant of Jerusalem who remain in this land, and those who dwell in the land of Egypt.

Beyond Tappanese, which is near the modern-day Suez Canal, Migdal is north and east of Tappanese. It was another town on the frontier of Egypt. Another of the contingent of the Jews to which Jeremiah's prophecy is addressed are found in the land of Pathros.

[6 : 59] The people of Pathros are mentioned in Genesis chapter 10, verse 14, in the Table of Nations. They live in Upper Egypt, which is the south of the country. Lower Egypt is in the north, and Memphis is the capital of that part of the land.

The Lord tells them to recall the disaster that came upon Jerusalem and the cities of Judah. The destruction of Judah and Jerusalem was on account of the evil that they performed, most particularly the idolatry that they gave themselves over to.

Time and again the Lord sent his prophets to them, challenging them and calling them to change their ways, but they stubbornly refused to do so. Their persistence in idolatry and their other practices led to the destruction of Jerusalem.

The Lord had warned them of such a fate back in Jeremiah chapter 7, verses 17 to 20. Do you not see what they are doing in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? The children gather wood, the fathers kindle fire, and the women knead dough to make cakes for the Queen of Heaven, and they pour out drink offerings to other gods to provoke me to anger.

Is it I whom they provoke, declares the Lord? Is it not themselves to their own shame? Therefore thus says the Lord God, Behold, my anger and my wrath will be poured out on this place, upon man and beast, upon the trees of the field and the fruit of the ground.

[8 : 14] It will burn and not be quenched. If they looked at Jerusalem now, they would only find a waste and a desolation. The Lord's word had been fulfilled, and yet they had not learned the lesson.

All that they are doing now is provoking the Lord even further to anger, bringing down even worse judgment upon themselves. They had already rejected the word of the Lord in going down to Egypt. They had already brought themselves to a position of even more devastating judgment, and now they are going to pile on top of this further abominations of idolatry.

As they behave in such a manner, they are inviting the Lord's judgment, and the result of this will be that they will become a curse and a taunt among all the nations. They have failed to learn from the destruction of Jerusalem, and they have failed to learn from the evils of their fathers and what came upon them.

The Lord here mentions their fathers, the kings of Judah, the wives of the kings, the current people themselves, and then their wives also. The distinction of men and their wives is probably noteworthy in this particular context, as the worship being performed is for the Queen of Heaven.

The sort of worship in question is gendered. There is a family dynamic involved, as we saw in Jeremiah chapter 7, verse 18. The children gather wood, the fathers kindle fire, and the women knead dough to make cakes for the Queen of Heaven.

[9 : 29] The interplay of men and women in such idolatrous worship is also seen in the example of Solomon. In 1 Kings chapter 11, verses 4 to 8, For when Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods, and his heart was not wholly true to the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father.

For Solomon went after Ashtoreth, the god of the Sidonians, and after Milcom, the abomination of the Ammonites. So Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and did not wholly follow the Lord, as David his father had done.

Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh, the abomination of Moab, and for Molech, the abomination of the Ammonites, on the mountain east of Jerusalem. And so he did for all his foreign wives, who made offerings and sacrificed their gods.

The importance of kings' wives as an impetus towards idolatry is also seen in the character of Jezebel, who very much plays a role in sponsoring the worship of Baal and Ashtoreth.

The negative influence of the wives of the kings can be seen in the fact that they often come from surrounding nations. The kings of Judah and Israel would marry foreign women, as a way of forming treaties with the surrounding nations, to oblige their new wives and to strengthen the relationship between nations.

[10 : 44] They would have adopted and supported and established the cults of foreign gods in the land of Israel. The Lord had explicitly warned about the dangers of intermarriage in the covenant, a danger that was particularly keen for the kings.

Beyond the kings, however, this seemed to be a dynamic that afflicted all of the people. In this chapter, it is particularly the women who seemed to be instigating the worship and the men who were supporting them.

The people had consistently failed to humble themselves, to obey the word of the Lord and to walk in his law. As a result, the Lord would set his face against them. He would cut off the entirety of Judah.

The land of Egypt would become the grave of the exiled company. The familiar triad returns here. They will die by the sword, by famine and by pestilence. The punishment that fell upon the land would also come upon Egypt.

No one who fled to Egypt would escape it and only the smallest remnant would be left. The judgment that came upon them would be such a signal one that they would become an oath, a horror, a curse and a taunt.

[11 : 46] This same judgment had been spoken of earlier in Jeremiah chapter 42, verse 17. All the men who set their faces to go to Egypt to live there shall die by the sword, by famine and by pestilence.

They shall have no remnant or survivor from the disaster that I will bring upon them. Here, however, the possibility of a few escaping is raised. The people refuse to listen to Jeremiah. They stubbornly persist in their ways.

Indeed, they double down on their position. They have made vows to the Queen of Heaven and they have every intention to carry through with them. It might come as a shock to the hearer of the book of Jeremiah that a strikingly different interpretation of the story of Judah is possible.

And yet, even after all of their recent history, the people here have a very different understanding of how things came about. They look back to the good old days under Manasseh before the reforms of Josiah.

In those good old days, everything was going well for them until Josiah came along and his reforms led to one disaster after another. As soon as they gave up their idolatrous worship, they became the prey of all of their enemies.

[12 : 49] Josiah was killed by Pharaoh Necho. Pharaoh Necho then removed Jehoahaz. Jehoiachin was taken by Nebuchadnezzar and then Zedekiah was taken by him too, all after they had abandoned the proper worship of the Queen of Heaven.

The Queen of Heaven is Ashtoreth, also associated with Ishtar of the Babylonians. The worship of the Queen of Heaven described here seems to be similar in character to that that is mentioned back in chapter 7 of the book.

The women are the primary worshippers, but they have the complete support and approval of their husbands. The prophet responds by presenting what the book of Jeremiah throughout has given as the orthodox reading of Judah's history.

The Lord has seen their evil deeds, he has seen their false worship, he has seen their idolatrous practice. It is on account of this that judgment has come upon them, far from being the good old days.

The days of Manasseh were the days that sealed the fate of Jerusalem and the southern kingdom. Jeremiah declares the word of the Lord to them. They have made their vows and now they have expressed their commitment to carrying them through, in which case they should go right ahead.

[13 : 51] If they have so stubbornly chosen the course of death, let them stick to it. But the Lord has a word for them. The land of their chosen exile is going to be a land devoid of true worship.

The name of the Lord will be silenced in the land. As they have stuck to their idolatrous vows, so he is going to make this vow. They will be utterly consumed and will come to an end. In that day, the two vows that have been made will be tested, which will stand, the word that they have made to commit themselves to the Queen of Heaven, or the word that the Lord has made to blot them out.

The Lord declares that he is watching over his word. He is watching over them for disaster and not for good. We have similar language to this in Jeremiah chapter 31 verse 28. And it shall come to pass that as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy and bring harm, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, declares the Lord.

All of this draws our mind back to Jeremiah chapter 1 verses 11 to 12 in the call of Jeremiah where the Lord grants Jeremiah his first vision. And the word of the Lord came to me saying, Jeremiah, what do you see?

And I said, I see an almond branch. Then the Lord said to me, You have seen well, for I am watching over my word to perform it. In the final years of the kingdom, King Zedekiah had made an ill-advised treaty with Pharaoh Hophra of Egypt.

[15 : 11] The chapter ends by comparing the fate that awaits Pharaoh Hophra with the fate that befell Zedekiah. Pharaoh Hophra too will be given into the hand of his enemies. A question to consider.

The fate of the community of exiles in Egypt is that of being finally erased from the story of God's people. There is no root of redemption left for them, only the certain awaiting of judgment.

What lessons might we learn from their cautionary example?