

Jeremiah 26: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Jeremiah chapter 26 You shall say to them, Thus says the Lord, If you will not listen to me to walk in my law that I have set before you, and to listen to the words of my servants the prophets, whom I send to you urgently, though you have not listened, then I will make this house like Shiloh, and I will make this city a curse for all the nations of the earth.

The priests and the prophets and all the people heard Jeremiah speaking these words in the house of the Lord. And when Jeremiah had finished speaking all that the Lord had commanded him to speak to all the people, then the priests and the prophets and all the people laid hold of him, saying, You shall die. Why have you prophesied in the name of the Lord, saying, This house shall be like Shiloh, and this city shall be desolate without inhabitant?

And all the people gathered around Jeremiah in the house of the Lord. When the officials of Judah heard these things, they came up from the king's house to the house of the Lord, and took their seat in the entry of the new gate of the house of the Lord.

Then the priests and the prophets said to the officials and to all the people, This man deserves the sentence of death, because he has prophesied against this city, as you have heard with your own ears.

Then Jeremiah spoke to all the officials and all the people, saying, The Lord sent me to prophesy against this house and this city all the words you have heard. Now therefore mend your ways and your deeds, and obey the voice of the Lord your God, and the Lord will relent of the disaster that he has pronounced against you.

[1 : 5 3] But as for me, behold, I am in your hands. Do with me as seems good and right to you. Only know for certain that if you put me to death, you will bring innocent blood upon yourselves, and upon this city and its inhabitants.

For in truth the Lord sent me to you to speak all these words in your ears. Then the officials and all the people said to the priests and the prophets, This man does not deserve the sentence of death, for he has spoken to us in the name of the Lord our God.

And certain of the elders of the land arose and spoke to all the assembled people, saying, Micah of Moresheth prophesied in the days of Hezekiah king of Judah, and said to all the people of Judah, Thus says the Lord of hosts, Zion shall be ploughed as a field, Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height.

Did Hezekiah king of Judah and all Judah put him to death? Did he not fear the Lord and entreat the favour of the Lord? And did not the Lord relent of the disaster that he had pronounced against them?

But we are about to bring great disaster upon ourselves. There was another man who prophesied in the name of the Lord, Uriah the son of Shemiah from Kiriath-Jerim. He prophesied against this city and against this land in words like those of Jeremiah.

[3 : 0 4] And when King Jehoiakim with all his warriors and all the officials heard his words, the king sought to put him to death. But when Uriah heard of it, he was afraid and fled and escaped to Egypt.

Then King Jehoiakim sent to Egypt certain men, El-Nathan the son of Akbor, and others with him. And they took Uriah from Egypt and brought him to King Jehoiakim, who struck him down with the sword and dumped his dead body into the burial place of the common people.

But the hand of Ahicham the son of Shaphan was with Jeremiah, so that he was not given over to the people to be put to death. Jeremiah chapter 26 belongs to the chapters of the book, known as the Jehoiakim cluster, including chapters 25, 6, 35 and 36.

These chapters are interspersed with other material known as the Zedekiah cluster. This chapter connects to the theme of conflict with false prophets in the adjacent chapters of chapter 27 to 29.

This thematic reordering might help us to explain why the material is broken up as it is. This occurred at the beginning of Jehoiakim's reign in 609 BC, and this chapter provides the background for the temple prophecies that are recorded in chapter 7 verses 1 to 15.

[4 : 18] The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord. Stand in the gate of the Lord's house and proclaim there this word and say, Hear the word of the Lord, all you men of Judah who enter these gates to worship the Lord.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Amend your ways and your deeds, and I will let you dwell in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words. This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.

For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly execute justice one with another, if you do not oppress the sojourner, the fatherless, or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own harm, then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers forever.

Behold, you trust in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, We are delivered, only to go on doing all these abominations.

Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, I myself have seen it, declares the Lord. Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it, because of the evil of my people Israel.

[5 : 44] And now, because you have done all these things, declares the Lord, and when I spoke to you persistently, you did not listen, and when I called you, you did not answer. Therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name, and in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your fathers, as I did to Shiloh, and I will cast you out of my sight, as I cast out all your kinsmen, all the offspring of Ephraim.

Jehoiakim, the son of Jeziel, came to the throne after Jehoahaz, his brother's, short three-month reign. Jehoahaz came to the throne after the death of Jeziel.

Jeziel was killed by Pharaoh Necho, and then his son Jehoahaz was deposed by Pharaoh Necho. Jehoiakim, who was originally called Eliakim, but was renamed by Pharaoh Necho, was set up in place of his brother.

Jeziel had brought about some reformation, but it tragically seems to have been shallow and short-lasting. Judah is rapidly returning to its old ways. Only a year or so after the death of Jeziel, it seems that Judah is once again in a position of serious covenant unfaithfulness.

They are not looking to the Lord or being faithful to him. Their confidence is rather in the religious system, and the temple in their midst. They seem to see the temple as giving them immunity from the Lord's judgment.

[7 : 02] Provided that they worship there and perform the proper rituals, the Lord will not call them to account. In the process, the temple has been perverted into something that's the exact opposite of what it should be.

It has become like a den of robbers, a place that scoundrels can return to, to find refuge against those who would seek them out for their crimes. Jeremiah is sent to these people, and he is cautioned not to reduce or soften the message that the Lord gives to him.

He holds out the possibility of repentance. The hope is that Judah will heed, and individually and collectively respond. The Lord calls for everyone to turn from his evil way.

This must be a more general response on the part of the people. It can't just be their leaders. Every single person needs to be committed to this sort of repentance. We might compare the sort of message that Jeremiah is bringing here to the messages of Jesus and John the Baptist in the Gospels.

If people respond appropriately, the Lord can relent of the disaster that he would otherwise bring upon them. And they are charged to listen. The Lord is urgently addressing them through the prophets, hoping that they will respond.

[8 : 09] The particular warning that provokes the ire, however, of the men of Judah is the claim that Jerusalem's temple might be made like Shiloh. Shiloh was the original sanctuary of the Lord that was destroyed at the beginning of 1 Samuel.

The destruction of Shiloh and its aftermath was the historical background behind the story that led up to the building of Solomon's temple and the rise of Jerusalem as the religious centre of Israel.

The authorities and many of the people seem to think that Jerusalem, being connected with the Davidic covenant, is going to be preserved by the Lord and is not vulnerable to destruction. This belief might have been reinforced by the dramatic deliverance of the city in the days of Hezekiah and Isaiah in 701 BC from the hand of Sennacherib.

Jeremiah's statement of judgment against the temple challenges the ruling dogma about the Lord's commitment to Jerusalem. And the prophets, the priests, and the people turn upon Jeremiah to try to put him to death.

Jeremiah is placed on trial and he defends himself by appealing to his divine commission, declaring its purpose in the people's repentance. He warns them that if they put him to death, they will have innocent blood upon their hands.

[9 : 19] And the people, after hearing Jeremiah's testimony, change sides and with the officials, they defend Jeremiah to the priests and the prophets, accepting Jeremiah's claim to be speaking in the name of the Lord.

Some of the elders appeal to the memory of Micah of Moresheth, who prophesied in the 8th and early 7th centuries BC, about 100 years previously, prophesying both the destruction of Samaria and Jerusalem.

During the days of Hezekiah, Micah had prophesied, a prophecy recorded in Micah chapter 3, verses 9 to 12. Hear this, you heads of the house of Jacob, and rulers of the house of Israel, who detest justice and make crooked all that are straight, who build Zion with blood, and Jerusalem with iniquity.

Its heads give judgment for a bribe, its priests teach for a price, its prophets practice divination for money, yet they lean on the Lord and say, Is not the Lord in the midst of us?

No disaster shall come upon us. Therefore because of you, Zion shall be ploughed as a field, Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height.

[10 : 25] Rather than seeking to kill the prophetic bearer of this unwelcome message, however, Hezekiah had responded faithfully to this prophecy, repented, and reformed the land. We read something of Hezekiah's reforms in 2 Kings chapter 18, verses 3 to 6.

And he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, according to all that David his father had done. He removed the high places and broke the pillars and cut down the Asherah, and he broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it.

It was called Nehushtan. He trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel, so that there was none like him among all the kings of Judah after him, nor among those who were before him. For he held fast to the Lord, he did not depart from following him, but kept the commandments that the Lord commanded Moses.

One of the things that the message of Jeremiah does is bring in the conditionality of the covenant of Sinai into a context where the unconditionality of the Davidic covenant seemed to be giving people a false sense of security.

The Lord had relented from the judgment of which he had warned the people in Hezekiah's day, and there was hope for the people of Jeremiah's day too, if they would follow the example of Hezekiah. A contemporary of Jeremiah had not been so fortunate as Jeremiah though.

[11 : 43] Uriah of Kiriath-Jerim had prophesied against the city of Jerusalem and the land. He had fled when the king sought his life, and he was then hunted down and brought back from Egypt to be executed.

So concerned was King Jehoiakim to remove this troublesome prophet. Presumably extradition of traitors was part of the treaty between Egypt and Judah during that time. Jeremiah was delivered from death through the assistance of Ahicham, the son of Shaphan.

The scribal family of Shaphan was a very important one. The genealogy is laid out by Jack Lumbum. Shaphan received the law book found by Hilkiah the priest in the temple in 2 Kings chapter 22.

His son Ahicham was sent with him by Josiah to Huldah the prophetess after the book was found, and he was also involved with protecting Jeremiah here. Gedaliah, his son, was appointed governor at Mizpah after the destruction of Jerusalem.

Gemariah, Ahicham's brother, heard the reading of Jeremiah's scroll and encouraged King Jehoiakim not to burn it in Jeremiah chapter 36. Micaiah, Gemariah's son, also heard the scroll and reported it to the princes.

[12 : 51] And finally, Elisa, Ahicham and Gemariah's brother carried Jeremiah's letter to the exiles in Babylon. The role played by this faithful family is quite significant.

A question to consider, what similarities can you see between Jeremiah's message concerning the temple and the message of Jesus and the early church? A question to consider, what is the name of the church?