

Jeremiah 51: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Jeremiah chapter 51. Thus says the Lord, Behold, I will stir up the spirit of a destroyer against Babylon, against the inhabitants of Leb-Kamai, and I will send to Babylon winnowers, and they shall winnow her, and they shall empty her land when they come against her from every side on the day of trouble. Let not the archer bend his bow, and let him not stand up in his armour.

Spare not her young men. Devote to destruction all her army. They shall fall down slain in the land of the Chaldeans, and wounded in her streets. For Israel and Judah have not been forsaken by their God, the Lord of hosts. But the land of the Chaldeans is full of guilt against the Holy One of Israel.

Flee from the midst of Babylon. Let everyone save his life. Be not cut off in her punishment. For this is the time of the Lord's vengeance, the repayment he is rendering her. Babylon was a golden cup in the Lord's hand, making all the earth drunken. The nations drank of her wine, therefore the nations went mad. Suddenly Babylon has fallen and been broken.

Wail for her. Take balm for her pain. Perhaps she may be healed. We would have healed Babylon, but she was not healed. Forsake her and let us go, each to his own country. For her judgment has reached up to heaven, and has been lifted up even to the skies. The Lord has brought about our vindication. Come, let us declare in Zion the work of the Lord our God. Sharpen the arrows. Take up the shields. The Lord has stirred up the spirit of the kings of the Medes, because his purpose concerning Babylon is to destroy it. For that is the vengeance of the Lord, the vengeance for his temple. Set up a standard against the walls of Babylon. Make the watch strong. Set up watchmen. Prepare the ambushes.

For the Lord has both planned and done what he spoke concerning the inhabitants of Babylon. O you who dwell by many waters, rich in treasures, your end has come. The thread of your life is cut.

[2 : 0 4] The Lord of hosts has sworn by himself. Surely I will fill you with men, as many as locusts, and they shall raise the shout of victory over you. It is he who made the earth by his power, who established the world by his wisdom, and by his understanding stretched out the heavens.

When he utters his voice, there is a tumult of waters in the heavens, and he makes the mist rise from the ends of the earth. He makes lightning for the rain, and he brings forth the wind from his storehouses. Every man is stupid and without knowledge. Every goldsmith is put to shame by his idols, for his images are false, and there is no breath in them. They are worthless, a work of delusion. At the time of their punishment they shall perish. Not like these is he who is the portion of Jacob, for he is the one who formed all things, and Israel is the tribe of his inheritance. The Lord of hosts is his name. You are my hammer and weapon of war. With you I break nations in pieces. With you I destroy kingdoms. With you I break in pieces the horse and his rider. With you I break in pieces the chariot and the charioteer. With you I break in pieces man and woman. With you I break in pieces the old man and the youth. With you I break in pieces the young man and the young woman. With you

I break in pieces the shepherd and his flock. With you I break in pieces the farmer and his team. With you I break in pieces governors and commanders. I will repay Babylon and all the inhabitants of Chaldea before your very eyes for all the evil that they have done in Zion, declares the Lord. Behold, I am against you, O destroying mountain, declares the Lord, which destroys the whole earth. I will stretch out my hand against you and roll you down from the crags and make you a burnt mountain. No stone shall be taken from you for a corner and no stone for a foundation, but you shall be a perpetual waste, declares the Lord. Set up a standard on the earth, blow the trumpet among the nations, prepare the nations for war against her, summon against her the kingdoms. Ararat, Minai, and Ashkenaz, appoint a marshal against her, bring up horses like bristling locusts, prepare the nations for war against her, the kings of the Medes with their governors and deputies, and every land under their dominion. The land trembles and writhes in pain, for the Lord's purposes against Babylon stand, to make the land of Babylon a desolation, without inhabitant. The warriors of Babylon have ceased fighting. They remain in their strongholds. Their strength has failed. They have become women. Her dwellings are on fire. Her bars are broken. One runner runs to meet another, and one messenger to meet another, to tell the king of Babylon that his city is taken on every side. The fords have been seized, the marshes are burned with fire, and the soldiers are in panic. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, the daughter of Babylon is like a threshing floor, at the time when it is trodden. Yet a little while, and the time of her harvest will come. Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, has devoured me. He has crushed me. He has made me an empty vessel. He has swallowed me like a monster. He has filled his stomach with my delicacies. He has rinsed me out. The violence done to me and to my kinsmen be upon Babylon, let the inhabitant of Zion say. My blood be upon the inhabitants of Chaldea, let Jerusalem say. Therefore thus says the Lord,

Behold, I will plead your cause, and take vengeance for you. I will dry up her sea, and make her fountain dry. And Babylon shall become a heap of ruins, the haunt of jackals, a horror and a hissing, without inhabitant. They shall roar together like lions. They shall growl like lions' cubs. When they are inflamed, I will prepare them a feast, and make them drunk, that they may become merry. Then sleep a perpetual sleep, and not wake, declares the Lord. I will bring them down like lambs to the slaughter, like rams and male goats. How Babylon is taken, the praise of the whole earth seized. How Babylon has become a horror among the nations. The sea has come up on Babylon. She is covered with its tumultuous waves. Her cities have become a horror, a land of drought and a desert, a land in which no one dwells, and through which no son of man passes. And I will punish Bel in Babylon, and take out of his mouth what he has swallowed. The nations shall no longer flow to him. The wall of Babylon has fallen.

Go out of the midst of her, my people. Let everyone save his life from the fierce anger of the Lord. Let not your heart faint, and be not fearful at the report heard in the land. When a report comes in one year, and afterward a report in another year, and violence is in the land, and ruler is against ruler. Therefore behold, the days are coming, when I will punish the images of Babylon. Her whole land shall be put to shame, and all her slain shall fall in the midst of her. Then the heavens and the earth, and all that is in them, shall sing for joy over Babylon, for the destroyer shall come against them out of the north, declares the Lord. Babylon must fall for the slain of Israel, just as for Babylon have fallen the slain of all the earth. You who have escaped from the sword, go, do not stand still.

[7 : 43] Remember the Lord from far away, and let Jerusalem come into your mind. We are put to shame, for we have heard reproach. Dishonour has covered our face, for foreigners have come into the holy places of the Lord's house. Therefore behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will execute judgment upon her images, and through all her land the wounded shall groan. Though Babylon should mount up to heaven, and though she should fortify her strong height, yet destroyers would come from me against her, declares the Lord. A voice, a cry from Babylon, the noise of great destruction from the land of the Chaldeans. For the Lord is laying Babylon waste, and stilling her mighty voice. Their waves roar like many waters, the noise of their voice is raised. For a destroyer has come upon her, upon Babylon. Her warriors are taken. Their bows are broken in pieces. For the Lord is a God of recompense. He will surely repay. I will make drunk her officials and her wise men, her governors, her commanders, and her warriors.

They shall sleep a perpetual sleep, and not wake, declares the king, whose name is the Lord of Hosts. Thus says the Lord of Hosts, The broad wall of Babylon shall be leveled to the ground, and her high gates shall be burned with fire. The peoples labor for nothing, and the nations weary themselves only for fire. The word that Jeremiah the prophet commanded Saraiah, the son of Neriah, son of Masir, 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 prophecy of Jeremiah ends with an extended series of prophecies against the nation of Babylon. Throughout the book, Babylon has been the great threat from the north that is going to come upon Judah and the rest of the nations of the region, and now at the very end, Babylon is going to be made to drink the cup of the Lord's judgment too.

The Lord will be behind the judgment upon Babylon, just as he will be behind the judgment upon Judah. The prophecies here might largely date from before 594 BC, just before Saraiah is sent to Babylon by Zedekiah. The Lord will raise up an enemy, a destroyer against Babylon. Leb-Kamai, mentioned in verse 1, is an at-bash of Chaldea. An at-bash is a sort of code by which the first letter of the alphabet is replaced by the last, the second letter of the alphabet by the penultimate letter of the alphabet, the third letter of the alphabet by the anti-penultimate, and so forth. There is another instance of this in verse 41, where Babylon is spoken of as Shishak. It does not seem likely that this is being used as a way of disguising the identity of this place. More likely it's being used as a form of wordplay. The new term that stands in for Chaldea could be translated heart of my adversaries. The prophecy describes the routing of the army of Babylon and of its population.

This judgment occurs on two accounts. The Lord has not rejected his people and he's going to act on their behalf, on the behalf of Israel and Judah. In addition to this, the sin of Babylon, the proud city, has grown great and the Lord is going to bring judgment upon them on account of their guilt. Seeing the judgment that's about to come upon this city, the people are warned to flee from her, presumably the exiles in her midst. Earlier, Babylon was the means of the Lord's judgment. Babylon was the golden cup of the Lord's judgment that he made the nations drink.

[11 : 54] But now Babylon is going to have to drink the cup of the Lord's judgment. The language here might remind us of chapter 25 verses 15 to 17. Thus the Lord, the God of Israel, said to me, Take from my hand this cup of the wine of wrath and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it. They shall drink and stagger and be crazed because of the sword that I am sending among them.

So I took the cup from the Lord's hand and made all the nations to whom the Lord sent me drink it. And then again in verses 27 to 29 of that chapter, Then you shall say to them, Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Drink and be drunk and vomit. Fall and rise no more because of the sword that I am sending among you.

And if they refuse to accept the cup from your hand to drink, then you shall say to them, Thus says the Lord of hosts, you must drink. For behold, I begin to work disaster at the city that is called by my name. And shall you go unpunished? You shall not go unpunished. For I am summoning a sword against all the inhabitants of the earth, declares the Lord of hosts. Like Egypt and Judah before her, Babylon is a nation searching for healing, for balm, and yet there is none to be found. The nations exiled within her cannot heal her, and they must all flee to their own country.

Her judgment is about to fall upon her, and they should not be around when that occurs. The great announcement of the fall of Babylon is also found in Isaiah chapter 21 verse 9, And behold, here come riders, horsemen in pairs. And he answered, Fallen, fallen is Babylon. And all the carved images of her gods he has shattered to the ground. More famously, this imagery is developed in the book of Revelation, referring to the city of Jerusalem, and a symbol of the great city that stands against the Lord. In chapter 18 verses 1 to 8, After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth was made bright with his glory. And he called out with a mighty voice, Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great.

She has become a dwelling place for demons, a haunt for every unclean spirit, a haunt for every unclean bird, a haunt for every unclean and detestable beast. For all nations have drunk the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality, and the kings of the earth have committed immorality with her, and the merchants of the earth have grown rich from the power of her luxurious living.

[14:14] Then I heard another voice from heaven saying, Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues. For her sins are heaped high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities. Pay her back as she herself has paid back others, and repay her double for her deeds.

Mix a double portion for her in the cup she mixed. As she glorified herself and lived in luxury, so give her a like measure of torment and mourning, since in her heart she says, I sit as a queen, I am no widow, and mourning I shall never see. For this reason her plagues will come in a single day, death and mourning and famine, and she will be burned up with fire, for mighty is the Lord God who has judged her. The destruction of Babylon is also the vindication of the people of the Lord.

It's the deliverance by which they are declared to be his people. As they return to Zion, they will declare the great deliverance that he has wrought. The Lord summons an army against Babylon, more particularly the army of the Medes. A number of scholars see this as anachronistic.

Babylon was not actually taken over by the Medes so much as by the Achaemenid Empire. This was a Persian empire led by Cyrus the Great, who had already taken over the Median Empire, an empire to Babylon's north, that enjoyed power concurrently. In later parts of scripture, however, in the book of Daniel and also in the book of Esther, the Medes and the Persians come as a pairing. In the book of Daniel, it's Darius the Mede that takes over Babylon. If we identify Darius the Mede with Cyrus the Great, as many commentators have done, then we might consider the way that Cyrus himself is connected to the Median royal family. That connection might explain why he is called Darius the Mede, but might also further explain why referring to the Medes here may not be entirely inaccurate.

This destruction will be the very end of Babylon. Babylon is described as the one that dwells by many waters, the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates, the many canals and lakes and other things in the region. Later, in the book of Revelation, Babylon the Great is described as sitting upon many waters. The Lord, not being able to swear by anything greater, swears by himself.

[16 : 26] The army that he will bring against Babylon will be like a swarm of locusts that will utterly cover their land and declare victory over them. Verses 15 to 19 are largely a repetition of verses that we find in chapter 10 verses 12 to 16. In that chapter, they are a declaration of the power of the creator God against the false and weak idols who cannot act to save their people. The Lord is the one who created all things, controls all natural forces. He is also the covenant God of Jacob, the one whose inheritance is Israel. He will demonstrate his power over his creation as he delivers Israel, which will also prove his faithfulness. Polemics against idols are an important trope within the prophets in the context of such promises of redemption. Such deliverances, which fulfill the promises and the predictions of the Lord, are a means by which he demonstrates his character, his power and his providence, and proves that he is unique as the creator God. We see things like this in Isaiah chapter 40 verses 18 to 25. To whom then will you liken God? Will what likeness compare with him? An idol? A craftsman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and casts for it silver chains. He who is too impoverished for an offering chooses wood that will not rot. He seeks out a skillful craftsman to set up an idol that will not move. Do you not know? Do you not hear? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers, who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them out like a tent to dwell in, who brings princes to nothing, and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness.

Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows on them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble. To whom then will you liken me? That I should be like him, says the Holy One. And then also in places like Isaiah chapter 44 verses 10 to 17. Who fashions a god or casts an idol that is profitable for nothing? Behold, all his companions shall be put to shame, and the craftsmen are only human. Let them all assemble, let them stand forth. They shall be terrified. They shall be put to shame together. The ironsmith takes a cutting tool and works it over the coals. He fashions it with hammers and works it with his strong arm. He becomes hungry and his strength fails. He drinks no water and is faint. The carpenter stretches a line. He marks it out with a pencil. He shapes it with planes and marks it with a compass. He shapes it into the figure of a man, with the beauty of a man, to dwell in a house. He cuts down cedars, or he chooses a cypress tree or an oak, and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest. He plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. Then it becomes fuel for a man. He takes a part of it and warms himself. He kindles a fire and bakes bread. Also he makes a god and worships it. He makes it an idol and falls down before it.

Half of it he burns in the fire. Over half he eats meat. He roasts it and is satisfied. Also he warms himself and says, Aha, I am warm. I have seen the fire. And the rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, and falls down to it and worships it. He prays to it and says, Deliver me, for you are my god. The futility of idolatry will be proved in the day that the Lord brings down the great power of Babylon. Just as he has proved his power over Chemosh and Milcom, he will also prove his power over Bel or Marjuk. Babylon was the means of the Lord's judgment, earlier described as the cup that the Lord used. In verse 20, Babylon is described as the Lord's hammer and weapon of war, much as the Lord used Assyria as his axe in the book of Isaiah, so the Lord used Babylon as his hammer. The Lord lists a number of the things that he will achieve with Babylon. Breaking nations and pieces, destroying kingdoms, horses and riders, chariots and charioteers, men and women, the old man and the youth, the young man and the young woman, shepherd and his flock, farmer and his team, governors and commanders. I think

Jack Lumbum is right in seeing a chiastic structure here, or a bookended pattern. Once the Lord has finished using this hammer, however, Babylon and the inhabitants of Chaldea will be repaid for what they have done. Babylon is described like a mountain destroying the whole earth, but its own mountain will be destroyed in the years to come. It will be utterly torn down beyond rebuilding, not a stone left upon another. Once again, the Lord summons the army against her. Northern kingdoms that are part of the Median Empire, that will later become part of the Achaemenid Empire, are going to be assembled as part of this great attacking host. They will desolate the land of Babylon, which will be powerless to resist them. Their boundaries will be breached, their defences overcome. They themselves will be made like a threshing floor, trodden underfoot in judgment, trampled beneath the boots of an invading army. Babylon is described like a great monster that has swallowed up Judah. The Lord is going to avenge the blood of his people upon this great beast. They are destined for a destruction, like lambs being brought to the slaughter.

Their judgment will be such a signal one that they will become a byword and a horror among the nations. The other nations will see what has befallen them, and they will become an object of hissing and derision. Just as Leb-Kamai was used for the Chaldeans in verse 1, in verse 41, Babylon is referred to as Shishak, which is another Atbash code word. This city was once the praise of the whole earth. All were in awe of her. Vast territories were under her thrall. In verse 36, the Lord described making her sea dry.

[22 : 14] In verse 42, sea imagery is used in a different way. The sea has come up and is going to overwhelm Babylon. She is going to be swamped by other nations. As we've seen before, the punishment here is not just upon a people. It's upon their false god. Their god Bel, otherwise called Enlil or Marjuk, is going to be punished and humiliated. He's going to have to disgorge the nations that he has swallowed.

From the belly of this slain monster, the Lord summons forth his people. The downfall of Babylon at the hand of this army from the north will be heralded by a united chorus of celebratory voices from heaven and earth, all joined in rejoicing over the downfall of this city. This judgment occurs because the Lord is avenging his people. Babylon must fall for the slain of Israel. As the exiled Judahites see this disaster fall upon Babylon, thoughts of Jerusalem should come to their mind.

They should remember the way that they were dishonored and ashamed. They should remember the way that Babylon had come into the holy places of the Lord's house and should recognize that what is befalling Babylon at this point is the fulfillment of the Lord's judgment upon her. The Lord bringing upon this great city what is due to her. Her deeds are returning upon her own head. The city gives up the greatest of cries as she's being destroyed and then all is silent. She's laid waste, made desolate, and no one will dwell in her again. This is all declared by the king, the lord of hosts, the one who has the power to bring this judgment upon Babylon and can predict it all in advance. The chapter and the body of the book ends with a colophon. The details contained in the colophon are listed by Lumbum, the name of the scribe, Saraiah the son of Neriah, son of Masiah, the date, the fourth year of Zedekiah, the source, the words that were written by Jeremiah toward Babylon, the reason for making the copy, for a public reading in Babylon, the place where the text should be deposited in the middle of the

Euphrates, the curse that will come with it. Thus shall Babylon sink to rise no more because of the disaster that I am bringing upon her and they shall become exhausted. Lumbum further observes a number of very striking parallels between this and the scroll that was written by Beirut, the son of Neriah, back in 605 BC. That was written in the fourth year of Jehoiakim. This is written in the fourth year of Zedekiah. There is political unrest on the international scene. There's just been the battle at Carchemish. In 594 there's been rebellion in Babylon. There's a decision made to prepare a scroll of Jeremiah's Judah prophecies and then there's a decision made to prepare a scroll of Jeremiah's Babylon prophecies. There's a member of a scribal family who writes the scroll from the prophet's dictation and both of them come from the same family. They're both sons of Neriah. The scribe later makes a public reading of the scroll and after the reading the scroll suffers a sort of destruction. It's burned in the fire by Jehoiakim in the winter palace in chapter 36 and after

Saraiah reads the scroll in Babylon it's sunk in the Euphrates. Both might be symbols of the destruction they speak of and then finally in both cases after delivering these prophecies Jeremiah steps back from public life for a period of time. In the final edition of this book this colophon becomes the end of the entire book save for the historical epilogue of the final chapter but this is the ending of the prophecies of Jeremiah.

- [25 : 49] A question to consider. The prophecies concerning the fall of Babylon in this and the preceding chapter become paradigmatic in scripture. Particularly in the book of Revelation this image of Babylon the great fallen is taken up and applied to another city. Why might the fall of Babylon be so paradigmatic? Why might the prophecies concerning its judgment be taken up and applied to different situations in the future? How does the judgment upon Babylon spoken of in these chapters anticipate a much greater and more final awaited judgment?