

Jeremiah 23: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Jeremiah chapter 23 I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, declares the Lord.

Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous branch, and he shall reign as king, and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.

In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely, and this is the name by which he will be called. The Lord is our righteousness. Therefore, behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when they shall no longer say, As the Lord lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt, but as the Lord lives who brought up and led the offspring of the house of Israel out of the north country, and out of all the countries where he had driven them, then they shall dwell in their own land.

Concerning the prophets, My heart is broken within me, all my bones shake. I am like a drunken man, like a man overcome by wine, because of the Lord, and because of his holy words.

For the land is full of adulterers, because of the curse the land mourns, and the pastures of the wilderness are dried up. Their course is evil, and their might is not right.

[1 : 44] Both prophet and priest are ungodly. Even in my house I have found their evil, declares the Lord. Therefore their ways shall be to them like slippery paths in the darkness, into which they shall be driven and fall, for I will bring disaster upon them in the year of their punishment, declares the Lord.

In the prophets of Samaria I saw an unsavory thing. They prophesied by Baal, and led my people Israel astray. But in the prophets of Jerusalem I have seen a horrible thing.

They commit adultery and walk in lies. They strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that no one turns from his evil. All of them have become like Sodom to me, and its inhabitants like Gomorrah.

Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts concerning the prophets, Thus says the Lord of hosts, Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes.

They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord. They say continually to those who despise the word of the Lord, It shall be well with you. And to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart they say, No disaster shall come upon you.

[3 : 01] For who among them has stood in the counsel of the Lord, to see and to hear his word? Or who has paid attention to his word and listened? Behold the storm of the Lord. Wrath has gone forth, a whirling tempest.

It will burst upon the head of the wicked. The anger of the Lord will not turn back, until he has executed and accomplished the intents of his heart. In the latter days you will understand it clearly.

I did not send the prophets, yet they ran. I did not speak to them, yet they prophesied. But if they had stood in my counsel, then they would have proclaimed my words to my people, and they would have turned them from their evil way, and from the evil of their deeds.

Am I a guard at hand, declares the Lord, and not a guard far away? Can a man hide himself in secret places, so that I cannot see him, declares the Lord? Do I not fill heaven and earth, declares the Lord?

I have heard what the prophets have said, who prophesy lies in my name, saying, I have dreamed, I have dreamed. How long shall there be lies in the heart of the prophets who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart, who think to make my people forget my name by their dreams, that they tell one another, even as their fathers forgot my name for Baal?

[4 : 17] Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let him who has my word speak my word faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat, declares the Lord?

Is not my word like fire, declares the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces? Therefore behold, I am against the prophets, declares the Lord, who steal my words from one another.

Behold, I am against the prophets, declares the Lord, who use their tongues and declare, declares the Lord. Behold, I am against those who prophesy lying dreams, declares the Lord, and who tell them and lead my people astray by their lies and their recklessness, when I did not send them or charge them, so they do not profit this people at all, declares the Lord.

When one of this people, or a prophet or a priest, asks you, what is the burden of the Lord? You shall say to them, you are the burden, and I will cast you off, declares the Lord.

And as for the prophet, priest, or one of the people who says, the burden of the Lord, I will punish that man and his household. Thus shall you say, every one to his neighbour, and every one to his brother, what has the Lord answered?

[5 : 28] Or what has the Lord spoken? But the burden of the Lord you shall mention no more, for the burden is every man's own word, and you pervert the words of the living God, the Lord of hosts, our God.

Thus you shall say to the prophet, what has the Lord answered you? Or what has the Lord spoken? But if you say, the burden of the Lord, thus says the Lord, because you have said these words, the burden of the Lord, when I sent to you, saying, you shall not say, the burden of the Lord.

Therefore, behold, I will surely lift you up, and cast you away from my presence, you and the city that I gave to you and your fathers. And I will bring upon you everlasting reproach and perpetual shame, which shall not be forgotten.

Chapters 21 and 22 are particularly addressed to the king of Judah. This body of material is concluded in verses 1 to 8 of Jeremiah chapter 23. It presents an indictment of the shepherds of the Lord's flock, especially the kings, but also including other rulers and leaders by extension.

There are several similarities between this and Ezekiel chapter 34 and its condemnation of the false shepherds. Ezekiel chapter 34, verses 1 to 6. The word of the Lord came to me, Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel.

[6 : 46] Prophesy and say to them, even to the shepherds. Thus says the Lord God, Ah, shepherds of Israel, who have been feeding yourselves, should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep.

The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them.

So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the fates of the earth, with none to search or seek for them.

And in verses 10 to 16, Thus says the Lord God, Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require my sheep at their hand, and put a stop to their feeding the sheep.

No longer shall the shepherds feed themselves, I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, that they may not be food for them. For thus says the Lord God, Behold, I, I myself, will search for my sheep, and will seek them out.

[7 : 54] As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered, on a day of clouds and thick darkness.

And I will bring them out from the peoples, and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country.

I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel.

I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy.

I will feed them in justice. The shepherds were also mentioned in the preceding chapter in verse 22. The wind shall shepherd all your shepherds, and your lovers shall go into captivity.

[8 : 58] Then you will be ashamed and confounded because of all your evil. Verses 1 to 8 are a cluster of oracles. Jack Lumbum argues for the presence of three distinct oracles in verses 1 to 4 alone.

Those verses declare woe on the destroying shepherds. The evil of leaders gets visited upon the people that they lead. Their leadership divides and fails to protect the flock, and also destroys them with their sin and folly.

Israel was a flock, and their leaders were shepherds throughout their history. The patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, kept sheep. Joseph and his brothers kept sheep, and on account of being shepherds, they were kept apart from the Egyptians.

Moses led Israel out of Egypt like a flock with his shepherd's rod. The Lord called David from the fold to lead his flock of Israel. Having declared woe upon the shepherds, the Lord turns to address the shepherds directly.

One of their tasks, as Lumbum notes, is to call the sheep to account. They have failed in this task, and the Lord will call them to account. The Lord's hand behind this situation is seen in verses 3 to 4.

[10 : 03] While the wickedness and folly of the shepherds was the proximate cause, it was the Lord who drove the flock to other countries. Now he declares his determination to bring them back, to re-establish the flock in their fold, and that they will be fruitful and multiply.

We should hear the allusion back to the creation account here. There is going to be something akin to a new creation situation. In anticipation of this, Israel is instructed to be fruitful and multiply, even in exile.

In Jeremiah chapter 29, verse 6, 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.

The Lord will establish new righteous shepherds over them, shepherds who will perform the fundamental duties that the false shepherds had neglected in their sin. They will be delivered from fear and from their shame, and they will be made whole as a new people in their land.

After the indictments of the royal house to this point, there is now hope of restoration of the people and the monarchy on the other side of exile. The oracle in verses 5-6 substantially reoccurs in chapter 33, verses 14-16.

- [11 : 13] The reestablishment of David's house and reign is an important theme in a number of prophecies. The condemnation of the false shepherds in Ezekiel chapter 34 also contains this theme in verses 23-24.

And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them. He shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the Lord, will be their guard, and my servant David shall be prince among them.

I am the Lord. I have spoken. Here the one who is going to be raised up for the house of David is called a righteous branch. The same sort of language is used in Zechariah chapter 3 verse 8.

Hear now, O Joshua the high priest, you and your friends who sit before you, for they are men who are a sign. Behold, I will bring my servant the branch. In Zechariah chapter 6 verses 12-13.

And say to him, Thus says the Lord of hosts, Behold the man whose name is the branch, for he shall branch out from his place, and he shall build the temple of the Lord. It is he who shall build the temple of the Lord, and shall bear royal honour, and shall sit and rule on his throne.

- [12 : 19] And there shall be a priest on his throne, and the council of peace shall be between them both. Isaiah chapter 11 verse 1 also speaks of something similar. A shoot coming from the stump of Jesse.

A branch from his root shall bear fruit. Here the image is of cutting down even below David himself, and so the branch from David is as life from the dead. David's family tree seems to have been cut off.

Indeed, at the end of chapter 22, Jehoiakim seems to be doomed to die without an heir. Matthew chapter 1 suggests that this was overcome, likely through adoption. The promised king will be good and wise.

He will execute justice and righteousness, the fundamental duties of the king. The reference to Judah and Israel also suggests a kingdom that is no longer divided. It will be fulfilled when the Lord has gathered his people from all of the lands to which they have been scattered.

To understand the meaning of the promised king's name, the Lord is our righteousness, we need to recognise that Zedekiah was the last king of Judah. The kingdom of Judah was brought down as he was taken into exile by Nebuchadnezzar.

- [13 : 24] Zedekiah's name means my righteousness is the Lord or the Lord is righteousness. Zedekiah's name stands as an indictment upon him as he failed to live up to it. It promised something great but it was hollow.

However, another Davidic king would arise who would live up to that name. Christians have generally seen this as a reference ultimately to Christ himself. The oracle of verses 7-8 is very similar to that of chapter 16 verses 14-15.

Therefore behold the days are coming declares the Lord when it shall no longer be said as the Lord lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt but as the Lord lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the north country and out of all the countries where he had driven them for I will bring them back to their own land that I gave to their fathers.

The deliverance that the Lord will bring about in the future will eclipse that that he achieved in the past. There is a greater salvation to look forward to a greater exodus. Jeremiah bears the true word of the Lord but it is a painful weight to carry.

His body is breaking under it. He is dismayed and shaken by the message and also by the evil and the corruption of the people and their leaders and the great opposition that they present to him.

[14 : 37] He feels keenly the curses falling upon the land as a result of their sin. The land cannot sustain the people's wickedness and is suffering terrible judgments. Both priests and prophets were both unfaithful and their corruption was pervasive entering even into the Lord's house and they would face disaster as a result.

The prophets of Samaria had led to Israel's downfall. They had prophesied by Baal and led the northern kingdom astray until it was sent away by the Lord. People in the south and Judah might think themselves faithful by contrast but in verse 14 the prophets of Jerusalem are also condemned for their unfaithfulness and lying ways and their support of wicked people presumably especially among the leadership of the land.

Jeremiah, as Walter Brueggemann observes, is accused of the opposite of what the false prophets are condemned for here in chapter 38 verse 4. Jeremiah, it is claimed, weakens the people's hands while the false prophets strengthen them in their evil.

They support the kings and underwrite with their false prophecies the ruling ideology. The prophets are condemned for adultery, perhaps a reference to sexual sin and infidelity, perhaps a metaphorical reference to idolatry or perhaps a way of speaking about a more general covenant unfaithfulness expressed in both their societal and their religious bonds.

They have ended up like Sodom and Gomorrah and they will face the same fate. The Lord declares that he will feed them bitter food and give them poisoned water to drink. This might be, among other things, an allusion to the test of jealousy in Numbers chapter 5 applied when a woman was suspected of adultery.

[16 : 14] Rather than delivering her to human judgment, the Lord would test the woman himself with a drink of bitter water bearing a curse, a curse which he would bring upon her if she had in fact been unfaithful.

The specific nature of the lying words of the false prophets was the declaration of peace. They preached peace, peace to a wicked people for whom there would be no peace. They were yes-men of the ruling ideology, declaring that no disaster would come upon the people.

The faithful and true prophet, like Jeremiah, however, receives his message directly from the Lord, by standing in the counsel of the Lord. The divine counsel is described in various places in scripture, perhaps most notably in 1 Kings chapter 22, when the true prophet Micaiah confronts the false prophets, testifying to what he witnessed in the divine counsel.

The false prophets were not sent by the Lord at all, and their messages of peace were quite contrary to the actual truth. Judgment is decreed for Jerusalem. It's already in motion, and soon enough the false prophets will be exposed.

The prophets have declared a domesticated God, a God who underwrites Jerusalem. They name-drop the Lord, but they don't consider that he is hearing their every word. God isn't contained by the temple walls.

[17 : 28] He is the transcendent, sovereign, creator God, who is far away, far above the creation, but he also fills heaven and earth. He is not a tame God, but is above all earthly powers, free in his exercise of his majestic might.

He cannot be tethered to Jerusalem, as if on a leash, required to maintain its well-being. There is no hiding place from this God. The prophetic word of the Lord will show up all the empty words of the prophets.

It is like wheat compared to straw, like the grain that is true food to the crushed stalks that are going to be blown away. It is like fire, it consumes falsehood. It is like the hammer that breaks rock.

The Lord's word, unlike those of false prophets, is powerful and effective. It will make itself known. The false prophets use the familiar formulas, thus declares the Lord, and other things like that.

They claim to have dreams when they have had no true revelation at all. They may even parrot the words of true prophets, but take them out of context and misdirect them. The collection of prophecies relating to the kings and the prophets concludes with a condemnation of the use of the expression, the burden of the Lord.

[18 : 40] The people are forbidden from using it any longer. The expression had become so overused for falsehood that it was dangerous and needed to be taken out of circulation. The burden is a message from the Lord, but the Lord puns upon it by telling Jeremiah to answer those who ask him what the burden of the Lord is by declaring that they are the burden.

They are the heavy weight that the Lord has to labor under. They are a burden that will eventually, in the end of the chapter, be lifted up and cast away from the Lord's presence along with their city.

Instead of the empty phrase concerning the burden of the Lord, which each prophet has been filling with his own fancies, they should genuinely seek the word of the Lord, not just their own projections.

The Lord is a God who speaks and who answers. He is the God who is the living God. He is not a projection of man, controlled by our ideologies, tethered to our projects, our causes, our countries, or contained by our temples or churches.

He is the free creator God, the judge of all, to whom we are all accountable. A question to consider, can you think of any ways in which we face the danger of claiming that we have the words of the Lord while emptying them out and projecting into them our own sentiments?

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