

Jeremiah 48: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Jeremiah chapter 48 concerning Moab. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel. Woe to Nebo, for it is laid waste. Kiriathim is put to shame. It is taken. The fortress is put to shame and broken down. The renown of Moab is no more. In Heshbon they planned disaster against her. Come, let us cut her off from being a nation. You also, O madmen, shall be brought to silence.

The sword shall pursue you. A voice, a cry from Horonim. Desolation and great destruction. Moab is destroyed. Her little ones have made a cry. For at the ascent of Luhith they go up weeping.

For at the descent of Horonim they have heard the distressed cry of destruction. Flee, save yourselves. You will be like a juniper in the desert. For because you trusted in your works and your treasures, you also shall be taken. And Chemosh shall go into exile with his priests and his officials.

The destroyer shall come upon every city, and no city shall escape. The valley shall perish, and the plain shall be destroyed, as the Lord has spoken. Give wings to Moab, for she would fly away.

Her cities shall become a desolation, with no inhabitant in them. Cursed is he who does the work of the Lord with slackness, and cursed is he who keeps back his sword from bloodshed. Moab has been at ease from his youth, and has settled on his dregs. He has not been emptied from vessel to vessel, nor has he gone into exile. So his taste remains in him, and his scent is not changed. Therefore, behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I shall send to him pourers who will pour him, and empty his vessels and break his jars in pieces. Then Moab shall be ashamed of Chemosh, as the house of Israel was ashamed of Bethel, their confidence. How do you say, we are heroes and mighty men of war? The destroyer of Moab and his cities has come up, and the choicest of his young men have gone down to slaughter, declares the king, whose name is the Lord of hosts. The calamity of Moab is near at hand, and his affliction hastens swiftly. Grieve for him, all you who are around him, and all who know his name. Say, how the mighty scepter is broken, the glorious staff.

[2 : 2 0] Come down from your glory, and sit on the parched ground, O inhabitant of Dibon. For the destroyer of Moab has come up against you. He has destroyed your strongholds. Stand by the way and watch, O inhabitant of Aroa. Ask him who flees, and her who escapes. Say, what has happened? Moab is put to shame, for it is broken. Wail and cry. Tell it beside the Anon, that Moab is laid waste. Judgment has come upon the table-land, upon Holon and Jazza, and Mepheath, and Dibon, and Nebo, and Beth-Diblathaeim, and Kiriathaim, and Beth-Gamel, and Beth-Meon, and Kirioth, and Bozrah, and all the cities of the land of Moab, far and near. The horn of Moab is cut off, and his arm is broken, declares the Lord. Make him drunk, because he magnified himself against the Lord, so that Moab shall wallow in his vomit, and he too shall be held in derision. Was not Israel a derision to you? Was he found among thieves, that whenever you spoke of him, you wagged your head? Leave the cities, and dwell in the rock, O inhabitants of Moab.

Be like the dove that nests in the sides of the mouth of a gorge. We have heard of the pride of Moab. He is very proud, of his loftiness, his pride, and his arrogance, and the haughtiness of his heart.

I know his insolence, declares the Lord. His boasts are false, his deeds are false. Therefore I wail for Moab. I cry out for all Moab. For the men of Ker-Haraseth I mourn. More than for Jazza I weep for you, O vine of Sidma. Your branches passed over the sea. Reach to the sea of Jazza. On your summer fruits and your grapes the destroyer has fallen. Gladness and joy have been taken away from the fruitful land of Moab. I have made the wine cease from the winepresses. No one treads them with shouts of joy. The shouting is not the shout of joy. From the outcry at Heshbon, even to Eliela, as far as Jehaz they utter their voice. From Zoar to Huronim, and Eglash to Elishia.

For the waters of Nimrim have become desolate, and I will bring to an end a Moab, declares the Lord, him who offers sacrifice in the high place, and makes offerings to his God. Therefore my heart moans for Moab like a flute, and my heart moans like a flute for the men of Ker-Haraseth. Therefore the riches they gained have perished. For every head is shaved, and every beard cut off. On all the hands are gashes, and around the waist is sackcloth. On all the housetops of Moab, and in the squares there is nothing but lamentation. For I have broken Moab like a vessel, for which no one cares, declares the Lord. How it is broken! How they wail! How Moab has turned his back in shame! So Moab has become a derision, and a horror to all that are around him. For thus says the Lord, Behold, one shall fly swiftly like an eagle, and spread his wings against Moab. The city shall be taken, and the strongholds seized. The heart of the warriors of Moab shall be in that day like the heart of a woman in her birth pains. Moab shall be destroyed, and be no longer a people, because he magnified himself against the

Lord. Terror, pit, and snare are before you, O inhabitant of Moab, declares the Lord. He who flees from the terror shall fall into the pit, and he who climbs out of the pit shall be caught in the snare.

[5 : 45] For I will bring these things upon Moab, the year of their punishment, declares the Lord. In the shadow of Heshbon fugitives stop without strength, for fire came out from Heshbon, flame from the house of Sihon. It has destroyed the forehead of Moab, the crown of the sons of Tumult. Woe to you, O Moab! The people of Chemosh are undone, for your sons have been taken captive, and your daughters into captivity. Yet I will restore the fortunes of Moab in the latter days, declares the Lord.

Thus far is the judgment on Moab. From the Philistines to the west of Judah, Jeremiah chapter 48 moves to the Moabites to the east of Judah. Moab was on the plateau east of the Dead Sea, about 3,000 feet in elevation. The precise boundaries of the land have been much debated.

Many have seen the main body of the territory of Moab lying between the rivers Zered and Anon. However, many of the Moabite cities mentioned are north of the Anon. The people of Moab descended from Lot from his incestuous relationship with one of his daughters. Balak, the king of Moab, had earlier summoned Balaam to curse the Israelites. The Israelites had taken some of the former territory of Moab from Sihon, king of the Amorites, with Reuben and Gad settling in that part of the Transjordan.

These tribes, along with the half-tribe of Manasseh, were taken captive by the Assyrians, of whom the Moabites were vassals from the first half of the 8th century BC. The greatest source of information about Moab is the biblical text itself, although the Moabite stone, or the Meshtelah of around 840 BC, found at the site of Dibon, tells of the Moabite's escape from the yoke of Israel. Ruth, famously, was a Moabitess. Moab was present at the conference of 594 BC, so Jeremiah might have delivered some of the prophecies directly to the Moabite Ambasta in Jerusalem. The subjugation of Moab occurred in 582 BC, but Nebuchadnezzar had used Moab to harass Judah back in 599-598 BC. This is recorded in 2 Kings chapter 24, verses 1-2.

In his days, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, came up, and Jehoiakim became his servant for three years. Then he turned and rebelled against him. And the Lord sent against him bands of the Chaldeans, and bands of the Syrians, and bands of the Moabites, and bands of the Ammonites, and sent them against Judah to destroy it, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by his servants the prophets. The material from verse 29 of this chapter has very close parallels in places like Isaiah chapter 15 verse 16 and chapter 24. Jeremiah, or possibly the editors of the book of Jeremiah, are using and developing traditional material concerning the nation of Moab.

[8 : 35] The chapter begins with woes upon a number of different places, describing the desolation that's going to come upon them. Nebo, most famously, was the site from which Moses had seen the land from the far side of the Jordan. However now, Nebo, along with a number of the other of the major cities of Moab, are being brought down. They're going to be silenced, they're going to experience disaster, they're going to be cut off, they're going to be put to shame and broken down. The series of place names and the list of the disasters that are going to befall them gives us a sense of the comprehensive judgment that is going to fall upon the Moabites. The pride of the land is going to be humbled, and here, as elsewhere in the chapter, is going to provoke great mourning. While the city of madmen will be put to silence, in verse 3 to 5 there is a series of cries, the cry of desolation and great destruction, from Horonaim. Elsewhere, it will be the sound of the crying of orphaned children.

At Luhith, people will go up weeping. The Moabites are counseled to flee, to save their lives. The judgment that's about to befall them is coming upon them because of their pride and their arrogant self-confidence. They trusted in their works and in their treasures, and they and their God, his priests and his officials, are all going to go into captivity. This likely refers to events of 582 BC.

The god Chemosh was worshipped under various names. He seems to be the same deity as Nergal of the Babylonians. Carchemish is also named after Chemosh. Solomon most famously built a high place for Chemosh in 1 Kings chapter 11 verses 7 and 33. Verse 10 expresses a curse upon the one who does the work of the Lord with slackness. What is this work? It's the judgment upon Moab. The bearer of the sword has been given his task, and he must do it with diligence and speed. This underlines the fact that the Lord is the one that is bringing this judgment upon Moab and its God. Moab and its table land were important wine-growing regions, and so the prophecy against Moab uses a number of different illustrations from winemaking. Moab is described as a settled place, and the prophecy compares it to wine that has settled on its dregs, or its sediment. Leaving the wine with the dregs was part of the necessary process of fermentation. Left for longer, it would produce highly refined wine. But here one gets the sense that Moab is wine that has been left too long on its lees. It should have been removed. However, since Moab has remained on its sediment for so long, it has not been moved around or uprooted and sent into exile, it has a very distinct flavour of its own, undiluted by other peoples. However, the Lord is about to perform the task that is overdue. He is going to send porous, and he is going to take the wine of

Moab and move it into different jars, breaking the old vessels of Moab, presumably the cities in which Moab has long felt secure. This will be a humiliation not just for Moab, but for Chemosh, their god.

The northern kingdom of Israel had been made ashamed of Bethel, their cultic site that was set up by Jeroboam I. When the Assyrians came upon them in the first half of the 8th century, their worship proved powerless to protect them. One can imagine this being a cautionary example to Judah in the south, which had put a vain faith for so long in its mere possession of the temple.

[11 : 52] In verse 14, the boast of the Moabite men is recorded. They think themselves great heroes and valorous men of war, but the emptiness of their boast is about to be exposed. The destroyer appointed for Moab has come upon them, and Moab's proud young men have perished. The following verses describe the outcome of the calamity and the lamentation that follows. Peoples once enthroned in powerful cities must come down and sit on the parched earth. People by the wayside will see people fleeing from the destruction, and will hear the tidings of the downfall of Moab and its power. Verses 21 to 24 give a litany of the cities that have suffered this destruction. Moab's horn is cut off, and his arm is broken. These are both symbols of strength and might. Moab is also made drunk so it will suffer a downfall. The once haughty Moab, that marked at Israel, will suffer the indignity of wallowing in its own vomit. We might here recall the imagery of Jeremiah 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. Verse 27 is difficult to read. Jack Lumbum suggests that we could read it as follows. Then surely the joke is for you, Israel, if among thieves he has been found.

For more than all your words against him, you will shake your head. Moab had once treated Israel as an object of derision, but now the Lord invites his own people to mock Moab, as they have been utterly humiliated. Verse 29 to the end of the chapter seems to reuse and develop traditional material, particularly that found in the book of Isaiah. Isaiah chapter 16, verse 6 to 12. We have heard of the pride of Moab, how proud he is, of his arrogance, his pride, and his insolence. In his idle boasting he is not right. Therefore let Moab wail for Moab, let everyone wail. Mourn utterly stricken for the raisin cakes of Ker-Harasath. For the fields of Heshbon languish, and the vine of Sidma, the lords of the nations have struck down its branches, which reached to Jezre, and strayed to the desert. Its shoots spread abroad and passed over the sea. Therefore I weep with the weeping of Jezre for the vine of Sidma.

I drench you with my tears, O Heshbon and Eliela. For over your summer fruit and your harvest the shout has ceased, and joy and gladness are taken away from the fruitful field. And in the vineyards no songs are sung, no cheers are raised, no treader treads out wine in the presses. I have put an end to the shouting. Therefore my inner parts moan like a lyre for Moab, and my inmost self for Ker-Harasath.

And when Moab presents himself, when he wearies himself on the high place, when he comes to his sanctuary to pray, he will not prevail. Then again in Isaiah chapter 15 verses 2 to 7, he has gone up to the temple and to Dibon, to the high places to weep. Over Nebo and over Medibah, Moab wails. On every head is baldness, every beard is shorn. In the streets they wear sackcloth. On the housetops and in the squares everyone wails and melts in tears. Heshbon and Eliela cry out. Their voice is heard as far as Jehaz. Therefore the armed men of Moab cry aloud. His soul trembles. My heart cries out for Moab. Her fugitives flee to Zoar, to Eglash, Shalishia. For at the ascent of Luthith they go up weeping. On the road to Horonaim they raise a cry of destruction. The waters of Nimrim are a desolation. The grass is withered. The vegetation fails. The greenery is no more. Therefore the abundance they have gained, and what they have laid up they carry away over the brook of the willows.

[16:36] The Lord is playing the funeral flutes. They are shaving their head, cutting off their beards. They are cutting themselves for the dead, and they are wearing sackcloth. The judgment coming upon them is coming upon them speedily, swooping down upon them like an eagle flying from the north. In the face of this destruction, they will be like a woman, crying out and lacking in strength in the midst of her birth pangs. Once again we are told that the judgment is coming upon Moab because of its pride, precisely because Moab magnified itself against the Lord. The language of Isaiah chapter 24 verses 17 to 18 is taken up here. Terror and the pit and the snare are upon you, O inhabitant of the earth.

Woe to you, O Moab! You are undone, O people of Chemosh! He has made his sons fugitives and his daughters captives to an Amorite king, Sihon. And then in chapter 24 verse 17. I see him, but not now.

However, the prophecy ends on a promising note. Even after all of these things that befall them, Moab will be restored. A question to consider. What might the prophet mean by speaking of Moab magnifying himself against the Lord? What sort of actions and attitudes might this have involved?

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