

Jeremiah 41: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Jeremiah chapter 41 And the Chaldean soldiers who happened to be there.

On the day after the murder of Gedaliah, before anyone knew of it, eighty men arrived from Shechem and Shiloh and Samaria with their beards shaved and their clothes torn and their bodies gashed, bringing grain offerings and incense to present at the temple of the Lord.

And Ishmael the son of Nethanar came out from Mizpah to meet them, weeping as he came. As he met them, he said to them, Come in to Gedaliah the son of Ahicham. When they came into the city, Ishmael the son of Nethanar and the men with him slaughtered them and cast them into a cistern.

But there were ten men among them who said to Ishmael, Do not put us to death, for we have stores of wheat, barley, oil and honey hidden in the fields. So he refrained and did not put them to death with their companions.

Now the cistern into which Ishmael had thrown all the bodies of the men whom he had struck down along with Gedaliah was the large cistern that King Asa had made for defence against Baasha king of Israel.

[1 : 2 7] Ishmael the son of Nethanar filled it with the slain. Then Ishmael took captive all the rest of the people who were in Mizpah, the king's daughters and all the people who were left at Mizpah, whom Nebi Zaradan, the captain of the guard, had committed to Gedaliah the son of Ahicham.

Ishmael the son of Nethanar took them captive and set out to cross over to the Ammonites. But when Johanan the son of Korea and all the leaders of the forces with him heard of all the evil that Ishmael the son of Nethanar had done, they took all their men and went to fight against Ishmael the son of Nethanar.

They came upon him at the great pool that is in Gibeon. And when all the people who were with Ishmael saw Johanan the son of Korea and all the leaders of the forces with him, they rejoiced. So all the people whom Ishmael had carried away captive from Mizpah turned around and came back and went to Johanan the son of Korea.

But Ishmael the son of Nethanar escaped from Johanan with eight men and went to the Ammonites. Then Johanan the son of Korea and all the leaders of the forces with him took from Mizpah all the rest of the people whom he had recovered from Ishmael the son of Nethanar after he had struck down Gedaliah the son of Ahicham, soldiers, women, children and eunuchs, whom Johanan brought back from Gibeon.

And they went and stayed at Geruth-Kimham near Bethlehem, intending to go to Egypt because of the Chaldeans. For they were afraid of them, because Ishmael the son of Nethanar had struck down Gedaliah the son of Ahicham, whom the king of Babylon had made governor over the land.

[2 : 5 3] Jerusalem has fallen to the Babylonians. Judahite rulers, mighty men and craftsmen have been deported to Babylon. In the wake of the disaster, Gedaliah, the new governor under the rule of the Babylonians, is trying to establish a new order within the land.

The situation is fraught, however. On the one hand, he has to keep on the right side of his new overlords, the Babylonians. On the other side, he's going to be dealing with a fractious and restive people that will always be tempted towards some sort of rebellion.

There are also people among the ruling classes who will resent the fact that he's been advanced ahead of them. There are nearby kingdoms like that of Baalus that will resent the power of the Babylonians coming to be established in their region.

At the end of the preceding chapter, the new governor Gedaliah had been warned about a plot hatched between Baalus the king of the Ammonites and Ishmael the son of Nethanar. Johanan had asked for permission preemptively to strike Ishmael in order to ensure that the plot didn't come to pass.

If it did come to pass, it would threaten the fragile order in Judah and bring devastating consequences for everyone involved. Gedaliah, however, does not seem to have believed the warning given by Johanan and did not give him permission to strike Ishmael.

[4 : 03] Tragically, the intelligence that Johanan had brought to Gedaliah was accurate. Ishmael was plotting against his life, and in the seventh month, he strikes Gedaliah down. The exact chronology at this point is uncertain.

It happens in the seventh month. This is the Feast of Tabernacles. However, Jack Lumbum raises the possibility of a telescoping of Gedaliah's governorship. The city falls back in July, in chapter 39, verse 2.

In August and September, the summer fruits are gathered. In chapter 40, verse 12, that's mentioned. And now in verses 4 to 5 of chapter 41, pilgrims are arriving into Jerusalem for tabernacles.

It is possible that the assassination of Gedaliah happened a few years later, provoking Nebu Zaradan's return and the further deportation of 582 BC, mentioned in chapter 52, verse 30.

If such a chronological telescoping has taken place, perhaps the book of Jeremiah is encouraging us to consider the death of Gedaliah against the backdrop of the festal calendar. It's underlining the fact that although it has first fruits, it does not arrive at the Feast of Ingathering.

[5 : 10] At this point, we discover that Ishmael was a member of the deposed royal family, although probably not in the direct line of descent. This would have made him one of the potential rivals to Gedaliah, who represents not the house of David, but the scribal family of Shaphan, which had tensions with the Davidic king at various points, especially under Jehoiakim.

It was understandable that Baalus, the king of the Ammonites, would use such a man to get to Gedaliah, possibly with promises to support him as a prospective king of Judah in Gedaliah the governor's place.

The assassination of Gedaliah is also recorded in the book of 2 Kings, in chapter 25, verse 25. But in the seventh month, Ishmael, the son of Nethaniah, son of Elishamah, of the royal family, came with ten men and struck down Gedaliah and put him to death along with the Jews and the Chaldeans who were with him at Mizpah.

Ishmael carries out the assassination to feast. As a ruler, Gedaliah would be trying to forge alliances, in part through showing great hospitality to other people whose support he needed.

At this time, Johanan and a number of the other leaders of the people seem to have been elsewhere, so it's a promising situation for Ishmael's insurrection. Not only will Gedaliah be off his guard at a banquet, he also won't have the same number of people around him to retaliate if his life is taken.

[6 : 27] The men who are around him are killed too, along with the Chaldeans, and naturally, the killing of the Chaldeans would have provoked a serious response from Babylon. The fact that people do not seem to have been prepared provided the conditions for Ishmael and just ten men to achieve this insurrection.

The next day, people still do not realise what has happened, and eighty men are coming down from the north. In other situations, this might be seen as a promising sign that the north and the south, under the governorship of Gedaliah, might be joined in a new unity.

One people beyond the division of the kingdoms might be re-established, and when the repopulation of the land with the former exiles and the re-establishment of the Davidic king occurs, they might be one people, whereas formerly they had been divided.

The influence of the faithful worship of the Lord had already been expanding north, under the reign of Josiah. In 2 Kings chapter 23, verses 19-20, we discover that many of Josiah's reforms occurred north of the borders of Judah.

And Josiah removed all the shrines also of the high places that were in the cities of Samaria, which kings of Israel had made, provoking the Lord to anger. He did to them according to all that he had done at Bethel.

[7 : 35] And he sacrificed all the priests of the high places who were there on the altars, and burned human bones on them. Then he returned to Jerusalem. The men are coming in a state of mourning.

The temple has been destroyed. The true worship of God is not occurring as it had formerly done. But it is still possible to present grain offerings and incense, even in the sight of the destroyed temple.

However, the fact that they have their beard shaved, and their bodies gashed, suggests that they have adopted some of the mourning customs of the nations, things that they had been forbidden to do in Deuteronomy and Leviticus.

In Deuteronomy chapter 14, verse 1, for instance, you are the sons of the Lord your God, you shall not cut yourselves, or make any boldness on your foreheads for the dead. Ishmael feigns that he is mourning too, and goes out to meet them.

He summons them in to meet Gedaliah the son of Ahicham. But Gedaliah, of course, has been killed. The violence of Ishmael is going to spread even further in the land. The northern pilgrims, who seem to have good intentions, are killed by Ishmael, perhaps because they are inconveniencing him, perhaps because they have witnessed something that they should not have, perhaps because he fears they might inform the Babylonians about him.

[8 : 44] Ishmael and his men take them by surprise and kill them, save for ten men who are spared because they have supplies hidden. Seventy are killed, ten are spared. Ishmael throws the bodies of all of his victims into the great cistern that Asa had dug as a defence against the northern king of Baasha.

Perhaps this underlines the way that violence between the north and the south has erupted again, even when there was a possibility that the people could be brought together as one. Ishmael gathers the rest of the people, along with the daughters of the royal house, and then goes to flee to the Ammonites.

Baalus will give him protection until the time has come for the next stage of the insurrection. Johanan and the forces who are with him discover what Ishmael has done. They've been away from the scene of Mizpah, and now they are returning.

They come upon Ishmael at the great pool at Gibeon. This pool was formerly famous during the conflict between David and Ish-bosheth, the son of Saul. The men of Joab and Abner had fought at the pool.

[9 : 5 2]

A question to consider. How many other examples of coups and insurrections can you think of in the history of Judah and Israel? In what ways can the insurrection of Ishmael be compared and contrasted with them?

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