

Jeremiah 25: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Jeremiah chapter 25. The word that came to Jeremiah concerning all the people of Judah in the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Jeziel king of Judah. That was the first year of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, which Jeremiah the prophet spoke to all the people of Judah and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem. For twenty-three years from the thirteenth year of Jeziel the son of Ammon king of Judah to this day the word of the Lord has come to me, and I have spoken persistently to you, but you have not listened. You have neither listened nor inclined your ears to hear, although the Lord persistently sent to you all his servants the prophets, saying, Turn now every one of you from his evil way and evil deeds, and dwell upon the land that the Lord has given to you and your fathers from of old and forever. Do not go after other gods to serve and worship them, or provoke me to anger with the work of your hands. Then I will do you no harm. Yet you have not listened to me, declares the Lord, that you might provoke me to anger with the work of your hands to your own harm. Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts, because you have not obeyed my words, behold I will send for all the tribes of the north, declares the Lord, and for Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, my servant, and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants, and against all these surrounding nations. I will devote them to destruction, and make them a horror, a hissing, and an everlasting desolation. Moreover I will banish from them the voice of mirth, and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom, and the voice of the bride, the grinding of the millstones, and the light of the lamp. This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, declares the Lord, making the land an everlasting waste. I will bring upon that land all the words that I have uttered against it, everything written in this book, which Jeremiah prophesied against all the nations. For many nations and great kings shall make slaves even of them, and I will recompense them according to their deeds and the work of their hands. 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, Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, its kings and officials, to make them a desolation and a waste, a hissing and a curse, as at this day. Pharaoh, king of Egypt, his servants, his officials, all his people, and all the mixed tribes among them, all the kings of the land of Uz, and all the kings of the land of the Philistines,

Ashkelon, Gaza, Ekron, and the remnant of Ashdod, Edom, Moab, and the sons of Ammon, all the kings of Tyre, all the kings of Sidon, and the kings of the coastland across the sea, Dedan, Temer, Buz, and all who cut the corners of their hair, all the kings of Arabia, and all the kings of the mixed tribes who dwell in the desert, all the kings of Zimri, all the kings of Elam, and all the kings of Media, all the kings of the north, far and near, one after another, and all the kingdoms of the world that are on the face of the earth, and after them the king of Babylon shall drink. Then you shall say to them, Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Drink, 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. You therefore shall prophesy against them all these words, and say to them, The Lord will roar from on high, and from his holy habitation utter his voice. He will roar mightily against his fold, and shout like those who tread grapes against all the inhabitants of the earth. The clamor will resound to the ends of the earth, for the Lord has an indictment against the nations. He is entering into judgment with all flesh, and the wicked he will put to the sword, declares the Lord. Thus says the

Lord of hosts, Behold, disaster is going forth from nation to nation, and a great tempest is stirring from the farthest parts of the earth. And those pierced by the Lord on that day shall extend from one end of the earth to the other. They shall not be lamented, or gathered, or buried. They shall be dung on the surface of the ground. Wail, you shepherds, and cry out, and roll in ashes, you lords of the flock.

For the days of your slaughter and dispersion have come, and you shall fall like a choice vessel. No refuge will remain for the shepherds, nor escape for the lords of the flock. A voice, the cry of the shepherds, and the wail of the lords of the flock. For the Lord is laying waste their pasture, and the peaceful foals are devastated, because of the fierce anger of the Lord. Like a lion he has left his lair, for their land has become a waste, because of the sword of the oppressor, and because of his fierce anger.

In Jeremiah chapters 25, 26, 35, and 36, we have material related to the reign of Jehoiakim. All of the chapters open with a dating during his reign, both 25 and 36, to the fourth year of the reign, which was clearly an important year in the ministry of Jeremiah. It was also the year that Babylon defeated the Egyptians at Carchemash, and the first year of Nebuchadnezzar. The power dynamics of the region are changing. A great tempest is rising in the north, and Jeremiah foretells where it will lead. The chapter anticipates the latter part of the book of Jeremiah, where judgment oracles concerning the foreign nations are contained. These oracles are placed after verse 13 in the ordering of the Septuagint. The synchronization of Babylonian and Judahite chronology here anticipates the fact that Judah's life will soon be measured by the times of Babylon. Jeremiah here begins his address to the people by speaking about his 23 years as a prophet to them. The year now is about 605 BC.

[6 : 24] He has faithfully delivered the Lord's word to them for over two decades, but without positive response. Within this testimony, we can hear something of the pain and the difficulty of his vocation. He had been charging them to turn back to the Lord and praying for them to be restored.

But now the dark cloud that heralded the storm of their doom was rising on the northern horizon, and their judgment seemed inevitable. And it was not just Jeremiah. The Lord had persistently sent prophets to them, and they had all been rejected. He had given a consistent and a long-term witness.

The message was one of turning back from evil ways and false gods and returning to the Lord, so that they would enjoy peace and security in the land as a result. However, they failed to respond. They provoked the Lord to anger, and his judgment would come upon them as a result. The result is the judgment from the north that Jeremiah foretold at the outset of his ministry. The enemy, now identified as Babylon, would be sent against them. Startlingly, Nebuchadnezzar is described as the Lord's servant. Although he is the enemy, he is doing the Lord's work here. And the surrounding nations are also caught up in Judah's judgment. We might think of the beginning of the book of Jonah, where the unfaithfulness of the Israelite prophet leads to a storm that all of the people on his ship suffer from. In Jonah, that storm is, among other things, a sign of the judgment that comes upon the whole region as a result of Israel's sin. It will be shaken up by the advent of the Assyrians. Here, a similar thing will happen as a result of Judah's sin. The great enemy from the north would come, and all of the people in the surrounding region would suffer. The language of desolation that we find elsewhere in the book recurs here. He will devote them to destruction and make them a horror, a hissing, and an everlasting desolation. He will banish the voice of mirth, the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom, and the voice of the bride, the grinding of the millstones, and the light of the lamp. The land is going to become a ruin and a waste. We've heard all of these expressions before, but every time they're repeated they sink in somewhat deeper.

Graciously, with this declaration of the final judgment upon Judah, there is also a hope of life beyond it. The light at the other end of the tunnel is the promise that they would serve Babylon for 70 years. After that period, there will be judgment upon Babylon and release for the nations that have suffered under him. Even though God is currently using Babylon as the rod of his judgment, judgment still awaits it. In verse 13, Jeremiah presumably is given a vision in which he is to act as the Lord's cupbearer for the cup of his wrath to the nations. God is hosting, as it were, a banquet of the nations, and he is using Jeremiah as his instrument of judgment. The imagery of the judgment cup of the Lord is one that's found on several occasions in scripture, in both the Old and the New Testament. The cup is one that produces intoxication. Scholars differ over whether we should see the intoxication as a result of the cup being poisoned, or as a result of excessive drinking. Whichever of the two it is, the cup has as its intent a drunkenness that belongs to judgment. The drinking is not a test, as in the test of jealousy in Numbers chapter 5. It actually ministers the judgment. Uses of this imagery can be found in places like Ezekiel chapter 23 verses 31 to 34.

You have gone the way of your sister, therefore I will give her cup into your hand. Thus says the Lord God, you shall drink your sister's cup that is deep and large. You shall be laughed at and held in derision, for it contains much. You will be filled with drunkenness and sorrow, a cup of horror and desolation, the cup of your sister Samaria. You shall drink it and drain it out, and gnaw its shards, and tear your breasts, for I have spoken, declares the Lord God. Also Isaiah chapter 51 verse 17.

[10:17] Wake yourself, wake yourself, stand up, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk from the hand of the Lord the cup of his wrath, who have drunk to the dregs the bowl, the cup of staggering. The list of the nations to be judged begin with Jerusalem and Judah, and with its kings and officials. Judgment begins with the house of God, it begins with the chief city, it moves on to the other cities, it focuses especially upon the king, the highest authority of all, and then moves on to the officials. From Jerusalem and Judah, however, we move out to other nations, Pharaoh the king of Egypt, his servants, his officials, all his people, and all the mixed tribes among them. All the way down the classes of Egypt, all of them will come under the Lord's judgment. The kings of the land of Uz, presumably in the area of northern Arabia, and all the kings of the land of the Philistines. The cities of Philistia mentioned here exclude Gath, which had already been destroyed. Philistia was to the west of Judah, on the Mediterranean coast. Edom is next. Edom was the brother nation of Israel, the descendants of

Esau. After Edom, moving from the south to the north of the Transjordan, Moab, and then Ammon, the kings of Tyre and Sidon, southern Phoenician coastal cities in modern-day Lebanon, are the next in the list. They are associated with the kings of the coastland across the sea, the Mediterranean colonies of the Phoenicians in places such as Carthage. Next in line are the Arabian peoples, Didan, Timah, Buz, and the kings of Arabia, followed by the kings and the sheikhs of the various desert and nomadic peoples. Zimri is next, possibly associated with Arabia, but we don't know exactly where it was.

The kings of Elam were in the east of the Tigris, opposite the south of Babylon. The median kings and associated people are listed next. Then all of the kings of the north are mentioned, the rulers of the lesser peoples. All of these people shall be made to drink the cup of the Lord's judgment. He's shaking up the entire world. And then finally the king of Babylon shall drink.

The pattern of Judah first, Babylon last, is a pattern that is borne out in the foreign oracles with which the book concludes. The word used for the king of Babylon in verse 26 is shishak.

This is what is called an atbash. An atbash works by replacing the first letter of the alphabet with the last letter, the second letter with the penultimate letter, the third letter with the anti-penultimate letter, and so on. The word shishak corresponds with Babel. Scholars differ over whether at this point it is intended just as wordplay or whether it is intentionally cryptic. The kings have no choice. They will suffer this judgment. Jeremiah is a minister of the word of judgment, and it is effective through him. Once again we might think back to chapter 1 verses 9 to 10.

[13 : 06] Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth, and the Lord said to me, Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant. The idea that the word of the Lord through the prophet is an effective means of judgment, and not just a reporting on the Lord's judgment, can also be seen in places like Hosea chapter 6 verse 5. Therefore I have hewn them by the prophets, I have slain them by the words of my mouth, and my judgment goes forth as the light.

The conclusion of the chapter contains a number of different oracles strung together. The Lord is going to roar like a lion from the heavens. He is going to threaten the sheep of the fold. He will shout as people treading out grapes. The imagery of treading out grapes is found on several occasions in scripture. At many points it is an image of God's judgment. At some points it is an image, as in Revelation, of God gathering in faithful martyrs. As elsewhere in scripture, perhaps we should see some connection between the treading out of the grapes and the preparation of the wine of the Lord's wrath. This is a judgment that is going forth on all flesh. The Lord is entering into judgment with the world. There is going to be a sort of political earthquake throughout the entire region. When things finally settle, a very different world will exist. A great and terrible storm is rising. It will affect every one of the nations. It is a storm brought up by the Lord, and its result will be utter devastation throughout the various lands. This section began with the Lord roaring from on high, and at the end talks about the Lord being like a lion that has left his lair, going out on the hunt. The threat of the Lord roaring against the fold is now extended to be a threat upon the shepherds. The kings of the nations, their shepherds, are going to be left bereft of their flocks. The Lord is going to lay waste their flocks and their pastures. No place of refuge or escape exists.

A question to consider. How can the example of the vision given to Jeremiah here help us to think about the way that the messenger of the Lord's words participates in the authority of the message that he is delivering?