

# Jeremiah 36: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     Jeremiah chapter 36 In the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, this word came to Jeremiah from the Lord. Take a scroll and write on it all the words that I have spoken to you against Israel and Judah, and all the nations, from the day I spoke to you, from the days of Josiah until today.

It may be that the house of Judah will hear all the disaster that I intend to do to them, so that everyone may turn from his evil way, and that I may forgive their iniquity and their sin. Then Jeremiah called Beirut the son of Neriah, and Beirut wrote on a scroll at the dictation of Jeremiah all the words of the Lord that he had spoken to him.

And Jeremiah ordered Beirut, saying, I am banned from going to the house of the Lord, so you are to go. And on a day of fasting, in the hearing of all the people in the Lord's house, you shall read the words of the Lord from the scroll that you have written at my dictation.

You shall read them also in the hearing of all the men of Judah who come out of their cities. It may be that their plea for mercy will come before the Lord, and that everyone will turn from his evil way, for great is the anger and wrath that the Lord has pronounced against this people.

And Beirut the son of Neriah did all that Jeremiah the prophet ordered him, about reading from the scroll the words of the Lord in the Lord's house. In the fifth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, in the ninth month, all the people in Jerusalem, and all the people who came from the cities of Judah to Jerusalem, proclaimed a fast before the Lord.

[ 1 : 2 5 ]     Then in the hearing of all the people, Beirut read the words of Jeremiah from the scroll, in the house of the Lord, in the chamber of Gemariah the son of Shaphan the secretary, which was in the upper court, at the entry of the new gate of the Lord's house.

When Micaiah the son of Gemariah, son of Shaphan, heard all the words of the Lord from the scroll, he went down to the king's house, into the secretary's chamber, and all the officials were sitting there.

Elishamah the secretary, Deliah the son of Shemeah, Elnathan the son of Akbor, Gemariah the son of Shaphan, Zedekiah the son of Hananiah, and all the officials. And Micaiah told them all the words that he had heard, when Beirut read the scroll in the hearing of the people.

Then all the officials sent Jehudi the son of Nethaniah, son of Shalamiah, son of Cushai, to say to Beirut, Take in your hand the scroll that you read in the hearing of the people, and come.

So Beirut the son of Neriah took the scroll in his hand and came to them. And they said to him, Sit down and read it. So Beirut read it to them. When they heard all the words, they turned one to another in fear.

[ 2 : 2 9 ]     And they said to Beirut, We must report all these words to the king. Then they asked Beirut, Tell us, please, how did you write all these words? Was it at his dictation?

Beirut answered them, He dictated all these words to me, while I wrote them with ink on the scroll. Then the officials said to Beirut, Go and hide, you and Jeremiah, and let no one know where you are.

So they went into the court to the king, having put the scroll in the chamber of Elishamah the secretary, and they reported all the words to the king. Then the king sent Jehudi to get the scroll, and he took it from the chamber of Elishamah the secretary.

And Jehudi read it to the king, and all the officials who stood beside the king. It was the ninth month, and the king was sitting in the winter house, and there was a fire burning in the fire pot before him.

As Jehudi read three or four columns, the king would cut them off with a knife, and throw them into the fire in the fire pot, until the entire scroll was consumed in the fire that was in the fire pot.

[ 3 : 27 ] Yet neither the king nor any of his servants who heard all these words was afraid, nor did they tear their garments. Even when Elnathan and Delaiah and Gemariah urged the king not to burn the scroll, he would not listen to them.

And the king commanded Jeremiel the king's son, and Saraiah the son of Azrael, and Shalamiah the son of Abdiel, to seize Beirut the secretary, and Jeremiah the prophet. But the Lord hid them.

Now after the king had burned the scroll with the words that Beirut wrote at Jeremiah's dictation, the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah. Take another scroll, and write on it all the former words that were in the first scroll, which Jehoiakim the king of Judah has burned.

And concerning Jehoiakim king of Judah, you shall say, Thus says the Lord, You have burned this scroll, saying, Why have you written in it that the king of Babylon will certainly come and destroy this land, and will cut off from it man and beast?

Therefore thus says the Lord concerning Jehoiakim king of Judah, He shall have none to sit on the throne of David, and his dead body shall be cast out to the heat by day, and the frost by night.

[ 4 : 30 ] And I will punish him and his offspring and his servants for their iniquity. I will bring upon them and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and upon the people of Judah, all the disaster that I have pronounced against them, but they would not hear.

Then Jeremiah took another scroll, and gave it to Beirut the scribe, the son of Neriah, who wrote on it at the dictation of Jeremiah, all the words of the scroll that Jehoiakim king of Judah had burned in the fire, and many similar words were added to them.

Chapter 36 of Jeremiah begins with a reference to the fourth year of King Jehoiakim. This is a key date in the book of Jeremiah, and also for the Near Eastern region's history. It was the year in which Jeremiah delivered the prophecy of chapter 25, and in chapter 45 we have a reference to Baruch's writing of Jeremiah's prophecies in a book in that year.

Beyond Jeremiah's ministry, however, the fourth year of Jehoiakim was Nebuchadnezzar's first year as king of Babylon. It was the year in which he defeated the Egyptians at Carchemish, and changed the regional political situation.

From this point onwards, Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon would start to dominate over Syria and later Judah. The presence of Baruch and the writing of a scroll in this chapter, and then again in chapter 45, has led many to regard the section of Jeremiah that they bracket as the Baruch document.

[ 5 : 49 ] By this point, Jeremiah was already facing increasing opposition. He doesn't seem to have had the freedom to pronounce his message in the temple himself, and so he is instructed to write a scroll for Baruch which he can read in the temple.

From the Lord's first instruction to Jeremiah, to Jeremiah's dictation, to the movement of the scroll by stages into the very presence of the king himself, this chapter recounts the effectiveness of the written word of scripture.

The scroll was likely written on papyrus. Baruch may have been a scribe of note, and he becomes very strongly associated with the character of Jeremiah from this point. The written scroll or book provides a way in which the words of Jeremiah can be uttered in the precincts of the temple itself, although Jeremiah himself is not permitted access.

The scroll can represent Jeremiah's message, and Baruch can be his mouthpiece. The contents of this initial scroll have been debated. Some have suggested that it contained the material of chapters 1 to 6, which seems unlikely.

Others, that it contained the material from the beginning of chapter 1 to the first half of verse 13 of chapter 25. Jack Lumbum disputes this and suggests that it was most likely chapters 1 to 20, at least in some initial form.

[ 7 : 00 ] The scroll is an important actor within this chapter. Walter Brueggemann writes, From now on, establishment leadership must face a book which relentlessly places established power in jeopardy.

The scroll is so much more difficult to resist because it cannot, like a person, be intimidated, banished or destroyed. It keeps reappearing. John Goldingay makes a similar point.

Spoken words are one thing. They can get lost. They can be denied. Words in writing are another. Putting something into writing makes it more definite. If there are words about the future and statements of intent, they become more certain, more fixed.

Jehoiakim knows it. He burns the scroll to stop it from coming true. It's a naive gesture, but it's a meaningful one. It fits that Jeremiah then simply re-dictates the scroll and adds lots more words to it.

That closing note makes one shiver, not least for Jehoiakim. The written word will find fulfillment. This book will later be part of a larger gathering of the scriptures themselves.

[ 8 : 02 ] Like this scroll of Jeremiah, it matters that the scriptures are written down. Their being in writing, scriptures, gives them a character more independent from the prophets and others who first delivered their words.

The scroll is delivered in the hope that people will be receptive to the word, that they will repent, and as a result be spared the disaster that the Lord would otherwise bring upon them. The day chosen for its reading seems to have been chosen for this end.

This was not one of the regular feasts, but was an occasional day of fasting, presumably because the nation was facing some peculiar peril. In this context, where a large number of the people had gathered together, and they were in a penitential state of mind, they might be in the best state of mind to hear such a challenging prophecy.

As large numbers of the people of Judah are gathered together for this particular fast, Baruch reads out the scroll in their hearing, in the chamber of Gemariah the son of Shaphan the secretary.

Shaphan the secretary was an important figure during the reign of Josiah, and various members of his family appear on several occasions during the story of the book of Jeremiah, often helping Jeremiah at key points.

[ 9 : 08 ] Back at the end of chapter 26, a heikon, one of Shaphan's sons, helped to deliver Jeremiah from death. We don't know the exact manner of this reading, whether Baruch just stood up and read the scroll, or whether there was a scheduled, officially authorized reading at a particular point.

Gemariah himself wasn't present to hear the reading of the scroll, but his son, Micaiah, was. Hearing the words of the scroll, he knew that it was important for the leaders of the people to hear, so he brought word of it to the king's house, to the high officials in the secretary's chamber.

Gemariah the son of Shaphan is a person for whom we have independent archaeological evidence, in the form of an inscription on a seal impression. Micaiah reported the words of Jeremiah's scroll to them, the words that he had heard Baruch reading.

Having heard about the contents of the scroll, the officials then send Jehudai to summon Baruch to their company. Surprisingly, we are given three generations of Jehudai's ancestry. This reveals that he is a descendant of an Ethiopian.

Having summoned Baruch to them, they instruct him to sit down and read the scroll. And when he reads the scroll, their response is one of fear. They take the words seriously and believe that it should be reported to the king.

[ 10 : 18 ] However, before they do so, they want to be clear about the origin of the scroll, that it is not a hoax or otherwise some document purporting to be something more than it actually is. Baruch confirms that he received the word from Jeremiah, that the words were directly dictated to him, and he wrote them down with ink on the scroll.

The officials, presumably knowing that Jehoiakim will not hear the words favourably, instruct Baruch and Jeremiah to hide themselves and not tell anyone where they are. The fact that the officials themselves do not know where Baruch and Jeremiah will hide will also help to protect them from the king.

To understand their concern to hide Baruch and Jeremiah, we might think back to chapter 26, where Uriah, the prophet from Kiriath-Jerim, had to flee from Jehoiakim into Egypt.

And then Jehoiakim sent men to kill him there. In that account, we are told that the words of Uriah were very much like those of Jeremiah. The officials know how dangerous it is to be a faithful prophet in this sort of situation.

All the evidence, however, suggests that they are on the side of Jeremiah and Baruch. They might also be thankful for the presence of this scroll. The scroll has an independent character to it. It is not a prophet that can be killed in the same way, and it declares warnings and judgments that perhaps even they, as high officials, had tried to bring to the king in their own capacity.

[ 11 : 35 ] Now they have a further testimony that they can draw upon. They don't bring the scroll to the king, but leave it in the chamber of Elisha, the secretary, and then report the words upon it to the king. Much as the officials had done with the message of Micaiah, however, the king sends Jehudai to bring the scroll to him.

Perhaps the officials intentionally preferred a situation where the king had to summon the scroll to himself, rather than their bringing it to him. As Jehudai reads the scroll to the king, however, the king cuts off bits that he has finished reading and throws them into the fire.

After Jehudai has finished reading, the entirety of Jeremiah's scroll has been committed to the flames. Gemariah and a number of the other leading officials try to urge the king not to destroy the scroll, but he doesn't listen to them.

The king's response contrasts with that of his officials. He's not fearful, as they were, and he does not tear his clothes, rather he tears the document. The king then sends men to seize Baruch and Jeremiah, but the Lord protects them.

Jehoiakim's attempt to silence the word of the Lord is entirely in vain. After the first scroll has been burnt, the word of the Lord comes to Jeremiah again, and he is instructed to take another scroll and write all the words upon it again.

[ 12 : 45 ] Perhaps here we might recall another significant document that we read of in scripture, the tablets of stone. The first tablets of stone were broken by Moses as a result of the people's sin with the golden calf, and then another set were given.

Here, once again, the rejected covenant word leads to judgment. The initial document had been given with the hope that there would be repentance, and that the Lord would relent from the judgment that he was going to bring.

Now, however, the declaration of judgment is strengthened. Jeremiah takes the other scroll, and at his dictation, Baruch writes down all of the words of the previous scroll, and many more like them.

The initial judgment is not only made more sure, it is intensified. A question to consider. Where else in the scriptures do we read of very specific documents containing part of the biblical text?

What are some of the various ways in which these specific copies of parts of the scripture function?