

Jeremiah 39: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Jeremiah chapter 39. In the ninth year of Zedekiah king of Judah, in the tenth month, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and all his army came against Jerusalem and besieged it.

In the eleventh year of Zedekiah, in the fourth month, on the ninth day of the month, a breach was made in the city. Then all the officials of the king of Babylon came and sat in the middle gate. Nergal Sar-Ezar of Samgar, Nebu Sar-Sekim the Rapsaris, Nergal Sar-Ezar the Rabmag, with all the rest of the officers of the king of Babylon. When Zedekiah king of Judah and all the soldiers saw them, they fled, going out of the city at night by way of the king's garden through the gate between the two walls, and they went toward the Araba. But the army of the Chaldeans pursued them and overtook Zedekiah in the plains of Jericho, and when they had taken him, they brought him up to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon at Riblah in the land of Hamath, and he passed sentence on him.

The king of Babylon slaughtered the sons of Zedekiah at Riblah before his eyes, and the king of Babylon slaughtered all the nobles of Judah. He put out the eyes of Zedekiah and bound him in chains to take him to Babylon. The Chaldeans burned the king's house and the house of the people and broke down the walls of Jerusalem. Then Nebu Zerdan, the captain of the guard, carried into exile to Babylon the rest of the people who were left in the city, those who had deserted him, and the people who remained.

Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon gave command concerning Jeremiah through Nebuchadnezzar, the captain of the guard, saying, Take him, look after him well, and do him no harm, but deal with him as he tells you.

So Nebuchadnezzar the captain of the guard, Nebuchadnezzar the Rabsaris, Nergal Sariza the Radmach, and all the chief officers of the king of Babylon, sent and took Jeremiah from the court of the guard. They entrusted him to Gedaliah the son of Ahicham, son of Shaphan, that he should take him home, so he lived among the people. The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah while he was shut up in the court of the guard. Go and say to Ebed-Melech the Ethiopian, thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel. Behold, I will fulfill my words against this city for harm and not for good, and they shall be accomplished before you on that day. But I will deliver you on that day, declares the Lord, and you shall not be given into the hand of the men of whom you are afraid. For I will surely save you, and you shall not fall by the sword, but you shall have your life as a prize of war, because you have put your trust in me, declares the Lord. Chapters 37 and 38 of Jeremiah concern Jeremiah's personal trials. In chapter 39 there's a break in the prophet's personal narrative to give an account of the fall of the city. The account here is similar to that in chapter 52. Jack Lumbum suggests that chapter 39 verse 1 to 40 verse 6 might have initially served to close off an earlier version of the book. He notes the parallels between the account of this and the final chapter in chapter 52. Jerusalem's fall, Zedekiah's capture, the death of key citizens, exile for others, and the parallel between the release of Jeremiah and the release of Jehoiachin. The account also completes the period of time that's mentioned in chapter 1 verses 1 to 3. The words of Jeremiah the son of Hilkiah, one of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, to whom the word of the Lord came in the days of Josiah the son of Ammon, king of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign. It came also in the days of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of

[3 : 34] Judah, and until the end of the eleventh year of Zedekiah the son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the captivity of Jerusalem in the fifth month. The siege of Jerusalem began in 588 BC. Nebuchadnezzar's army came up against the city. It seems that Nebuchadnezzar was headquartered at Ribla in the north in the land of Hamath, in the region of Syria, as he was fighting against Judah. Just over 20 years previously, Jehoahaz had been brought before Pharaoh Necho there in 609 BC. Ribla then seems to have been a significant location both for Egyptian and Babylonian campaigns. During this period, Nebuchadnezzar was dealing with Egypt and western Syria at the same time as Judah, so Judah wasn't the only thing on his mind. The fall of Jerusalem has been anticipated for a long time in the book of Jeremiah, and now it's finally taking place. Determining the exact year of its fall depends upon questions concerning the chronology that one follows. It seems most likely that it was in 586 BC. As the city falls, chief officials of Babylon take up their place and sit in the middle gate, a place of judgment.

All of this goes to fulfill the word of the Lord given at the beginning of the book. In the call of Jeremiah, at the beginning of the book, in chapter 1 verses 13 to 15, we read, The word of the Lord came to me a second time, saying, What do you see? And I said, I see a boiling pot facing away from the north. Then the Lord said to me, Out of the north disaster shall be let loose upon all the inhabitants of the land. For behold, I am calling all the tribes of the kingdoms of the north, declares the Lord. And they shall come, and everyone shall set his throne at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem, against all its walls all around, and against all the cities of Judah.

It also fulfilled the prophecy of chapter 21 verse 4. Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, Behold, I will turn back the weapons of war that are in your hands, and with which you are fighting against the king of Babylon, and against the Chaldeans who are besieging you outside the walls, and I will bring them together into the midst of this city. As King Zedekiah and his soldiers see the enemy coming into the city, they flee. Likely after hiding for some time, they go out of the city at night, by way of the king's garden, probably using some postern that was hidden from the enemy.

Fleeing from the south of the city, they head towards the Araba. While the Araba can be used to refer to the whole Rith Valley going from the Sea of Galilee to the Gulf of Aqaba, here it likely refers more specifically to the Arad region south of Jericho. King Zedekiah's likely intent is to cross the Jordan and take refuge with the Ammonites, or perhaps to take refuge in caves on the west bank of the Dead Sea.

As Lumbum observes, David had taken a similar escape route during the coup of Absalom. This fulfills in part the symbolic action that was performed by Ezekiel in Ezekiel chapter 12 verses 3 to 12.

[6 : 26] As for you, son of man, prepare for yourself an exile's baggage, and go into exile by day in their sight. You shall go like an exile from your place to another place in their sight.

Perhaps they will understand, though they are a rebellious house. You shall bring out your baggage by day in their sight, as baggage for exile, and you shall go out yourself at evening in their sight, as those do who must go into exile. In their sight dig through the wall, and bring your baggage out through it. In their sight you shall lift the baggage upon your shoulder, and carry it out at dusk. You shall cover your face, that you may not see the land, for I have made you a sign for the house of Israel. And I did as I was commanded. I brought out my baggage by day as baggage for exile, and in the evening I dug through the wall with my own hands.

I brought out my baggage at dusk, carrying it on my shoulder in their sight. In the morning the word of the Lord came to me, Son of man, has not the house of Israel, the rebellious house, said to you, What are you doing? Say to them, Thus says the Lord God, This oracle concerns the prince in Jerusalem, and all the house of Israel who are in it. Say, I am a sign for you, as I have done, so shall it be done to them. They shall go into exile, into captivity. And the prince who is among them shall lift his baggage upon his shoulder at dusk, and shall go out. They shall dig through the wall to bring him out through it. He shall cover his face, that he may not see the land with his eyes.

King Zedekiah, having rejected the word of the Lord through Jeremiah, the instruction to surrender himself to the king of Babylon, now falls into the king of Babylon's hands and faces a far more devastating fate. His sons are killed before his eyes, cutting off his line. The nobles of his court are killed, and then his own eyes are removed, and he is taken in chains to Babylon. As his eyes are removed, the last sight that he has seen is the devastating sight of the death of all of his sons.

As his eyes are removed, and he is taken to Babylon, we might see some fulfillment of Ezekiel chapter 12 verse 13, which speaks cryptically of what's about to take place. And I will spread my net over him, and he shall be taken in my snare, and I will bring him to Babylon, the land of the Chaldeans. Yet he shall not see it, and he shall die there. After Jerusalem falls to the Babylonians, the king's house and the house of the people are burned with fire, and the walls of the city are broken down. Jerusalem has ceased to be a city. Over the last 120 years, Judah has gradually been whittled down. Forty-six cities had fallen in Sennacherib's campaign back in 701 BC. Many of those cities would not have been built up again. Then there had been another devastating defeat in 597 BC, and now in this final great blow, Jerusalem falls, its walls are broken down, and it ceases to be a city.

[9 : 16] The remainder of the people in the city, the deserters and those who are taken as prisoners of war, and other remaining people are taken as prisoners to Babylon. The remainder of the people here are probably artisans, metal workers, stone workers, and any remaining military men.

Chapter 52 refers to a number of different stages of deportation. The first wave of the deportations comes in 597 BC, the second wave in 586, and the third wave in 582, likely after the killing of Gedaliah.

We have different numbers for the people taken in the deportation in different parts of scripture. The differences between them probably depend upon who's being counted. The ruling classes, the skilled craftsmen, and the men of war are included in some, whereas others might only include the ruling classes. Judah is stripped of its might, it's stripped of its leaders, it's stripped of its military, it's stripped of its skilled craftsmen, the metal workers, the stonemasons, and others who might build up its strength once more. However, much of the land is given to the poor and the destitute within it. Having received their land from the king of Babylon, they were likely to be more loyal to him.

One of the reasons why Judah was judged and put into exile was their failure to give the land its Sabbaths. Here we might have an indication of another reason, their failure to perform the year of Jubilee, during which ancestral land was returned to those who had lost it. Earlier in the reign of Zedekiah, there had been a short-lived covenant in which rich Judahites released their Hebrew slaves.

Here, in the Lord's providence, through the king of Babylon, the land is being returned to poor people who had been denied it. As they submitted themselves to the king of Babylon, they would have peace and enjoy the fruit of the land. In this, the Lord was making them the beneficiaries of a great Sabbath.

[11 : 00] They were also enjoying the benefit promised in Jeremiah chapter 27 verse 11. But any nation that will bring its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon and serve him, I will leave on its own land to work it and dwell there, declares the Lord.

Nebuchadnezzar gives explicit command concerning Jeremiah through Nebuchadnezzar, the captain of his guard. How Nebuchadnezzar has heard about Jeremiah, we can only speculate, perhaps through messages that Jeremiah sent to the exiles in Babylon. Perhaps it was from defectors who reported the message of Jeremiah, what he had declared concerning submission to the king of Babylon. By treating people like Jeremiah and the poor of the land well, King Nebuchadnezzar would reduce the amount of force that he would have to use against the people of the land. As he treated people like Jeremiah well, there would be a lot more support for him and a much lower likelihood of rebellion. Jeremiah is entrusted to Gedaliah the son of Ahicham the son of Shaphan. Shaphan was the father of a scribal family of great significance in the book of Jeremiah. He was present for the discovery of the book of the law under the reign of Josiah. His son Ahicham mentioned here interceded on behalf of Jeremiah in his trial in chapter 26. As the fate of Jerusalem is described, we might wonder what became of Ebed-Melech, the Ethiopian who delivered Jeremiah from the pit. At the end of this chapter, going back a little while, we learn that the word of the Lord had come to Jeremiah while he was in the court of the guard. Through Jeremiah, the Lord assured Ebed-Melech that he would not fall into the hand of the Babylonians. Even as the city fell, he would be delivered. On account of his faithfulness and his trust, he would escape the great downfall with his life. A question to consider.

In 2 Chronicles chapter 36 verses 20 to 21 we read, He took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah until the land had enjoyed its Sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate, it kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years. And then Leviticus chapter 26 verses 33 to 35 and verse 43. And I will scatter you among the nations, and I will unsheathe the sword after you, and your land shall be a desolation, and your city shall be a waste. Then the land shall enjoy its Sabbaths as long as it lies desolate, while you are in your enemy's land. Then the land shall rest and enjoy its Sabbaths. As long as it lies desolate, it shall have rest, the rest that it did not have on your Sabbaths when you were dwelling in it. But the land shall be abandoned by them, and enjoy its Sabbaths while it lies desolate without them. And they shall make amends for their iniquity, because they spurned my rules, and their soul abhorred my statutes. How might the giving over of the land of

Judah to the poor in this chapter, and the judgment concerning their failure to keep Sabbath, help us to understand the purpose of the Lord in giving the land to them in the first place, and how they had failed in the way that they had acted within it.