

Jeremiah 40: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Jeremiah chapter 40. The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord after Nebuchadnezzar the captain of the guard had let him go from Ramah, when he took him bound in chains along with all the captors of Jerusalem and Judah who were being exiled to Babylon. The captain of the guard took Jeremiah and said to him, The Lord your God pronounced this disaster against this place.

The Lord has brought it about and has done as he said. Because you sinned against the Lord and did not obey his voice, this thing has come upon you. Now behold, I release you today from the chains on your hands. If it seems good to you to come with me to Babylon, come, and I will look after you well.

But if it seems wrong to you to come with me to Babylon, do not come. See, the whole land is before you. Go wherever you think it good and right to go. If you remain, then return to Gedaliah the son of Ahicham, son of Shaphan, whom the king of Babylon appointed governor of the cities of Judah, and dwell with him among the people. Or go wherever you think it right to go. So the captain of the guard gave him an allowance of food and a present, and let him go. Then Jeremiah went to Gedaliah the son of Ahicham at Mizpah, and lived with him among the people who were left in the land. When all the captains of the forces in the open country and their men heard that the king of Babylon had appointed Gedaliah the son of Ahicham governor in the land, and had committed to him men, women, and children, those of the poorest of the land, who had not been taken into exile in Babylon, they went to Gedaliah at Mizpah. Ishmael the son of Nethaniah, Johanan the son of Korea, Sariah the son of Tanhumeth, the sons of Ephiath and Netaphathite, Jezaniah the son of the Maacathite, they and their men.

Gedaliah the son of Ahicham, son of Shaphan, swore to them and their men, saying, Do not be afraid to serve the Chaldeans. Dwell in the land and serve the king of Babylon, and it shall be well with you.

As for me, I will dwell at Mizpah, to represent you before the Chaldeans who will come to us. But as for you, gather wine and summer fruits and oil, and store them in your vessels, and dwell in your cities that you have taken. Likewise, when all the Judeans who were in Moab, and among the Ammonites, and in Edom, and in other lands, heard that the king of Babylon had left a remnant in Judah, and had appointed Gedaliah the son of Ahicham, son of Shaphan, as governor over them, then all the Judeans returned from all the places to which they had been driven, and came to the land of Judah, to Gedaliah at Mizpah, and they gathered wine and summer fruits in great abundance.

[2 : 2 4] Now Johanan the son of Korea, and all the leaders of the forces in the open country, came to Gedaliah at Mizpah, and said to him, Do you know that Baalus, the king of the Ammonites, has sent Ishmael the son of Nethaniah to take your life? But Gedaliah the son of Ahicham would not believe them.

Then Johanan the son of Korea spoke secretly to Gedaliah at Mizpah, Please let me go and strike down Ishmael the son of Nethaniah, and no one will know it. Why should he take your life, so that all the Judeans who are gathered about you would be scattered, and the remnant of Judah would perish?

But Gedaliah the son of Ahicham said to Johanan the son of Korea, You shall not do this thing, for you are speaking falsely of Ishmael. In chapter 40 of Jeremiah, the disaster that has long been anticipated has fallen upon Jerusalem. It has been captured by the Babylonians, its walls have been destroyed, its rulers, its aristocracy, its craftsmen, its mighty men have all been deported to Babylon, and the small remnant of leaders that are left have to form a new government, a new order submitted to the king of Babylon, with those that remain. The few remaining rulers and members of the aristocracy have to establish a new life in the land, and much of the land is now given into the hands of those who were formerly dispossessed of the Judahites. In such figures we see something of the obverse of the bringing down of the mighty that the captivity in Babylon represents. As the mighty are brought down, the poor are raised up. The defeat and the exile of Judah is not bad news for everyone in the land.

There are not a few for whom it will represent an improvement in their material conditions, Jeremiah being one of them. Jack Lumbum has suggested the possibility that chapter 39 verse 1 to 40 verse 6 closed off an earlier edition of the book of Jeremiah. He notes the parallels between these passages in chapter 52, which also recounts the fall of Babylon, followed by a more positive reversal of fates for another character at the end. In chapter 40 verses 1 to 6, Jeremiah is released and he's given an allowance of food. A similar thing happens to King Jehoiakim in chapter 52 verses 31 to 34, and in the 37th year of the exile of Jehoiakim king of Judah, in the 12th month, on the 25th day of the month, evil Meridat king of Babylon, in the year that he began to reign, graciously freed Jehoiakim king of Judah, and brought him out of prison. And he spoke kindly to him, and gave him a seat above the seats of the kings who were with him in Babylon. So Jehoiakim put off his prison garments, and every day of his life he dined regularly at the king's table. And for his allowance, a regular allowance was given him by the king, according to his daily needs, until the day of his death, as long as he lived.

Nebuchadnezzar, the captain of the guard, had been instructed to show special favour to Jeremiah, and to release him. Surprisingly here, in verses 2 and 3, he repeats Jeremiah's own theology to him.

[5 : 13] The Lord your guard pronounced this disaster against this place. The Lord has brought it about, and has done as he said. Because you sinned against the Lord, and did not obey his voice, this thing has come upon you. We need not assume that Nebuchadnezzar was a believer in the Lord, or that he held an accurate theology. This statement may have been a shrewd statement within Jeremiah's own theological framework to keep him and the Judahites in their place.

Whatever his intention, it serves to confirm the word of the Lord that he had delivered through Jeremiah. In the events of the preceding chapter, it has all come to pass. The word of the Lord, and also his prophet, have been vindicated. Being released, Jeremiah is given the freedom to go wherever he would like. He can go with Nebuchadnezzar and the rest of the captives to Babylon, where he will be treated well, or he can stay in the land under the governorship of Gedaliah.

As the rest of the nation is experiencing extreme captivity, Jeremiah is now set at liberty, given the choice of his preferred course. At this point, there are three paths open to many of the Judahites and to Jeremiah. Either they can be radically subservient to the king of Babylon, to throw in their lot with Babylon completely and take on their ways, or they can take the path of rebellion, or in obedient submission to the king of Babylon, they can seek to establish their own faithful life within the land. Jeremiah, while advocating for submission to the king of Babylon, had always been concerned that Judah would pursue faithfulness, retaining its distinct identity.

Rejecting the way of rebellion while remaining in the land under the governorship of Gedaliah seems to be the most promising course at this point. The task facing Gedaliah is a challenging one. He represents some continuity. He is from a prominent Jerusalem family of scribes, the grandson of Shaphan, one of Josiah's chief men. Throughout the book of Jeremiah, his family has been very supportive of Jeremiah. As a moderate figure of the Jerusalem establishment, he would be among those best placed to retain some continuity with the past regime, but would also be well situated to deal with the Babylonians. His problems, of course, are many.

To many in the land, he would be seen as a traitor, someone leading a sort of Vichy government. To a number of those nearest to him, he would be seen as a threat. They had been stripped of much of their power, privilege, and possessions, while he had been advanced ahead of them. And then on his borders, he's facing people like the Ammonites, who are deeply concerned that a functioning satellite government to Babylon is not established near to their own borders. In chapter 27, Ammonite princes had been among the delegations in Jerusalem plotting rebellion against the king of Babylon.

[7 : 43] King Zedekiah had likely also been intending to flee to Ammon in the preceding chapter. These threats, coupled together, would ultimately prove to be Gedaliah's downfall. Baalist, the king of the Ammonites, sent Ishmael, a deposed member of the Judahite royal family, to kill Gedaliah. At this point, however, Gedaliah is trying to get a functioning governorship off the ground. He gathers the people to him at Mizpah. Mizpah, the place where Samuel had ruled from, and the place where Saul was anointed king, is now the capital instead of Jerusalem.

Gathering leading men to him, Gedaliah instructs them to focus upon the economy of the land, to ensure that the people, in submission to the king of Babylon, are re-establishing the agriculture of the land, and also resettling its cities. If they peacefully submit to the yoke of the king of Babylon in this manner, they can prosper, and they can also enjoy peace.

The important thing that he instructs them to do is to leave the politics to him. He will act as their political advocate to the Babylonians, speaking on their behalf. Gedaliah seems to be concerned to present his rule as speaking on behalf of the Judahite people to the Babylonians, rather than being an expression of the Babylonians' power over them. If they submit to the king of Babylonians' rule, there really need be no trouble for them. They can return to regular life, they can gather in their harvests, they can dwell securely in their settlements, and there will be no need for them to fear another great disruption. Accustomed as we are to seeing the exile purely in terms of being uprooted from the land, being sent into captivity, and the land being laid waste, it can be surprising for us to recognize that for many, the exile was a chance at a homecoming. The poor and the dispossessed of the land could finally own property and be settled, and many former refugees, seeing that peace and security had been established under the Babylonians, returned to the land and settled there once more. Furthermore, after a long period of divine judgment upon the fruitfulness of the land and the experience of famine and pestilence during the siege, now the people are gathering the fruit of the land in great abundance. However, Gedaliah's governorship was not to last. The first warning comes in the form of an intelligence from Johanan and other leaders of the forces in the country. Johanan informs

Gedaliah that Baalus, the king of the Ammonites, has conspired against him, and sent Ishmael, the son of Nethanar, to kill him. Ishmael, as a member of the deposed royal family, presumably has a personal grudge, and Ishmael's personal ambitions and interests obviously align with the concerns of Baalus, who is worried about the encroachment of Babylonian power upon his region. Johanan pleads with Gedaliah to allow him to kill Ishmael. He is greatly concerned that if Ishmael's plot should succeed, that the fall of the governorship of Gedaliah would bring devastating consequences for all of the people in the land.

If a pre-emptive strike against Ishmael would prevent this great disaster, why not attempt it? No one need know. Gedaliah, however, does not believe the word of Johanan or accept his counsel.

[10:37] A question to consider. In our own day and age, Christians who once enjoyed considerable cultural power find themselves increasingly marginalised. In such a situation we may find ourselves facing comparable choices to the people of Jeremiah's day. Do we submit to non-Christian governments and seek to be faithful under them? Or do we seek to take back control for ourselves? Or do we seek to accommodate ourselves to the new powers as much as possible, adopting their ways and their values?

How might the book of Jeremiah assist us in our thinking about these questions?