

Jeremiah 46: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Jeremiah chapter 46. The word of the Lord that came to Jeremiah the prophet concerning the nations. About Egypt. Concerning the army of Pharaoh Necho, king of Egypt, which was by the river Euphrates at Carchemish, and which Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, defeated in the fourth year of Jehoiakim, the son of Jeziel, king of Judah. Prepare buckler and shield, and advance for battle.

Harness the horses. Mount, O horsemen. Take your stations with your helmets. Polish your spears. Put on your armor. Why have I seen it? They are dismayed and have turned backward.

Their warriors are beaten down and have fled in haste. They look not back. Terror on every side, declares the Lord. The swift cannot flee away, nor the warrior escape. In the north, by the river Euphrates, they have stumbled and fallen. Who is this rising like the Nile, like rivers whose waters surge? Egypt rises like the Nile, like rivers whose waters surge. He said, I will rise, I will cover the earth. I will destroy cities and their inhabitants. Advance, O horses, and rage, O chariots. Let the warriors go out. Men of Kush and Put, who handle the shield. Men of Lud, skilled in handling the bow.

That day is the day of the Lord God of hosts, a day of vengeance, to avenge himself on his foes. The sword shall devour and be sated, and drink its fill of their blood. For the Lord God of hosts holds the sacrifice in the north country by the river Euphrates. Go up to Gilead and take balm, O virgin daughter of Egypt. In vain you have used many medicines. There is no healing for you. The nations have heard of your shame, and the earth is full of your cry. For warrior has stumbled against warrior.

They have both fallen together. The word that the Lord spoke to Jeremiah the prophet about the coming of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon to strike the land of Egypt. Declare in Egypt, and proclaim in Migdal, proclaim in Memphis and Tappanese. Say, Stand ready and be prepared, for the sword shall devour around you.

[2 : 0 6] Why are your mighty ones face down? They do not stand, because the Lord thrust them down. He made many stumble, and they fell, and they said one to another, Arise and let us go back to our own people, and to the land of our birth, because of the sword of the oppressor. Call the name of Pharaoh king of Egypt, noisy one who lets the hour go by. As I live, declares the king, whose name is the Lord of hosts. Like Tabor among the mountains, and like Carmel by the sea shall one come. Prepare yourselves baggage for exile, O inhabitants of Egypt. For Memphis shall become a waste, a ruin without inhabitant. A beautiful heifer is Egypt, but a biting fly from the north has come upon her.

Even her hired soldiers in her midst are like fattened calves. Yes, they have turned and fled together. They did not stand, for the day of their calamity has come upon them, the time of their punishment. She makes a sound like a serpent gliding away, for her enemies march in force, and come against her with axes. Like those who fell trees, they shall cut down her forest, declares the Lord. Though it is impenetrable, because they are more numerous than locusts, they are without number. The daughter of Egypt shall be put to shame. She shall be delivered into the hand of a people from the north. The Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, said, Behold, I am bringing punishment upon Ammon of Thebes, and Pharaoh and Egypt, and her gods and her kings, upon Pharaoh and those who trust in him. I will deliver them into the hand of those who seek their life, into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and his officers. Afterward Egypt shall be inhabited as in the days of old, declares the Lord. But fear not, O Jacob my servant, nor be dismayed, O Israel. For behold, I will save you from far away, and your offspring from the land of their captivity. Jacob shall return and have quiet and ease, and none shall make him afraid. Fear not, O Jacob my servant, declares the Lord.

For I am with you. I will make a full end of all the nations to which I have driven you. But of you I will not make a full end. I will discipline you in just measure, and I will by no means leave you unpunished. The prophecies of Jeremiah were not just delivered to Judah. In Jeremiah chapters 46 to 51, we read Jeremiah's prophecies to the nations, beginning in chapter 46 with the prophecy to Egypt.

In his original call back in Jeremiah chapter 1, Jeremiah had been set apart as a prophet to the nations. Verse 5, Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you. I appointed you a prophet to the nations. And in verses 9 to 10, 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. Jeremiah isn't unique in prophesying concerning many nations. As Robert Carroll, for instance, notes, such collections of prophecies are common to all of the major prophetic anthologies, and can also be found in several of the minor prophets. They are also found in pagan works of the ancient Near East. So as a genre of prophecy, it wasn't limited to prophets of the Lord. Such prophecies, for instance, could bring comfort in wartime. They might offer the reassurance that some enemy is about to be brought down. Of course, the case of Egypt, with which chapter 46 is concerned, was more complicated in the days of Jehoiakim. Although the foreign policy of Judah fluctuated, it seems as though the pro-Egypt camp would have been more dominant at the time of this prophecy. So the word that Jeremiah brings is not an encouraging one to the leaders of Judah.

It would serve as a judgment and a rebuke upon their misguided hopes. At the beginning of Jeremiah chapter 27, we also see Jeremiah speaking to foreign kings through their delegates. So we should not assume that the words of these prophecies were not heard by the leaders of the countries concerning whom they are spoken. Further collections of prophecies concerning foreign kingdoms can be found in places like Isaiah chapters 13 to 23 and Ezekiel chapters 25 to 32. The first couple of chapters of Amos are another good example of this in the minor prophets. When the whole region is in upheaval and we've been told that Jerusalem and Judah are going to be brought down, these prophecies evidence the fact that the Lord is still in charge. God is sovereign over all of the nations. There are two main editions of the book of Jeremiah. One is from Egypt, which is preserved in the Septuagint, and the other is from Babylon. It's the version in our Bibles. In the Septuagint version of Jeremiah, the oracles against the nations are situated earlier in the book, positioned after the first half of chapter 25 verse 13.

[7 : 03] In that edition, verses 15 to 38 of chapter 25 of our edition function as the conclusion of the oracles against the nations. The composition of the book of Jeremiah seemingly occurred through several stages. We have very good reason to believe that material has been shifted from one point to another at various points in the book and in various stages of its composition. In the Septuagint, the prophecies also occur in a different order. Elam, Egypt, Babylon, Philistia, Edom, Ammon, Kedar, Hazor, Damascus, and Moab. The likely later order in the text of our Bibles makes more sense.

It largely follows the order of chapter 25 verses 15 to 26, the text that follows the oracles against the nations in the Septuagint. 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, Timur, Buzz, 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. In chapters 46 to 51,

Egypt begins the collection, and Babylon ends it. These are the two great powers in the region, Egypt in the south and Babylon in the north. Egypt's position also creates continuity with the chapters that proceed, which concern the descent of the unfaithful Judahite refugees into Egypt.

This oracle comes from a much earlier time than chapters 42 to 44, but we should consider the importance of Egypt in the later events. Egypt is the main alternative to Babylon, and during the final years of the northern kingdom of Judah, Egypt and Babylon are engaged in a regional struggle for supremacy. Judah is caught between these two powers. King Josiah was killed by Pharaoh Necho.

His replacement, Jehoahaz, was deported to Egypt where he died. The Egyptians established Jehoiakim in the place of Jehoahaz. After Jehoiakim, Jehoiakim was deported to Babylon. Zedekiah replaced Jehoiakim and then Zedekiah was later taken to Babylon. The final pages of Judah's history then is in the shadow of these two great powers, the one in the north and the one in the south.

[10 : 05] The context of the prophecy is the fourth year of Jehoiakim. Nebuchadnezzar will become king of Babylon in this year, and before then he will defeat the Egyptians at Carchemish. This is 605 BC.

Nineveh had fallen to the Babylonians and the Medes in 612 BC, and Haran had fallen in 610 BC, Pharaoh Necho came north to assist the Assyrians in 609 BC and killed Josiah on the way. The Egyptians took Carchemish that year, but were later crushed at Carchemish and Hamath by the Babylonians in 605 BC, led by Nebuchadnezzar, who was at that time the crown prince. He became the king of Babylon later that same year. Only a few years later, Babylon was so dominant that they were fighting with Egypt on their own borders in 601 to 600 BC. Nevertheless, that particular battle was not as successful as the Babylonians had hoped, and they had to go back to lick their wounds. The fourth year of Jehoiakim is mentioned on several occasions in the prophecy of Jeremiah. It's a pivotal year in the history.

It's the year that the tide begins to turn and the whole politics of the region shift. The Babylonians ascend, and the Egyptians recede. The oracle against Egypt begins with an ironic summons to battle. A great army is called to dress itself for battle. They must array themselves in all of their armour and bring all of their weaponry. The buckler, which was a smaller shield, mostly used to protect the face, and then the larger shield to protect the whole body. They must prepare their chariots and horses. They must put on their helmets. They must polish their lances and put on their chain mail. But this great summons to battle is ironic, because they are being summoned to their doom. All of this great preparation of armour and weaponry makes them seem like an indomitable force. They cannot be resisted, and yet they are summoned to a battle where they will be utterly routed. Right after the summons, we see them dismayed and running away. They are afflicted by terror on every side, and they don't look back as they flee and retreat. There are two rivers in conflict, the Euphrates and the Nile. The river of the Nile seeks to rise, but the forces of the Nile stumble and fall at the Euphrates. The great imperial ambitions of Egypt, seeking to rise like a great river and engulf all of the nations of the region, will not succeed. Verse 9 contains another ironic summons to battle. Egypt and its mercenaries are called upon. Cush is modern-day Ethiopia,

Put would be Libya, and Lud is probably the Ludim, which is the region of Lydia. These three groups are all mentioned back in Genesis chapter 10 in the Table of the Nations. It is the Lord behind the routing of the army of the Egyptians and their mercenaries. He is having a day of vengeance. Maybe we should see here the Lord avenging the death of Josiah upon the Egyptians. The battle is described like a great sacrifice that's being held, and the sword as something that's drinking up blood. We find similar imagery in Isaiah chapter 34 verses 5 to 7. For my sword has drunk its fill in the heavens.

Behold, it descends for judgment upon Edom, upon the people I have devoted to destruction. The Lord has a sword. It is sated with blood. It is gorged with fat, with the blood of lambs and goats, with the fat of the kidneys of rams. For the Lord has a sacrifice in Bozrah, a great slaughter in the land of Edom. While the oxen shall fall with them, and young steers with the mighty bulls, their land shall drink its fill of blood, and their soil shall be gorged with fat. In another ironic taunt, Egypt is called upon to go up to Gilead and take balm. And yet there is no healing for the nation of Egypt.

[13 : 43] Its wound is too great, and it has been ashamed in the presence of all of the nations. The verses that follow speak of a later period in the conflict between Babylon and Egypt. The battle of Carchemish has already occurred, and now Egypt is warned that war is going to come to its own borders. Frontier towns of Egypt like Migdal and Tapanes must take up the warning, and Memphis, the capital of Lower Egypt, must also take up the warning. While this is not yet an invasion, they are going to face significant losses and some humiliation. Verse 15 describes the mighty ones face down, or more likely the mighty bull face down. Likely a reference to the Egyptian bull guard, Apis, a case that Jack Lumbum makes in his commentary. The Lord has pushed over the Egyptian God, and he is powerless to resist the humiliation of his army. Egypt's mercenaries decide to return to their own lands, and Pharaoh himself is humiliated with a name that contrasts his bold and brave speech with his utter failure to take effective action in time. Noisy one who lets the hour go by. We see a similar humiliating name in Isaiah chapter 30 verse 7. Egypt's help is worthless and empty, therefore I have called her Rahab who sits still. Jerusalem herself had a humiliating name back in chapter 30 verse 17. For I will restore health to you, and your wounds I will heal, declares the Lord, because they have called you an outcast. It is Zion for whom no one cares. A greater humiliation yet awaits Egypt. Inhabitants of Memphis are warned to prepare themselves for exile. They should pack their bags because the Babylonians are going to come upon the city and carry many of them in captivity to Babylon. It is not clear when this prophecy was fulfilled. Josephus talks of the

Babylonians invading Egypt in 582 BC. That was the year of the final deportation of Judahite exiles to Babylon. The book of Ezekiel speaks of another attack upon Egypt in 571 to 570 BC. Babylonian records speak of a further attack in 568 BC. Egypt wasn't occupied by the Babylonians, but we do know that a great number of Egyptians were taken as captives to Babylon, and there are records of communities of Egyptian exiles in Babylon in the 6th century BC. In his coming upon them, the Lord compares himself to two prominent mountains within Israel, Tabor in the northeastern Jezreel valley, and Carmel by the sea. His glory is comparable to their prominence. Earlier the Lord spoke of the humiliation of Apis, the bull god of the Egyptians, and now Egypt is compared to a beautiful heifer, a heifer that is pursued by a biting fly from the north, the Babylonians. Similar language is found in Isaiah chapter 7 verse 18, ironically concerning the fly of Egypt. In that day the Lord will whistle for the fly that is at the end of the streams of Egypt, and for the bee that is in the land of Assyria.

Perhaps readers are also supposed to think of the myth of the god Io, who was transformed into a bull and pursued by a gadfly to Egypt. Egypt is going to suffer a similar fate. If Egypt is like a heifer, her hired soldiers are like fattened calves, prepared for a day of slaughter. From being compared to a bull, Egypt is now compared to a serpent that is slithering away trying to escape. After her come men with axes, ready to chop down her trees, her forests, but also her great cities. Much as Jerusalem is described at points, like a forest that is going to be felled by an opposing army, so cities of Egypt will suffer a similar fate. The imagery continues to accumulate. The axemen that are coming down to cut the forests of Egypt are more numerous than locusts. They are like a great devouring force, like a new plague that has come upon the land of the south. The judgment that is coming upon Egypt is a judgment that is brought by the Lord. It is a punishment that he is inflicting upon them. He is going to deliver them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians who seek their life. However, Egypt will not be utterly destroyed. After the assaults of the Babylonians, life in Egypt will be restored to what it was beforehand. Jeremiah's oracle concerning Egypt ends with an encouraging word to Judah.

Although exiles from Judah will be taken to Babylon and also to Egypt and others will flee to other lands, Judah as a people will not be wiped out. The time will come when the Lord will save them from far away and bring them back to the land, from the lands of their captivity. The Lord will deal decisively with all of the enemies raised up against them, but although he will punish Judah for all of its sins, he will not finally destroy them. A question to consider, where else in scripture do we have the language of rising waters, of rivers, or of seas as imagery of an opposing Gentile force?

