

Jeremiah 27: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Jeremiah chapter 27 This is what you shall say to your masters.

It is I who by my great power and my outstretched arm have made the earth, with the men and animals that are on the earth, and I give it to whomever it seems right to me. Now I have given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, my servant, and I have given him also the beasts of the field to serve him.

All the nations shall serve him, and his son and his grandson, until the time of his own land comes. Then many nations and great kings shall make him their slave. But if any nation or kingdom will not serve this Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and put its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon, I will punish that nation with the sword, with famine, and with pestilence, declares the Lord, until I have consumed it by his hand.

So do not listen to your prophets, your diviners, your dreamers, your fortune tellers, or your sorcerers, who are saying to you, you shall not serve the king of Babylon. For it is a lie that they are prophesying to you, with the result that you will be removed far from your land, and I will drive you out, and you will perish.

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. To Zedekiah king of Judah I spoke in like manner.

[1 : 5 1] Bring your necks under the yoke of the king of Babylon, and serve him and his people and live. Why will you and your people die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence, as the Lord has spoken concerning any nation that will not serve the king of Babylon?

Do not listen to the words of the prophets who are saying to you, you shall not serve the king of Babylon. For it is a lie that they are prophesying to you. I have not sent them, declares the Lord, but they are prophesying falsely in my name, with the result that I will drive you out, and you will perish, you and the prophets who are prophesying to you.

Then I spoke to the priests, and to all these people, saying, Thus says the Lord, Do not listen to the words of your prophets who are prophesying to you, saying, Behold, the vessels of the Lord's house will now shortly be brought back from Babylon.

For it is a lie that they are prophesying to you. Do not listen to them. Serve the king of Babylon and live. Why should this city become a desolation? If they are prophets, and if the word of the Lord is with them, then let them intercede with the Lord of hosts, that the vessels that are left in the house of the Lord, in the house of the king of Judah, and in Jerusalem, may not go to Babylon.

For thus says the Lord of hosts concerning the pillars, the sea, the stands, and the rest of the vessels that are left in this city, which Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon did not take away, when he took into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon, Jeconiah the son of Jehoiakim king of Judah, and all the nobles of Judah and Jerusalem.

[3 : 1 9] Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, concerning the vessels that are left in the house of the Lord, in the house of the king of Judah, and in Jerusalem, They shall be carried to Babylon, and remain there until the day when I visit them, declares the Lord.

Then I will bring them back and restore them to this place. Jeremiah chapters 27 to 29 form a unit, with Jeremiah in conflict with the false prophets.

Like the chapter that precedes them, Jeremiah chapters 27 to 28 have Jeremiah and the false prophets coming into collision over the question of the threats hanging over and the duration of the Lord's judgment upon Jerusalem.

These chapters also belong to what some have called the Zedekiah cluster of narrative material, along with chapter 24, the prophecy concerning the good and the bad figs. Chapter 27 could be divided into three separate sections.

The first is Jeremiah's address to the foreign envoys, the second Jeremiah's earlier address to king Zedekiah, and the third Jeremiah's address to the priests and all of the people. The chapter is set after 597 BC and the first deportation to Babylon.

[4 : 28] That event is described at the beginning of chapter 24. Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, had taken into exile from Jerusalem, Jeconiah the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, together with the officials of Judah, the craftsmen and the metal workers, and had brought them to Babylon.

Jeremiah had been in conflict with the false prophets for quite some time. Previously, they had denied that judgment was going to come upon the land. Now their insistence seemed to be that no further threat would arise against Jerusalem, and also that the former deportees would soon return.

This claim, we should note, appeals to God's power and commitment. However, it is founded upon a very mistaken understanding of the covenant and what it actually entailed. Once again, Jeremiah is instructed by the Lord to perform a symbolic action.

This time, he makes himself straps and yoke bars. Such yokes would be used for working animals, and here it is a sign of submission to the rule of another. On several other occasions in scripture, the yoke is a symbol of covenant.

The yoke is also a symbol that Christ takes up for his followers and disciples. My yoke is easy and my burden is light. At the start of Jeremiah's ministry, he was set apart for a ministry to the nations.

[5 : 42] In this chapter, we see the word of the Lord addressed quite directly to people beyond the land of Judah. It is likely that the envoys from the other nations were in Jerusalem in order to conspire together against the suzerainty of Babylon in the region.

Jeremiah's warning to them is that this effort will not be successful. Their choice is to submit to the king of Babylon and remain in their lands, or to rebel and be destroyed. The Lord addresses them as the one who is sovereign over all human affairs, the one who rules over the world of international politics, and also the one who is the creator of all things.

The Lord's universal providence is understood on the basis of his being the creator of all things. We encounter a similar statement in Isaiah chapter 45 verses 11 to 13.

Thus says the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, and the one who formed him, Ask me of things to come. Will you command me concerning my children and the work of my hands? I made the earth and created man on it.

It was my hands that stretched out the heavens, and I commanded all their host. I have stirred him up in righteousness, and I will make all his ways level. He shall build my city and set my exiles free, not for price or reward, says the Lord of hosts.

[6 : 55] Living in Judah and the surrounding nations, it would have been easy to think of yourself as pawns on the great playing field that's dominated by Egypt in the south, and by the great powers of the north, such as Assyria and Babylon.

It is their power that dominates your thought. They are the ones who shape the affairs of the region, and determine how things will play out. The message of Jeremiah is that this is not the case.

The Lord is in fact the one who's sovereign over the entire region. He's the one who's sovereign over the world, as the creator of all things. What happens to these nations is determined not by the king of Babylon, but by the Lord himself.

He gives a strong warning that they must submit to the king of Babylon, otherwise they will suffer the effects of resistance. The threats listed are the things that would naturally come upon a nation that is resisting this great empire.

Famine, pestilence and sword would be the fate of many in besieged cities. They must be particularly aware of the danger of listening to their prophets, diviners, dreamers, fortune-tellers and sorcerers who are telling them not to serve the king of Babylon.

[8 : 0 0] That is a losing proposition, and the people who are bringing this message are liars. However, driving home the point that it is not ultimately the king of Babylon who is in charge, in verse 7 we are told that Babylon's own time will come, and many nations and kings will make him their slave.

The actual rebellion does not seem to have effectively materialized, and a number of the kings mentioned here changed sides. The king of Edom turned against Judah in the time of its crisis. Moab and Ammon seem to have been subdued in 582 BC.

Tyre and Sidon seem to have submitted as vassals to Babylon. Jeremiah enacted this message wearing the yoke, and he brings the message to Zedekiah, the king of Judah, too. It is utterly pointless for Zedekiah and his people to die by the sword, famine and pestilence.

If they submit to the king of Babylon, they will be spared all of these things. Indeed, in submitting to the king of Babylon, they will be submitting to the word of the Lord. Of all of the prophets, Jeremiah is peculiarly challenged by false prophets prophesying in the name of the Lord.

The Lord has not sent these false prophets, yet they continue to bring false words of comfort in his name. They appeal to the authority of the Lord and his word, but their words are ultimately empty.

[9 : 1 4] This warning is sent to Zedekiah, and a similar one is spoken to the priests and all of the people. The priests in particular seem to have bought into the ideology that taught that Jerusalem was ultimately invulnerable, that the Lord was committed to it in such a way that all of the judgments it had recently experienced would soon be reversed, and that there was no real threat of a greater destruction.

More specifically, the prophets were saying that the vessels that had been taken away from the temple would soon be returned. Jeremiah, speaking in the name of the Lord, declares this message to be vain.

Indeed, it is a very dangerous message. If it leads them not to serve the king of Babylon, they will suffer a worse fate in the future. What they should really be worried about is not the failure of the treasures that they have lost to return, it is the loss of what still remains.

If they were true prophets, the prophets' efforts would be far better invested in interceding to the Lord, that the remaining treasures of the house of the Lord not be taken away to Babylon to join the rest.

However, immediately after raising this challenge, the Lord declares by Jeremiah that this too would be futile. The fate of the remaining treasures and vessels is already determined. They will go to Babylon.

[10 : 24] All of this is confirmed in the final chapter of the book, which seems to allude back to this point here, in verses 17 to 23, where the items that are taken from the house of the Lord are listed in detail.

The chapter, however, ends on a note of hope. The Lord will visit them, and he will bring back and restore the items to the temple that were taken away. The Lord, not the king of Babylon, is the true master of history.

A question to consider. Where else in the Old Testament can we see the word of the Lord being directly addressed to foreign nations?