

Jer. 29:7

Seek the welfare of the city

JEREMIAH 27:19:32, COMING TO TERMS WITH BABYLON

OVERVIEW

The literary unity of these chapters marked by linguistic peculiarities, a common date, and a focus on submission to Babylonian rule, including acceptance of the exile as been noted in the Overview of chaps. 26. They demonstrate the political and theological conflict that arose in Jerusalem and Judah indeed, among the surrounding peoples, who also chafed under the Babylonian yoke about whether or not it was possible to break free from Babylonian domination. The natural assumption, then and now, would be that **if such rebellion could be accomplished successfully, it should certainly take place. The harshness of the Babylonians needs no underscoring. In 597 BCE they had besieged Jerusalem and deported much of the leadership of the population as well as the treasures of the Temple. Clearly, any possibility of overthrowing Babylonian rule would be highly desirable. Not only is that view maintained among a large segment of the population, but there were also voices who deemed it possible, if not probable.**

The large thrust of this section is to say as loudly as possible that rebellion against Babylonian rule by the remaining elements in Judah or by its neighbors is not only impossible but also wrong. Babylonian domination and deportation of Judeans to Babylon is the work of the Lord, an act of judgment that cannot be set aside. There is only one thing to do: Accept the punishment and learn to live with it, because the Lord is still at work and there is a hopeful future out there. Meanwhile, do not try to thwart the judging activity of God or fall prey to false hopes raised by false prophets. The yoke of Babylon has been placed on Judah by the Lord. For a period of time, it must be worn.

It is possible that this stance represents a development in the prophecy of Jeremiah in the light of the events of 597. The call to submit to the yoke of Babylon in order to live is not reflected in the oracles of Jeremiah 10, where the word about Babylon is totally a word of destruction and exile. In 597 B.C., this language took on concrete form. It is only after the fulfillment of the prophetic word that a unique shift occurred in the prophet's perspective on the present and future. The concrete circumstances of 597 gave the prophet Jeremiah and his message a startling and forceful validation; at the same time, these circumstances gave rise to a distinct transformation of that message for the post 597 community in Judah who had experienced and survived the catastrophe. This transformation included a new focus directed toward the necessity of Judah's submission to Babylon, away from the often hyperbolic vision of military punishment as a judgment upon Judah's sins (Jer 9:10, 18, 21; 12:11; 14:8ff.). Jeremiah 27:1?8:17, The Yoke of Submission Link to: Jeremiah 27:1

<Page 778 ends>><Page 782 begins>>

COMMENTARY

Within the larger whole of chaps. 27?9, these two chapters are a subunit recounting a symbolic prophetic action that Jeremiah undertakes and interprets at length (chap. 27) and the counter-move

of another prophet, Hananiah, whose symbolic action seeks to reverse the force of Jeremiah's (chap. 28). Herein lies one of the classic OT accounts of the conflict of true and false prophecy. What Jeremiah's oracles have spoken about in much detail false prophets who oppose his message with words of peace vividly demonstrated in this narrative. The focus of the conflict is the matter of whether or not the word of the Lord is judgment (Jeremiah) or salvation (Hananiah). The specifics have to do with what is going to happen with regard to Babylonian control of Judah and, more specifically, with the temple vessels and treasures.

27:1-11. While the initial verse, missing from the Greek text of Jeremiah, seems to set this incident in the time of Jehoiakim, vv. 3 and 12 explicitly refer to Zedekiah, and vv. 16-22 presuppose that later time when the temple vessels have already been taken to Babylon. Thus the narrative, as v. 28 indicates, belongs in the reign of the last king of Judah, Zedekiah, sometime between 597 and 586 BCE. There is a conflict in the datings of 27:1 and 28:1 as to whether these events were understood as happening in the first year or the fourth year of Zedekiah's reign, and it is difficult to say which is correct.

Jeremiah is commanded to perform a simple but dramatic act, one that would be highly visible to the larger community. He is told to put on a yoke, customarily worn by oxen, and strap it to his neck (v. 2). This act is to symbolize the submission of Judah and other nations to the Babylonian yoke, an interpretation given in an extended divine speech addressed to emissaries of the kings of Edom and Moab, the Ammonites, and to Tyre and Sidon. The speech is a theologically reflective interpretation that underscores four points:

(1) The Lord of Israel is in control of history, as indicated by Yahweh's power-manifesting creation of the earth and all that inhabits it. This is an assertion of the claim of the Lord over the other nations and what happens to them. After all, they are part of the people and animals the Lord made (v. 5). The conclusion of this divine claim I give it to whomever I please (lit., I give it to whomever it seems right in my eyes to do provides the premise for the other themes.

(2) At this point in time and history, the Lord has given **בְּלִי תְּבִילָה** that is, **בְּלִי** || these lands **בְּלִי** to the Babylonian king Nebuchadrezzar (Nebuchadnezzar in chaps. 27:9). The assertion here is that **Babylonian domination is by the direct intent of the Lord, and the various nations of the area of Syria-Palestine will have to acknowledge this. Babylonian domination is neither an accident nor contrary to the intention of the creator God of Israel.** The claim I give/have given is reiterated three times in vv. 5-6. **This Babylonian hegemony will come to an end but not for a long time** (v. 7), a point that is regularly made about the Lord **שֶׁלֹּם** **בְּלִי** of the Babylonian Empire, but not the main point of this symbolic act and its interpretation. The glimmer of light in the tunnel is to be noticed but not dwelt upon; it is far down the road. The mistaken assumption being addressed in these words is that Judah and the other nations think they can see light just around the corner.

(3) **The only point that is made with more emphasis than the Lord's giving the lands and everything in them over to Nebuchadrezzar is the necessity for all their inhabitants to serve the king of Babylon. Seven times in these verses the verb serve is repeated. The point of the yoke around Jeremiah's neck is made abundantly clear: Neither rebellion nor false hopes of miraculous rescue is the order of the day. Failure of any of these nations to accept the necessity to subjugate themselves to Babylonian rule will mean an even worse fate** (v. 8b).

To be noted in this connection is the second time Nebuchadrezzar is called my servant by the Lord (cf. 25:9; 43:10). The designation probably arose out of a textual corruption in v. 6, where the text

probably read originally, מִן have given . . . into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, to serve him, reflecting a minor difference in the consonantal text of the Hebrew. The resulting phrase מִן y servant was then brought over into 25:9 and 43:10, effecting a theological understanding of Nebuchadnezzar as not merely the instrument of the Lord מִן judgment but, as the term

<Page 782 ends>><Page 783 begins>>

My servant implies, one who is in מִן conscious and mutual relationship which is characterized by humble submission, obedience, and dedication to Yahweh on the part of the servant.⁴⁷ Such an understanding probably comes from a later period when Nebuchadnezzar was described in the tradition as having come to a direct acknowledgment of the sovereignty of the Lord of Israel (Dan 2:47; 3:28-29; 4:34-35, 37).

(4) Do not listen to the prophets and others who think this submission to Babylon can be avoided. Jeremiah מִן reaction to the other prophets is consistent. The word of the Lord is once more that prophecies of a future without judgment are lies. They will be undone by the facts of the future. Furthermore, a decision relative to whose word will be confirmed is fraught with significance for the people. Submission to the yoke of Babylon will mean that those still in Judah can live on their land and survive. They can work their land and get a living off of it as they have done in the past (v. 11). The fulfillment of the words of doom in the first siege and in the exile of 597 leaves open the possibility of a future for those who survived that deportation and remain in Judah. Resistance to the Babylonian yoke will bring a certain end.

REFLECTIONS

1. The ground of the Lord's claim to be at work in the domination of Babylon over the states of Palestine is based on a succinct but powerful joining of creation and history into a single sphere over which the Lord's sovereignty is manifest. Nowhere, perhaps, is creation more explicitly a ground for history than here. Nowhere is history more directly an outcome of creation. The easy tendency to separate these two spheres creation and history, nature and culture's negated in this text as the activity of God in history, seen in the effecting of judgment through the agency of Babylon and its king is a manifestation of the creative power of God. The text is thus resistant to theologies of salvation history and God מִן mighty deeds as well as to those that see creation as the horizon of theology, at least in the Old Testament.¹⁵¹ The two are melded into one, creation and universal history, the particular activity of God in and through Israel and also the judgment of nations unrelated to Israel, the domination of a despotic ruler as the outcome of the power of God at work in creation. The divine speech in 27:4-11 begins in God מִן creative work and leads into the events of the early sixth century BCE as a manifestation of that creative power. Lest one forget that it is the work of the Creator that sets Babylon loose on these nations, the end of the divine speech in 27:11 returns to explicit creation language as the promise is made that any nation that properly submits to the yoke and מִן erves?(db[(Abad) the Babylonian king will be able to live on its מִן round?(hmda) adAm? cf. Genesis 1?) and מִן ill?((Abad) it, which is the human vocation, according to the story of God מִן creation (Gen 2:15; 4:2b). Submission to the Lord מִן rule of history, which is rooted in the creative power of God, leads to human life lived according to God מִן intent in the creation.

<Page 786 ends>><Page 787 begins>>

2. The maker of heaven and earth is the one who does with it whatever is the divine pleasure. That pleasure, as the NRSV translates the end of 27:5, is really a manifestation of the Lord's righteous control of history. Against human expectations and even human hopes, against prophetic claims and political machinations, the Lord defines what is right for the world. The rule of a tyrannical king is in this case a manifestation of the action of God in history and a conformity with the norm that is the Lord's own. This is a difficult message for the contemporary hearer, who knows that the Lord who speaks in Scripture is compassionate and loving, wills the good of humankind, and attends to the oppressed. It does suggest that the right as the Lord defines it is not always manifested in what human beings see in a particular moment as right. There is a larger view, which is one of the main things the book of Jeremiah contributes. And there is an understanding that human definitions, expectations, and desires do not always perceive or conform to the Lord's creative power at work in history. So readers of the signs of the times and those who would speak in God's behalf or even against God in behalf of the human, need to beware a misreading of what God is doing in the world, from the beginning until the end.

3. Theology and politics are once again joined in the prophecy of Jeremiah. There are such large claims here that one risks reading them as religious stuff or merely ideological rhetoric for pressing through a particular party line. The stuff of this text is, indeed, religious and ideological. Within both, there is an awareness that the realm of God's work in the world is the affairs of people and nations, the politics of alliances and the rise and fall of empires. "It is I," says the Lord, and the construction is explicitly emphatic (27:5). The destiny of the nations of the Fertile Crescent is not merely Israel's but is at the direction of Yahweh, and in the growing vision of the text the Babylonian king is seen to be the one who does the will of the Lord. Yet even the servant of the Lord stands under divine control and judgment. What is going on in history is fraught with human decisions, inclinations, evil, and good. It is all the context in which the Lord is working out the divine purposes, a context that itself is provided by the Creator. The politics of human communities are found to be in some fashion coterminous with the politics of God. That is not something we can always discern or make sense of, and there may be times when we have to call human evil simply that and make no more of it. But Jeremiah suggests that we think about what is going on in the world as God's work, even with alien and strange instruments.

4. The line between faith and ideology is a very slim one. Indeed, any large perspective that speaks about the fate of a political community and seeks to spur particular kinds of responses and actions on the basis of an analysis or perception of present reality and future possibilities has an ideological bent to it, an underlying somewhat explicit, somewhat implicit conviction about the community whence and whither and a program for bringing about the proper goal or outcome. That was no less true of Jeremiah than of Hananiah. What must never be missed is the Bible's conviction that ideologies are not all the same, that some bring us closer to what God is doing in the world and thus may be spoken of as faithful as well as ideological. Those programs for the future that build upon the biblical story and, like the prophets of old, use the language of Zion and claim divine guidance but are not consonant with that story and its direction, that do not really listen to the prophets of old, their instruction and warnings, are engaged in an ideology that is finally bad faith.¹⁵²

5. Political expediency at times may be also an act of obedience. It is customary to see acts of resistance and rebellion as the proper manifestation of a religious or, even more specifically, Christian conscience, as, for example, in the lives of the martyrs, of a Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

In Jeremiah's time, the proper submission to the will of God involved a submission to the political authorities, not because of some theory of church and state relations but because at that moment in time submission and acceptance of domination was the intention of God in history. One cannot extrapolate a general principle one way or the other about the correlation between prudence/resistance and obedience. But the story before us identifies a moment in history when the **right political move was an acceptance of the bad situation because it was God's work, and not simply fate.**

6. The encounter between Hananiah and Jeremiah makes us aware of the difficulty of discerning the times or of knowing whose wisdom, whose discernment, whose interpretation is **right** (28:11) from the Lord. Formal characteristics will not finally tell us who speaks truly. Both Hananiah and Jeremiah spoke and acted **rightly** as prophets of the Lord. We are not finally given some rules of the game that let us know whose word we can trust. The listeners must themselves discern who is **right** sent and who is not. Once again, as in chap. 26, one way to get at that is set out in the text. It is the need to pay attention to what the prophets of the past have said. That is not an infallible criterion. Prophets of the past spoke **rightly** oracles of salvation or peace as well as authentic words of the Lord **rightly**. In one sense, we learn from these chapters only about what happened in the early sixth century BCE in the Judean kingdom and the different ways prophets responded to that crisis and declared the word of the Lord. But Jeremiah's citation of the prophets of the past suggests that if we keep reading and listening to the prophetic voices of Scripture, who are for us the authentic word of the Lord, we may have the resources at hand for discerning the voices of those who are **right** sent in our own time. There are no guarantees, no criteria of credibility that one can slip in to claim truth over falsehood. The only resource one has is attentive listening to the prophets of old to attune oneself for listening for the truth. (On Nebuchadnezzar as a servant of the Lord, see the Reflections at 25:1-14.)

Jeremiah 29:1-32, Accepting Exile

Link to: Jeremiah 29:1

<Page 788 ends>><Page 791 begins>>

COMMENTARY

While the themes of this chapter continue from the preceding chapters, the form is rather unusual. Prophetic oracles are couched in a series of letters, by Jeremiah and others, back and forth between Jerusalem and Babylon. The heart of the chapter is a long letter from Jeremiah to the exiles who were deported to Babylon in 597 BCE (vv. 1-23), followed by the report of an exchange of letters reflecting conflict between Jeremiah and another prophet, Shemiah. The form of the chapter bears little resemblance to typical Hebrew letters, but the reference to the letter bearers (v. 3) and the Lord's self-identification as a witness (v. 23), which functions as a kind of countersignature to the letter inasmuch as its content is a message from the Lord, reinforce the claim of the opening verse that we have here a kind of prophetic-pastoral letter to the exiles.

The thematic foci of the chapter are two: the need for exiles to accept their fate and know that the God who has brought it upon them is at work for their ultimate good, and the danger (once more) of listening to false prophets who create a false hope of immediate deliverance. Just as chap. 27 addressed the Judean survivors of the 597 deportation, calling upon them to accept Babylonian

domination of Judah and the surrounding countries, so also now chap. 29 calls upon the deportees to accept servitude in Babylon. For those at home and those away, this is a time of punishment, and the first order of business is to acknowledge that and live with it. But the muted indications of an end to the punishment in chap. 27 are here extended to become a larger part of the message. That word of hope for a future restoration has its full development in the chapters that immediately follow (chaps. 30-33).

There is one problem in the arrangement of the chapter that needs to be observed. There is an obvious disjunction (reflected in the NRSV ³⁰ use of a dash) between v. 15, which returns to the matter of prophets, and the immediately following verses, which are words of judgment against the Judeans who remained in the land after the first deportation in 597. Some would argue that vv. 16-19 ³¹ ³² ³³ ³⁴ ³⁵ ³⁶ ³⁷ ³⁸ ³⁹ ⁴⁰ ⁴¹ ⁴² ⁴³ ⁴⁴ ⁴⁵ ⁴⁶ ⁴⁷ ⁴⁸ ⁴⁹ ⁵⁰ ⁵¹ ⁵² ⁵³ ⁵⁴ ⁵⁵ ⁵⁶ ⁵⁷ ⁵⁸ ⁵⁹ ⁶⁰ ⁶¹ ⁶² ⁶³ ⁶⁴ ⁶⁵ ⁶⁶ ⁶⁷ ⁶⁸ ⁶⁹ ⁷⁰ ⁷¹ ⁷² ⁷³ ⁷⁴ ⁷⁵ ⁷⁶ ⁷⁷ ⁷⁸ ⁷⁹ ⁸⁰ ⁸¹ ⁸² ⁸³ ⁸⁴ ⁸⁵ ⁸⁶ ⁸⁷ ⁸⁸ ⁸⁹ ⁹⁰ ⁹¹ ⁹² ⁹³ ⁹⁴ ⁹⁵ ⁹⁶ ⁹⁷ ⁹⁸ ⁹⁹ ¹⁰⁰ ¹⁰¹ ¹⁰² ¹⁰³ ¹⁰⁴ ¹⁰⁵ ¹⁰⁶ ¹⁰⁷ ¹⁰⁸ ¹⁰⁹ ¹¹⁰ ¹¹¹ ¹¹² ¹¹³ ¹¹⁴ ¹¹⁵ ¹¹⁶ ¹¹⁷ ¹¹⁸ ¹¹⁹ ¹²⁰ ¹²¹ ¹²² ¹²³ ¹²⁴ ¹²⁵ ¹²⁶ ¹²⁷ ¹²⁸ ¹²⁹ ¹³⁰ ¹³¹ ¹³² ¹³³ ¹³⁴ ¹³⁵ ¹³⁶ ¹³⁷ ¹³⁸ ¹³⁹ ¹⁴⁰ ¹⁴¹ ¹⁴² ¹⁴³ ¹⁴⁴ ¹⁴⁵ ¹⁴⁶ ¹⁴⁷ ¹⁴⁸ ¹⁴⁹ ¹⁵⁰ ¹⁵¹ ¹⁵² ¹⁵³ ¹⁵⁴ ¹⁵⁵ ¹⁵⁶ ¹⁵⁷ ¹⁵⁸ ¹⁵⁹ ¹⁶⁰ ¹⁶¹ ¹⁶² ¹⁶³ ¹⁶⁴ ¹⁶⁵ ¹⁶⁶ ¹⁶⁷ ¹⁶⁸ ¹⁶⁹ ¹⁷⁰ ¹⁷¹ ¹⁷² ¹⁷³ ¹⁷⁴ ¹⁷⁵ ¹⁷⁶ ¹⁷⁷ ¹⁷⁸ ¹⁷⁹ ¹⁸⁰ ¹⁸¹ ¹⁸² ¹⁸³ ¹⁸⁴ ¹⁸⁵ ¹⁸⁶ ¹⁸⁷ ¹⁸⁸ ¹⁸⁹ ¹⁹⁰ ¹⁹¹ ¹⁹² ¹⁹³ ¹⁹⁴ ¹⁹⁵ ¹⁹⁶ ¹⁹⁷ ¹⁹⁸ ¹⁹⁹ ²⁰⁰ ²⁰¹ ²⁰² ²⁰³ ²⁰⁴ ²⁰⁵ ²⁰⁶ ²⁰⁷ ²⁰⁸ ²⁰⁹ ²¹⁰ ²¹¹ ²¹² ²¹³ ²¹⁴ ²¹⁵ ²¹⁶ ²¹⁷ ²¹⁸ ²¹⁹ ²²⁰ ²²¹ ²²² ²²³ ²²⁴ ²²⁵ ²²⁶ ²²⁷ ²²⁸ ²²⁹ ²³⁰ ²³¹ ²³² ²³³ ²³⁴ ²³⁵ ²³⁶ ²³⁷ ²³⁸ ²³⁹ ²⁴⁰ ²⁴¹ ²⁴² ²⁴³ ²⁴⁴ ²⁴⁵ ²⁴⁶ ²⁴⁷ ²⁴⁸ ²⁴⁹ ²⁵⁰ ²⁵¹ ²⁵² ²⁵³ ²⁵⁴ ²⁵⁵ ²⁵⁶ ²⁵⁷ ²⁵⁸ ²⁵⁹ ²⁶⁰ ²⁶¹ ²⁶² ²⁶³ ²⁶⁴ ²⁶⁵ ²⁶⁶ ²⁶⁷ ²⁶⁸ ²⁶⁹ ²⁷⁰ ²⁷¹ ²⁷² ²⁷³ ²⁷⁴ ²⁷⁵ ²⁷⁶ ²⁷⁷ ²⁷⁸ ²⁷⁹ ²⁸⁰ ²⁸¹ ²⁸² ²⁸³ ²⁸⁴ ²⁸⁵ ²⁸⁶ ²⁸⁷ ²⁸⁸ ²⁸⁹ 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**Peace be within your walls,
and security within your towers.(NRSV)**

But such prayers of intercession would have included prayers for Babylon's deliverance from threats and dangers as well.

Within these commands to the exiles is an assurance that the divine blessing of fertility, well-being, productivity, and the regular provision of the possibilities of life continues even in exile. The punishment characteristic of what has happened is clear, and it is not quickly over. So for that very reason, the exiles are enjoined to find their life now in this new and difficult place, assured by the command of God that life is possible, that home and family, food and shelter, the things that support and keep human beings human, are possible and over the long haul. The creation blessing of Gen 1:28-30 continues, even in exile.

Jeremiah's letter is a rather astonishing manifestation of his commission to build and to plant (v. 5; cf. 1:10). It is worth noting that the divine commission in Jeremiah's call to build and plant comes after the other commands to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow. Jeremiah's earlier words have been in fulfillment of the first part of that commission; now he is carrying out the second part, albeit quite strangely or unpredictably. The positive possibilities for life **뻗** ome, productivity, and family **뻗** re to be found in exile. Strangest of all is the prayer for the enemy capital that brought about Judah **뻗** downfall.

There is a pragmatic dimension to the direction the Lord gives to the people through Jeremiah. Those who live in Babylon can find their possibilities for life only as Babylon is a viable place to live, secure and at peace. So seeking the peace and welfare of Babylon is not simply altruistic; it is a safeguard on the possibility of the deportees finding their own well-being in a difficult situation. If Babylon is besieged and attacked, if it is subject to plague or famine, then the exiles will suffer also.