

THE WORDS AND TEARS OF JEREMIAH
(3) THE TRUTH ABOUT THE WORLD

Jeremiah 46-51 (selected)

Jeffrey S. Carlson

June 24, 2018

KEY SCRIPTURE

¹Thus says the LORD: I am going to stir up a destructive wind against Babylon and against the inhabitants of Leb-qamai; ² and I will send winnowers to Babylon, and they shall winnow her. They shall empty her land when they come against her from every side on the day of trouble. ³ Let not the archer bend his bow, and let him not array himself in his coat of mail. Do not spare her young men; utterly destroy her entire army. ⁴ They shall fall down slain in the land of the Chaldeans, and wounded in her streets. ⁵ Israel and Judah have not been forsaken by their God, the LORD of hosts, though their land is full of guilt before the Holy One of Israel (Jeremiah 51:1-5 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

Today we are continuing the series on “The Words and Tears of Jeremiah.” Jeremiah addresses most of his messages to the people of Judah but he also mentions Israel. The use of the term “Israel” can be confusing. It is used in at least five different ways in the Bible. It can refer to the new name given to Jacob the grandson of Abraham and Sarah after Jacob wrestled with an angel (Gen 32:28). It often refers to the ethnic group which traces its ancestry back to Jacob by way of twelve tribal lines. The Lord tells Jeremiah to say:

But as for you, have no fear, my servant Jacob, and do not be dismayed, O Israel; for I am going to save you from far away, and your offspring from the land of their captivity. Jacob shall return and have quiet and ease, and no one shall make him afraid (Jer 46:27).

In this case, Jacob and Israel are used interchangeably. Jeremiah refers to Jacob in the singular but in point of fact he means the “ethnos” or nation consisting of his living descendants. Israel can also refer to the united kingdom under kings Saul, David and Solomon. It can refer to the northern split of this kingdom consisting of ten of the twelve tribes. When Jeremiah uses Israel in this sense he usually accompanies it by a reference to Judah which was the southern split from the united kingdom consisting of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. Lastly, Israel can refer to the people of God wherever they may be living in the world. So you have the Apostle Paul in the New Testament referring to “the

Israel of God” (Gal 6:16) meaning both Jewish and Gentile followers of Christ. How Jeremiah uses the word “Israel” can be determined by context.

In Jeremiah 46-51, Jeremiah’s messages are addressed to other nations. This is consistent with his call from God:

"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" (Jer 1:5).

Jeremiah is a prophet to the nations because God is the God of all nations. Jeremiah prophesies about the future of the nations that surround Israel. In 46 we read:

The word of the LORD that came to the prophet Jeremiah concerning the nations (Jer 46:1).

This Word is largely in the form of judgments against Egypt (ch. 46), Philistia (47), Moab (48), Ammon (49:1–6), Edom (49:7–22), Damascus (49:23–27 and technically a city not a nation or, if you prefer, a city-state), Kedar and Hazor (Arabia) (49:28–33), Elam (49:34–39), and finally Babylon (50–51). Some of these nations were temporary allies of Israel but all became the enemies of Israel at one time or another and all refused to honor the Lord. In most cases these messages were not delivered to the countries they targeted, because their intended audience was Israel. So why were they given at all?

PRAYER

Holy God, you knew us before we knew ourselves. You consecrate us even now to be your servants. Create in us hearts worthy to be your messengers that we might go where you send us, and speak the Word that you give us. Through the power of your Holy Spirit, place your words upon our lips and your grace upon our hearts so that we might pluck up and pull down, destroy and overthrow, build and plant, as you, alone, have commanded. Amen.

MESSAGE

The messages of Jeremiah to the nations are intended to make clear to the people of God that God is in charge and worthy of our trust. Earlier Jeremiah had prophesied that the coming of Babylon would be God’s judgment upon Judah. Here in 46-51 he prophesies that the coming of Babylon is God’s judgment upon the surrounding nations, also.

Please do not misunderstand. Jeremiah is not claiming that Babylon is a righteous nation. Far from it. The Babylonians (also known as the Chaldeans) were a violent and oppressive people. They are God’s tools to carry out his will but they are not his servants.

In the end Babylon too will be judged, and Judah saved from their oppression.

The first nation to be denounced is Egypt. There are two sets of oracles. The first (46:2-12) tells them that when they march to war against Babylon they will lose. The second (13-26) tells them that when Babylon, in turn, marches to war against Egypt, the Egyptians will lose again.

Egypt will be defeated first abroad and then at home. This takes up most of the chapter. At the end of the chapter there is a brief encouragement for Judah. But the people of Judah did not see it as encouragement. They believed Egypt would defeat the awful Babylonians. They put their trust in Pharaoh Neco and not in the Lord. An act made even more evil by the fact that five years earlier Neco had killed Josiah – the King of Judah and one known for his sweeping reforms in his attempt to bring his people back into faithful service to God.

Egypt was powerful. Babylon was more powerful. But God is all-powerful. He rules over all. He is sovereign over all. This is the truth about the nations that Jeremiah wishes to underscore. God is in charge and is worthy of our trust.

This theme repeats itself throughout these chapters. For our purposes this morning I am not going into much detail about the other nations. But we can summarize the actions found in these chapters by saying God was going to use Babylon to punish these nine unrepentant people groups of the ancient world. But then Babylon itself would eventually be the tenth nation to be judged by the Lord. Jeremiah declares:

Thus says the LORD: I am going to stir up a destructive wind against Babylon and against the inhabitants of Leb-qamai (51:1).

Leb-qamai is actually a cryptogram for Chaldea and was considered an insult or taunt. Chaldea is another name for Babylon. Babylon was destroyed but its name lives on as a term for great evil.

Babylon is mentioned 260 times in Scripture, and is second in importance only to Jerusalem. Biblically it is viewed as the devil's city while Jerusalem is viewed as God's city. They are always seen in opposition to each other. Babylon is the result of apostasy against God's plan of salvation. Jerusalem is the result of God's call of a nation to perpetuate his plan of salvation.

In the New Testament it is a code word for Rome and its persecution of Christians. In the Revelation to John we read:

Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, "With such violence Babylon the great city will be thrown down, and will be found no more. . . And in you was found the blood of prophets and of saints, and of all who have been slaughtered on earth." (Rev 18:21,24 NRSV).

Both Jeremiah in the Old Testament and John in the New stress the sovereignty of God. God is in charge. There are no limits to God's rule. He rules over the whole world, and everything that happens in it. He is never helpless, never frustrated, never at a loss. But sovereignty is not the same as predetermination.

There is a popular view that everything mentioned in biblical prophecy refers to a predetermined and irrevocable detail that must take place. I am reminded of a time when I met Tony Campolo, retired professor of Sociology and popular Christian speaker and author. He was part of a conference that was being held at the YMCA Camp of the Rockies. I arrived early to one of the workshops he was leading. He is a very friendly guy. He came over and introduced himself and we started talking. When he found out I was Presbyterian his face lit up and he said, "Presbyterian. Presbyterian. Oh! Oh! You guys believe in predestination right? OK, what did the Presbyterian elder say after he fell down a flight of stairs?" I said, "I don't know, Tony, What did the Presbyterian elder say after he fell down a flight of stairs?" Tony wiped his forehead and said, "Whew! Thank God that's over!"

Now how do you tell a famous Christian speaker that he was confusing predestination for predetermination? Predestination is a perfectly good term found in Scripture that refers to God's plan of salvation. Basically this teaches us that unless God had come after us we would never have pursued God. God always makes the first move.

Predetermination means everything is fated to happen and we cannot change what is going to happen. Presbyterians do not believe this nor is this the teaching of Scripture. For Jeremiah to call for repentance and for John to call for fervent prayer and then for both of them to tell us that these things are meaningless would be totally absurd.

We do have a choice and choices matter. We can choose whether or not to repent. We can choose whether or not to pray. We can choose whether or not to yield ourselves to God.

The ten nations that are condemned in these chapters all had a choice. But they chose the path of pride, brutality and idolatry. And if God judged the nations in the past for pride, brutality and idolatry then is it safe to assume these things are no longer any big deal to

God? I think not. But whether we heed these warnings or not is our choice.

Hidden among the condemnations in these chapters are jewels of hope. Even people not numbered among the children of Israel can be restored if they but turn and trust in the Lord. Elamites (49:39) and Egyptians (47:26) and others can find a future if they turn from evil and cling to God. Interestingly enough, Elamites and Egyptians are among those explicitly named as being present on the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came upon the followers of Jesus and they proclaimed the Good News of salvation in Christ's name (Acts 2:9-11). Their stepping forward fulfilled an unlikely prophecy made by a weeping prophet hundreds of years earlier. The point being that anyone, regardless of ethnicity, can be restored to God.

The sovereignty of God means that God's overall plan will not be thwarted – cannot be thwarted. But changing lives for the better is not only possible within God's plan – it's our job description.