

## LISTENING TO JEREMIAH

### THE BOOK OF CONSOLATION (30-33)

The title for this section comes from the instruction of Yahweh to Jeremiah to record his visions of the nation's future hope in a document (30:2), hence, the "Book of Consolation." While the vast majority of Jeremiah's oracles were bleak as they describe the death of the nation, the present collection is largely optimistic. Though Jeremiah never retracts his predictions of terrible disaster for the present generation, he still holds forth a distant hope for restoration that positively shines in its contrast with the immediate anticipation of doom.

Most scholars doubt that all the material in 30-33 was composed at the same time. It is more likely that this material is a collection of oracles from various periods of Jeremiah's life, but that they have been grouped together because of their similar content. Various attempts to date the different poems and prose sections have been attempted, but there is little consensus. More important is the fact that Jeremiah consistently maintained that the nation, which was under the sentence of death by Yahweh, and more particularly, the dynasty of David, which was being cut to the roots, still possessed a future. Hints of this future had been given previously (cf. 3:14-18; 5:18; 16:14-15, 21; 23:3-8; 24:4-7; 27:21-22; 29:10-14), but now it is described in detail.

### The End of Jacob's Trouble

The central message of the entire Book of Consolation is that Yahweh intends to bring Israel back to her land (30:3; 31:17; 33:7). The sufferings of exile, called the "time of trouble for Jacob" (30:7), are vividly described. It is a time of terror (30:5) and pain (30:6). The ghostly figure of Rachel, the mother of the Benjamite tribe in the south and the grandmother of the Ephraimite tribe in the north, is pictured as weeping for her banished children (31:15). Still, this distress would come to an end, and the nation of Israel would be saved from her trouble (30:7b). The bondage of exile would be broken, and the nation would once more serve a king from David's line (30:8-9).<sup>1</sup> Though Yahweh would not

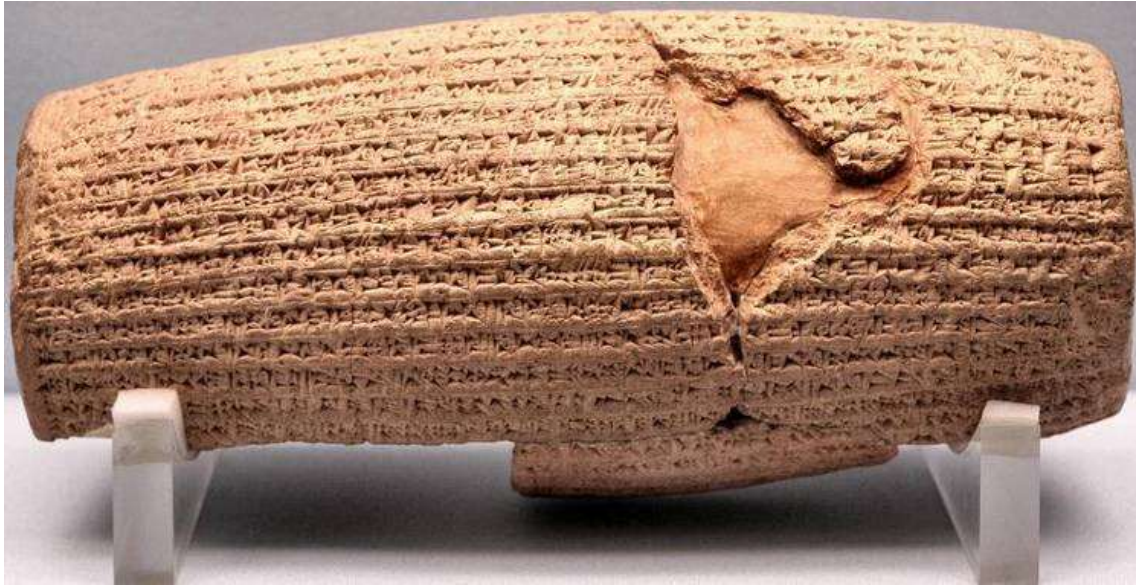
### THE PROPHETS AND THE RESTORATION

*The theme of exile and restoration is ubiquitous among the prophets. In the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, both Amos and Hosea in the north (Am. 9:14-15; Hos. 2:21-23; 3:4-5) and Isaiah and Micah in the south (Mic. 2:12; 4:6-7; Is. 11:11-12) predicted that a remnant of the exiles would be allowed to return home. This theme continues on into the 7<sup>th</sup> century after the demise of the northern kingdom, and Jeremiah was a major voice in this vision of restoration (Zeph. 3:19-20; Jer. 23:3-8; 29:10-14; 50:18-20), Eze. 11:16-17; Dan. 9:1-3). Central to this vision was a link to David's family (Am. 9:11; Hos. 3:5; Isa. 16:5; Jer. 23:5; Eze. 34:23). After the fall of Babylon, Cyrus the Great of Persia would be the historical figure who would issue an edict of repatriation, a direct fulfillment of the word of Jeremiah, allowing displaced peoples like the Jews to return to their ancestral homes (Isa. 45:1, 13; Ezra 1:1-4; 2 Chr. 36:22-23). The return from exile and the rebuilding of Jerusalem takes center stage in the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai and Zechariah.*

*The return from exile in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, however, did not exhaust the range of predictions, and many of them, according to New Testament writers, find their fulfillment in the coming of Jesus, the Messiah, the son of David.*

<sup>1</sup>The promise of a future king in David's line is simply expressed as "David" (30:9), but this should be taken as a

allow the sinful nation to go unpunished (30:11b; 33:1-5), her incurable wound, in fact, would be cured by a divine healing (30:12-15, 17; 33:6; cf. 8:22; 10:19). The fallen tent of the nation with its broken ropes (10:20) would be pitched again (30:18). The nation would be saved from the land of her exile (30:10-11).<sup>2</sup> The community would be revived, and its new leader would be fully devoted to Yahweh (30:19-22).



*The famous Cyrus Cylinder documents the decree of Cyrus to displaced peoples: “I returned to these sacred cities on the other side of the Tigris, the sanctuaries of which have been in ruins for a long time, the images which used to live therein and established for them permanent sanctuaries. I also gathered all their former inhabitants and return to them their habitations.”*

British Museum, London

Of course, this wonderful promise would be fulfilled for only a remnant (31:7b), those who survived the sword of exile (31:2). Still, Jerusalem, its royal palace, and its temple on Zion would be rebuilt (30:18b; 31:6b, 12, 23, 38-40), along with the other cities of Judah (31:24-25; 33:9-13). Even Samaria, the former capital of the northern nation, would be restored (31:5-6). All the clans of Israel would find a restored relationship with Yahweh (31:1). Just as God had once “wooed” Israel in the desert of Sinai (31:3), so he would again restore Virgin Israel (31:4). He would bring the exiles from the lands of their northern enemy, where they had been scattered, and he would care for them like a loving father and a faithful shepherd (31:8-14, 16). The tragedy of exile was like the disciplining of a wayward animal or even a prodigal child (31:18-20; cf. Ho. 11:1-11). But the road toward home would be open (31:21)! This promise of regathering, like the judgment of exile, is firmly grounded in the Deuteronomic blessings. If the curse was exile (Dt. 28:36-37, 41, 49-52, 63-68), the blessing of repentance would be regathering and restoration (30:1-10).

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metonymy for a son within David's dynasty (cf. 23:5; 33:15, 17, 22). The notion that this is David *redivivus* in the millennium, such as espoused by some dispensationalists (e.g., Dwight Pentecost), is based on a misplaced literalism that has failed to come to terms with the idiomatic use of language.

<sup>2</sup>The fact that Israel is here called the Servant of Yahweh is similar to the songs of the servant in the latter part of Isaiah (Is. 41:8-9; 44:1-2, 21; 45:4; 48:20; 49:3).

## TALKING POINTS

- *While the Jews' return from exile is established historical fact, one of the perennial questions is how to interpret those promised features that were not realized (e.g., the king from David's line, the freedom from foreign oppression, the return of divine glory to the 2<sup>nd</sup> temple, and so forth). How would you respond to such questions?*

## The Sign of the Field in Anathoth

Jeremiah's purchase of the field owned by his cousin in Anathoth served as a sign pointing toward the predicted restoration (32:1-14). The property deed and the terms of the purchase were sealed in a clay jar so that they would survive the years of captivity (32:15). The hope for such a restoration seemed preposterous in view of the present threat (32:16-25), but nothing would be too hard for Yahweh (32:17b, 26-27). Yes, Jerusalem would be devastated (32:28-29), for her citizens had broken the covenant (32:30-35), and the Deuteronomic code could not be altered. Yet the Deuteronomic promise of regathering held true as well (32:36-42). The field of Anathoth, now owned by Jeremiah, stood as a sign representing all the fields which would be repossessed after the exile had ended (32:43-44).

## The New Covenant

At the very beginning of his ministry, Jeremiah was told that his mission was to preach a message of uprooting, tearing down, destroying, and overthrowing (1:9-10a). Yet there was also the more positive message of building and planting (1:10b). During the course of the future, Yahweh declared that he would be watching in order to guarantee that the predictions would be fulfilled (1:12). Part of Yahweh's watching was his evaluation of the nation's sins, as Jeremiah declared in his temple sermon (cf. 7:11). At the same time, part of his watching was to guarantee that after the exile, the Deuteronomic promises of restoration would be kept (24:4-7). This same double interpretation of Yahweh's watching eye resurfaces in the Book of Consolation (31:27-28).

In the restoration there would be a marked difference from the previous era. Torah had declared God to be not only the one who forgives sins but the one who inflicted the iniquity of the parents upon their children for several generations (Ex. 20:5-6; 34:6-7; Nu. 14:18; Dt. 5:9).<sup>3</sup> From this idea, the proverb became popular, "The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" (31:29; cf. Eze. 18:1-2). Consequently, those who suffered discipline at Yahweh's hand were apt to blame their punishment on their ancestors rather than acknowledging the responsibility themselves, and in fact, they accused God of being unjust (cf. Eze. 18:3-32). Jeremiah as well as Ezekiel rejected this interpretation, declaring that every person's punishment was for his/her own sin (31:30; Eze. 18:4-29). Nevertheless, in the future there would be a new covenant--a covenant distinctly different in its formulation than the old one of Sinai (31:31-32).

This promise of a new covenant is the theological climax of Jeremiah's prophecies. It was to be

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<sup>3</sup>This repetitive statement is grounded in the corporate personality of ancient Israel in which the members of a household are bound together in the solidarity of transgression, cf. H. Robinson, *Corporate Personality in Ancient Israel*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980). It should also be noted that the idioms "showing love to thousands" and "visiting the iniquity of the fathers to the third and fourth generation" are intended to contrast the unbounded love of Yahweh with his limitations of punishment. It should not be taken as a mathematical or wooden literalism.

established with the survivors of the unified nation, that is, with both the houses of Israel and Judah, northern and southern (31:31). The contrast between this new covenant and the Sinai covenant is profound (31:32). Whereas the Sinai covenant was spelled out in an external law code, the core of which was codified on tables of stone, the new covenant would be internally written in human hearts (31:33). Whereas the Sinai covenant was grounded in an obedience-reward and disobedience-punishment motif, the new covenant would be grounded in forgiveness (31:34; 33:8). Whereas the justice of the old was retributive, the justice of the new was gracious (32:36-41). And whereas the tenure of the old could end by a divine rejection of the nation for its sin, the tenure of the new was guaranteed for all time (31:35-37; 32:40).

### The Re-establishment of David's Line

Associated with the new covenant which Yahweh promised was the revival of David's dynastic kingship. Jeremiah had preached elsewhere of the Righteous Branch that would sprout from David's line (cf. 23:5-6). Earlier, this restoration was clearly to be associated with the return of the nation from exile (23:3-4, 7-8), and so it is here (33:6-13). In the restoration, the ancient promise to David, the promise that he would never lack a descendent to reign from his throne (cf. 2 Sa. 7:16; 23:5; Ps. 89:35-37), would be fulfilled (33:17). Furthermore, the priests and Levites were guaranteed a perpetual ministry as well (33:18). The covenant was bound by Yahweh's most solemn declaration of certainty (33:19-26).

### Interpreting the New Covenant

There is little question but that the post-exilic community who returned from exile with the permission of Cyrus of Persia expected the new covenant and all its ramifications to be fulfilled immediately. Some statements by Jeremiah clearly seem to point in this direction (cf. 23:3-8; 30:3, 10; 31:23-25; 50:4-5, 19-20). When this did not fully happen, the disillusionment of the community is apparent in the post-exilic works of Zechariah, Haggai, and Malachi. In the NT, of course, the new covenant is quoted and alluded to extensively (Mt. 26:28//Mk. 14:24//Lk. 22:20; Ro. 11:27; 1 Co. 11:25; 2 Co. 3:4-18; He. 8:7-13; 9:15; 12:24). For Christians, the new covenant is established in the death of Jesus Christ, the son of David (Mt. 1:1, etc.), and the benefits of the new covenant extend to all who come to faith in him. The ultimate fulfillment of the return from exile is when "all the scattered children of God" are brought together and made one (Jn. 11:49-52). Israel as God's flock is broadened to include people from other nations (Jn. 10:14-16; Rom. 11:5-6, 25-27). The regathering of the northern Israelites is fulfilled in the Gentile mission (Rom. 9:24-26). The restoration of Judah from exile is fulfilled in the gospel to the nations (2 Co. 6:1-2; cf. Isa. 49:8-9).

### TALKING POINTS

- *What do you make of this superimposing of ancient promises so that some refer to the near future and some to the distant future?*
- *Can you begin to see why Luke says that "beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he [Jesus] explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Lk. 24:27)?*