

LISTENING TO JEREMIAH

Gedaliah's Assassination (40:7--41:15)

Nebuchadnezzar appointed Gedaliah, a Jewish noble, to be the governor of those Jews who had not been deported (2 Kg. 25:22). Asylum was granted to the guerrilla fighters who had escaped to the



Archaeologists have uncovered a brown agate seal reading: "[belonging to] Baalis ['] king of B[nei Ammo]n," presumably the instigator of the plot to assassinate Gedaliah.

outlying regions (40:11-12), and Gedaliah advised the entire community to regroup and give their attention to rebuilding their farms (40:7-10; 2 Kg. 25:23-24). However, though Gedaliah was able to rally the survivors temporarily, another Israelite prince, Ishmael, was not pleased. Whether from sheer jealousy or because he perceived Gedaliah as a collaborator, he had determined, at the urging of Baalis of Ammon, to kill Gedaliah. One of Gedaliah's officers warned him of the plot, but Gedaliah would not believe it (40:13-16). Sure enough, with a vigilante force of ten, Ishmael assassinated Gedaliah during a dinner (41:1-2; 2 Kg. 25:25), and he also slaughtered Gedaliah's attendants as well as some Babylonian soldiers (40:3). The next day, he butchered 70 others, this time pilgrims who had come to Zion to worship (41:4-9). He began his escape toward Ammon in the Transjordan (41:10), but Gedaliah's officers caught up with them at the pool in Gibeon. The captives were recovered, though Ishmael himself escaped (41:11-15).

The Flight to Egypt (41:16--43:13)

The assassination of Gedaliah and its aftermath threw the entire group into a panic. What might the Babylonians do now? The officers determined they would be safest if they escaped to Egypt, as far away from the power of Babylon as possible (41:16-17). Still, since Jeremiah was part of the group, the officers were at least willing to approach him to inquire if there was any word from Yahweh, and they promised to do anything Yahweh said (42:1-6). It was ten days before Jeremiah received a word from God (42:7), and when he did, it was that the people should stay in the land. In their own land, Yahweh promised that they would be built up and planted (cf. 1:10b). They could set their hearts at rest regarding Nebuchadnezzar, for there would be no reprisals (42:7-12). However, if they persisted in their plans to go to Egypt, they could count on a disastrous trip, for there they would encounter war, famine and plague (42:13-22).

When the officers had heard Jeremiah's response, they accused him of lying and of being manipulated by Baruch, his scribe (43:1-3). (Why they should have thought that Baruch was trying to entrap them is not explained.) In any case, they determined to go to Egypt anyway, and to Egypt they went, taking Jeremiah and Baruch with them to the area of Tahpanhes in the northeast delta (43:4-7; 2 Kg. 25:26). While there, the word of Yahweh again came to Jeremiah to enact another of his parables. He selected some large stones and buried them in the brick pavement at the entrance to Pharaoh's palace as a sign that Nebuchadnezzar would attack Egypt, burning down the Egyptian temples and wreaking death and destruction to all who were in the area (43:8-13).¹

¹Nebuchadnezzar did indeed invade Egypt on a punitive expedition, thus fulfilling Jeremiah's words.

Oracle to the Exiles in Egypt (44)

Jeremiah's conflict with his own people continued in full vigor. After they arrived in Egypt, the Jewish refugees continued their habits of worshipping the Queen of Heaven (cf. 7:18). In response to this, Jeremiah urged the community to realize that the desolation of Jerusalem was a direct result of such idolatry (44:1-6). The fact that this idolatry was continuing, even in Egypt, was evidence that the people had not learned from their tragedy (44:7-10). Further disaster was inevitable (44:11-14).

Instead of heeding Jeremiah's warning, however, the men in the Jewish community bluntly opposed Jeremiah (44:15-16). In fact, they maintained that the disaster at Jerusalem had occurred because they had neglected to worship the Queen of Heaven (44:17-19). But Jeremiah reiterated to them that the desolation of Judah was a judgment upon them because of their idolatry (44:20-23), a judgment that would be leveled at them again in Egypt, since they refused to listen (44:24-30). The Jewish community in Egypt would also be destroyed, and only a few would escape to return to Judah (44:28, cf. 44:14). Hophra, the reigning pharaoh, would also be deposed.² As for the refugees, they had come full circle. Yahweh was still watching them (44:27; cf. 1:12), and he who had revealed his name to them in Egypt so many years ago in the time of Moses (Ex. 3:14) and brought them to Canaan had now taken his name away from them (44:26) when they returned to Egypt!



The Queen of Heaven was a female astral deity, probably Ishtar (Astarte), and part of the pantheon of gods and goddesses connected with the zodiac, stars and other celestial phenomena.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- *Why do you think that the community of Jews remaining in Jerusalem still refused to listen to Jeremiah?*
- *Does it surprise you that after all the devastation, which Jeremiah directly attributed to idolatry and covenant violation, the refugees who escaped to Egypt still resorted to worshipping the Queen of Heaven?*

Oracles About the Nations

Chapters 46-51 form a distinct unit in the Book of Jeremiah. At the very beginning of his ministry, Jeremiah was appointed by Yahweh as a prophet, not only to Judah, but "to the nations" (1:5b). Yahweh was not merely a provincial God, and his prophets were not merely provincial preachers. Like Amos, Nahum, Obadiah, Jonah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel, Jeremiah addressed the surrounding nations of the ancient Near East as well as Israel and Judah. Yahweh was Lord of the nations of the world, and their destinies, as well as the destiny of Israel and Judah, lay in his hands.

²Hophra was, in fact, deposed by a young relative, Amasis, and when Hophra attempted to win back the throne, he was killed in 566 BC.



The order in which the nations are addressed is along geographical lines, from south to north, and west to east. The oracles begin with Egypt in the south, then progress to the Philistines in the west, then east into the Transjordan with Moab, Ammon and Edom, then farther north to Damascus, Kedar and Hazor, and finally even farther east to Elam and Babylon in Mesopotamia.

The primary theme in each oracle is war, and in each case, the wars against the nations are directed by Yahweh. It is Yahweh who

fights against Egypt (46:10), Philistia (47:6-7), Moab (48:10), Ammon (49:2), Edom (49:8, 20), Damascus (49:27), Kedar and Hazor (49:32b), Elam (49:35), and Babylon (50:15, 21, 25; 51:2). The aggressive nations who conquered others, whether they realized it or not, were Yahweh's war club, his battle weapon with which he shattered the kingdoms under his divine judgment (51:20-23). In the context of these wars, some nations were given hopes of restoration, while others were to be eliminated altogether. Egypt, Moab, Ammon, and Elam were promised a future (46:26b; 48:47; 49:6, 39). Philistia and Damascus were not. Kedar and Hazor were promised desolation forever (49:33), and Edom and Babylon were to be destroyed with the terrible finality of Sodom and Gomorrah (49:18; 50:39-40). Also interspersed among the hopes for the nations is the hope for Israel, a hope which would be realized in her regathering from exile and her new covenant (46:27-28; 50:4-5).

In summary, then, the oracles of Jeremiah to the foreign nations point towards God's sovereignty over them and his intention to hold them accountable. Because God had chosen Israel for a special purpose did not mean that the other nations were outside his provenance. Here, we will look at two of these oracles, the one against Egypt and the one against Babylon.

Oracles About Egypt (46)

This first oracle is dated at 605 BC, the year of Egypt's conflict with Babylon at Carchemish in northwest Mesopotamia. Here Pharaoh Neco II was soundly defeated, an event not only predicted by Jeremiah (46:1-12) but verified by the Babylonian Chronicles.³ This event left Nebuchadnezzar as the leading power of the ancient Near East. Since this oracle was given during the reign of Jehoiakim,

³The Babylonian Chronicles are cuneiform tablets translated in 1956 by D. J. Wiseman. The relevant text regarding this encounter runs as follows: "He [Nebuchadnezzar] crossed the river [Euphrates] to go against the Egyptian army which lay in Carchemish. The armies fought with each other and the Egyptian army withdrew before him. He accomplished their defeat and beat them to nonexistence. As for the rest of the Egyptian army which had escaped from the defeat so quickly that no weapon had reached them, the Babylonians overtook and defeated them in the district of Hamath so that not a single man escaped to his own country. At that time Nebuchadnezzar conquered the whole of Hatti-land," cf. R. Harrison and E. Blaiklock, "Carchemish," *Dictionary of Biblical Archaeology*, p. 119.

a number of years before the eventual fall of Jerusalem, it should have served as a verification of Jeremiah's prophetic legitimacy, since it proved him to be a genuine prophet, which is to say, his prediction came to pass.

The second oracle is undated, but if it describes Nebuchadnezzar's advance toward Egypt following the Battle of Carchemish, and after a brief interval when his father died, it should be dated at about 604 BC, when Nebuchadnezzar pressed southward once again. Of special interest is the sarcastic labeling of Pharaoh as an empty braggart,⁴ and the LXX rendering of 46:15, "Why has Apis fled?" (so RSV).⁵ Attached to the oracles about Egypt is a reaffirmation of the promise made to Israel and Judah in the Book of Consolation (cf. 30:10-11).

Oracle About Babylon (50-51)

The final oracle concerns the primary enemy of Judah, Babylon itself. Babylon represents the world system which both attracts and persecutes the people of God, a fact made clear by the obvious parallelisms between Revelation 17-18 and Jeremiah 50-51. Like the gods of the other nations, the Babylonian gods would also be powerless before Yahweh, the Divine Warrior (50:2). Once Babylon had been the nation from the north swooping down upon Palestine, but now an enemy even farther to the north would swoop down upon it (50:3, 9, 41; 51:48).⁶ When Babylon would fall, the prediction by Jeremiah that the Jews could return from their exile to their own land would be fulfilled (50:4-7, 16, 19, 33-34; 51:5-6, 10, 45). Babylon's aggression toward Judah would be repaid



Seal impression of Baruch's brother, reading, "Belonging to Seriahu/Neriyahu," who carried Jeremiah's letter to Babylon
(from a private collection)

in full (50:11-12, 17-18; 51:55-56), and Israel would be restored (50:19-20). Babylon, who was once Yahweh's war club, would itself be shattered (50:23). Babylon had destroyed Yahweh's holy temple on Zion, and now Yahweh would destroy Babylon (50:28; 51:11, 24, 35, 50-51). Babylon's destruction would be permanent, and there was no hope for restoration (50:39-40; 51:26, 39, 57, 62).

Jeremiah gave this entire oracle to Baruch's brother, so that it might be carried to Babylon and read aloud (51:59-62). Doubtless, such a message would have been a strong word of comfort and hope to the Jewish exiles living there. As he had himself performed earlier, Jeremiah prescribed for his courier an acted-out parable to reinforce his message. The scroll containing the judgment about Babylon was to be tied to a stone and thrown into the Euphrates from the midst of the Babylonian capital, the capital of the greatest political power on earth (51:63-64). With this, Jeremiah's oracles were complete (51:64b).⁷

⁴His name in 46:17 is variously translated as "King Bombast" (NEB), "Much-noise-but-he-lets-the-chance-slip-by" (JB), "Crash" (Driver) and "Loudmouth" (Harrison), cf. D. Wiseman, "Jeremiah," *The International Bible Commentary*, ed. F. Bruce (England/Grand Rapids: Marshall Pickering/Zondervan, 1986), p. 792.

⁵Apis is the Egyptian bull-deity of Osiris.

⁶The new enemy from the north is the Median federation under Cyrus which conquered Babylon in 539 BC.

⁷This final statement marks off the text from the appendix in Chapter 52.