

LISTENING TO JEREMIAH



The brooding figure of Jeremiah as depicted by Michelangelo on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome.

Biblical scholars have long observed that there is a striking similarity of perspective in the Books of Deuteronomy and Jeremiah. Though there are different ideas about a precise relationship,¹ theologically there is an unmistakable connection.

To properly understand Jeremiah, then, one must have a keen appreciation of Yahweh as the covenant God and Israel as a covenant people, especially as expressed in Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy is especially concerned with the nature and role of the monarchy, the centralization of worship in Jerusalem, the laws of holy war, the call for periodic covenant renewal, and the promise of blessings or curses for obedience or disobedience.

The Book of Jeremiah exhibits all of these same theological emphases. The rise and fall of Judah's national life among the surrounding nations were a direct outworking of the conditions of the covenant. The role of the king, the nature of worship, the threat of religious syncretism,

and the character of holy war all loom large in Jeremiah's interpretation of his nation's fortunes. The word "covenant" appears many times in the Book of Jeremiah, so an understanding of ancient Near Eastern covenant is essential.

UNDERSTANDING COVENANT

The idea of *berit* (= covenant) was woven throughout the woof and warp of ancient Near Eastern life. A covenant was a solemn promise between individuals, clans, or states made binding by an oath which both parties recognized as sacred. In the absence of international law, the obligations accepted by someone in such a covenant relationship carried the force of law. Such covenants regulated the social behavior of ancient peoples so that a certain level of predictability and trust could be counted on. Other than blood ties, the covenant was perhaps the single most important

¹That there are affinities between language, thought and style in the two books, no one denies. Some explain the relationship in terms of a Deuteronomistic school of thought, a sort theological tradition which was rooted in Deuteronomy and was reflected in Jeremiah. Whether or not this is true, the fact remains that the same concerns of Jeremiah are precisely those of the Book of Deuteronomy, cf. E. Achtemeier, *Deuteronomy, Jeremiah [PC]* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), pp. 6-7, 48.

social relationship between ancient Near Eastern peoples, and it controlled both domestic and political life.²

That God used the institution of ancient Near Eastern covenants by which to establish his own relationship with the people of faith is everywhere attested in the Torah. After the dramatic contest between Yahweh and Pharaoh, just as Yahweh had promised, the Israelites came to Mt. Sinai to worship (Ex. 19:1-2). From the mountain, Yahweh defined the purpose for Israel's existence (Ex. 19:3-8). It is now universally accepted among scholars that the Sinai covenant was in large part modeled upon the existing suzerainty treaties of the ancient world. Yahweh, the great Suzerain and King, established his covenant with Israel, his vassal. By a free and gracious act, Yahweh chose for himself a people and entered into covenant with them.

The covenant preamble introduces the "Great King" as the one who initiates the covenant. Clearly, this type of treaty is not between equals (i.e., a parity treaty), but rather, it is a proclamation initiated by the Great King for the good of his vassal (i.e., a suzerainty treaty) and expected to be wholeheartedly accepted.

I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

The heart of the treaty was the list of stipulations or requirements which the vassal must perform out of deference to the suzerain. These stipulations included the demand for undivided allegiance as well as the periodic renewal of the covenant. For Israel, the Ten Commandments form the heart of the covenant stipulations (Ex. 20:1-17; Dt. 5:6-21).

From the time of the Sinai experience, the remainder of the Old Testament is governed by the idea that Yahweh and Israel are bound together in covenant by solemn oath. Virtually every aspect of Israel's future--her fortunes and misfortunes, the eventual exile, the prophetic interpretation of the exile, and eventually, the returning remnant to Palestine--all of these aspects of Israel's future flow out of the fundamental institution of covenant. Yahweh is a covenant God, and Israel is a covenant people.

TALKING POINTS

- *Does it surprise you that God would use the ancient Near Eastern form of covenant as a basis for relationship with his people Israel?*

THE FORM OF A SUZERAINITY TREATY

Suzerainty treaties are widely attested in the ancient world. The form that most closely resembles what is found in Deuteronomy is the Hittite suzerainty treaty.

Preamble: *"These are the words of the Great King..."*

Historical Prologue: *Details about the Great King's benevolence in the past*

Stipulations: *The respective obligations of the vassal and overlord*

Deposit of Document: *Written record with copies deposited in the respective temples of the covenant parties*

Witnesses: *The deities of the respective parties*

Blessings and Curses: *Implications for obedience or covenant violation*

The Book of Deuteronomy follows this form very closely.

² G. Mendenhall, "Covenant" *1DB* (1962) 1.714-715.

- *How would defining Israel as a covenant people help shape their identity for the future?*
- *How is the idea of covenant important for people of faith beyond the ancient world of the Israelites?*

THE ENDURING CHARACTER OF THE COVENANT

That the Sinai covenant between Yahweh and Israel was to continue for succeeding generations is clear. The law was intended to regulate the entire lives of the people of Israel, particularly after the conquest of Canaan. The generation that received the Torah at Mt. Sinai passed it along to their children, and this second generation, some forty years later, in turn was to pass the tradition to their children and grandchildren (Dt. 4:9-10, 40; 5:29; 6:1-2, 6-9; 29:29).



Vassal Treaty of Esarhaddon II (University of Pennsylvania)

Precisely because the Sinai covenant appeared in the form of a suzerainty treaty, the potential for breaking covenant was real. Consequences for covenant violation were not left to the imagination, and striking parallels exist between the curses found in Esarhaddon's Vassal Treaty and the penalties for covenant violation in the Book of Deuteronomy. The rewards for covenant faithfulness and the penalties for covenant breaking are spelled out in vivid detail. If the nation was faithful to the covenant, Yahweh promised fertility, peace, and general favor (Dt. 11:13-15; 28:1-14; 30:15-16). If the nation broke covenant, they could

expect disease, drought, invasion, and devastation (Dt. 28:15-68; 30:17-18). Longevity in the land was entirely dependent upon covenant faithfulness (Dt. 28:36-37). The final penalty for unrelenting covenant violation was exile (Dt. 28:64-68).

CURSES FROM DEUTERONOMY 28

- *Yahweh will plague you with diseases*
- *At midday you'll grope about like a blind man*
- *Your carcasses will be food for the birds and the beasts*
- *You will be pledged to be married...but another will take and ravish her*

CURSES FROM ESARHADDON II

- *May Sin...clothe you with leprosy*
- *May Shamash...take away your eyesight*
- *May Ninurta...give your flesh to eagles and vultures*
- *May Venus...let your wives lie in the embrace of your enemies*

The penalty of exile, however, was not Yahweh's final covenant word. Even if the covenant should be violated and even if the severest penalties had been exacted upon the disobedient nation so that

its people were driven into exile because of their unfaithfulness, Yahweh still held forth the possibility of restoration if his people would only turn to him in heartfelt repentance (Dt. 30:1-10).

The Tabernacle, and later, Solomon's Temple, served as a visible symbol of Mt. Sinai. It was not merely a sanctuary for public worship, it was a dwelling place for Yahweh himself (Ex. 25:8-9). Thus, the Tent of Meeting, and later, the Temple became the sanctuary which housed Sinai's glory and the divine epiphany (Ex. 40:34-35; 1 Kg. 8:10-11; 2 Chr. 5:13-14). At the center of all was the sacred ark, which served as Yahweh's throne (Ex. 25:22) and as a depository of the covenant containing the tables of stone (Ex. 25:16; 40:20).

JEREMIAH AND THE COVENANT

Jeremiah had the unenviable task of calling his people back to the covenant, which they had egregiously violated. He repeatedly warned them that if they did not reverse direction, a disaster beyond comprehension was awaiting them.

This is the word that came to Jeremiah from Yahweh: "Listen to the terms of this covenant and tell them to the people...this is what Yahweh says, "Cursed is the man who does not obey the terms of this covenant." I said, "Obey me and do everything I command you, and you will be my people, and I will be your God." ...but they did not listen or pay attention; instead, they followed the stubbornness of their evil hearts. Therefore, this is what Yahweh says, "I will bring on them a disaster they cannot escape" (Jer. 11:1-13).

COVENANT VOCABULARY

*A number of important words attend the idea of covenant, among them **righteousness** (tsedeqah) and **faithful love** (hesed). Above all, what Yahweh, the Great King, required of his vassal, Israel, was behavior that was in line with covenant norms (righteousness) and loyal devotion (hesed). Indeed, Yahweh displayed his own covenant character by both of these attributes: regardless of what Israel might do, Yahweh always could be depended upon as righteous in his judgments, while his faithfulness endured forever.*

The corporate responsibility for maintaining the nation's covenant relationship with Yahweh was largely vested in the priests and kings. Both failed terribly in their leadership responsibilities. Hence, Jeremiah repeatedly found himself in conflict, not only with the people in general, but their leaders as well. Indeed, he even found himself in conflict with other prophets, whom he regarded as charlatans.

TALKING POINTS

- *How difficult would it be to convince people of something they didn't want to believe?*
- *What might the experience of ancient Israel have to say to modern Christians who, while not in quite the same situation as ancient Israel, still are reminded that "these things happened to them as examples for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come" (1 Co. 10:11)?*