

Jeremiah: Prophets, Kings and People
May 24, 2020

We approach the end of our studies of the prophets this spring with Jeremiah this week and Hosea next week. Our lesson writer has focused on the theme of justice, in particular the messages to the rulers of those times, whether the kings before the exile or leading authorities afterward. They had oppressed the vulnerable of society: the widow, the orphan, the sojourner, and the poor. In Jeremiah chapter 22, the prophet brings this unwelcomed message to the reigning king in Jerusalem.

It is unclear which king this is. The preceding chapters contain prophecies against different kings, and may not be in order. The king mentioned most often in Chapter 21 is Zedekiah, the last king of Judah. When he was reigning, the city of Jerusalem had already surrendered to the besieging Babylonians earlier in 597 B.C. At that time King Jehoiakim had died and his son Jehoiachin, 18 years old, was made king. Three months later Jehoiachin surrendered to Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon. (These are the “Chaldeans” of Habakkuk’s prophesy.) King Jehoiachin along with the officials, warriors, artisans and smiths, were carried off into captivity. The Babylonians took any people who would have value to them, ten thousand of them. (That’s how the prophet Ezekiel came to be in Babylon, while Jeremiah remained in Jerusalem.) Only the poor remained. All of the treasure that could be found in the temple and in the king’s palace were also carried away to Babylon. “King” Zedekiah was installed to govern in Jerusalem as a client king over those that remained. (The Babylonians even dictated Zedekiah’s name; he had been named Mattaniah.) After several years Zedekiah, like Jehoiakim a decade earlier, revolted against his Babylonian overlord, Nebuchadnezzar. The Babylonians returned, and again put Jerusalem under siege. Jeremiah, as he had before, counseled King Zedekiah and the People that this was God’s judgment. They would do well to accept that and surrender. (The account of all this can be found in 2 Kings chapters 24-25.) Jeremiah Chapter 21 (just before the lesson book’s scripture reading) ends with this message:

11 To the house of the king of Judah say: Hear the word of the LORD, 12 O house of David! Thus says the LORD: Execute justice in the morning, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed, or else my wrath will go forth like fire, and burn, with no one to quench it, because of your evil doings. 13 See, I am against you, O inhabitants of the valley, O rock of the plain, says the LORD; you who say, “Who can come down against us, or who can enter our places of refuge?” 14 I will punish you according to the fruit of your doings, says the LORD; I will kindle a fire in its forest, and it shall devour all that is around it.

(It seems odd that Jeremiah is speaking of “inhabitants of the valley.” At the end of Jerusalem’s siege, King Zedekiah and what remained of his army broke out of Jerusalem and escaped towards Jericho. He was likely trying to reach the desolate valleys and hiding places in the Judean desert west of the Dead Sea, where centuries later Jews hid and were pursued by the Romans. Jeremiah is perhaps warning that there will be no escape, as indeed there wasn’t.)

You may be thinking, as I do under comparable circumstances in our modern world, “Why should the people suffer for the transgressions of the king?” In our modern world, we as Americans tend to blame foreign governments for the terrible things a country might do, and consider the citizens of the country innocent. For example, things like the bombing of cities during World War II, war brought against civilians, has been a difficult issue. War against civilians was done by all sides. Even today we live in an era of “peace,” but under a doctrine of “mutually assured destruction” that holds the populations of entire countries hostage. So, in the Bible, reading of the entire city of Jerusalem suffering destruction and exile for the sins of the king may bother us too. Yes, this was common in that day. The difference is, this punishment is described, by God’s prophet Jeremiah, as God’s judgment. Why not just punish the King only?

I think our answer to that question lies hundreds of years earlier in the time of Samuel. He was both a prophet and a “judge”. The people complained that they wanted a King, like all of the other nations. There are two threads to the story that appear in Samuel and later throughout the monarchy. In one, Samuel warns the people what a king will be like. He will confiscate their resources and enslave their sons and daughters. In the other thread, the King is accepted as the intermediary between God and the people. In that thread, the “House of David” is established forever. In both cases though, the King is to be the responsible party. He is supposed to do what is right and make sure bad things don’t happen, enforcing what is right as necessary. So, yes, it’s the king’s fault! Do you see what has happened? The people perhaps thought that they were evading responsibility. It is they who wanted the king. But, ultimately, they too paid the price for the failings of the kingship as an institution. It wasn’t just the king that was oppressing the widow, the orphan, the sojourner, and the poor. It wasn’t just the king who worshiped foreign gods of the Assyrians, Babylonians, or Canaanites.

It’s interesting to see how the nature of prophesy changed with circumstances. Before the monarchy, prophets did speak words of judgment against authorities (as young Samuel did to Eli). But more often, as with Deborah, they brought a message that God had heard the people’s cries when they were oppressed. Once the kings were reigning, the prophets typically brought their messages to the king. In the northern Kingdom of Israel, that changed with the transition from Elijah to Elisha in the days of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. You most often hear Elisha, and others who follow him like Amos and Hosea, speaking to the people, not the king. It was as if God had given up on the kings of Israel, while prophets did still bring their messages to the kings of Judah.

We see the same transition in the prophecies of Jeremiah. Before the fall of Jerusalem, we hear prophecies like the one in our scripture reading today, words of judgment and a plea for reconciliation with God, that the people may live, even though Jerusalem was doomed to fall. Jeremiah is best known for such prophecies; he’s not called “the cheery

prophet”. The word “jeremiad” for a critical doom-saying is based on that perception. But after the fall of Jerusalem, his message is no longer to the king and authorities. They are no more. It is to the people. It is a message of hope. One of my favorite passages in the Bible is from Jeremiah, words of hope that look forward to what we, as Christians, see as the coming of Jesus and the Holy Spirit:

Jeremiah 31: 31 The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. 32 It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt – a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. 33 But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

After the exile, the kingship was never reestablished. The Jews looked forward to its reestablishment when the messiah would come. That still has not happened in the way they envisioned. Meanwhile, God’s message came to the people, as well as those such as the priests who happened to wield some degree of authority, by the later prophets. Then Jesus appeared, not just a prophet, but as a fulfilment of God’s promise spoken of by Jeremiah. We have the benefit of living within that New Covenant. In Jesus Christ we are forgiven. And, the Holy Spirit within us lights our way. As Paul expressed in his epistle to the Romans, nothing can separate us from the love of God through Christ Jesus our Lord.