

More Contemplations about Jeremiah
May 24, 2020

I wrote yesterday about how I was preparing for Sunday's lesson on Hosea, only to discover part way through that I was off a week! May 24, not May 31, is the upcoming Sunday. The lesson is supposed to be from Jeremiah 22. Somehow I never registered the fact that we are spending two weeks on Jeremiah. Not that he isn't worth it. We could spend a whole quarter on Jeremiah and find ourselves wanting more. So, here are some more thoughts concerning this week's lesson.

As mentioned last week, the order of passages and events in the Book of Jeremiah are not necessarily chronological. The text skips back and forth in time in places, and sometimes it is hard to tell what period a particular passage belongs to. So it is with Jeremiah 22: 1-9. Nothing explicitly identifies whether it is during the time of Jehoiakim (earlier) or Zedekiah (later). Indeed, the exegesis in the interpreter's Bible suggests that, except for verses 6-7 (the poetic content), this passage is from a later editor. With verse 10, the chapter addresses "Shallum", another name for Jehoahaz, the son of Josiah. Jehoahaz / Shallum was given the throne by the people of Judah after his father's death at Megiddo. (That's very interesting – why chosen by "the people"? And, he was younger, at 23, than his brother, Jehoiakim, who was 25.) Jehoahaz was on the throne only three months. Pharaoh Neco, who had killed his father Josiah in the battle at Megiddo, replaced him with Jehoiakim. Neco then carried Jehoahaz off to exile as a prisoner to Egypt, where he died sometime later.

So in this verse 10, right here at the end of our scripture passage, we step back to a decade or so before the Babylonian siege. So, confusing as it may be, "he who dies," is Josiah, and "he who goes away," is Jehoahaz. Verses 11 and 12 are a prose explanation of this prophesy, by an editor, perhaps Jeremiah's secretary Baruch. I don't understand why the lesson writer identifies Shallum (his "private" or personal name) / Jehoahaz (his regal name) as evil. There is an unsupported characterization of him as evil given in 2 Kings 23:32. He was only 23, and reigned for but 3 months (when the Pharaoh got around to dealing with Judah). Jehoahaz followed immediately after his reforming and highly respected father Josiah, and he was apparently chosen by "the people." I'd like to think that was because he walked in the way of his father Josiah. Why would he have had the inclination and the time to do evil? No explicit explanation is given in 2 Kings. Jeremiah says people should weep for him, as he would never return to his native Jerusalem. Furthermore, the Pharaoh was replacing him with someone likely more pliable to Egyptian interests, which suggests Jehoahaz was less willing to compromise to their agenda. (I really don't understand why the lesson writer included verse 10.)

The lesson book is mostly concerned with Jehoiakim. As mentioned, he was placed on the throne by Pharaoh Neco of Egypt three months after Josiah was killed by Neco. That takes some explaining. Babylon had become powerful, and conquered (with help from the Medes) the Assyrian capital of Nineveh in 612 B.C. Then Egypt allied with the remnant of Assyria to try and balance against this aggressive new Babylonian empire. Josiah had tried to prevent the Egyptians from reinforcing Assyria when he intercepted their army at Megiddo (609 B.C.) and was killed.

What happened after that, was that Pharaoh Neco continued north to join his Assyrian allies. There they joined forces to recapture Harran from the Babylonians. Harran was the last capital of the Assyrian empire. Neco then seems to have then returned to Judea to take care of business there. That was the replacement of Jehoahaz with Jehoiakim. He made Jehoiakim a client king and imposed tribute. His fight against the Babylonians in Harran was why it was three months before he was able to get back to deal with Jerusalem. (Confusing, isn't it?)

Harran eventually again fell to the Babylonians again in 605 B.C., and that was the end of Assyria. The Babylonians and Egyptians remained the two greatest powers of the day, with Palestine directly between them. Jehoiakim was a vassal king to Pharaoh. It is no surprise that Nebuchadnezzar moved against Jerusalem as next on his agenda after exterminating the Assyrians. 2 Kings tells us that Jehoiakim switched allegiance to Babylon for three years. Then he then rebelled, likely because of the heavy tribute, and with encouragement from Egypt. The Babylonians invaded in retaliation. That culminated in the first siege (by the Babylonians) of Jerusalem.

It is in this context, the reign of Jehoiakim, that Jeremiah prophesies against that king in verses 13-23. This is a difficult time for the people of Judah. As a vassal king to Egypt, initially, Jehoiakim had to pay a large tribute raised necessarily by taxation. Then, when he switched allegiance to Babylon, he would have had to pay a heavy tribute to them. The land and people were impoverished. But Jehoiakim was a king! He needed to live like one! To do so, he used forced labor, and must have spent much of his people's money raised through taxes for the cedar and other fittings needed for his luxurious palace. This had to have been during the period before the Babylonians invaded.

13 “Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice; who makes his neighbor serve him for nothing, and does not give him his wages; 14 who says, ‘I will build myself a great house with spacious upper rooms,’ and cuts out windows for it, paneling it with cedar, and painting it with vermilion. 15 Do you think you are a king because you compete in cedar? Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with

him. 16 He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is this not to know me?” says the LORD. 17 “But you have eyes and heart only for your dishonest gain, for shedding innocent blood, and for practicing oppression and violence.”

It is interesting that in verse 13 Jeremiah refers to the King as oppressing his “neighbor,” as if the king was of no higher standing than his subjects. In fact, as a vassal king, he was no better in function than the “publicans” of Jesus’s day. His job was to squeeze every bit of wealth he could out of his people in order to pay tribute. That’s what Jehoiakim was doing, and felt that as an oriental despot, he was entitled to do so. Kings were supposed to be absolute. (In other nations they were not plagued by prophets of the LORD!) At this time, empire meant being a top king with vassal kings that had been conquered through force or intimidation. It was a way to earn money for the king by taxing other peoples through tribute, not your own. (In our day, of course, modern “empires” tax everybody as much as they can!) . As with the publicans later, Jews who worked as tax collectors for the Romans, it was easy for Jehoiakim to skim something off the top for himself. He was king, so it was his money. The warnings of Samuel in I Samuel chapter 8:10-18, about how the people would be made slaves of the king had been fulfilled. This was true even more so, as the king himself was no more than the slave of a pagan foreign monarch. Oppressors of the judges era did not have this handy mechanism in place to help them pillage the land; they had to do it themselves. Having a king had its disadvantages.

The prophesy against Jehoiakim of Jeremiah 22 13-23 is followed by a prophesy in verses 22: 24-30 against Jehoiachin (royal name) / Coniah (personal name), the next king. He was Jehoiakim’s son, who came to the throne when Jehoiakim died. This was just before, or while, Jerusalem was under siege by the Babylonians. Jehoiachin was only 18. He was on the throne for but three months when he surrendered to Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon. The Babylonians at this time thoroughly looted the temple, palace, and carried off into captivity anyone who might make a useful slave, including officials, smiths and anybody else of value. They installed Zedekiah as king. (Zedekiah was yet another son of Josiah, Jehoiakim’s brother and Jehoiachin’s uncle.) Verses 24-27 may be editorial, written later. Jeremiah’s words about Jehoiachin (Coniah) are:

28 Is this man Coniah a despised, broken pot, a vessel no one cares for? Why are he and his children hurled and cast into a land which they do not know? 29 O land, land, land, hear the word of the LORD! 30 Thus says the LORD: “Write this man down as childless, a man who shall not succeed in his days; for none of his offspring shall succeed in sitting on the throne of David, and ruling again in Judah.”

Verse 28 is Jeremiah quoting sympathizers of Jehoiachin. The prophesy begins with verse 30. This particular prophesy is interesting, because Jehoiachin is the grandfather of Zerubbabel, who was governor over Jerusalem under the Persians, in the time of the prophet Zechariah. He was important in the rebuilding of the Temple. Zerubbabel never became king though. He may have tried to make himself king. But he disappeared without any account given of why.

Jehoiachin is also the ancestor of Jesus, through whom Matthew and Luke trace Jesus's ancestry back to David.

It is known that Jehoiachin had sons. Seven are listed in Chronicles 3:17. Also, a cuneiform tablet was found in Babylon listing rations of oil allocated to the king of Judah and his five sons, from the period of his captivity. This literally reflects the last passage in II Kings, that reports Jehoiachin was released from prison and allowed to dine at the king's table.

How as Christians do we see this passage? It seems to contradict the notion of Jesus as the inheritor of the throne of David. As Christians, we see that as an identification of Jesus as messiah. Is Jeremiah wrong? Does his prophesy fail here? Clearly Jehoiachin had sons, and they had descendants, and one of those was Jesus.

All I can say is, God is gracious. How many times does the Bible report that God turned back from carrying out a punishment prophesied? There are numerous instances. You may recall, Jonah was very, very disappointed that God did not fulfil his prophesy. He gave warning of God's imminent destruction (40 days hence) on Nineveh. But, God did not carry out that destruction when the Assyrians repented. Jehoiachin's failings would not frustrate God's plans. We can give thanks for that.