

A Prophet To The Nations

“This is the word of the Lord that came to Jeremiah the prophet concerning the nations: Concerning Egypt.....concerning the Philistines ... concerning Moab ... concerning the Ammonites ...concerning Edom ... concerning Damascus ... concerning Kedar and the kingdoms of Hazor ... concerning Babylon.” Jeremiah 46-50

Jeremiah worked so long and hard in Jerusalem at ground zero that we might forget that he was appointed by the Lord “as a prophet to the nations” (1:5). Any thought that Jeremiah represented some isolated ethnic deity rather than the Sovereign Lord of the nations ought to be quickly dispelled by his mission to the surrounding nations and by his thorough and detailed knowledge of each of them. His familiarity with the nations was not that of a tourist, but of a prophet, who was called to deliver sweeping messages of judgment. The God of Israel was none other than the Lord Almighty whose rule continues to extend over all the nations.

Jeremiah’s Global Village

Jeremiah’s message of judgment was carefully crafted to capture the brave bravado of nationalistic zeal and the abject horror of utter defeat. He prophesied that regal warriors would be routed and crushed, proud kings humiliated and forced into exile. He used national idols, like the serpent, to depict a defeated Egypt slithering away (46:22). He likened an invading army to an overflowing torrent that would overwhelm the Philistines and render them so helpless that even fathers could not help their children (47:3). He prophesied that Moab’s prime real estate, situated proudly on an elevated plateau east of the Dead Sea, would be reduced to rubble. Like a vintage wine she would be poured out and her wine jugs smashed. He exposed Moab’s pride, Ammon’s materialism, and Edom’s conceit. He described the once proud capital city of Syria, Damascus, as a feeble, panic-stricken woman with no place to turn. Even the nomadic tribes of Kedar and Hazor could not find refuge in the caves against Nebuchadnezzar’s advancing army. And Elam, located in modern Iran, east of Babylon, would be defenseless against an army that swept through like a hurricane, scattering, shattering and destroying everything in its path.

Jeremiah had been announcing international judgment in the global village for decades. In this final section, his prophecy against Egypt dates from 605 BC and his prophecy against Babylon was delivered in 594 B.C. (51:59). From a secular point-of-view Jeremiah had no platform from which to pronounce these judgments and in the eyes of the world he was a lone voice without credentials. The fact that he was from a small, inconsequential nation that mattered little on the world scene, did not stop him from doing what the Lord had called him to do, even though it put his own life at grave risk. His message against Babylon was as long as his messages against all the other nations combined. Babylon, the one time agent of God’s wrath, “the hammer of the

whole earth” (50:23), and “a gold cup in the Lord’s hand” (51:7), was now slated for the full fury of the Lord’s vengeance.

We tend to think that the world as a global village is a recent phenomenon inspired by modern technologies, world travel and global communications, but Jeremiah’s global village was neither supersonic nor wireless. It was not modeled after the Tower of Babel, nor was there a global economy driving Jeremiah’s global village. In Jeremiah’s world-view, human solidarity was ultimately all about the politics of the Kingdom of God. His vision of the global village was shaped by the nature of God and the reality salvation history (Peterson, 182). Even though he remained in the vicinity of Jerusalem for almost his entire life, until he was taken against his will to Egypt where he finished out his ministry (Jer 43:6), Jeremiah’s ministry was anything but provincial or parochial. His ministry was both incarnational and global, meaning that he embodied the message of God in every dimension of his personal life and then consistently applied the Lord’s message to the nations. There was an inseparable seamless connection between personal spirituality and global politics. The God of Israel was not a local deity sponsored by an ethnic religion, but the Lord Almighty, the sovereign God of the nations, who held the nations to account. His entire life was governed by this deeply personal and truly global mission, which was declared by God at the outset of work, “See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant” (1:10; see 31:28; 45:4).

Since Jeremiah’s world-view was shaped by the Sovereign Lord he was spared the feelings of humiliation and defeatism that often afflict an oppressed people. Ethnic pride and triumphalism had no place in his vision because his global perspective issued from divine revelation. He was able to pronounce God’s judgment against the nations with a judicial objectivity free of personal animosity and racial superiority because he was convinced of God’s ultimate control over history. Jeremiah’s hopeful vision of the future spared him the trauma of judging life solely on the basis of his personal experience of pain and injustice. His theology of the end times found passionate expression in his poetic description of the trauma of the human condition apart from God and the utter necessity of divine judgment.

The Poetry of Judgment

Hebrew Professor John Butler finds in these chapters (46-51) “some of the finest poetry in the entire prophetic canon” (307). Jeremiah’s primary concern was to communicate the *experience* of judgment. The *reasons* for judgment can be found embedded in his vivid description of the horrors of war. Instead of a pedantic description of wrongs or an indictment of offenses, Jeremiah chose to portray battle scenes. The modern equivalent might be the first twenty minutes of Stephen Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan*. In his message “against the army of Pharaoh Neco king of Egypt,” Jeremiah described one of the most decisive battles in Egyptian history, the battle at Carchemish on the Euphrates River (the modern Jerablus), when Nebuchadnezzar defeated the Egyptian army in 605 B.C. (Thompson, 688). This was the same Pharaoh who killed King Josiah at Megiddo four years earlier (609 B.C.).

Jeremiah has the Egyptian commander barking out orders one minute and describing a full scale rout the next,

“Present arms!
March to the front!
Harness the horses!
Up on the saddles!
Battle formation! Helmets on,
spears sharpened, armor in place!’
But what’s this I see?
They’re scared out of their wits!
They break ranks and run for cover.
Their soldiers panic.
They run this way and that,
stampeding blindly.
It’s total chaos, total confusion, danger everywhere!’”
God’s Decree (Jer 46:3-5, The Message)

No one was swift enough, strong enough, or skilled enough to escape the Lord’s day of vengeance. The Egyptian army went up in smoke like a huge sacrifice on the banks of the Euphrates. There was nothing available, certainly no balm in Gilead, that would heal their wound or take away their shame (46:6-12). Jeremiah’s focus on the catastrophic experience almost ignores the reasons for judgment, except for a statement that comes at the center of his first poem against Egypt that says,

“Who is this like the Nile in flood?
Like its streams torrential?
Why, it’s Egypt like the Nile in flood,
like its streams torrential,
Saying, ‘I’ll take over the world.
I’ll wipe out cities and peoples.’” (Jer 46:7-8, The Message).

The second poem describes Egypt’s futile last stand against Nebuchadnezzar’s invasion (46:13-26). The call to battle can be heard throughout the land to rally the troops, but it is pointless because Egypt’s warriors are powerless against the Babylonian army. “They cannot stand, for the Lord will push them down. They will stumble repeatedly; they will fall over each other....They will exclaim, ‘Pharaoh king of Egypt is only a loud noise; he has missed his opportunity’” (46:15-17). Egypt is like “a beautiful sleek heifer attacked by a horsefly from the north!” Egypt is like a hissing snake fleeing from an advancing army. The “Daughter of Egypt” is like a woman “raped by vandals from the north”(46:20,22,24 The Message). We get the picture of devastating judgment. Jeremiah’s postscript summarizes the Lord Almighty’s verdict and then adds a single line that hints of Egypt’s future restoration, which reads, “‘Later, however, Egypt will be inhabited as in times past,’ declares the Lord” (46:26). Even though the judgment theme dominates, there is more to the story of Egypt than judgment. She still has a future in God’s plan.

Gospel Parallels

This single line of hope for Egypt precedes Jeremiah's message of consolation for Israel. For in the end their destinies are tied together. They are united in the history of redemption. God will bless the nations through Israel by sending his Anointed One, through whom "all peoples on earth will be blessed" (Gen 12:3). What Jeremiah said to Israel could very well have been repeated after each of his messages to the surrounding nations. The lines of hope Jeremiah threw out to the surrounding nations are tied to the destiny of Jacob. So when he concluded his judgment pronouncement against Moab by saying, "Yet I will restore the fortunes of Moab in days to come," Jeremiah was convinced that such a promise rested on the destiny of Israel (48:47). And when he concluded his judgment pronouncement against Ammon by saying, "Yet afterward, I will restore the fortunes of the Ammonites," declares the Lord," the prophet believed that Ammon's future and Israel's future were linked in God's redemptive plan (49:6; see 49:39). The message of hope followed Jeremiah's first message of judgment as a comforting reminder of Israel's strategic redemptive place among *all* the nations.

Jeremiah's message of blessing was a precursor to the first word of the Gospel. Repeatedly, Jesus began his encounters with the reassuring phrase "Do not be afraid." This was not a polite attempt to put people at ease in his presence, but a bold pronouncement of lasting hope grounded in God's Salvation History. The first word of the Gospel and Jeremiah's word of consolation have the same source and meaning. "Do not fear, O Jacob my servant; do not be dismayed, O Israel," is not a passing line of nationalistic rhetoric, but a powerful reminder of God's covenant with Israel to bless the nations.

The second parallel between Jeremiah's message of hope and Jesus' Gospel message is the description of what we are saved out of. Jeremiah declared the Lord's promise,

"I will surely save you out of a distant place, your descendants from the land of their exile. Jacob will again have peace and security, and no one will make him afraid" (46:27).

Both Israel and the Church are saved "out of a distant place." Just how "distant" can be judged from Jeremiah's poetic description of the surrounding nations. Moab, located east of the Dead Sea on a high fertile plateau, was known for her lush vines and wine production. Moab had placed her trust in riches and enjoyed a luxuriate lifestyle. She was complacent and had her full of wine. Like Pharaoh she also exuded pride. "We have heard of Moab's pride," preached Jeremiah, "her overweening pride and conceit, her pride and arrogance and the haughtiness of her heart. I know her insolence but it is futile" (48:29-30). Because of this pride Jeremiah rained down the vocabulary of judgment to describe what would happen to every city of Moab. She would be ruined, disgraced, shattered, silenced, broken and laid waste (48:1-10) and the Lord, far from delighting in this judgment, would wail, cry out, moan and weep for Moab (48:31-36).

Idolatry and greed made Ammon and Edom "distant places" as well. But the terror of the Lord

was about to silence their boasting and shatter their trust in riches. There was no place for Damascus, Kedar and Habor to hide from God's judgment, for even though "'you build your nest as high as the eagle's, from there I will bring you down,' declares the Lord" (49:16). Jeremiah's poetic description of judgment renders all the "distant places" traumatized and terror struck. Israel's neighbors from Egypt to Elam are helpless to defend themselves or escape the wrath of God. Nevertheless, Yahweh promised, "I will surely save you out of a distant place....Though I completely destroy all the nations among which I scatter you, I will not completely destroy you" (46:28).

These "distant places" out of which Israel was to be saved parallel the rescue of believers from a world of pride, greed, idolatry and sloth. Jeremiah's description of the nations illustrates the nature of worldliness and "the basic principles of this world" (Col 2:20). Whether speaking of political powers or individual selves, the earthly nature manifests itself in "sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry." It is because of this world that Paul declared, "the wrath of God is coming" (Col 3:5-6). This is the world of trouble that Jesus Christ has overcome (Jn 16:33), the "distant place" where the believer is *in* the world, but no more *of* world than Christ is *of* the world (Jn 17:14-16). It is the world that Christ's followers are called out of and sent back into for Christ's sake (Jn 17:18). James warned us to keep our distance from this "distant place" when he said that "friendship with the world is hatred toward God" (James 4:4). And John declared, "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of the eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever" (1 Jn 2:15-17). Peter reminds us that those who "called out of darkness into his wonderful light" are "aliens and strangers in the world" and urged "to abstain from sinful desires" (1 Pet 2:9-11).

A third parallel can be found between Jeremiah's message of consolation and Jesus' great commission. Even as Israel existed among the surrounding nations, so the Church exists in the world. If the people of God were extracted from the world, the world would be left behind, but neither in the case of Israel nor the Church has this been the plan of God. Israel, scattered among the nations, parallels the church commissioned to "make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19). Israel as a faithful remnant set the stage for the emergence of the world-wide Body of Christ. The Lord's promise to Israel, "Do not fear, O Jacob my servant, for I am with you," parallels the Lord's promise to the Church, "Surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age" (Mt 28:20). The word of the Lord, through the prophet Jeremiah, parallels the letters to the seven churches recorded in the apostle John's Revelation. "Though I completely destroy all the nations among which I scatter you, I will not completely destroy you. I will discipline you but only with justice; I will not let you go entirely unpunished" (46:28). The Church will not be saved from the tribulation, but through the tribulation. The trajectory of Jeremiah's new covenant prophecy reaches all the way to end and gathers up the promises made to the faithful remnant *in Christ*. Zion will not be a geographic destination in the Holy Land but a relational congregation before the Holy One. Jeremiah prophesied better than he knew, but his prophecy applies to the Church today

better than we know. Time has not eclipsed his message, but only served to heighten it.

“In those days, at that time,’ declares the Lord, ‘the people of Israel and the people of Judah together will go in tears to seek the Lord their God. They will ask the way to Zion and turn their faces toward it. They will come and bind themselves to the Lord in an everlasting covenant that will not be forgotten” (Jer 50:4-5).

The Lord of the Nations

The tenth and final nation on Jeremiah’s judgment list was Babylon. The hammer that God used to shatter the whole earth was next in line to become broken and shattered (50:23). The Babylonian army towered above the Egyptian army like a steep mountain (46:18) and swept over the Philistines with their galloping stallions and iron chariots (47:3). They swooped down on Moab like an eagle (48:40) and reduced Ammon to “a mound of ruins” (49:2). They struck such fear in the heart of Edom’s warriors that they became like women in labor (49:22) and they burned Damascus down to the ground (49:27). Even the nomadic peoples of Kedar and Hazor were not safe from the Babylonian terror and Elam’s bow was no match for Babylonian might (49:29,35).

Babylon has ravaged the nations, but what she has done to Israel deserved special indictment. Babylon’s fate was sealed because she had pillaged Yahweh’s inheritance (50:11), crushed his bones (50:17), oppressed his people (50:33), and committed violence against Zion (51:24,35). She “defied the Lord, the Holy One of Israel. Therefore, her young men will fall in the streets; all her soldiers will be silenced in that day” (50:30). Jeremiah announced, “The Lord will take vengeance, vengeance for his temple” (51:11). “Babylon must fall because of Israel’s slain, just as the slain in all the earth have fallen because of Babylon” (51:49). The Lord Almighty was lifting up his banner over Babylon and announcing to the nations that Babylon’s idols, including Bel, the title of the storm-god Enlil and Marduk, king of the gods and head of the Babylonian pantheon, were to be put to shame (50:2).

The once proud superpower was to be reduced to a wasteland (50:39). “...The boast of the whole earth seized!” Jeremiah exclaimed. “What a horror Babylon will be among the nations! The sea will rise over Babylon; its roaring waves will cover her....and the wall of Babylon will fall” (51:41-44). The once invincible Babylonian army will cower behind their barricades, terrified by “waves if enemies” who will rage against them like a tidal wave (51:55). The Lord Almighty was going to hold nothing back. “The Lord has opened his arsenal and brought out the weapons of his wrath, for the Sovereign Lord has work to do in the land of the Babylonians” (50:25). God was sending “a nation from the north,” also referred to as “an alliance of great nations from the land of the north,” and “a great nation and many kings...from the ends of the earth,” who will “chase Babylon from its land in an instant” (50:3,9,41,44).

The timing of Jeremiah’s prophesies against Babylon can be dated in 594/3 B.C. when Baruck’s brother Seraiah, a staff officer to Zedekiah king of Judah, read them aloud in Babylon. During this period between the two exiles, Zedekiah must have been forced by Nebuchadnezzar to come to Babylon to pledge his loyalty. At the time, Babylon dominated the world and showed no signs of

loosening its grip. We are left with the picture of Seraiah reading Jeremiah's scroll aloud, presumably to the Hebrew delegation that had traveled with him from Jerusalem. When he finished, as ordered by Jeremiah, he pronounced this verdict: "O Lord, you have said you will destroy this place, so that neither person nor animal will live in it; it will be desolate forever." He then tied a stone to the document and threw it into the Euphrates, saying, "So will Babylon sink to rise no more because of the disaster I will bring upon her. And her people will fall" (51:62-64).

A century earlier Babylon topped Isaiah's hit list as well. Even though Babylon was then only an emerging superpower and Assyria was Israel's immediate threat, Babylon would eventually conquer Judah and force the Jews into exile. Ever since the Tower of Babel (Gen 11) Babylon has symbolized the solidarity of worldly principalities and powers. Isaiah called Babylon "the jewel of kingdoms," and his description of the boastful Babylonian spirit recalls the people of Shinar:

"You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.' But you are brought down to the grave, to the depths of the pit" (14:13-15; see 13:19).

Isaiah pictured Babylon as an emerging threat and Jeremiah described Babylon as a reigning superpower. Both prophets saw Babylon as the embodiment of human success turned against the Lord God. Some seven hundred years after Jeremiah, the Apostle John used Babylon to symbolize not only the Roman Empire, but every secular and spiritual power that set itself up against the Kingdom of God. Down through the ages God has pronounced judgment against the spirit of Babylon. "Woe! Woe, O great city, O Babylon, city of power! In one hour your doom has come! (Rev 18:10). The apostle John saw ancient Babylon as the prototype for the first century Roman Empire and he used the language of Isaiah and Jeremiah to prophecy against Rome. Jeremiah's message continues to have special relevance for today's representation of the people of God, the Church. Israel's vulnerability among the nations and her centrality in God's redemptive plan is true today for the Body of Christ. Like Isaiah, Jeremiah offered a powerful vision of what it means to pray, "Your Kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Mt 6:10).

Jeremiah's message of judgment remains a forceful reminder to the Church of just how desperate the human condition is apart from God. For all those who place their trust in themselves are doomed to experience the horror of God's judgment. Those who trust in the idols of success, sex, and self for salvation will meet with the same fate Jeremiah pronounced against the nations. It is a grave mistake to dismiss God's judgment as an anachronistic Old Testament theme. Jesus spoke of hell (Mt 5:29-30; 10:28) and referred to a place of utter darkness, "where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Mt 8:12). He said that it would be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for those who reject the gospel (Mt 10:15). He envisioned a fiery and painful final end to all who rejected the witness of the Spirit and persisted in their evil ways (Mt 12:31-33; 13:42). At the end of the age, Jesus said, "angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Mt 13:50; 24:51). It is impossible to believe in salvation and reject judgment

because the two are inseparable, as the apostle Paul stated so forcefully, “For those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For God does not show favoritism” (Rom 2:8-11). Jeremiah’s prophecies bring the message home that the Lord will judge his people, and as the author of Hebrews wrote, “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb 10:31).

What is different between Jeremiah and Jesus is the point of emphasis. The truth of divine judgment and salvation remain the same, but since Jesus has come the accent has shifted to the good news of salvation. The Gospel assumes the truth of divine judgment and emphasizes the truth of the gift of salvation: “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son” (Jn 3:17-18; see Jn 12:47-50). It is as if the Gospel assumed all that Jeremiah prophesied on judgment and then built on Jeremiah’s single lines of hope and restoration (46:26; 48:47; 49:6; 49:39). What Jeremiah said about Israel being saved “out of a distant place” (46:27-28) and Israel being bound “to the Lord in an everlasting covenant” (50:4-5) is the truth the Gospel builds on and commends to a lost world. Jeremiah looked forward to that day when there would be freedom from oppression and rest throughout the land, because “their Redeemer is strong; the Lord Almighty is his name” (50:33-34). Inherent in his message of hope is the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.