

Jeremiah Lecture Notes—Summer 2011
The Exiles and the Hope for the Future
Jeremiah 29-30

Introduction:

Jeremiah 29—The Prophets' Mail

--This chapter is the record of a series of letters between Jeremiah in Jerusalem and the exiles in Babylon. The primary letter, from Jeremiah to the exiles, is included in Jer. 29:1-23. Verses 24-28 records Jeremiah's response to a letter from a prophet named Shemaiah, who was in Babylon. This letter could be a part of the first letter, or a second letter, written after the first letter had been received and read, prompting a response from Shemaiah. However, the response in verses 24-28 could simply be an oracle of the prophet, in which case 29:24-32 are a single unit, albeit a somewhat confusing one. The latter seems the best option for interpretation. Jeremiah's further response to the public reading of Shemaiah's letter is found in Jer. 29:29-32, perhaps representing a third letter, although the exact chronology of the composition of the letters is impossible to ascertain.¹

JER 29:1 This is the text of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders among the exiles and to the priests, the prophets and all the other people Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. ² (This was after King Jehoiachin and the queen mother, the court officials and the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the craftsmen and the artisans had gone into exile from Jerusalem.) ³ He entrusted the letter to Elasah son of Shaphan and to Gemariah son of Hilkiyah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to King Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon.²

--Jeremiah sent this letter between 597 and 587, since a parenthetical statement informs the reader that the letter was sent after Jehoiachin went into exile. It was sent to people from Jerusalem now in exile, from the elders down to "all the other people." The introduction to the letter specifically mentions "the prophets," probably because the prophet would single them out for censure.

--Elasah and Gemariah, emissaries of king Zedekiah to Babylon, deliver the first letter. The fact that Jeremiah could send a letter by Zedekiah's emissaries is indeed ironic. Elasah is the son of Shaphan. Another son of Shaphan, Ahikam, supports Jeremiah in Jer. 26:24 when the prophet is threatened with death because of the "Temple Sermon." Gemariah is the son of Hilkiyah. Hilkiyah is a somewhat common name in the Hebrew Bible. Jeremiah's father (or at least ancestor) was Hilkiyah, as was an administrator in the time of Isaiah. In 2 Kings 22-23, the high priest, Hilkiyah, found the Book of the Law in the temple. Since, Gemariah was an emissary of the king, the latter Hilkiyah would be a good candidate for his father. If this is correct, then both of these men were likely involved in Josiah's reform and were supporters of Jeremiah.³

¹ See Fretheim, *Jeremiah*, 399-400, for the view of three separate letters. Bright, *Jeremiah*, 210-211, offers the alternative of 29:24-32 as a unit.

² Biblical quotations are NIV, except where otherwise noted. Retrieved from *NIV Complete Bible Library*.

³ See Fretheim, 401-402, for a brief discussion of these possible familial relationships.

JER 29:4 This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵ “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶ Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. ⁷ Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.” ⁸ Yes, this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: “Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. ⁹ They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them,” declares the LORD.

--The prophet confronts two issues in this first letter: the need for the exiles to accept their fate and settle down at peace in Babylon and a warning to ignore the words of the false prophets.⁴

--First, they should make themselves at home in Babylon. All of the expectations of vv. 5-6 are the expectations of normal life. In other words, the exiles were to continue with life as normal, accepting that Babylon is now their home.

--They are to increase, even in exile. God’s creative work in His people does not cease because of judgment and exile. Still, God is active among His people. Still, God wants to bless His people. As Fretheim states, “this word is testimony to God’s ongoing work of creation and blessing, that flowing, rhythmic, non-dramatic divine activity.”⁵ God will work in their midst, if they will serve Him, even in a foreign land not of their choosing, if they will accept the judgment that they have earned. Furthermore, the command to plant and build even in exile reflects the call of Jeremiah, which was both destructive and creative. These exiles have experienced the judgment of God, now they must prepare to accept his grace and blessing. On the duration of exile, see below on v. 10.

--Beyond this, however, the prophet told the exiles to “seek the peace and prosperity of” Babylon.

--On its face, this prophecy is self-seeking. Since you are to make yourselves at home, you had better pray that Babylon prospers, since as Babylon goes, so you will go. On another level, however, scholars point out possible far-reaching implications of this command. As Fretheim states, “such prayers assume that God desires to be present and active in a focused way in the lives of the exiles and in the lives of the Babylonians.”⁶

--Jeremiah uses the Hebrew *shalom* (שָׁלוֹם) three times in 29:7. The translation, “peace,” is seldom adequate for *shalom*; rather a term like “welfare” or “well-being” is probably more appropriate. The well-being of the exiles depends completely upon the welfare of Babylon. If famine or war comes to Babylon, it also comes to the exiles from Judah. Babylon, not Jerusalem, must be the focus of their prayers for blessing. This is an interesting twist to the psalmist admonition in Psalm 122:6-7, “Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: May those who love you be secure. May there be peace within your walls and security within your citadels.” Certainly, much to their dislike, the welfare of the exiles is now tied to Babylon, not Jerusalem.⁷

⁴ See Miller, “Jeremiah,” 791, for a brief discussion of these two issues and the organization of the chapter under these two broad topics.

⁵ Fretheim, 409.

⁶ Fretheim, 410.

⁷ Miller, 792.

--What does this text say to the residents of modern cities?⁸ How should residents of cities pray for their cities? How should they seek to improve their cities? If believers take seriously the NT words of the apostle in 1 Peter 2:11, then they are, in a sense, exiles anywhere in the world. Therefore, they should pray for, and actively seek, the welfare of their cities. They should seek to make these cities better places to live, marry, and have children.

--Second, they should ignore the “prophets and diviners” among them. Jeremiah tells them to ignore the prophets because they are prophesying lies in the LORD’s name. The LORD declares that He did not send them. The prophet will relate details of the prophetic conflict later in the chapter.

29:10-14—After 70 Years

JER 29:10 This is what the LORD says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. ¹¹ For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. ¹² Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. ¹³ You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. ¹⁴ I will be found by you,” declares the LORD, “and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,” declares the LORD, “and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.”

--The reader may interpret these verses in several directions and from several perspectives. All of these questions appear at first glance to have very simple answers, but the simplicity of the answers is quickly dispelled upon further study.

--First, what is “70 years”?

--The immediate answer is, of course, that the exile will last for 70 years. The problem is, of course, that the exile did not last for 70 years. Scholars have proposed several solutions to the enigma of the “70 years.”⁹

--The first exile occurred in 597, which is the context of Jer. 29, thus 70 years would be 527. Since nothing significant happened in that year, interpreters have sought other solutions. Cyrus’ defeat of Babylon occurred in 539, so some have dated from Nebuchadnezzar’s defeat of Egypt and ascension to the throne of Babylon in 609. The year 539 is exactly 70 years from the ascension of Jehoiakim to the throne in Judah, and he was the first foreign appointed king of Judah. The rededication of the temple in Jerusalem was 71 years after its destruction in 586. The problem with all of these interpretations is that none of them fit the interpretative demands of Jer. 29:10!

--Further complicating the issue is the use of “7 years” in Daniel 9. That chapter appears to be a reinterpretation of Jeremiah’s 70 years, because of the recognition that the promised blessings have not occurred. Thus, the “70 years” of Jeremiah becomes “70 weeks of years” in Daniel.¹⁰

⁸ One may see Daniel L. Smith, “Jeremiah as Prophet of Nonviolent Resistance,” *JSOT* 43 (1989): 95-107, for an explanation and critique of the pacifist interpretation of this text.

⁹ See Gerald L. Keown, Pamela J. Scalise, and Thomas G. Smothers, *Jeremiah 26-52*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 27, ed. David Hubbard, et al (Dallas: Word Books, 1995), 74-75, an excellent summary of interpretation of “70 years,” esp. as it relates to Jer. 29.

¹⁰ See Gerald H. Wilson, “The Prayer of Daniel 9: Reflection on Jeremiah 29,” *JSOT* (1990): 91-99, for a summary of interpretation on the Daniel text and its relationship to Jer. 29.

--Many scholars would take a less literal approach to the “70 years” prophecy. In Ps. 90:10, a lifetime is 70 years. In Is. 23:15, the prophet promises Tyre’s judgment in 70 years. In Jer. 27:7, the prophet describes the length of Babylon’s rule as encompassing Nebuchadnezzar, his son, and his grandson—thus, 3 generations. Perhaps this text in Jeremiah is meant to communicate a period of time too long for an individual to survive, especially in contrast to the two years prophesied by Hananiah in Jer. 28:2-4. As Scalise describes the meaning, “an individual who hears ‘within two years’ can think, ‘I can wait that long,’ but seventy years evokes the response, ‘I’ll be dead before then.’”¹¹ As Miller concludes, “the exiles who received the letter could not expect to see home ever again.”¹² Thus, the message is, “settle down, have children, have grandchildren, and they will enjoy the benefits of your patience.”

--Second, what does God promise?

--The LORD’s initiative following the 70 years is three fold. He will “visit” them (Hebrew *paqad*), reversing the visitation of judgment promised earlier in Jeremiah. He will fulfill His promises to the exiles, thus redeeming them as the remnant. Third, He will act to bring them back to their homeland.

--Third, what are God’s plans?

--God’s plans are for *shalom* (“to prosper” in NIV, but more properly, “for welfare, good, or prosperity”), not for *ra`ah* (“to harm” in NIV, better “for evil, bad, or evil”). The problem with this blessing is two-fold. First, it will only take place after 70 years (see above). Second, what brings it about? Is the blessing and return contingent upon the exiles’ proper attitude and action toward God?

--Fourth, when does God hear?

--Does God hear their cries before, or only after, the 70 years? The text of Jer. 29 is somewhat ambiguous, as a comparison of English versions displays. The interpreter must keep the message of Jeremiah to the exiles clearly in mind while reading this text. The LORD has promised his presence with the exiles. Certainly, the text can not mean that He will only hear them after the 70 years. The implication must be, rather, that God will answer their cries after the 70 years. The fact that they must pray for Babylon and seek *shalom* in Babylon means that God will indeed listen to them. Unfortunately, the answer they truly seek—deliverance—will come only after the 70 years is completed.

Jeremiah 29:15, 20-32—Jeremiah and the False Prophets

JER 29:15 You may say, “The LORD has raised up prophets for us in Babylon. . . .”

JER 29:20 Therefore, hear the word of the LORD, all you exiles whom I have sent away from Jerusalem to Babylon. ²¹ This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says about Ahab son of Kolaiah and Zedekiah son of Maaseiah, who are prophesying lies to you in my name: “I will hand them over to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and he will put them to death before your very eyes. ²² Because of them, all the exiles from Judah who are in Babylon will use this curse: ‘The LORD treat you like Zedekiah and Ahab, whom the king of Babylon burned in the fire.’ ²³ For they have done outrageous things in Israel; they have committed adultery with their neighbors’ wives and in my name have spoken lies, which I did not tell them to do. I know it and am a witness to it,” declares the LORD.

¹¹ Keown, Scalise, Smothers, 73.

¹² Miller, 793.

JER 29:24 Tell Shemaiah the Nehelamite, ²⁵ “This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: You sent letters in your own name to all the people in Jerusalem, to Zephaniah son of Maaseiah the priest, and to all the other priests. You said to Zephaniah, ²⁶ “The LORD has appointed you priest in place of Jehoiada to be in charge of the house of the LORD; you should put any madman who acts like a prophet into the stocks and neck-irons. ²⁷ So why have you not reprimanded Jeremiah from Anathoth, who poses as a prophet among you? ²⁸ He has sent this message to us in Babylon: It will be a long time. Therefore build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce.””

JER 29:29 Zephaniah the priest, however, read the letter to Jeremiah the prophet. ³⁰ Then the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah: ³¹ “Send this message to all the exiles: ‘This is what the LORD says about Shemaiah the Nehelamite: Because Shemaiah has prophesied to you, even though I did not send him, and has led you to believe a lie, ³² this is what the LORD says: I will surely punish Shemaiah the Nehelamite and his descendants. He will have no one left among this people, nor will he see the good things I will do for my people, declares the LORD, because he has preached rebellion against me.’”

--In these words concerning false prophets, the writer will make just a few points.

--First, the reader should note that three prophets are mentioned, Ahab, Zedekiah, and Shemaiah, all in Babylon. (Ezekiel is also there, but he is not mentioned here among these false prophets.) All three are condemned by Jeremiah, who prophesies a violent end for them.

--Second, Shemaiah’s direct criticism of Jeremiah is that he is “madman” prophesying that the exiles will be in Babylon “a long time.” This word from Jeremiah directly contradicts the “official” prophetic line, as found in the words of Hananiah (Jer. 28:2-4). Shemaiah calls upon Zephaniah the priest to put Jeremiah into “stocks and neck-irons” as a “reprimand.” Shemaiah considers Jeremiah the one “who poses to be a prophet,” while the LORD proclaims through Jeremiah that Shemaiah and his cohorts are the ones “I did not send.”

--Third, how many letters are sent?

--Fretheim argues for three letters from Jeremiah, and one from Shemaiah. Jeremiah sent a letter to the exiles, found in 29:4-23. Jer. 29:24-28 appears to be a second letter, this time directly addressed to Shemaiah, probably in response to the latter’s letter to Zephaniah. This letter seems incomplete, since there is no real message to Shemaiah. Jer. 29:30-32 records a third letter, this time sent to the exiles to reassure them that Jeremiah is speaking for the LORD, not Shemaiah.¹³

--Holladay argues that the text of Jer. 29:24-32 is corrupt and should be reconstructed based upon the Greek and Syriac versions, yielding a narrative report of Shemaiah’s letter (29:24-29) and a response letter from Jeremiah (29:30-32).¹⁴ Because of the obvious textual problems, especially in 29:25, Holladay’s reconstruction is as plausible as any, but any reconstruction of the text must remain tentative, since the Masoretic Text, Septuagint, and Syriac disagree so radically at a foundational point in the text.

--The interpreter of the text should recognize the obvious purpose and message of the text, namely that Shemaiah wrote a letter to Zephaniah condemning Jeremiah and that Jeremiah responded with an equally strong condemnation.

Jeremiah 30:12-17—The Incurable Cured

JER 30:12 “This is what the LORD says:

““Your wound is incurable, your injury beyond healing.

JER 30:13 There is no one to plead your cause, no remedy for your sore, no healing for you.

¹³ Fretheim, 399-400.

¹⁴ William Holladay, *Jeremiah 2*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 136-137, 145-147.

JER 30:14 All your allies have forgotten you; they care nothing for you.
I have struck you as an enemy would and punished you as would the cruel,
because your guilt is so great and your sins so many.

JER 30:15 Why do you cry out over your wound, your pain that has no cure?
Because of your great guilt and many sins I have done these things to you.

JER 30:16 ““But all who devour you will be devoured; all your enemies will go into exile.
Those who plunder you will be plundered; all who make spoil of you I will despoil.

JER 30:17 But I will restore you to health and heal your wounds,’ declares the LORD,
‘because you are called an outcast, Zion for whom no one cares.’”

--These verses describe in beautiful poetic terms the irony of divine judgment. God will use the enemies of His people to enact His judgment through the defeat, destruction, and exile of Judah. Their wound is beyond healing. Prayer is no longer necessary, because He will not hear and heal. Their guilt is too great. Their sins make escape from judgment impossible.

--Yet, after the proper time of judgment (70 years of Jer. 29:10?), the enemies of God’s people will indeed meet their end. They, too, will be judged for their evil. When this happens, the LORD will indeed heal them and restore them.