

## Jeremiah Lecture Notes—Summer 2011

### Sin & Judgment: Jer. 7:1-8:3; 26:1-24; 23:9-40

--These texts concern God's word delivered by the prophet to God's people. A major theme of the Book of Jeremiah is the "word" or "words" of the Lord. In fact, 125 or the 715 uses of "word" or "words" in the Old Testament (NIV) are found in the Book of Jeremiah.<sup>1</sup> These passages, such as Jer. 7, are about the effects of that word delivered, both positive and negative.

#### Jeremiah 7:1-8:3—

--This passage is clearly parallel to Jer. 26:1-9, either as a different account of the same message at the temple, or as second and similar message. The two accounts are quite similar. The primary difference is the detail of the oracle, which here contains details of their sin, even mocking their insincere worship. It also contains no record of the response that led to accusations in ch. 26.

#### --Jeremiah 7:1-8—The Word(s)

<sup>JER 7:1</sup> This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: <sup>2</sup> "Stand at the gate of the LORD's house and there proclaim this message:

"Hear the word of the LORD, all you people of Judah who come through these gates to worship the LORD. <sup>3</sup> This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. <sup>4</sup> Do not trust in deceptive words and say, "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!" <sup>5</sup> If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, <sup>6</sup> if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, <sup>7</sup> then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your forefathers for ever and ever. <sup>8</sup> But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless."

--This discourse at the temple reflects a conflict between the "deceptive words" of false prophets and priests, and the "word of the LORD." Only the acceptance of the validity of God's word and of their need to repent would save them and their temple from destruction. The words that place false hope in the temple and Jerusalem were worthless, deceptive words.

--Their sins were (among other things, certainly) were failure to care for the least of society, those who could not protect themselves, namely the alien, the orphan, and the widow. They were willing to exploit others, apparently even allowing murder to take place, to maintain their lives in Jerusalem and at the temple. They forgot that like the widow and orphan were defenseless in this world, so were they ultimately defenseless against the judgment of God.

#### --Jeremiah 7:9-15—"Watching"

<sup>JER 7:9</sup> "Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, <sup>10</sup> and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, "We are safe"-safe to do all these detestable things? <sup>11</sup> Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been *watching!* declares the LORD.

<sup>JER 7:12</sup> "Go now to the place in Shiloh where I first made a dwelling for my Name, and see what I did to it because of the wickedness of my people Israel. <sup>13</sup> While you were doing all these things, declares the LORD, I spoke to you again and again, but you did not listen; I called you, but you did not answer. <sup>14</sup> Therefore, what I did to Shiloh I will now do to the house that bears my Name, the temple you trust in, the place I gave to you and your fathers. <sup>15</sup> I will thrust you from my presence, just as I did all your brothers, the people of Ephraim."

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<sup>1</sup>Source: *Zondervan NIV Bible Library*.

--As God promised Jeremiah at the time of his call, the LORD is “watching.”<sup>2</sup> He has seen the temple become a “den of robbers,” a place where the religious leaders exploit, lie, and steal. They have trusted the deceptive words of “peace” (as exhibited in Jer. 6), when disaster was on the horizon.

--In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus quoted the phrase, “den of robbers” (Matt. 21:13; Mark 11:17; Luke 19:46), when he attacked the merchants and money changers in the temple area. While the application is certainly different, the reference is interesting. Both Jesus and Jeremiah were condemning the mistreatment of the less fortunate, albeit in two different ways.

--The doctrine espoused here is often called the “inviolability of Jerusalem.” This doctrine stated that, since Yahweh dwelt in the temple in Jerusalem, and since this was the place “his name dwelt,” Jerusalem and the temple were protected by Him. They could never be destroyed.

--This teaching was bolstered by the actions of Hezekiah (see Isaiah 36-37, esp. 37:35), where Yahweh suggests that he has a shield around the holy city. As Miller pointed out, however, they did not account for what would happen if the LORD removed the shield.<sup>3</sup> In fact, they believed that it was an impossibility. Ezekiel will later see vision of the Glory of God leaving the temple, visually depicting the removal of Yahweh’s shield.

--If there are any who doubt Yahweh’s willingness to destroy His temple, they should take a trip to Shiloh. There they will find the remains of the worship place of Eli and Samuel, the one destroyed by the Philistines. The presence of God did not save Shiloh and would not save Jerusalem.

--The problem here is that they were relying on the “House that bears the name” rather than the “One who bears the Name.”

#### --Jeremiah 7:16-20—God’s Anger

<sup>JER 7:16</sup> “So do not pray for this people nor offer any plea or petition for them; do not plead with me, for I will not listen to you. <sup>17</sup> Do you not see what they are doing in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? <sup>18</sup> The children gather wood, the fathers light the fire, and the women knead the dough and make cakes of bread for the Queen of Heaven. They pour out drink offerings to other gods to provoke me to anger. <sup>19</sup> But am I the one they are provoking? declares the LORD. Are they not rather harming themselves, to their own shame?

<sup>JER 7:20</sup> “Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: My anger and my wrath will be poured out on this place, on man and beast, on the trees of the field and on the fruit of the ground, and it will burn and not be quenched.”

--Jeremiah is told to stop praying for the people. This is a difficult command from God that seems to go against the gracious nature of the LORD. However, this is not the only place in scripture where God rejects the worship acts of His people.<sup>4</sup> God rejects worship acts when they cease to be worship—an act of submission and honor to God.

--The Queen of Heaven was an Assyrian/Babylonian goddess also worshipped in Canaan (Ishtar=Astarte). Her worship included the baking of “sacred cakes.”

--God’s wrath would be poured out because of this abomination. His pathos is again revealed. His anger would result in the total devastation of the land.

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<sup>2</sup> The word for “Watching” (*ra'ah* רָאָה) here is not the same word as in Jer. 1:12 (*shaqad*, שָׁקַד).

<sup>3</sup> Miller, 636.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Isaiah 1:10-15; Amos 5:21-23; Malachi 1:10.

## Jeremiah 7:21-31--Rebellion

JER 7:21 “This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Go ahead, add your burnt offerings to your other sacrifices and eat the meat yourselves! <sup>22</sup> For when I brought your forefathers out of Egypt and spoke to them, I did not just give them commands about burnt offerings and sacrifices, <sup>23</sup> but I gave them this command: Obey me, and I will be your God and you will be my people. Walk in all the ways I command you, that it may go well with you. <sup>24</sup> But they did not listen or pay attention; instead, they followed the stubborn inclinations of their evil hearts. They went backward and not forward. <sup>25</sup> From the time your forefathers left Egypt until now, day after day, again and again I sent you my servants the prophets. <sup>26</sup> But they did not listen to me or pay attention. They were stiff-necked and did more evil than their forefathers.”

JER 7:27 “When you tell them all this, they will not listen to you; when you call to them, they will not answer. <sup>28</sup> Therefore say to them, ‘This is the nation that has not obeyed the LORD its God or responded to correction. Truth has perished; it has vanished from their lips. <sup>29</sup> Cut off your hair and throw it away; take up a lament on the barren heights, for the LORD has rejected and abandoned this generation that is under his wrath.’”

JER 7:30 “The people of Judah have done evil in my eyes, declares the LORD. They have set up their detestable idols in the house that bears my Name and have defiled it. <sup>31</sup> They have built the high places of Topheth in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to burn their sons and daughters in the fire--something I did not command, nor did it enter my mind.”

--These texts represent several pieces of evidence that the people of Judah had rebelled against Yahweh. First, in 7:21-26, the prophet proclaims the unacceptable nature of their sacrifices. The sacrifices are unacceptable because their acts of rebellion and refusal to hear the words of God’s prophets made them invalid. If the worship acts were to have no effect on their daily lives, then they might as well ignore the sacrificial law (along with the ethical law they were already ignoring!) and eat the whole burnt offering. This statement would certainly have been shocking to the hearers in Jeremiah’s day, when the sacrifices at the altar in the temple was tantamount to being in the presence of God.

--As Miller states, “The normal rules of sacrificial offering to the Lord are moot when the worshiper’s sacrifice is tainted with the blood of the innocent and the disobedience of a covenanted people.”<sup>5</sup>

--The issue here is not sacrifice vs. ethics; rather, the entire issue is obedience to the covenant. The covenant of Israel included requirements and expectations regarding the sacrificial rituals, but the Hebrew law also contained ethical and social requirements. The people of Jeremiah’s day (and that of Isaiah, Amos, Malachi, etc.) were ignoring portions of the law. Selective worship of God is unacceptable to Him; in fact, it is an abomination to the LORD.

--Jesus faced the same issue in must the same spirit as Jeremiah. <sup>MT 23:23-24</sup> “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices--mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law--justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.” Jesus, like the prophets before Him, proclaimed the necessity to follow the whole law. Obedience can not be selective.

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<sup>5</sup> Miller, “Jeremiah,” in *The Interpreter’s Bible*, 639.

## Jeremiah 7:31-8:3--Judgment

<sup>32</sup> So beware, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when people will no longer call it Topheth or the Valley of Ben Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter, for they will bury the dead in Topheth until there is no more room. <sup>33</sup> Then the carcasses of this people will become food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth, and there will be no one to frighten them away. <sup>34</sup> I will bring an end to the sounds of joy and gladness and to the voices of bride and bridegroom in the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem, for the land will become desolate.

JER 8:1 “At that time, declares the LORD, the bones of the kings and officials of Judah, the bones of the priests and prophets, and the bones of the people of Jerusalem will be removed from their graves. <sup>2</sup> They will be exposed to the sun and the moon and all the stars of the heavens, which they have loved and served and which they have followed and consulted and worshipped. They will not be gathered up or buried, but will be like refuse lying on the ground. <sup>3</sup> Wherever I banish them, all the survivors of this evil nation will prefer death to life, declares the LORD Almighty.”

--These verses describe the total destruction that will come from the rebellion of his people. All joy and gladness will be removed. The sun and moon that they have worshipped will bleach their bones, because they worshipped them. Those who do survive will desire death. The judgment will be terrible and unbearable (cf. Mt. 24?).

## Concluding Thoughts—

--Fretheim discusses the work of Jon Levenson in the matter of “grace alone.” The people of Jerusalem were trusting in “grace alone” to save them from disaster. Because God chose them and placed His temple there, they could trust in his “grace alone.” They could worship in the temple and trust in God’s “grace alone.” As Fretheim concludes, “in some respects the phrase (grace alone) is appropriate and in other respects it is not. I hear in [Levenson’s usage of the phrase] some resonance of Bonhoeffer’s understanding of “cheap grace.”<sup>6</sup>

--Indeed, no amount of grace excuses unethical behavior or rejection of covenant expectations of God. Those in relationship with God must trust in his “grace alone,” but they must also live “holy lives.” This is, indeed, the paradox of the faith of Christianity.

--Miller charges 21<sup>st</sup> century believers to a high standard of ethical living when he concludes: The Temple of old, like the temple or church sanctuary of the present, is a powerful symbol of divine presence and security. Such symbols are rendered meaningless when their adherents have violated the divine instruction and have used their economic and other powers for personal gain at the expense of others. This text is a critique of religious sloganeering—“the temple of the LORD,” “I have been baptized,” or “justification by faith”—and of an easiness in Zion that assumes living *the* good life is not finally dependent upon living *a* good life.<sup>7</sup>

## Jeremiah 26:1-24—

JER 26:1 Early in the reign of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, this word came from the LORD: <sup>2</sup> “This is what the LORD says: Stand in the courtyard of the LORD’s house and speak to all the people of the towns of Judah who come to worship in the house of the LORD. Tell them everything I command you; do not omit a word. <sup>3</sup> Perhaps they will listen and each will turn from his evil way. Then I will relent and not bring on them the disaster I was planning because of the evil they have done. <sup>4</sup> Say to them, ‘This is what the LORD says: If you do not listen to me and follow my law, which I have set before you, <sup>5</sup> and if you do not listen to the words of my servants the prophets, whom I have sent to you again and again (though you have not listened), <sup>6</sup> then I will make this house like Shiloh and this city an object of cursing among all the nations of the earth.’”

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<sup>6</sup> Fretheim, *Jeremiah*, 145. See Jon Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Winston, 1985), 166-168, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, or now *Discipleship*, *passim*.

<sup>7</sup> Miller, “Jeremiah,” in *The Interpreter’s Bible*, 641.

--Jer. 26:1-6 is a briefer version (or possibly a different event) of the sermon found in Jer. 7. Similarities between the two texts are several: the sermons are delivered at the temple, they are calls to repent, former prophets are mentioned, and the coming destruction is compared to Shiloh. There are differences as well. Most importantly, perhaps, is that Jer. 7 includes details of the sermon omitted in Jer. 26, while the latter chapter reports the reaction to the sermon.

--The LORD sends a “word” to Jeremiah and then commands the prophet to speak, and not to “omit a word.” The word is a simple, straightforward word of judgment, especially when compared to Jer. 7, delivered with the hope that the people might repent and avoid the disaster.

--The call is simply to “follow my law, which I have set before you.” There is no elaboration of particular areas in need of reform, or condemnations of particular sins. The prophet, and God, expects the people of Judah to know the Law and its expectations. Since the LORD had “set before” them this law, He could reasonably expect them to know it, and to obey it.

--The coming judgment is also obtuse, simply “I will make this house like Shiloh,” and “(I will make) this city an object of cursing.” Shiloh, the location of the tent and the priesthood of Eli at the end of the period of the judges, was destroyed by the Philistines over 400 years earlier. The hearers clearly understood the reference to Shiloh and to becoming an object of cursing as a threat of destruction. Their response was swift and sharp.

JER 26:7 The priests, the prophets and all the people heard Jeremiah speak these words in the house of the LORD. <sup>8</sup> But as soon as Jeremiah finished telling all the people everything the LORD had commanded him to say, the priests, the prophets and all the people seized him and said, “You must die! <sup>9</sup> Why do you prophesy in the LORD's name that this house will be like Shiloh and this city will be desolate and deserted?” And all the people crowded around Jeremiah in the house of the LORD.

--“The priests, the prophets and all the people” who heard “these words” immediately seized Jeremiah and proclaimed his condemnation. Jerusalem would not be cursed, Jeremiah would! They understood Jeremiah’s words as a prediction of Jerusalem becoming “desolate and deserted,” like Shiloh.

JER 26:10 When the officials of Judah heard about these things, they went up from the royal palace to the house of the LORD and took their places at the entrance of the New Gate of the LORD's house. <sup>11</sup> Then the priests and the prophets said to the officials and all the people, “This man should be sentenced to death because he has prophesied against this city. You have heard it with your own ears!”

--Those who heard Jeremiah’s message took him before the “officials.” This is an example of “justice in the gate,” or better “injustice in the gate.” The city officials met in the rooms that were formed by the recesses in the gate house.

JER 26:12 Then Jeremiah said to all the officials and all the people: “The LORD sent me to prophesy against this house and this city all the things you have heard. <sup>13</sup> Now reform your ways and your actions and obey the LORD your God. Then the LORD will relent and not bring the disaster he has pronounced against you. <sup>14</sup> As for me, I am in your hands; do with me whatever you think is good and right. <sup>15</sup> Be assured, however, that if you put me to death, you will bring the guilt of innocent blood on yourselves and on this city and on those who live in it, for in truth the LORD has sent me to you to speak all these words in your hearing.”

--Jeremiah speaks in defense of his message only by referring to his calling from the LORD. He claims his place as a true prophet sent by God, then he repeats the words of impending judgment, offering an opportunity to avoid the judgment by repenting and becoming obedient to the LORD.

--Jeremiah also warns them of the consequences of killing him. His death at their hands would bring “the guilt of innocent blood” on them, this city, and its inhabitants. They are reminded of the wide-ranging effect their actions had on the people of Judah. If they rejected “all these words,” everyone in Judah would suffer the consequences.

--These types of messages are common in the prophets, and they remind today’s leader that with the privilege of leadership comes great responsibility and that the failure of the leadership affects all of the ones they lead.

--26:16-19—Defense of Jeremiah by *Some Elders*

--Some of the elders came to the defense of Jeremiah based upon the earlier prophecy of Micah. They called upon the king and leaders to follow the example of Hezekiah, who recognized that Micah spoke from the Lord and did him no harm. They warn of impending judgment if they harm Jeremiah.

--26:20-24—Uriah, the prophet

--These verses are a sort of parenthetical statement concerning Jehoiakim’s murder of a prophet names Uriah, even sending to Egypt to extradite him for execution. Jeremiah is protected from such an end by the intervention of a person named, Ahikam, son of Shaphan.

### **Jeremiah 23:9-40—Words to “the Prophets”**

JER 23:9 Concerning the prophets:

My heart is broken within me; all my bones tremble.  
I am like a drunken man, like a man overcome by wine,  
because of the LORD and his holy words.

JER 23:10 The land is full of adulterers; because of the curse, the land lies parched  
and the pastures in the desert are withered.

The prophets follow an evil course and use their power unjustly.

JER 23:11 “Both prophet and priest are godless; even in my temple I find their wickedness,”  
declares the LORD.

--Jeremiah, as a true prophet of the Lord, is appalled at the practices of the prophets. In fact, the words of the LORD have caused Jeremiah physical pain and discomfort. He is overcome by the wickedness around him; and the prophets, far from combating that wickedness, are also evil, thus misleading those they were sent to call back to God.

--The reader should note the continued emphasis upon the affect of the people’s wickedness on the land itself. Famine and drought are considered a direct result of the failure of the people to be faithful to God.

JER 23:12 “Therefore their path will become slippery; they will be banished to darkness and there they will fall. I will bring disaster on them in the year they are punished,” declares the LORD.

--These verses include an interesting play on words in the Hebrew. The Hebrew for “wickedness” in v. 11 and for “disaster” in v. 12 is the same, *ra’ah* (רָעָה). This noun can mean evil, wickedness, depravity, misfortune, or calamity, with the distinction between the meanings very ambiguous and the translation of the terms subjective. Koehler and Baumgartner suggest that the basic meaning is probably “that which is harmful,”<sup>8</sup> with the exact translation into English dependent upon context and interpretation. Actions that are “evil,” *ra’ah* (רָעָה), brings results that are disastrous, *ra’ah* (רָעָה). Thus, evil begets evil.

--The subjects, and objects, of this statement are the prophets mentioned above. Their wicked actions will bear fruit of disaster. Unfortunately, the disaster will encompass not only the prophets, but also all of those they were supposed to lead. A message to all spiritual leaders is probably appropriate at this point. Care in the delivery of God’s word is especially important, since the consequences are far-reaching.

JER 23:13 “Among the prophets of Samaria I saw this repulsive thing:

They prophesied by Baal and led my people Israel astray.

JER 23:14 And among the prophets of Jerusalem I have seen something horrible:

They commit adultery and live a lie.

They strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that no one turns from his wickedness.

They are all like Sodom to me; the people of Jerusalem are like Gomorrah.”

--As in Jer. 3, the prophet compares the actions of Israel (here Samaria) and Judah (here Jerusalem). Again, the prophets of Jerusalem are no better than those of Samaria. The prophets of Samaria had led the people of Israel astray by prophesying the message of Baal rather than Yahweh. The prophets of Jerusalem “commit adultery” and “live a lie.” These prophets have rebelled against the LORD, and now they propagate (both in word and action) a lie. From the context of Jeremiah, the lie would probably be the promise of peace and prosperity when judgment and destruction were on the horizon.

--Jesus faced the same issue in His ministry. <sup>MT 7:15</sup> “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. <sup>16</sup> By their fruit you will recognize them. The prophets who speak the best messages are often wolves masquerading as sheep. Unfortunately, those following the wolves often do not recognize their deception until the fruit of destruction comes.

--Fretheim points out that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this problem still abounds. “Our own time seems to have been visited by a virtual religious cacophony, and members of the community of faith are often hard put to sort out the true from the false.”<sup>9</sup> While discerning the true from the false is, at times, difficult, followers of Jesus are called to “test the spirits to see whether they are from God” (1 John 4:1). Leaders must be careful what they teach and preach, and listeners must never check their brains at the door because a message is powerful, palatable, or popular!

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<sup>8</sup> Koehler and Baumgartner, s.v. רָעָה, where they state, “The distinction between the groups subdivided below is often subjective and the transition from one to the other is fluid.”

<sup>9</sup> Fretheim, *Jeremiah*, 342.