

Allan MacRae, Jeremiah: Lecture 2

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Jeremiah, Kings and Officials: Protection of Jeremiah

Jeremiah 21: Zedekiah and the chronology of the book of Jeremiah [00:00]

Now, we had questions for today, and one was to look at Jeremiah 21. In Jeremiah 21, the first question was the character of the particular king. Of course, you notice that in this chapter the king who is discussed is Zedekiah. And you notice that Zedekiah here was interested in knowing what the will of the Lord was, so he was a king that had at least some belief in God. And then the second question was the character of the leading officials, though I don't think you learned anything about that from this chapter. The third question was the means God used to protect Jeremiah, and here again there is nothing told; the king certainly did not try to injure Jeremiah. The king showed a certain amount of favor to him. The fourth question shed light on how the book of Jeremiah was formed. You get some information on this from this chapter, but you might need another chapter, a later chapter than I assigned, to get a fuller answer. The fact is Zedekiah here is the important king in this chapter, and as I told you last time, most of Jeremiah's ministry was in the reign of three kings – Josiah, Jehoiakim, and Zedekiah – and this is the last of the three. So when you meet him as early as chapter 21, it would suggest that the arrangement of the book is not strictly arranged chronologically. When you come to a later chapter and find there you are dealing not with Zedekiah but an earlier king, you get clear proof that the book is not chronologically arranged as are most of the other prophetic books. Here you have not merely a reference to Zedekiah, but an event in his reign which is described before events described in the reign of an earlier king.

Jeremiah 26: God's protection of Jeremiah [1:52]

Then the second passage was Jeremiah 26; it highlights an interesting event. In fact, there were two important events. Jehoiakim made an attempt to get Jeremiah killed, and he succeeded in getting another prophet killed who, we are told, made predictions very similar to Jeremiah's. Here, in answer to the first question, you find that the

character of this king was that he was a vicious enemy of God and of God's prophet and desired to destroy God's prophet. You have very clear evidence here of the answer to the first question. The answer to the second question is, of course, also clear that Jehoiakim's officials protected Jeremiah. They interfered; they made arguments to the king. They protected Jeremiah though the king's hatred of what Jeremiah was saying was so great that the king sent clear to Egypt to capture another prophet that was saying substantially the same thing as Jeremiah did, and to have the other prophet brought back and killed. You have very definite evidence as to the character of Jehoiakim and evidence that he had officials that interfered with his doing what he desired.

Third, the means God used to protect Jeremiah was through godly officials in the king's court. We have clear evidence here that this was not an absolute monarchy; that while the king had very great power, his power was also greatly affected by the attitudes of his leading officials. Then fourth, the way the book of Jeremiah was formed, again here is an event in the reign of Jehoiakim, in fact early in his reign – I told you last time he reigned 11 years and this event happens in the fourth year of his reign – and the previous chapter told about an event that happened in the reign of Zedekiah. You don't get much information, but you get a little information about the way the book was formed here.

Jeremiah 36: Protection of Jeremiah through the officials and hiding [3:37]

Then the next was chapter 36, which had a very interesting event, an event that must have occurred after the event described in chapter 26. There was a situation in which Jeremiah thought it unwise to appear personally before the king. That would suggest strongly that the previous event had occurred. Jeremiah dictated his prophecy. By the way that word "prophecy" used today generally means a prediction of a future event. The Hebrew word "to prophesize" simply means "to speak out, to present a message". It does not necessarily mean a predictive message. So in the Bible, while the prophet's work includes prediction, prediction is by no means all a prophet's message. Probably less than half of a prophet's message is prediction. The prophecies of Jeremiah, the statements he had made denouncing the sin of the nation, had already affected Jehoiakim

to such an extent that Jeremiah did not wish to appear publically at this time, but he dictated this material to Baruch and he read it publically. We find that the officials wanted the king to read what Jeremiah wrote, and then when the king wanted to destroy it, the officials tried to stop him, but the king went ahead and destroyed it anyway. Jeremiah hid and re-dictated the material. We read he added many other similar words in the new scroll. From that we learn that the character of Jehoiakim, already clear from the previous chapter, is made even clearer in chapter 36.

The character of the leading officials, already suggested in the previous chapter, is here equally strongly suggested. This means God used two ways to protect Jeremiah: first, having the officials to protect him, and second, causing Jeremiah to hide rather than showing himself at this juncture. Some people think that it would be the duty of a man like Jeremiah in this situation to come out publically and present himself, but the Bible shows that there are times when one can do God's work best by avoiding danger.

**Jeremiah 36: Jeremiah's [Baruch's] writing and the means
of the production of the book [5:35]**

Now the fourth point, on which we had little evidence up to this point, you have a great deal in this chapter. We find in this chapter that Jeremiah wrote these things in a scroll specifically for this occasion. Whether he had ever written down anything before in a permanent form, we do not know. But it is obvious here that Jeremiah thought back over what he had said at various times and the messages God had given him, and he wrote them down, but they were destroyed by Jehoiakim. But he rewrote them and added many other words, and this suggests that the book of Jeremiah does not represent what God gave the prophet one year and then the next and so on, but that he begins with such a writing and then he went back and rewrote it, inserting various matters into his new work. It is clear that Jeremiah later made insertions into his writings, or Baruch did in the final copy of it. This chapter is very important in giving us an idea of just how the book of Jeremiah was formed.

**Jeremiah 38: Zedekiah weak/timid; officials strongly against Jeremiah
[6:32]**

Then I asked you to look at chapter 38. In chapter 38 we again find Zedekiah, but we have more information about him here. We have his officials wanting Jeremiah killed, and we have Zedekiah telling them there is nothing he can do to oppose them; that they can do whatever they want. So we find the officials here having great power, but nevertheless not going against what was clearly Zedekiah's desire. They didn't kill Jeremiah, but they put him into a cistern. They hoped he would die of natural causes, but they were not willing to oppose what was obviously the king's desire to the extent of killing Jeremiah. We find king Zedekiah talking to Jeremiah and desiring to find out what Jeremiah wants, but afraid for his life if his officials knew what Jeremiah was actually telling him. We have a situation here that shows the character of Zedekiah, and it does not show him as an overtly wicked man. My inclination is to think that Zedekiah was a man who, under normal circumstances, would have been a good man, who would have drifted along following what he thought was the Lord's will and desiring to promote those who supported God's purposes. But he had officials who were very strongly opposed to him, and he was afraid of those officials. He was a timid man. He was one who was in a rather difficult situation and one who hid his real desires. There are many rulers in history who have been in that situation; there are many officials in every sort of organization who from time to time find themselves in that position. The number of completely absolute rulers in the world's history is comparatively small. They have to have not only a system that gives them the right to be absolute rulers, but also the power and the personality to put down whoever opposes them and to maintain their power, no matter how great the opposition. I think Zedekiah was a man who in normal times would easily get the reputation of being a good man. Now in Kings where it speaks of him (2 Kings 24:18ff), it says he did evil in the sight of the Lord. I think he did do evil in the sight of the Lord. He was a man who did not have the character to resist the difficulties that he faced and to stand for the Lord in difficult situations. But we find that his officials were quite a different type.

King Josiah appointing godly officials [8:51]

I believe these four passages give us a clue to an important development. King Josiah reigned for 31 years during which time Jeremiah began his ministry. King Josiah, in his eighteenth year, led a great revival, which is described at great length in Chronicles (2 Chronicles 34:1ff), and there is considerable information about it in the book of Kings (2 Kings 22:1ff). In the years between Josiah's eighteenth year and his thirty-first year, in those thirteen years, we can be sure that as positions became vacant, as men died or retired, Josiah filled those positions as he could with men who honored the Lord and desired to follow Him. The result was that when, after a three month period in-between, Jehoiakim, the son of King Josiah became king, there were men in the important official positions whom Josiah had appointed or whom Josiah had given special opportunities to advance. These men were men of the type of officials that Josiah wanted. Jehoiakim, in his desire to do wickedness, was greatly hampered by the fact that he had a group of godly officials working with him. They were in a position where for them to come right out and very strongly oppose the king might have subjected them to being killed, at least to losing their position, but where they could still do great a deal to alter his attitudes or to prevent them from being carried out in the royal court. Thus we have a situation in the reign of Jehoiakim where he inherited royal officials, mostly godly officials, appointed by his father.

Jehoiakim [evil] restrained by Josiah's godly officials [10:30]

As early as the fourth year of his reign when these two events happened, Jehoiakim, while his own power was very great, was greatly hampered by the strong influence of officials whom his father had appointed, many of whom had a very strong position with the people. It would have been very hard for Jehoiakim to dislodge them. But during the eleven years of Jehoiakim's reign, we can be sure that when one of them died or was dismissed or made some mistake that would give Jehoiakim sufficient excuse to get rid of him, that he replaced them with ungodly men. So when Jehoiakim died, again there was a three-month period in between, but then Zedekiah became king. Zedekiah was not in as strong a position as Jehoiakim was because when Jehoiakim died, it was expected that he would be succeeded by his son. His son, Jehoiachin, however,

but he only reigned three months because the Babylonian king came and took him off into captivity. For some reason, the people were greatly attached to this son, Jehoiachin.

Jehoiakim [father] & Jehoiachin [son] contra Zedekiah [uncle disliked] [11:33]

In the English translation, "Jehoiakim" has been represented by a "k" and "Jehoiachin" with a "ch" in his name, though there's no difference in the spelling of the names in Hebrew at that point. But Jehoiachin reigned for three months and then the Babylonian king seized him and took him off as a prisoner. The people felt that Jehoiachin was their rightful ruler, and so when he was gone, they considered his uncle Zedekiah as merely a sort of temporary regent, someone who was holding the throne until Jehoiachin came back, which they expected would happen very soon. Jehoiachin was only there three months, but Zedekiah is considered king and is listed as such. But the people still felt the rightful king was Jehoiachin and that he would come back soon. So when a man is considered as only filling in for his nephew, his power naturally isn't as great as a man whom they felt was the rightful king. Zedekiah, when he became king, doubtless had to contend with officials whom Jehoiakim had gradually gotten into power, whose character was like Jehoiachin's wicked father.

Protecting Jeremiah via officials of Jehoiakim and the timidity of Zedekiah [12:52]

So we have this alternation: God used the officials to protect his prophet in Jehoiakim's reign and then later used king Zedekiah himself, despite his timidity, to save Jeremiah's life during the next eleven years. Those facts come out in these chapters that we looked at. We don't find anything from this chapter about the fourth question, how the book of Jeremiah was formed. But I think for a real understanding of the book, we have to have an understanding of that feature of the role of the officials.

Kings not absolute monarchs in Israel [vid Ahab/Naboth] [13:25]

By the way, I'd like to make another point. People often have the impression that the kings of Judah and Israel were absolute monarchs. Kings had tremendous power, but

they were very far from being absolute monarchs. You remember that King Ahab, one of the most wicked kings in the history of the northern kingdom, when he wanted Naboth's vineyard, in fact, he didn't think he could get it. We read that he sulked and tried repeatedly to buy the vineyard, but when Naboth wouldn't sell, the king just sulked. It was his wife Jezebel who said, "Why do you sulk like this? After all, you're the king – why don't you do something about this?" And he said, "There's nothing I can do." He clearly was not an absolute monarch. And then Jezebel asked him to give her his royal seal--and the indication was so she could act in his place--and she proceeded to hire people to lie about Naboth and to say that Naboth had cursed God and the king. Through these lies, Naboth was convicted and killed and then it was easy to get his vineyard. That is a very clear proof that Ahab was certainly not an absolute monarch.

Incidentally, you really need that fact to understand the story of Elijah's flight. You remember that Elijah stood at Mount Carmel and faced the prophets of Baal and proved that God was the true God. King Ahab was absolutely defeated on that occasion and went back. Elijah said there's rain coming, though there hadn't been rain for three years. But then we read that the next day Jezebel sent word to him and said by this time tomorrow, you'll be in the same situation as these prophets of Baal that you killed. Elijah was so frightened that he fled. Well, Jezebel couldn't possibly have injured Elijah at that time when he was a great hero to the whole nation for what he had done. And even if he hadn't been, she didn't have the power. In order to get rid of Naboth, she had to hire people to tell lies. She couldn't possibly have done that. Elijah's flight then was because he was so tired and took it for granted that he was simply being framed, so he became frightened and instead of trusting God, he fled. But I think that knowing kings were not absolute monarchs is important in all our Old Testament history.

Josiah killed by Pharaoh Necho at the Megiddo pass (609 BC) [15:39]

At this point let me just say something about the history. It is important, I hadn't intended to give it quite yet, but I was going to get to it. The history is stated clearly in the book of Kings and some statements about it are made in Chronicles - and this is important (Cf. 2 Kings 22:1ff; 2 Chr. 34:1ff). King Josiah, who had this great revival in

the eighteenth year of his reign, in the thirty-first year of his reign heard that Pharaoh Necho, the king of Egypt, was marching up through Palestine, along the sea coast, heading to the north. Nobody knows why King Josiah felt that he must stop Pharaoh Necho. Whether he felt that Necho had no right to go through his territory without first getting his permission, or whether he felt that Pharaoh Necho was going to interfere with events to the north and he was interested in their coming out differently than Pharaoh Necho would want them to. Whatever it was, we read in Kings and Chronicles (2 Kings 23:29; 2 Chr. 35:20-24) that Josiah immediately took a force and rushed north from Jerusalem to Megiddo. Megiddo is a place where the broad plain by the sea coast narrows down to a little narrow pass, then it's a broader plain north of that. There's a little pass there at Megiddo that an army would have to go through and where a small group could conceivably hold off a fairly large army. During the first World War, there was a rather important battle fought at that place. There have been many battles at that place, and in fact, it passes into the New Testament under the word "Armageddon," which is a Greek way of saying "the hill of Megiddo." It was a crucial point because it is one where it would be easy for a small force to hold up a large one. Josiah, we read, went up to that place with the number of forces he could rally rapidly together, for there had been no television reporters on the scene to give them immediate on-the-scene reports about Pharaoh Necho's coming. He simply heard what was happening on the sea coast and rushed up quickly with his force and ordered Pharaoh Necho, who was ruler of a far greater power than he had, to not pass through that pass but to stop. Pharaoh Necho, it says in Kings, said, "Get out of the way – I'm not interested in you. I have nothing against you. I am coming up here to go north." Then in Kings we have the Hebrew preposition "'al" used. I am coming up here "'al" the king of Assyria, nothing to do with you. That "'al" is translated in the King James Version as "against" and in the NIV, "to help" which sounds quite different. The King James Version translates it "against" as in "I am coming against the King of Assyria, I'm not interested in you." And Pharaoh Necho said, "You have no right to stop me from going through here" and ordered his forces forward.

Assyria and Babylon (ca. 612 BC) [19:21]

The first thing that happened was that Josiah was killed. They took Josiah's body and carried it back to Jerusalem. The KJV, as we noticed, says, "I am going up against the King of Assyria". A few years ago there were discovered cuneiform tablets which tell about the death throes of the great Assyrian empire. The Assyrian empire had for several centuries been the greatest force in the Near East – they had even conquered Egypt at one time, though they hadn't held it very long. The Babylonians had been subject to the Assyrians but had revolted. Now the Babylonians together with a group called the Medes were attacking the Assyrian empire. They had attacked it and captured the leading city, Nineveh, and destroyed it in 612 B.C. The Assyrians fought on until 604 B.C. They were decisively defeated and their whole power ended as they ceased to be a power after that. The Babylonians took their place as great leaders in the Near East. Evidently, Pharaoh Necho, who owed his power to quite an extent to Assyrian support, came up there to help the beleaguered Assyrian empire. That's made quite clear in the cuneiform tablets.

Pharaoh Necho and the Assyrians [20:34]

So it was declared that the Bible was wrong because it said that he (Necho) came up "against" the Assyrians in 2 Kings 23:29. Well, there is a clear contradiction between what history tells us as we now know it, and the statement in Second Kings 23:29 as it is translated in the King James Version. However, I could easily say that in the last war, the United States fought "with" Germany. But I could equally truly say that the United States fought with England and France "against" Germany. I could use "with" in either sense. Prepositions often have a rather wide range of meaning. This Hebrew preposition "al" very frequently has the meaning "concerned" or "about". It also may have meant "upon" or "near". It used in both ways.

You may say, "What a crazy language that one word has such a range of meaning," but I mentioned the range of our English "with". In every language, prepositions are one of the hardest things to know exactly what range of meaning they cover. And so this preposition "al" can just as well mean "concerned" as "against". And

as I said, the NIV translates it equally correctly as with the King James. The King James isn't wrong in its translation, you have to pick within the range of meaning and the one they picked falls outside of what we know was clearly intended.

Many people say why bother to learn Hebrew and Greek? Your English Bible certainly gives you what the Bible said and certainly the truths of God are clear enough in the English Bible that anyone can get all that is necessary for salvation from it. But when it gets into precise understanding of many points, the English cannot exactly represent the original. You don't learn Hebrew or Greek because you expect to make a better translation than we have. You learn these languages because you can see at a glance possibilities of meaning in the original that cannot all be put into any translation. You can also see that certain possibilities of your English may be definitely ruled out by what is there in the original. Even though the English may be a good translation, it inevitably brings in meanings that were not in the original and leaves out some ideas in the original. That is true of any translation from one language to another language.

Implications of the death of Josiah (609 BC) and enthronement of Jehoiakim by Necho [23:17]

This was the death of Josiah then, so he had no chance to designate who should succeed him. When Josiah died, the people of the land passed over the oldest son, Jehoiakim, and they took a younger son, named Jehoahaz. They evidently thought Jehoahaz was a better man and made him king. But after Pharaoh Necho had carried on some warfare in the north, he made a trip back to Egypt, perhaps to get additional forces because he continued fighting up there off and on for a few years. But on the way, he stopped in Jerusalem and he seized the man the people had made king and carried him off to Egypt and made the oldest son king instead. He made Jehoiakim swear to be loyal to Pharaoh Necho, to whatever he might desire. That's the way that Jehoiakim became king and Josiah had nothing to say about it.

Succession of Jehoiakim to Zedekiah [24:08]

Jehoiakim reigned eleven years and after that, when he died, the people were very fond of his son Jehoiachin. Just why, we don't know, because we don't know much about

him. He reigned for three months and at the end of the three months he reigned, the King of Babylon came and carried him off to Babylon. When he was taken, they made his uncle their king, another son of Josiah, named Zedekiah, evidently a rather timid man, but a man whose desire was to be a good king but who in actuality proved to be an evil king because of, principally, the strength of his officials, either in doing what they wanted or in leading him to do what they wanted. So he was called an evil king in the list of kings, but in each case, the previous king had had no say in the circumstances that had occurred in determining who the successor would be. Now I think this is a very interesting thing, the way that the influence of each of these three kings carried over into the next reign through the officials whom they had appointed. It would be pretty hard to understand the events in Jeremiah's life without understanding the relationship between the kings and their officials.

God's promise to protect Jeremiah (Jer 1:14ff) [25:16]

Now, we looked last time at the call of Jeremiah and that call, we noticed, contained a very definite prediction of the downfall of Jerusalem in Jeremiah chapter 1 verse 14. Here was a specific prediction, "Their kings – that is the kings of the northern kingdoms – will come and set up their thrones in the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem". They will set up their thrones in the entrance of the gates – in ancient times, that's where business was conducted, in the gates. We find many places in the Old Testament where we read of events that occurred at the gates. So we read in chapter 39 the names of the officials who would sit there at the gate as they determined what they would do with Jerusalem after it had been taken. So there was a specific prediction in that verse that was literally fulfilled.

Then it continues, "I will pronounce my judgments on my people because of their wickedness" but in verse 17 of chapter one the Lord continues speaking to Jeremiah. The last three verses of this chapter give a promise to Jeremiah, a tremendous promise, a promise that He says in verse 18 that, "Today I have made you a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall." Now can anybody who says we have to take everything in the Bible literally tell me how Jeremiah became a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze

wall? It is clearer that He said I will make you very strong so that you cannot be destroyed. It is clearer and more beautiful as figurative language, but it is figurative language. I always say that figurative language is like salt. You put salt in a dish and you add greatly to the tastefulness of the dish. But if you pour a whole bucket of salt in, you completely ruin it. When somebody says, "Revelation is a symbolic book, everything is symbolic for something else," he is reducing the book to just a collection of words that anybody can make mean anything. And of course the Lord does not give revelation of that type. He may include figurative language, but the greater part must inevitably be in literal language. But figurative language adds greatly to the beauty of any production and also may add to its understandability because by using a good figure you can often give a lot of meaning that would perhaps take many words to say literally. And so God says He is going to make Jeremiah a fortified city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests, and the people of the land. They will fight against Jeremiah, but will not overcome him. That is a tremendous, literal prediction in figurative language. It is a prediction specifically given to Jeremiah.

Uriah [Jer 26] unprotected prophet of God [27:57]

Now in Chapter 26 you read how there was another prophet who gave substantially the same prophecies Jeremiah did and the king sent to Egypt and got him and brought him back and killed him. So we see that this is a prediction, but not in general for anyone who stands for God, that all opposition will be overcome. God may choose to have us suffer or die for his cause. Very often through a martyr, God has done much more through someone's death or seeming failure. We cannot tell by which method God gives us apparent success or apparent failure. But God says in the case of Jeremiah, that Jeremiah would not be overcome because God would be with Him and would rescue him.

Lessons: keeping one's eyes on God in failure or success [28:40]

We can be sure that if God has a specific thing for us to do, He will protect us until we fulfill the task. But we do not know that though our failure seems apparent, if we are

doing our best and keeping our eyes on the Lord, and trying to serve Him in all things, our apparent failure may really be what God had in mind and something through which He uses us. So God wants us to keep our eyes on Him and be conscious of His presence and over-ruling power at all times. We are to trust Him to give us success in what we undertake--if that's His will--He will accomplish His will and to give us contentment and peace of mind, if seeming success is not His will, because maybe through our seeming failures He will give success and not our through successes.

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