

Allan MacRae: Jeremiah: Lecture 3

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Jeremiah 21-22 and the lack of chronology in the Book

Historical Background of Jeremiah

Now I want to review briefly the principle part of the historical background which is vital for the understanding of the book of Jeremiah. We know that it is in the 13th year of the reign of Josiah that Jeremiah began his prophesying. Five years later the great revival came, which is described in Kings and Chronicles. We don't know how much Jeremiah had to do with bringing on this revival. The revival that caused a great improvement in the general situation of the people in the land of Judah was before the end of Josiah's reign and probably the effects of the revival had pretty well dissipated, and the greater part of Jeremiah's work during the reign of Josiah was probably done during those years.

Then we mentioned how Josiah was killed when he tried to hold back Pharaoh Necho in the 31st year of his reign. And the people chose not his oldest son but a younger son named Shallum, or Jehoahaz as their king. But three months later Pharaoh Necho came and took Shallum away to Egypt and made the oldest son of Josiah king—Jehoiakim, who was a very bad man. He reigned for eleven years. The end of those eleven years, when he died, he was succeeded by his son, Jehoiachin. But after three months Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, came and took Jehoichin away into captivity and made Jehoiachin's uncle, Mattaniah, whose name was changed to Zedekiah, the next king of Josiah's kingdom. He reigned eleven years. Then Nebuchadnezzar came and after three years' siege he destroyed Jerusalem and took Zedekiah as captive off to Babylon.

Jeremiah 22 and the lack of chronology in Jeremiah

Now, those are the main points of the prophet's background, and to understand the book of Jeremiah it is quite important to keep them in mind. But I want you to look now

with me at chapter 22 of Jeremiah. It is easy to see that one might naturally think that the first verse of it refers to Zedekiah. If this was the book of Ezekiel or the book of Isaiah, we would be quite sure that the king referred to here was the king mentioned in previous chapters unless there was a major break mentioned in the book. But there is a great difference between the book of Jeremiah and the books of Isaiah and Ezekiel. In Ezekiel the material of most of the book goes straight forward chronologically. They are in sections that follow one another straight through. In Isaiah there are a number of sections from 6 to 15 chapters in length, and in each of these sections the material moves straight forward. Each section of it is a separate movement, but all sections can be placed together.

Jeremiah 22 Zedekiah or Jehoiakim?

In Jeremiah we're in a different situation. Now we read in chapter 36 that King Jehoiakim destroyed the scroll that Jeremiah had made and then we read that Jeremiah dictated the scroll over again and added many other words. And we find that the material in this is not in chronological order as we would expect. This is particularly true of chapter 21, because chapter 21 begins with King Zedekiah. Now Zedekiah we would expect to find near the end of the book, not near the beginning. In fact, we have nothing that occurs in the next years of Zedekiah previously mentioned in the book, and very little for quite a ways after. So, as chapter 21 seems chronologically out of place we have to answer the question: Does chapter 22 come chronologically immediately after 21 or was it written at a different time? And so I can see the reason why someone would say the king of Judah in chapter 22 refers to Josiah and some would say most of it refers to Zedekiah. But we read there at the beginning of the chapter of 22: "This is what the Lord says: 'Go down to the palace of the King of Judah and proclaim this message there: "Hear the word of the Lord, O King of Judah, you who sit on David's throne. You, your officials, and the people who come through these gates. This is what the Lord says: Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of his oppressors the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place.'"

This gives the impression of a bigger king, and it does not fit with what we know about Zedekiah. And so we raise the question right here whether it was Zedekiah; it would seem more consistent with Jehoiakim. But we cannot prove that yet, so we have to go on and see what else we find in the chapter. He said, “Do no wrong or violence to the alien, to the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place.”

New International Version and the King James Version

By the way, I am reading from the New International Version. If you have the King James, you have a beautiful version. English at that time was a far more beautiful language than the language we have today. But our language has changed so much during these nearly 400 years that in many cases you won't understand the meaning of the King James. I've had many students that if they use the New International Version they cover much more material because they don't have to explain its meaning. However, if you are using the King James Version, or you are using any other version and you find that the meaning there differs from what I read here, or it does not fit with the meaning that you have, please call my attention to it because there might be something that I can explain for you.

A Conditional Prediction—compare Jonah

He continues then in verse 4 with a prediction, and this is the type of prediction that we do not find very much of in Isaiah or in Ezekiel, but we find a great deal in Jeremiah. It is a conditional prediction. There are predictions that hold certain conditions. A conditional prediction says that if you fulfill certain requirements then this is what will happen. And an unconditional prediction says that this is what is going to happen regardless. In most cases we can tell whether it is conditional or not. There is one important, one well-known case, where you might not feel that it is a condition, and yet if we read it again we see that it really was. In the case of Jonah, it is when Jonah went into Nineveh and said yet forty days and then Nineveh will be destroyed. And when he said that, you'll remember, they had a great revival. After he had gone back and forth throughout the city giving that terrible prophecy to them, there was a revival in the city of Nineveh. So the Lord had mercy, much to Jonah's disgust. And the city was not

destroyed. The words that he used did not sound conditional at all that in forty days the city would be destroyed, and that *is* what God had told them. The fact that they did repent shows that the prophecy did come with conditions. The people repented and it was not destroyed at that time. But the destruction of Nineveh a hundred or more years later was one of the most terrible destructions in all of history: greater than that of any other. And so we can say that it proved accurately that the prediction did come true. It was just what God declared would happen, but the act of repentance postponed it, but the nation did not continue in repentance and was not ultimately spared. And eventually the city brought terrible destruction upon itself.

Jeremiah 22:4 a conditional prediction and promise

Now in this case we have a conditional prediction that begins with a wonderful promise: “For if you are careful to carry out these commands, then a King who sits on David’s throne will come through the gates to the palace, riding in chariots and on horses, accompanied by their officials and their people (22:4).” In other words, you will not be the last king or one of the last kings; there will be many kings after you if you make a great turn-about and turn to the Lord and live the kind of godly life that He desires. There will be a continued dynasty of David with kings that sit on David’s throne and who go back into the city.

But he says (verse 5): “But if you do not obey these commands, declares the Lord, I swear by myself that this house will become a ruin.” So here we have the two sides of the conditional prediction. The second side of it is developed more at length. And there is pretty good evidence here that it is somewhat like the prediction in relation to Nineveh. It is perfectly clear from the character of this particular king that the condition of the first part here was not met, so Jeremiah proceeded to describe in biblical terms the punishment that is going to come on his listeners.

Conditional Punishment Described

He says: “For this is what the Lord says about the palace of the King of Judah: though you are like Gilead to me, like the summit of Lebanon.” You know Gilead is in the land of trans-Jordan across the Jordan River to the east. When it rains the land is a

beautiful territory. It was an area which the people of the western tribes looked with longing for but which was off limits. “Though you are like Gilead to me, though you are like the summit of Lebanon.” Lebanon was the great mountain of the north where they had an extensive rainy season. “I will surely make you a desert, like towns not inhabited. I will send destroyers against you, each man with his weapon, and they will cut up your fine cedar beams and throw them into the fire. People from many nations will pass the city and ask one another, Why has the Lord done such a thing to this great city? And the answer will be, Because they have forsaken the covenant of the Lord their God and have worshiped and served other gods.”

Time of Prediction: Zedekiah or Jehoiakim?

Now with this prediction given here you cannot guess from the text as to the time of when this was given. It perhaps seems to fit a little better with the time of Jehoiakim--when the idea of the destruction seemed a long way off than during the reign of Zedekiah when two kings had been cut off and it would be easy to see that destruction seemed to be on the horizon. However, you cannot prove what time this prediction was given.

Support for the time of Jehoiakim

But now you come to verse 10. He says: “Do not weep for the dead king or mourn his loss; rather, weep bitterly for him who is exiled, because he will never return nor see his native land again.” And this statement here seems to fit very nicely with the early part of the reign of Jehoikim, because here people are told not to weep for the dead king or mourn his loss. And it does not seem natural that people would do much weeping about Jehoiakim. That would not seem a very natural reaction, though it might be that some would, for in verse two it would fit better in the reign of Jehoiakim.

And of course, this would fit after the death of Josiah, who was still a comparative youth, and when he was trying to stop Pharaoh Necho. And so this fits very well with the reign of Jehoiakim, although it may fit with Zedekiah, though not as well. The exiled king was Shallum, whom the people had selected to be king, and they looked forward to having a great and good king, but Pharaoh Necho replaced him. Pharaoh Necho returned

to Egypt, stopped and went to Israel, and having just defeated the army of the Lord he took Shallum off to Egypt.

There it says, “For this is what the Lord says about Shallum, son of Josiah, who succeeded his father as king of Judah but has gone from this place.” Well that doesn’t sound right for being in the time of Zedekiah, when Shallum was taken and destroyed. It sounds like a more recent event. “For this is what the Lord says about Shallum son of Josiah, who succeeded his father as king of Judah: He will never return. He will die in the place where they have led him captive; he will not see this land again.” It doesn’t say where he was led into captivity here, but presumably it is Egypt.

And so up to this point then we have evidence this prediction is in the early part of the reign of Jehoiakim. And then we turn to another subject that begins at verse 13 that does not talk about Josiah or about Shallum, but perhaps going back to the early version of chapters originally written by Jeremiah before his rewrite, where he calls on the king to do what is just and right, not to shed innocent blood, not to do wrong and violence to the aliens, the fatherless and the widows. He turns to that again; he says (verses 13-17), “Woe to him who builds his palace by unrighteousness, his upper rooms by injustice, making his countrymen work for nothing, not paying them for their labor.” We have no evidence that this was done by Zedekiah. But this fits with what was said earlier, “Woe to him who does these things. He says, ‘I will build myself a great palace with spacious upper room.’ So he makes large windows in it, panels it with cedar and decorates it in red. Does it make you a king to have more and more cedar? Did not your father have food and drink? He did what was right and just, so all went well with him. He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me? Declares the Lord. But your eyes and your heart are set only on dishonest gain, on shedding innocent blood and on oppression and extortion.”

Jehoiakim explicitly mentioned (Jer 22:18)

Then verse 18 continues, “Therefore this is what the Lord says” and this is where we have in chapter 22 verse 18 to think “about Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah.” Though there is no specific reference to Shallum and explicit reference to Jehoiakim, it

makes it seem as if we have a continuation of previous chapters dealing with Jehoiakim even though the previous chapter dealt with Zedekiah. We continue in verse 18 of chapter 22: “Therefore, this is what the Lord says about Jehoiakim: They will not mourn for him: Alas, my brother! Alas, my sister! They will not mourn for him: Alas, my master! Alas, his splendor! He will have the burial of a donkey—dragged away and thrown outside the gates of Jerusalem.” It is a parable telling what end will come to the life of Jehoiakim.

Transjordan Mountains

"Go up to Lebanon and cry out, let your voice be heard in Bashan, cry out from Abarim, for all your allies are crushed." These are three mountains across the Jordan. As you look to the north, there's that great mountain of Lebanon, and then farther south there is the area of Bashan, a high hill country, and then farther south is the mountain that we call Abarim. "Go up to Lebanon, let your voice be heard through all these areas, for your allies are crushed." There's no help you can get from other countries there. "I warned you when you felt secure but you said, I will not listen! This has been your way from your youth; you have not obeyed me. The wind will drive all your shepherds away, and your allies will go into exile. Then you will be ashamed and disgraced because of all your wickedness. You who live in Lebanon, who are nestled in cedar buildings (verses 18-22)." Here, Lebanon would not refer to the mountain, but referring to the great house that the king had built from the cedars of Lebanon. And we find that in the time of Solomon he built a great house called "the house of Lebanon," and he referred to in 1 Kings 7:2. And so here he is referring to Jehoiakim's great pride, "You who live in Lebanon and are nestled in cedar buildings, how you will groan when pangs come upon you, pains like that of a woman in labor!" (verse 23)

Jer 22:24—From Jehoiakim to Jehoiachin a rejected signet ring

And then in verse 24 he looks forward to Jechoiachin the son of Jehoiakim, and whether from verse 24 the person referred to is during the life of Jehoiachin or later in his life, it is hard to say, because this may be an insert part in Jeremiah's re-write. This, however, could entirely have been written in the time of Zedekiah because it says, "As

surely as I live, declares the Lord, even if you, Jehoiachin son of Jehoiakim king of Judah, were a signet on my right hand, I would still pull you off.” Now that could have been written in the first 3 months of Jehoiachin, son of Jehoiakim, or it could have been in written in the time shortly before Jehoiachin. Some might have thought, "Well, once Jehoiakim is out we'll will have this son. He's a fine young lad, once he becomes king, everything will be fine."

“As surely as I live, declares the Lord (verse 24), even if you, Jehoiachin son of Jehoiakim king of Judah, were a signet ring on my right hand I would still pull you off. I will hand you over to those who seek your life, those you fear—to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and to the Babylonians. I will hurl you and the mother who gave you birth into another country, where neither of you was born, and there you both will die. You will never come back to the land you long to return to.”

This does not sound like Jehoiachin has already gone, but rather that he has been convicted and that he will go. Jehoiachin will be taken off not to Egypt like Shallum, but by Nebuchadnezzar King of Babylon, he will be taken away. And he says, “You will never come back to the land you long to return to.” And you read in Kings (2 Kings 25:27-30) that after Jehoiachin had been for many years in prison in Babylon that the son of Nebuchadnezzar released him from prison, gave him a seat at his own table, and provided food for him. And it has been in the last thirty years discovered at Babylon, a clay tablet recording the materials for Jehoichin for taking care of him and his children, and we have it recorded on this tablet.

Jehoiachin: a broken rejected pot

Then Jeremiah continues in chapter 22 verse 28, “Is this man Jehoiachin a despised, broken pot, an object no one wants?” They said, "What do you think? This is Jehoiachin; he's supposed to be wonderful, he's the one we are looking forward to having rule. " But Jeremiah says, “Is this man a despised, broken pot, an object no one wants? Why will he and his children be hurled out, cast into a land they do not know?”

Do not put your trust in Coniah [Jehoiachin]

And Jeremiah answers in verse 29, “O land, land, land, hear the word of the Lord! This is what the Lord says: Record this man as if childless, a man who will not prosper in his lifetime, for none of his offspring will prosper, none will sit on the throne of David or rule anymore in Judah.”

And so the people are not to put their hopes and trust in Coniah, which is another name for Jehoiachin. He is going to be sent into exile and he will never come back. Many of the people considered him the rightful king and Zedekiah the false king.

As I have mentioned before, most of the prophetic books go straight through chronologically. Jeremiah is not for the most part in chronological arrangement because the initial scroll was destroyed and a new scroll was written. But at any rate, I would propose Jehoiachin is the one whom it is said none will sit on the throne of David, and yet he is listed in the book of Matthew as the forefather of Christ (Matt. 1:12). We will not deal with this issue at this time.

Jeremiah 23 and the chapter break –Bad Shepherds [kings]

So now we’re at chapter 23 verse one, but my personal opinion is that there should not be a break in the passage. I feel that the break should be at verse 9 rather than here. Chapter 23, the first 8 verses are a continuation of what we’ve seen, and they form the final section that chapter 22 was leading up to. It begins, “Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture! Declares the Lord.” Now the LORD is speaking there of His own pasture. They are not Jehoiachin’s or Zedekiah’s people, but God says: I have many sheep of the pasture and the shepherds are destroying them and scattering the sheep. Now kings might occasionally take care of the people but this says “declares the Lord,” so the Lord is speaking. And the figure of the king as the shepherd is used quite frequently, as in Psalm 23. And so we have here, I believe, a summary of the condemnation of the king: “Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture! Declares the Lord. Therefore this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says to the shepherds who tend my people.” The passage is clear that the figure of the king is the shepherd. The people are the sheep. Everything cannot be taken as figurative, otherwise it would be impossible to tell what it means. But the

term "shepherd" is a well-known image drawn from the ancient Near East referring to kings. Interestingly, Jesus calls himself the "good shepherd" and he lays down his life for the sheep.

Future Gathering of Scattered People

So there the chapter clearly points to the king. And he says, "Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done. I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and will bring them back to their pasture." Now how can He say this, "I will bring them back out of the country to where I have driven them," when the people haven't yet gone into exile? The answer is that two thirds of the people had already gone into exile over a hundred years before. The Northern Kingdom had been taken into exile to Assyria in 722 BC. And though there were two kingdoms for a couple of centuries, they always felt that they were one nation. There was the nation of Israel, with two parts to it west and east of the Jordan River, which divided under King Solomon's son Rehoboam around 930 BC. And the people from the northern kingdom were already scattered and had been taken into exile by the Assyrians of Nineveh, and the people of the south were going to be scattered shortly after this by Babylon.

But the Lord said, "I will gather my people and bring them back to the pasture, where they will be fruitful and increase in number." There seems to be a bringing of these exiles back to the land of Israel today. That is not necessarily what this prophecy would appear to refer to. But other nations of antiquity have disappeared. One nation and another have been destroyed, but this nation was the one God had chosen and preserved, even to the present.

Return and New Shepherd –righteous branch of David [Christ]

And so He says, "I will bring them back to this pasture. I will place shepherds over them who will tend them and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing, declares the Lord." And now we find the climax of the prediction about the end of the faithful line of David. We've had unworthy people over the people of Israel.

But we find that He says here that, “The days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch.” And he will bring someone up from David’s line. Literally, it says, “I will raise up to David,” but this means from the line of David, referring to the successors of David; there will be one who continues like David, the leader of God’s people, and he will be one who is approved from heaven, a man after God’s own heart, a righteous one, a king. This is not a succession as the previous rulers had been; this is “a great king who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his name Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called; The Lord Our Righteousness.” I believe this is completely the one who has the right to be king, the only one who is righteous, the one who is going to carry out this wonderful promise. God would come to the land of Judah. So I believe we have a wonderful promise of the coming of the Christ. Here is the righteous Branch. It is a figure of speech used that way in many cases pointing to the Messiah.

New Exodus

“So then, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when people will no longer say, As surely as the Lord lives, who brought the Israelites up out of Egypt, but they will say, 'As surely as the Lord lives, who brought the descendants of Israel up out of the land of the north and out of all the countries where he had banished them.' Then they will live in their own land.” (Jeremiah 23:7,8) This section is beyond anything that has as yet happened, where they will be under their new king who will rule over them. Whether what has already occurred in 1948 in Israel at the beginning may be part of the fulfillment of this prophecy. Generally, leaders in Israel today are unbelievers, and in general it is a nation that is not honoring God at the present, but 1948 may be the beginning of this prophecy. We cannot say dogmatically. There is no way for us to know for sure. But this is a wonderful promise given securing Israel's future.

Text Division at Jer 23:8 not 23:1

And what becomes clear to me is that I now believe this is the climax to this section, that is, the one that we started with chapter 22. The break should not be at 23:1, but after verse 8. As you know the chapter divisions were added in the thirteenth century

AD and they are not original. Some of the divisions are very good and some of them are very wrong. But we've been talking about the king; now we begin to talk about the prophet, as we go ahead.

I want you to get the main points of Jeremiah. This is a very long book and while Isaiah has 66 chapters, there are many more pages of text in Jeremiah than in Isaiah. Because it is long, I'd like you to focus on the main points.

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