Our focus in this session is going to be on Jeremiah chapters 27 to 29. We are specifically dealing with the topic of prophetic conflict. We raised this issue in our study of Jeremiah 23: the qualities, the characteristics of a true prophet that are laid out in Deuteronomy 18, the struggle that Jeremiah in his ministry had with the false prophets who were promising the people peace and who were giving the people a reason to ignore his message and his warnings of judgment. That issue of prophetic conflict is going to come to the fore in chapters 27 and 29 as well.

Let me also connect these passages to the structure that we’ve been working through. We’ve talked about chapters 26 to 45 as a story of the rejection of the word of the Lord. The theological purpose behind this was to demonstrate that it was the rejection of God’s word that ultimately led to the judgment of exile. It was not God failing to fulfill his covenant obligations. It was Israel failing to fulfill their obligations to the Lord. We’ve also seen, or tried to look at, the Jehoiakim framework around this passage, chapters 26 to 35 and chapters 36 to 45. We have these four events and episodes from the time of Jehoiakim’s ministry that provide a grid that we read this story through. The time of Jehoiakim was a decisive moment when Judah turned away from the Lord and when the rebellion and the kings rejection of the word of God ultimately brought Judah’s judgment and sealed their fate.

In our last session we talked about the fact that there was an offer of life given to the people, but the promise of life at the end of each panel is only given to a very tiny remnant. In panel one, in chapter 35, we have the promise to the Rechabites. This obscure tribe that have remained faithful to their family traditions and as a result of that, the Lord says, “The Rechabites will never fail to have a man to stand before me.” In the second panel, we have Baruch, who has been
Jeremiah’s faithful scribe. Jeremiah was a weeping prophet. Baruch was a weeping scribe because he went through the same experiences that Jeremiah did. Because of his faithfulness, he is promised life in the context of national judgment. But at the end of both of those sections where you have the deliverance of the Rechabites and life for Baruch, you also have judgment on the nation as a whole.

In chapter 34, there is going to be judgment on the people of Judah and on the king because they have turned back from their covenant to release their slaves the way that the Mosaic Law prescribed. In chapter 44, there is going to be judgment on the remnant in Egypt because they have continued in their idolatrous ways. So we’ve looked at the outer part of the structure and the frame itself. Now we’re going to turn and look inside the structure to see a little bit more of what’s there.

I want to make one word, or one comment, about the structure. I understand that I am presenting a certain structure of the book of Jeremiah. There are other scholars who are going to present structures that may be equally valid but that differ in some ways. For example, I’ve seen a number of studies that will look at this section and they will divide this structure this way: chapters 26 to 36: The stories of Jehoiakim’s rejection of the word of the LORD provide an inclusio. So they will see the second section going from perhaps chapters 26 to 36. Then in chapter 37 and following, we have the roughly chronological story of what happens in the last days of Judah as a nation. So there are sometimes more than one way to explain a structure and I don’t want to say about the structure that I’m presenting here: “This is the definitive way to read the book.” It is one way to read the book that I think helps us to make sense of some important things and does reflect some of the architecture and design of the book. But it’s often difficult to say, “Clearly this is what was in the mind of the writer.” We are simply trying to provide a structure that I think provides coherence for all of this. Sometimes the structures, I think, work more effectively when we keep them at a general level. When we know general parallels, there are times where we can develop structures,
that are so complex that you almost think that Jeremiah and Baruch would have had to have a computer to do this kind of work. Or the book of Isaiah is laid out in such chiastic structures that it would have been very difficult for the prophet to have done this. So I see a structure here that I think shows some general pattern, general design, and that helps us to make sense of the message where we divide the sections into 26 to 35 and 36 to 45 as two panels.

Now within the panel, within the structure, in the middle of this, there is a choice that is facing Judah as a people and a nation that is very different than what is offered to them in Jehoiakim’s day in chapters 26 to 35. Inside the structure, we’re dealing more with the time of Zedekiah. The framework around this deals with the time of Jehoiakim--609 to 597 BC. Within the structure, we are dealing primarily with the time of Zedekiah, who reigned from 597 to 586 BC. We’re looking at the last days of Judah as a nation, and so the hope and the possibility that’s given to Jehoiakim in the opening chapters is, “Perhaps you and the people will respond and you can be spared from judgment.” There’s the real opportunity where there’s a choice between listening to God and avoiding judgment or not listening to God and experiencing the destruction and devastation that God is going to bring upon them.

What’s going on within the structure, however, and within the framework is that the choice facing Judah now has changed in a significant way. Now the two options that Zedekiah and the people have are to submit to Babylon, surrender to them, and be spared from judgment. Look, God is sending the Babylonians as his instrument of judgment. If you will surrender to them and accept this and submit to them and turn back to God, then God will spare you. If you continue your resistance, if you persist in your sin, if you believe that you can militarily figure out a way to avoid God’s judgment, it’s ultimately going to lead to total destruction. So the choice for Jehoiakim is: choose God’s way and be spared from judgment. The choice facing Zedekiah and the people is: choose God’s way or be absolutely destroyed.
In chapter 27 to 29, we get a reflection of the prophetic conflict that is going on during Zedekiah’s reign dealing with this issue, “What do we do with the Babylonians?” or, “What would God want us to think?” or, “What perspective should we have on the Babylonian crisis?” Remember, Jeremiah’s perspective is that Judah has violated the covenant, they have not been faithful to the LORD. One of the covenant curses that God had warned he would bring against his people was the covenant curse of military invasion and exile. Jeremiah is warning the people that God is using the Babylonians as his instrument of judgment. This is all falling out in accordance with the covenant laid out in the days of Moses. If they do not repent and turn from their sinful ways, then God is going to use the Babylonians to bring destruction on them. However they see this, or however they respond to this, if they do not submit to Babylon, they are going to be absolutely destroyed. There is no way for them at this point to avoid subjugation to Babylon. God has given the Babylonians dominion over the nations and that dominion includes the nation of Judah.

The prophets that opposed Jeremiah have a fundamentally different understanding of the covenant. They believe that God has chosen Israel as his special people, that God is obligated because of that to bless them, and that God is going to protect them no matter what. Jeremiah is warning, “The Babylonian army is coming and these waves of exile that you are experiencing are increasingly going to get worse and worse.”

Jeremiah is going to tell them that the exile is going to last for seventy years. The people that are taken away into exile need to settle down there, build houses, marry, raise families, submit to the king of Babylon and pray for the peace of Babylon because they’re going to be there for a while. The false prophets, based on their defective view of covenant, believe that God is going to rescue them and within a couple of years this crisis will soon be over. So we have the debate and the discussion in chapters 27 to 29: What do we do about the Babylonian crisis? Jeremiah is saying submit to Babylon; the prophets are saying something else.
Now, this is paralleled in the second panel in chapters 37 to 39 because, again, we’re in the days of Zedekiah; it’s the last days before the fall of Jerusalem. But, now, it’s more the political and the military officials debating: what do we do about Babylon?

In the second panel, Jeremiah’s going to say the same thing: submit to Babylon, and be spared. We have the officials and the military leaders who have listened to the defective promises of the prophets, and they’re continuing the resistance. So the parallel in the two panels is: What do we do? What about the issue of submission to Babylon that’s going to be a major focus in 27 to 29, 37 to 39? We also have a cause-and-effect relationship here because in 27 to 29, we have two prophetic messages. Do we believe Jeremiah, and do we submit to Babylon? Do we change our ways, or, do we believe in the false promises of the prophets of peace and continue the resistance? The consequence of that is that Jerusalem is going to be destroyed, and we get a record of that in chapters 37 to 39. So, in a sense, there’s also a warning and fulfillment parallelism between 27 to 29 and 37 to 39. But as we go back now and look specifically at chapters 27 to 29, I’d like for us to notice three specific instances of prophetic conflict that Jeremiah is going to endure and go through because of this message of “submit to Babylon.” Remember, the people are the ones that are in the middle here. The officials and the kings are also involved. How do we respond; who do we believe? This is a serious thing. The life of the nation of Judah and their fate is ultimately going to be determined by how they respond to this message.

We’re reminded, just at a practical level of the importance of theology. What we believe about God, and the ideas that we have about God, ultimately determine the most important decisions and actions that we make in life. The theology of the prophets of peace and the theology of the prophet Jeremiah give us two very different understandings of reality. How people act on the basis of those theologies is ultimately going to determine the fate of Judah. So today, when people say, “You know, we need to give up our debates about theology; it’s not
important anyway. Let’s just focus on living out what it means to be a Christian.” I think they are undermining the importance of something that’s very real: the way that our theology ultimately determines our behavior.

So, here’s the debate about that theology that’s going on in chapters 27 and 29. It tells us in chapter 27, verse 1, it says, “In the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah.” So, remember Zedekiah comes to the throne in 609 BC, but it also tells us in chapter 28 that the story that happens there is in the same year as the event in 27. It says there in that same year at the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah the king of Judah in the 5th month of the 4th year. So the fourth year of Zedekiah’s reign is 593 BC. So, that’s the time that’s the chronological context for what we’re going to see taking place in chapters 27 and 28.

**Jeremiah 27 and the Prophetic Conflict**

Now, there’s something else about the opening verse of chapter 27, verse 1 that I wanted to call attention to. In the ESV and in most English Bibles it’s going to say, “In the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah.” That’s the title that’s provided for this section. The Hebrew version is going to say, “In the beginning of the reign of Jehoiakim.” So, what we’ve talked about the Jehoiakim frame and the fact that there are only passages about Jehoiakim in 26, 35, 40, 36, and 45 actually, in the Hebrew text, we have a reference to Jehoiakim in 27:1. In the Greek text, we do not have a heading at all. But, as we look at the events that take place in this story, it’s clearly something that’s dated to the time of the reign of Zedekiah. So the reference in the MT [Masoretic Text; Hebrew], the title that says, “In the reign of Jehoiakim.” It’s a title that’s been added later. I think the English versions are right in amending “Jehoiakim” to read “Zedekiah.” So, that keeps our framework intact, but the time of this is 593.

What’s going on here is that a delegation of ambassadors from various the nation states that surround Judah have come to Jerusalem for a conference with Zedekiah. What this conference is about is that these smaller nations realize that on their own and by themselves there is no way that they’re going to be able to
withstand the power of the Babylonian army. There’s no way that they’re going to be able to resist the Babylonian invasion. So what they have decided to do is to join together in an alliance. If we pull our forces together and we saw the same thing happening with Judah and the nations states during the Assyrian crisis in the previous century, if we can come up with an alliance, maybe we can stand up to the big bully on the block. So they are entertaining the possibility of a rebellion against the Babylonians. What does Jeremiah think about that? Well, Jeremiah’s message is: God has decreed that the Babylonians are going to be in control of the nations. Any type of resistance against them is futile. That’s not just the political assessment. That’s not just, well, I’m looking at the size of our armies versus the size of their armies. It’s a theological assessment based on Jeremiah’s understanding of what God had revealed to him that the Babylonians are God’s instrument of judgment. During the Assyrian crisis Isaiah had said the Assyrians are the rod of God’s anger. Jeremiah is going to say Nebuchadnezzar is God’s servant and so resisting him, withstanding him, is not going to work. This conference that you’re having where you’re plotting and putting together this political solution is not going to work.

We read also in Jeremiah chapter 51, verse 59 that Zedekiah was actually required to go to Babylon in 593 BC, and he was sent back. He was allowed to remain on the throne, but you have to wonder if Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians have not heard about this conference and they want a report from Zedekiah where Zedekiah is affirming to them his continued loyalty in the fact that he’s going to pay tribute to them. The Babylonians were the ones who had set Zedekiah up as the king of Judah in 597 BC when they captured the city of Jerusalem and took away Jehoiakim. They had set up Zedekiah as their puppet. Zedekiah would be allowed to remain on the throne as long as he was loyal to the Babylonians and he paid the tribute. What happens with Zedekiah, because of his own weakness as a leader, is that Zedekiah’s going to be drawn back and forth between do we continue to resist the Babylonians, or do we submit to them?
Zedekiah is listening to his military officials who say, “you know what we’ve got a shot. If we pull together our forces, if we come up with the right strategy, if we develop the right coalition, we can withstand the Babylonians.” Jeremiah is saying, “You don’t have a shot. God has decreed the subjugation of the nations to Nebuchadnezzar, and any kind of resistance to him is futile.” Jeremiah is going to give that message both to Zedekiah and to these other delegates and in chapter 27.

First to the people he’s going to repeat this message three times: resistance to Babylon is futile. Let’s look at verse three. “Send word to the king of Edom, the king of Moab, the king of the sons of Ammon, the king of Tyre, and the king of Sidon by the hands of the envoys who have come to Jerusalem.” I’ve got a message for all the nations and here’s what he says in verse five the Lord says, “It is I who by my great power and my outstretched arm have made the earth, with the men and animals that are on the earth, and I give it to whomever it seems right to me. Now I have given all of these into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, my servant, and I have given him also the beast of the field to serve him.” Look, the Lord says, “I’m the creator of the world. I own the earth. I’m not just the God of Israel. I’m the God of all nations and I have decreed as the sovereign Lord and the creator who determines these things that Nebuchadnezzar is to rule over the nations.” We mentioned this earlier in the course but by giving Nebuchadnezzar control, not only of the nations, but even of the animals. Nebuchadnezzar here is being portrayed in a sense as a second Adam, who was God’s vice regent, who was God’s image. Nebuchadnezzar is God’s image. To resist Nebuchadnezzar is to resist God. So, this political coalition is not going to work.

Here’s a warning to the nations, verse eight, “If any nation or any kingdom will not serve this Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, and put its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon, I will punish that nation with the sword, with famine, with pestilence, declares the Lord, until I have consumed it by his hand.” Remember, this is the time when Jeremiah is wearing the yoke around his neck.
This wooden yoke represents the message of subjugation. He’s not just preaching this, he’s visually demonstrating it. Now, he’s going to give a specific warning to the nations and to these envoys. He says, “Do not listen to the words of your prophets who are telling you, somehow, that you can resist the hegemony of Babylon. It will not happen. And don’t listen to these false prophets.

The interesting thing is when Jeremiah gives this message to the second audience in verse 10, listen to the people that he addresses there, “To Zedekiah, the king of Judah, I spoke in like manner.” This chapter is going to level Judah off with all of the other nations. They’re no different. They may have believed, “There are special circumstances because we’re the people of God and we’re involved in this.” It is the same message that God gives to the Edomites, to the Moabites, to the Ammonites, to the people of Tyre, and Sidon, the same message that the Lord is going to give to Zedekiah. His status as the Davidic king doesn’t put him outside the dominion of Babylonians. He’s going to say to Zedekiah, “Don’t listen to the words of your prophets, submit to Babylon, that’s the only hope that you have for survival.”

In the past, God has referred to David as his servant. What happens in this passage in chapter 27, verse 6 is that Nebuchadnezzar is God’s servant. The same thing is said in chapter 25. The Lord in Judah’s past history, and in the past history of Israel, has committed himself to the house of David. God had a special relationship with the Davidic king. He adopted the Davidic king as his son and he put him on the throne. What the Lord will say about this king is: “This is my anointed one, I have chosen him, I have installed my king on Zion, my holy hill, and all of the nations are to submit to him. If they do not, they will answer to me.” So David and David’s sons were God’s vice regents. As the sons of God, they ruled on earth as earthy representations of God’s heavenly dominion and sovereignty. The Lord says that ultimately, “I am going to give all of the nations of the earth and I am going to place them all under the authority of David.” It is a
pretty amazing statement in light of the fact that the land of Israel was about the size of New Jersey, but ultimately these kings are going to rule over the nations.

That arrangement has changed during the days of Jeremiah because now God’s servant, now God’s vice regent, is Nebuchadnezzar. So Zedekiah, don’t think that being the divinely appointed king and having a special relationship with God is going to exempt you from this. You are to submit to Babylon just as much as all of these other nations. Here’s the warning, verse 14, “Do not listen to the words of the prophets who are saying to you, ‘You shall not serve the king of Babylon.’” “For it is a lie, it is sheker, that they are prophesying to you. I have not sent them’, declares the Lord, ‘but they are prophesying falsely in my name with the result that I will drive you out of the land.” If you listen to this false message, if you buy into this false theology, it is going to have devastating consequences for you because the only way to survive is submission to Babylon. I think it’s very interesting the way that the prophet levels Judah off with the other nations. There are going to be other prophets that will do exactly the same thing as they’re preaching judgment on the people of Israel and Judah they’re going to level the nation of Israel and say, “You are no better than the nations themselves.”

Parallels in Amos 3

One of the prophets who does this particularly in an effective way is Amos. He does this in several ways, I’m just going to mention this real quickly and then go back to Jeremiah 27. Amos begins his oracles with a series of judgment speeches against the nations. Remember, he’s a prophet to Israel and in his seventh and final, or what appears to be the final judgment speech there’s a message against Judah, Israel’s enemy down in the south. I can imagine the people of Israel celebrating this and thinking, “Yeah! God go get ‘em! Get all the pagan people’s around us!” But the eighth oracle that Amos gives is a message against Israel itself. It’s “Wow, the hammer falls,” the fact that they are God’s chosen people does not mean that they are exempt from judgment. In Amos chapter 3, verses 1 and 2, Amos says this, ‘Hear this, word, that the Lord has spoken against
you, O people of Israel, against the whole family that I brought up from the land of Egypt. You only have I known of all the families of the earth;”

So you hear that and say, “Yeah, there it is, they are special. God brought them up out of the land of Egypt, God knows the people of Israel like he knows no other family on earth.” But listen to what Amos says, “Therefore, I will punish you for all of your iniquities.” He doesn’t say, “Therefore, you’re the chosen of all the earth. Therefore, I’m going to bless you, protect you, and watch out for you. No, because of that special relationship, you’re more responsible and I’m going to punish you as a result of that.”

Down in chapter 3 in Amos, later on in the passage in verse 9, “Proclaim to the strongholds in Ashdod and to the strongholds in the land of Egypt,” all these foreign places, “and say, ‘Assemble yourselves on the mountains of Samaria, and see the great tumult within her and all of the oppressed in her midst.’ They do not know how to do right, declares the Lord, those who store up violence and robbery in their strongholds.”

The Lord invites representatives from all these other nations to come to Samaria, to take a seat, to look on what’s going on in the city and he says to these, “Have you ever seen anyone as wicked as the people of Samaria and Israel?” So, the Israelites and the people of Judah, they thought, “We have an exempt status from all of this because we’re the chosen people of God.” The prophets level them off and say, “You’re under the same sentence of judgment that all of these other people are.” That’s what God is saying to Zedekiah here as well.

Third Repetition: Jer 27:16

Now, the third time this message is repeated, chapter 27 verse 16, again, three times the prophet is going to say it. This is pretty important. But listen to who the message is directed to this time. “Then I spoke to the priests and to all of the people.” Now the message is not just to the king, it’s to the people, it’s to the religious leaders who are going to be affected by this. It says, verse 16, “Do not listen to the words of your prophets who are prophesying to you saying, ‘Behold,
the vessels of the Lord’s house will now shortly be brought back from Babylon,’
for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you.’”

So three times in chapter 27 Jeremiah is going to make this statement,
“Submit to the Babylonians, it’s futile, it’s useless to withstand them, or try to
battle your way out of this.” Three times, who are the ones that are responsible for
this false belief?” It is the prophets. It is the prophets who are prophesying sheker,
who are making promises to the people and the Lord has not sent them. So again
we’re back to this issue of prophetic conflict. You can imagine the, the driving
topic on talk radio in Jerusalem in the last days is: “What do we do about the
Babylonian crisis?” We can imagine Jeremiah being invited in for the interview as
someone on the other side. You can pretty clearly see their positions, but that’s the
struggle going on in chapter 27 to 29.

Jeremiah Versus Hananiah (Jer 28)

We come to the second example of this in chapter 28. I think as we’ve
already talked at an earlier time. It is one of the most interesting examples of
Jeremiah in conflict with a false prophet. But what’s going on here is that we not
only see two different messages, but in a sense, I think we’re drawn into the
struggle that the people had in trying to determine, which one of these guys is
telling us the truth. There is Jeremiah who is prophesying, “Resistance is futile.”
He’s the one who’s wearing the yoke. On the other hand, there is Hananiah who
speaks in the name of the Lord and who is referred to in the text as a prophet but
who is giving a completely opposite message. If you are one of the people, you
want to listen to the message of Hananiah because it is so much more positive— “In
a short while all of this is going to be over.” Jeremiah is saying the exile is going
to last 70 years, so if you continue the resistance you are going to be destroyed.
They are already inclined to want to listen to Hananiah. So we have the struggle
over discerning a true prophet from a false one.

In the Greek translation of Jeremiah in this chapter we note something
interesting—Hananiah is referred to as a false prophet, a pseudo-prophet. But in the
Marsoretic text, here in the Hebrew, both Jeremiah and Hananiah are referred to
by the same term. They are both called “prophets.” Actually the term prophet is
added a number of times in the New Testament to emphasize this idea. We have
two people here that are speaking that both claim to be prophets. I think it’s even
interesting that we even have certain verses where it’s going to refer to both of
them as a prophet.” For example, in verse 5, “Then the prophet Jeremiah spoke to
Hananiah the prophet.” This gets confusing! In verse 15, “And Jeremiah the
prophet said to the prophet Hananiah...” So you’ve got this word “prophet” all
over the place and it’s referring to both of these guys.

Let’s remember the message of Hananiah. Jeremiah is proclaiming “Submit
to Babylon,” he’s wearing the wooden yoke. “You cannot resist, God has decreed
the sovereignty of the Babylonians over the nations.” Hananiah is very aggressive.
It takes a lot of chutzpah to do this, but he interrupts Jeremiah’s message, takes the
yoke off of Jeremiah’s neck and smashes it to the ground. He says, “Listen,
Jeremiah has got it all wrong, instead of this being a long-term problem, within
two years we will be delivered and everything about this Babylonian crisis will be
over.” As Hananiah is trying to convince the people of his message, in some ways
he gives a more convincing performance than Jeremiah does.

I think there’s this narrative going on here that I refer to as “prophetic
mirroring.” Jeremiah is called a prophet; Hananiah is called a prophet. Jeremiah
says “Thus says the Lord;” Hananiah says, “Thus says the Lord.” Hananiah
doesn’t step up and say, “I’m a false prophet, I’m speaking to you in the name of
Baal.” He says, “Thus says the Lord.” There may be even the possibility that at
times in his life Hananiah has been a true prophet of God and God has
communicated valid messages through him. Jeremiah performs a sign act; he
wears the wooden yoke. Hananiah performs a sign act; he breaks the yoke and
gives a message in connection with that. So it’s difficult.
Hananiah and the Zion Traditions

Something that adds a little bit to the tension to all of this is that Hananiah may have credibility and credentials as a prophet himself. But Hananiah also has a past theological tradition to base his message on. We looked, when we talked about Jeremiah’s Temple Sermon, at the Zion psalms. Psalm 46: “The Lord is a very present help in a time of trouble.” We know that Zion will not be moved, it will not be shaken, and even if there’s a storm that shatters the whole world, Jerusalem is a storm shelter. In the presence of God, even as these waters are roaring and foaming and raging, the presence of God is like a peaceful river that flows through the city. It’s like the spring of Gihon that brings God’s blessing to the people. We will not fall because God is with us. Zion is secure even if it’s attacked by an enemy army; even if these nations rage and roar and foam, God will deliver us. God’s going to protect. God has obligated himself to watch over the city of Jerusalem.

Hananiah also had the preaching of Isaiah, who in many ways appealed to the Zion traditions. Listen to what it says in Isaiah 17:12 which uses the same imagery that is in Psalm 46 is in this passage. Isaiah says, “Ah, the thunder of many peoples; they thunder like the thundering of the sea! Ah, the roaring of the nations;” [The raging of the nations is just like in Psalm 46]. “They roar like the roaring of mighty waters! The nations roar like the roaring of many waters, but he will rebuke them, and they will flee far away, chased like chaff on the mountains before the wind and whirling dust before the storm. At evening time, behold, terror! Before morning, they are no more!” So things might be bad at night but before the morning ever arrives these nations that are raging and roaring against Jerusalem, “God’s going to deliver us!” There’s this past theological tradition that Hananiah could have very easily appealed to here. He also could have appealed to the story of how God had delivered the city of Jerusalem from the Assyrians in 701 BC.
The Lord had done that in a really dramatic way. We’ve talked about this a number of times. The Asyrian army was 180,000 strong. They surround the city, Hezekiah trusts God, the angel of the Lord goes out in the middle of the night and defeats them. So there are all these things where Hananiah could have said, “Listen, there are other prophets that have said to you the same things that I am saying to you. Why should you listen to this guy Jeremiah who’s talking all of this doom and gloom?”

Something else more specific about Hananiah’s message, in 28:3, in the Hebrew text when he says “Within two years I will bring back to this place,” what the text actually says is “Within two days” [Within 2 yom]. Now we know the word yom doesn’t always necessarily mean a 24-hour day and there’s a huge debate about that in the days of creation—in Genesis 1—that I, thankfully, I don’t have to address here. Yom can be a general term for a period of time—the day of the Lord. But it’s interesting to note that he doesn’t simply say within two years. He actually says, “Within two days I will bring back the place.” Now I don’t think he literally means forty-eight hours here, but it’s an idiomatic way of saying, “Look, in a very short time the Lord is going to restore his people.”

Jeremiah 28:11, Hananiah, after he has broken the yoke, says to them, “Thus says the Lord, ‘Even so will I break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar King of Babylon from the neck of the nations within two days.’” So it’s one thing to prophesy two years, but to use this idiom “two days,” the deliverance is coming really soon.

Hananiah and Hosea

Again, I got to thinking about this in light of the past theological tradition of the prophets, Hananiah had a proof text—Hananiah had a passage that he could have gone to. Hosea, who is a prophetic predecessor to Jeremiah in Hosea 6:1, 2 is going to talk about the return and the restoration of the people of Israel after the judgment. What he’s going to say there is, “Come, let us return to the Lord; for he has torn us, that he may heal us… After two days he will revive us; on the third
day he will raise us up, that we may live before him.” So ”Yeah, we may have to
go through judgment but in a short time, within two days or within three God’s
going to resurrect us and raise us up.” Hananiah is saying the same thing. So if I’m
one of those people in Jerusalem that day, where one prophet is wearing a yoke
and another prophet is tearing off the yoke, I’m a little confused at this point. It’s
difficult to tell the difference.

**Jeremiah’s Response**

Now, there’s one more thing that adds to the tension as well–Jeremiah’s
reaction to Hananiah is also a little unusual because when Hananiah has the
chutzpah to step up and break his yoke, I can imagine that the normal reaction of a
prophet would be to immediately and angrily get in this guy’s face and point his
finger at him. But listen to what Jeremiah says in 28:5, “Then the prophet
Jeremiah spoke to Hananiah the prophet in the presence of the priests and all the
people … and he said, ‘Amen! May it be. May the Word of the Lord do so; may
the Lord make the words that you have prophesied come true, and bring back to
this place from Babylon the vessels of the house of the Lord, and all of the
exiles.’” Jeremiah, when he hears this message, when this prophet has ripped the
yoke off his neck and broken it and interrupted Jeremiah’s sermon, Jeremiah says
“Amen. You know, I’d like to see that too! Your Message sounds better than the
one that I’ve been preaching.” So, unless Jeremiah is speaking sarcastically here,
Jeremiah may be expressing a real desire that “Hananiah, maybe God sent you to
interrupt me.”

But then we come to see Jeremiah’s fuller response, and Jeremiah’s going
to explain to people “Yeah. It would be great if God would do this.” There was
always the possibility that God could step in on the 11th hour, but there’s a reason
why Hananiah’s message is the wrong message for this particular time. It may
have been the right message in the days of Isaiah, but it is not the right message in
this particular situation and Jeremiah’s going to explain why.

He’s going to help these people, who had to be struggling, with which
prophet is to be believed. Who’s wearing the black shirt? Who’s wearing the white shirt here? Who’s the good guy? Who’s the bad guy? Who’s the prophet? Who’s telling us the truth? Who’s not? Here’s what’s going to help them sort through this. Jeremiah says in chapter 28, verse 8, “The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied of war, famine and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms.” Jeremiah says “You have got your prophetic tradition, but I have my prophetic tradition as well. I can go to Hosea and even Isaiah, your prophet. I can go to Amos. I can go to Micah. There’s a tradition that prophets have announced war, famine, and judgment.” The response when a prophet announces this is to take that warning seriously. Amos says, God always, when he begins to move, God is going to speak through his prophets. So as a result of that the trumpet doesn’t sound unless there’s an emergency to be responded to. So Jeremiah says there’s a prophetic tradition of prophets constantly warning people of judgment, famine and war. The proper thing to do at that time is to assess, are we being unfaithful to God? Are we keeping the covenant commandments? If Judah would honestly do this at this time, instead of just blindly trusting these promises of peace, if they would assess where they stand in relationship to God they would see the idols, they would see the idolatry; they would see their failure to keep God’s commands. This false ideology of peace has blinded their minds to the truth. Jeremiah says, “Look, when a prophet speaks judgment you take it seriously.”

Now Hananiah, as for you,” verse 9, “As for the prophet who prophesied peace, when the word of that prophet comes to pass then it will be known that the Lord has truly sent the prophet.” So when a prophet prophesies judgment we take it seriously and we do an assessment. If a prophet promises peace, we only believe that message when the confirmation comes. Jeremiah sort of lays this challenge out to the false prophets in chapter 27. “You’re pronouncing and you’re announcing that the judgment is going to be over in a little while. Well, everything that going on in terms of contemporary events is arguing against that. There is this
wave of exile, 605 BC, 597 the second group taken away; and here we are in 593 BC and they’re still assessing “Is God really judging us by the hand of Babylon?” Jeremiah is saying, “Look, when a prophet of judgment is warning you, you take time to assess.” If you can’t think about it theologically just take a look at what’s going on. If there’s a prophet that step’s into the midst of this and prophesies peace we’re only going to believe that when it really happens.

He says to the false prophets in chapter 27, verse 18 “if they are prophets and the word of the Lord is with them, then let them intercede with the Lord of hosts, that the vessels that are left in the house of the Lord, in the house of the king of Judah, and in Jerusalem may not go to Babylon.” He says, “Look if they’re true prophets and they think this crisis is going to be over, let’s give them a little test. Let them pray to God that God do something kind of simple just bring back the vessels that were taken away by Nebuchadnezzar in 597. They can’t even do that. Without some kind of confirmation in light of the disaster circumstances they’re going through and in light of the repeated covenant and fidelity of the Lord, there’s no reason to listen to a prophet of peace at this point.

I think if Jeremiah had got into this debate a little bit more he could’ve said “Look if you want to talk about Isaiah, let’s talk about Isaiah.” Hananiah’s response: “I can go back to Isaiah. Isaiah prophesied the deliverance of Jerusalem, and it happened. You’re right a prophet of peace has to confirm himself but we still have Isaiah.” Jeremiah could’ve gone back to that book and said “The prophet Isaiah only promised deliverance when Hezekiah responded to the word of God in the right way. Without that kind of response there is no reason, there is no basis for your message of peace.

So the people definitely are caught in a quandary here. Who do we believe? Jeremiah says in light of the circumstances, in light of your covenant infidelity I’m just in the long tradition of prophets who have warned about calamity and disaster. In the past people have responded to this by taking it seriously. If you’re really going to believe this guy’s message that within 2 yoms all of this is going to be
over let’s see some evidence to show this.

So Jeremiah ultimately says “Amen. Let it happen.” But he pronounces God’s judgment and the sentence that’s going to fall on Hananiah. There’s a pretty serious thing here. Because of his opposition to the message, here’s what Jeremiah says. “For the nation in the place of the wooden yoke that you broke God is going to put an iron yoke in its place (28:13). Look you listen to these false prophets and here’s what God is going to bring against you. For Hananiah personally, Jeremiah says this “Listen, Hananiah, the Lord has not sent you. You can do all the prophetic mirroring that you want but the Lord has not sent you and you have made these people to trust in a lie. Therefore, thus says the Lord, behold I will remove you from the face of the earth. This year you shall die because you have uttered rebellion against the Lord.”

It tells us, the last verse in verse 17: “In that same year in the 7th month the prophet Hananiah died.” Here’s the irony. Here the punishment that fits the crime. Hananiah said that in 2 years the crisis will be over. The reality was within 2 months Hananiah was dead. The prophets of peace were promising life. The reality is what the people will experience is, if they follow them, the same death that the prophets themselves experienced they will experience.

Prophetic Conflict in Jer 29

Let us go on to the third example of prophetic conflict in Jeremiah chapter 29 and again the issue is going to be over submission to Babylon. Now the context of the opposition changes here because now the prophets who are opposing Jeremiah are in Babylon. So God had his true prophet in Babylon. God had Ezekiel there. God had Daniel, but the people had their false prophets there as well and they were preaching the same message of peace. This is not going to last long. This will be over in a short while. Here’s Jeremiah’s message to the exiles in Babylon he sends them a letter in the early parts of chapter 29 in verse 4 here’s what he tells them: “Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles to all to whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and
live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord God on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. [or in your shalom that will come through the shalom of Babylon]. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: do not let your prophets and your diviners who are among you deceive you,” and do not listen to their false and empty promises. So, here’s Jeremiah’s message; it’s the same thing he was saying to the people that were still in the land: “Submit to Babylon.”

Babylon replaces Jerusalem

For the exiles, that meant recognize that you’re going to be here for a while. Settle down, do the things that you do in normal life, build your houses, plant vineyards, grow your crops, and have children. Babylon in a sense, for these people, has taken the place of the promise land; it has become their promised land. God had said to Israel in Deuteronomy 6, I am going to give you cities and houses and vineyards that you didn’t plant, you’re going to enjoy all these things in the promised land. Well now, temporarily Babylon has become their promise land. This is going to be where they experience those things that were associated with the covenant blessings in God’s original arrangement with Israel. Have children; bear children there. Pray for the peace of Babylon. Remember the Psalm that tells us to pray for the peace of Jerusalem. Babylon has replaced Jerusalem. So you can imagine this is pretty subversive theology. If Jerusalem is not the city of shalom anymore, Babylon is! And if you will settle there, and if you will submit to Babylon, and give up these ideas that you’re going to be there a short while, the Lord ultimately is going to restore you.

Real Hope Jer 29:11

Here is the real hope that Judah has, in contrast to the false hopes that the prophets are giving them. And in in verse 10 “When the seventy years are
completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.” Alright, settle down, the exile is going to last for a while, and here’s the verse, maybe the only verse that many people know in Jeremiah, “For I know the plans that I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for wholeness and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.” Be careful of claiming someone else’s promises for yourself. There is a general promise here that God has the welfare and the well-being of his people in mind, but recognize that this is not a general promise; that people who know and love God are never going to experience difficulty; that the Lord is always going to deliver you out of harm; this promise is given to people who have already been taken away in judgment. Promise is given to people who are living in exile already. And this promise is given to people who in many ways are not going to experience the blessings themselves; it’s a blessing that’s given to their children after them.

One contemporary Christian writer has said about Jeremiah 29 that the passage gives us a promise that wonderful changes take place in your life as soon as we begin to live our lives according to God’s purpose. I do think, Romans 8:28 “God works all things together for good” but this is not a promise that everything that you do as a believer will prosper. It’s not a general guarantee. People do the same thing with Philippians chapter 4:13 “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” It is the athletes favorite verse, everyone has it on their hat, or their shoes, or their gloves; “I can do all things, I can hit the homerun in the 9th inning.” But be careful of taking these promises that are in a specific context, here this is a promise given to these exiles that God ultimately is going to bring them out of judgment and danger.

The message that Jeremiah gave, because of the subversiveness of its theology, was opposed by a group of prophets. Now the prophets are not Hananiah and the ones located in Judah, it’s the prophets that are in Babylon among the exiles. A couple of them are mentioned in this section; two of them in verse 21, “Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, concerning Ahab” who
was one of these prophets, and another one named Zedekiah. This is not the king, this is a prophet by the same name. They “are prophesying a lie to you in my name.” They were promising “look, the exile will be over in a little while.” Jeremiah is saying, it’s 70 years, settle down here. These prophets hate that message because they are offering empty promises of peace.

Jeremiah says “Behold, I will deliver them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, and he will strike them down before your eyes. Because of them this curse shall be used by all the exiles from Judah and Babylon. ‘The Lord make you like Zedekiah and Ahab, whom the King of Babylon roasted in a fire.” In some way Nebuchadnezzar ultimately viewed their promises of peace as being subversive and he put them to death; he roasted them in the fire.

I want us to notice this, what happens to Hananiah? He dies within 2 months. What happens to Ahab and Zedekiah? Their promising, “The Lord will prosper you and everything is going to go well,” they die because of their message. Very interesting, the prophets of peace ultimately are associated with death. Real life comes from following the prophets who are truly speaking the word of the Lord. It’s not an easy message, it’s not a message that dismisses the idea of judgment, but the empty promises of peace are never going to deliver on what they promised. You can see that in the lives of the prophets themselves.

Finally the last prophet that’s mentioned here is Shemaiah. And Shemaiah, like Hananiah, is going to engage in an act of prophetic mirroring. Jeremiah, thus says the Lord, and he writes a letter to express that, Shemaiah is going to write a letter in the opposite direction back to the religious leaders in Jerusalem and say, “This man Jeremiah, that’s telling the exiles that they’re not going to be delivered that they should just settle down, that man needs to be censored; he needs to be put in prison. This whole conflict of prophetic mirroring goes on again centered on “whose word is going to stand.” Jeremiah says, “Shemaiah because he’s spoken a lie, because he has not delivered the word of the Lord, this man will never
experience the blessings of restoration.

So constantly throughout the section the prophets of peace are the ones who are offering these empty hopes. But it’s Jeremiah’s message that gives life. It’s a message that says, “you need to recognize your sin, you need to recognize the judgment that God is bringing on you and God will ultimately restore us when we turn back to him. Prophecic conflict is the prophets of peace versus the messengers of the Lord, the true messengers of God. That’s what this section is about. The decision the people make about their response to this message, the decision that the leaders of Judah are going to make about this message is in chapter 37-39. We are going to see it is absolutely a matter of life and death how we respond to God’s word. It is the most important decision in life, and we are constantly reminded throughout the book of Jeremiah: how do we listen to God’s word? It is an issue of life and death.

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