Introduction: Structural Review

In our final two sessions of the book Jeremiah, we’re going to be looking at the third major section of the book in chapters 46-51, dealing with Jeremiah’s “Oracles against the Nations.” Remember that the book of Jeremiah divides up into 3 major sections. In chapters 1-25, we have Jeremiah’s messages of judgment against Judah in Jerusalem, the warnings of the exile that is going to come, the destruction that God is going to bring against the people if they do not repent or change their ways. In chapter 26-45, we have the stories and the account of Judah’s rejection of the prophetic word, along with that message of judgment which is focusing on how many different individuals within the nation of Judah have rejected the word of the Lord, the persecution and opposition that Jeremiah encountered and experienced as he preached the word. We also have the promise section in chapters 30-33 about the restoration of Israel and God’s future plans to bring the people back to the land. The third and final section of the book of Jeremiah are the oracles that Jeremiah prophesized against the nations that surround Israel.

Remember that in his commission Jeremiah is called to be a prophet to the nations. So, that role is definitely the primary focus in Jeremiah chapter 46-51. Remember that we have two different versions of the book of Jeremiah; we have the version that is reflected in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. We also have the Hebrew tradition that’s reflected in the Hebrew MT [Masoretic Text]. In the Septuagint [LXX] Greek version which may represent an earlier form of the book of Jeremiah these oracles against the nations occur after chapter 25 verse 12 and so they’re in the middle of the book. In the Masoretic edition they come at the end and I think one thing that we see about the placement
of these oracles at the end; it reflects more the basic chronology of what Jeremiah is laying out. First of all, God is going to bring his judgment against his own people and then God will bring his judgment against the nations.

As you read chapters 46-51 you should also keep in mind the end to section 1 in Jeremiah 25 where Jeremiah talks about the cup of God’s wrath and God’s anger. All the nations of the earth are going to drink the cup of God’s wrath, they’re going to stagger under its intoxicating power and Judah is included among those nations. But what’s part of that sequence as well is that after God has judged the nations, after God has executed judgment against his own people, Judah, the final judgment and the culminating judgment is going to fall on Babylon. The Masoretic tradition that has these oracles at the end of the book reflects that as well because ultimately the conclusion to this book is the judgment against Babylon in chapters 50 and 51 along with the appendix giving us another account of the story of the fall of Jerusalem.

Remember as we’ve worked our way through this book. We’ve also seen that Jeremiah in many ways has a lot of shocking things to say about the role that Babylon is going to play in carrying out God’s judgment, in executing God’s plan, in connection with this message of judgment that Jeremiah is preaching. In some ways what Jeremiah says about Babylon is not just shocking but seems to be subversive. He was accused by his own people of being a traitor or weakening the war effort in the resistance against Babylon. When we see the kinds of things Jeremiah was saying about Babylon we understand why that’s true.

Nebuchadnezzar as God’s Servant

Jeremiah was saying that God had appointed Nebuchadnezzar as his servant to carry out judgment on the people of Judah. One of the ways that Babylon is described in the oracles in 50 and 51 is this idea that Babylon is the hammer of the entire earth. Nebuchadnezzar is God’s servant, God has given dominion over the nations to Babylon, the Jews that are living in Babylon are told to pray for the peace of Babylon the way that in the past they have prayed for the peace of
Jerusalem. Nebuchadnezzar has taken the place of David as God’s appointed and anointed vice-regent.

So, Jeremiah has these subversive things to say about the role that the Babylonians are playing. God is actually fighting holy war against his own people by fighting with the Babylonians. But remember Jeremiah is not saying these things because he’s simply pro-Babylonian; Jeremiah is not saying these things because he’s a traitor. Jeremiah is trying to give the people a theo-political understanding of what they’re going through and a recognition that the issues that they are dealing with are not political; they are not a military problem that needs to get resolved; its ultimately a spiritual issue. Judah’s major problem is not that they’re having to deal with the Babylonians. Judah’s major problem is there is something wrong with their relationship with God. If they do not turn from their sinful ways, God is going to use Babylon as an instrument of judgment.

**Oracles against the Nations in the Other Prophets**

But in the end of the book as we come to chapters 46-51 the focus on the judgment of God’s people transforms into a focus on the judgment of these nations that surround Israel and Judah. As we look at Jeremiah, one of the things we notice in light of other prophetic books is that these oracles against the nations are an important part of the Old Testament prophetic tradition. All of the Major Prophets have sections of oracles where the prophet is speaking of God’s judgment against the nations. In the book of Isaiah we have these kinds of oracles in chapters 13 to 23. In the book of Ezekiel we have oracles against the nations in the middle of the book in chapters 25-32 that come right before the extended section where Ezekiel is going to describe the restoration of Israel. Here in Jeremiah in chapters 46-51 in the Hebrew version of the book. In the Minor Prophets we have oracles against the nations in the opening two chapters of the book of Amos. The book of Obadiah, the entire prophetic book is a judgment speech against the people of Edom. It’s a prophetic book, a very brief message that in many ways parallels the message the Jeremiah gives against Edom in Jeremiah
chapter 49 and the literary issues of common sources come up in that discussion. Another Minor Prophet that is an oracle against a foreign nation is the book of Nahum, where God announces his judgment on the people of Nineveh and the Assyrian empire for all of the cruelty and violence that they have done. So oracles against the nations are not just a part of the book of Jeremiah, they are a part of the Old Testament prophetic tradition in general.

Now this is part of Jeremiah’s mission because he has been appointed by God as a prophet to the nations. But that does not necessarily mean and these oracles against the nations do not mean that the Old Testament prophets did road trips and they went out and “I’m going to do some guest appearances in Babylon and here’s what I’m going to let these people know.” For the most part these messages seem to be directed to the people of Israel themselves. They are messages about these other foreign nations, but except in rare occurrences I don’t think the prophets normally went to these places and delivered these messages. If they did they probably had to quickly leave town afterwards.

Now one exception to that is Jonah who actually is commissioned by God to go to Nineveh and preach there and in part, Jonah’s resistance to that is; this is not normally the way it works, even when a prophet is preaching about foreign nations. You don’t normally go there, and Jonah’s objection is not just the fact that he’s going to have to preach judgment against them and they might get angry and not like it, that’s not the real reason. He’s afraid that if he goes there and preaches to the Ninevites they might take the message seriously and be spared from the judgment. Because of the fact that Assyria is the enemy of Israel and of Jonah, he doesn’t want that to happen.

It tells us in Jeremiah chapter 51 verses 59 and 60 that when Jeremiah composes these oracles against Babylon that he sends a man named Seraiah who appears to be the brother of his scribe Baruch and he commissions Seraiah. When Seraiah goes to Babylon and accompanies Zedekiah in 593 BC, he commissions him to read the scroll of Jeremiah’s prophecy’s against Babylon then to tie a rock
around them and throw them into the Euphrates, but as he’s reading them, if he actually preached them to the people, that’s not clear. The purpose of these oracles against the nation primarily was to speak to Israel and to teach the people of God the important prospective they need to keep in mind with all the things that were going on with Judah and Israel’s interactions with the other nations during the time of the classical prophet.

Why the Judgment on Foreign Nations

Here are some of the major themes and major reasons why God had his prophets convey these messages against foreign nations. Number one, it was a reminder to Israel and a demonstration to the people of Israel of God’s sovereignty over these other nations. The Lord is not just a nationalistic deity, who has influence in his own home territory. That’s often the way some of the gods of these other ancient Near Eastern people associate with; where their view is that they had a specific territory or area. God is not like that; he is not a nationalistic deity; he is not just interested in the people of Israel. He has a special relationship with the people of Israel, they are his heritage but he is actually the king over all the world and all of these nations answer to God.

We see several passages within these oracles against the nations that reflect that. The Lord is going to say to Egypt in chapter 46 verse 19 “Prepare yourselves baggage for exile, O inhabitants of Egypt! For Memphis shall become a waste, a ruin, without inhabitants.” The reason that God can deliver this kind of message against them is that in the verse right before this it says. “As I live, declares the King, whose name is the Lord of hosts.” Why can God announce that Egypt is going into exile, the same way that he can announce that Judah is going into exile? Because God is the king who controls what happens there as much as he controls among his people. The Lord is the Lord of hosts, the Lord of armies, who executes his will and carries out his sovereignty; it doesn’t matter whether it is in Judah or in Egypt. Remember one of the reasons why the refugees flee to Egypt and take Jeremiah with them is because they think this will move them outside the realm of
Babylon or outside the possibility of God bringing judgment against them. Jeremiah says that going to Egypt does not remove you from God’s territory, he his sovereign everywhere.

Elam

Probably the most distant land that is mentioned in these oracles Jeremiah 46-51 are the Elamites. Elam is a kingdom that actually to the east of Babylon. We don’t really see them focused on or highlighted in these other oracles against the nations, but the Lord says this about Elam hundreds of miles to the east of Mesopotamia which is 500 miles from the land of Israel and Judah. The Lord says in Jeremiah chapter 49, versed 37 and 38, “I will send the sword after them, until I have consumed them, and I will set my throne in Elam and destroy their king and officials, declares the Lord.” Where does God’s sovereignty extend to? Imagine the furthest reaches of the nations at this time; “I will set my throne in the most distant place.” God is the king.

The Lord also says to Egypt in chapter 46 verses 9 and 10. “Advance, O horses, and rage, O chariots! Let your warriors go out: the men of Cush and Put who handle the shield, the men of Lud, skilled in handling the bow. That day is the day Lord God of hosts.” In the same way God could fight a holy war against his own people, in the same way that he could commission armies to fight against Judah. The Lord is the king who rules over these other nations as well.

I said this when we began our study on the book of Jeremiah, and I believe that one of the most practical things we can learn from reading from the prophets and one of the most encouraging things to be reminded of is the fact that the Lord is in control of every political situation. The Lord moves the hearts of kings he directs them like water to do his will. No matter how chaotic things seem to be in the world, no matter how chaotic things were in Jeremiah’s day, God is absolutely sovereign not just over Israel but over the nations as well.

Purposes of the Oracles against the Nations and Israel’s Situation

A second thing that these oracles against the nation do, is that they are a
word of encouragement to the people of Israel that ultimately God would deal with their enemies. God would ultimately also deliver Israel from their bondage, their exile, their military defeat, and from these nations that had oppressed Israel. Ultimately the situation is going to be reversed and God is going to bring judgment on these nations as well. As an Israelite, I’m hearing these oracles against the Philistines, the Babylonians, and the Egyptians and the Moabites. I’m not just hearing about God’s Judgment of the other guys but I’m also being reminded of how God will intervene to deliver his own people. Jeremiah chapter 46 verses 27-28 again in this oracle directed toward Egypt, “the Lord says, do not fear, O Jacob my servant.” So we have a salvation oracle being given to the people of Israel. “Do not be dismayed, O Israel, for behold, I will save you from far away, and your offspring from the land of their captivity. Jacob shall return, and have quiet and ease and none shall make him afraid.” Then it says, “Fear not, O Jacob my servant, declares the Lord, for I am with you. I will make a full end of all the nations.”

So why is God bringing judgment against these nations? Not just because he hates foreigner’s. Ultimately this is to bring about the deliverance of his own people. In Zechariah chapter 2, verse 8, the prophet says “whoever touches Israel, touches the apple of God’s eye.” So Babylon and many of these other nations that had oppressed the people of Israel or the people of Judah, in a sense by doing that has stuck their finger in God’s eye. When you do that God is going to respond, he is going to react. The Lord is ultimately going to save and rescue his people and deliver his people. So, there’s message of salvation for the people of Israel that emerges from these oracles in 46-51.

Foreign Alliances will not save Israel

A third thing and again it was a specific message for the people of Israel these oracles against these nations ultimately are to warn Israel or to warn the political leaders of Israel and Judah that alliances with these other nations are not going to save them from whatever crisis they happen to be going through.
Remember that Zedekiah in the final days of Judah as a nation was hoping that an alliance with Egypt would somehow either buy him time or provide deliverance from the Babylonian crisis. Jeremiah argued and reminded him look that’s not going to help you, that is not going to save you. Even if you could defeat the Babylonian army yourself, and all that was left was wounded men, they would come back and defeat you.

The prophet Isaiah during the Assyrian crisis had warned Hezekiah “woe to those who trust in Egypt and go down to Egypt” because that’s what Hezekiah’s advisors were encouraging him to do. Let’s make alliances, let’s make a coalition and maybe if we can come up with the right arrangement or the right political coalition, so we can avoid this. Their problems were not political, their problems were not military, their problems were spiritual. They had a problem with God. So these alliances are not going to save them. We have an interesting reflection of this idea.

Edom

In Jeremiah chapter 49 in the message that’s given to Edom, Edom is one of the neighboring countries beside Judah. They are descendants of Esau. They have a very close relationship with these people. But in chapter 49 verses 14 and 16: “I have heard a message from the Lord, and an envoy has been sent among the nations.” What is significant about that? If you go back to Jeremiah chapter 27 verse 3, we read about a conference that took place in Jerusalem in 594/593 BC that evolved envoys from several nations coming to meet with Zedekiah. Edom that is mentioned here was one of the people that had sent and envoy to Jerusalem. The reason that they sent envoys there is that they are meeting with Hezekiah to plan out their military strategy. How do we withstand, how do we resist the Babylonians?

God’s response to that is that he sent out his own envoys to the nations, and here’s what they say: “Gather yourselves together and come against her, and rise up for battle. For behold, I will make you small among the nations, despised
among mankind. The horror you inspire has deceived you, and the pride of your heart, you who live in the clefs of the rock, who hold the height of the hill.” They were sending envoys to Jerusalem planning how to resist the Babylonians. Zedekiah thought, “the Edomites, maybe they can help me out.” Well, God has sent an envoy that says the Edomites are going to be defeated. It does not make sense to make an alliance with people who stand under Gods judgment themselves.

The reason why the opening chapter in chapter 46 deals with a message that is directed against Egypt is that Egypt was the primary nation that Zedekiah was looking forward to help him with the Babylonian army. They can’t help him because they stand under God’s judgment as well, and the Lord is sending Nebuchadnezzar to fight holy war against Judah. The message in chapter 46 is that God is also going to send messengers or the Babylonians to execute holy war on Egypt as well. The purpose here is to warn the leaders of Judah, to warn the kings, that military alliances with these other nations are not going to work.

Purposes of the Oracles against the Nations:

Noahic Covenant Indictment

The final major purpose of the oracles against the nations specifically, is to indict these nations for their violations of God’s covenant. Israel stands under condemnation, they stand under indictment from God because they have violated the Mosaic covenant. They have broken the terms of the arrangement that God has made with Israel and Judah as his chosen people. But as God indicts the nations of the earth, remember, they are not under the Mosaic covenant, God is not going to pull out the ten commandments or the 613 commandments of the law and point those out to the people of the nations as a basis for why is God is judging them.

God is judging the nations, it seems like, because of their violations of the Noahic covenant that go earlier back into the time of salvation history. The Noahic covenant was not just an arrangement that God made with the people of Israel, the Noahic covenant was a covenant God had established with all nations. The scary
thing and one of the things that we’ll reflect on is that if the Bible describes this as an everlasting covenant, and if God judged the nations of the earth that were in the world during the time of Jeremiah and Isaiah, if God held those nations accountable for their violations of the Noahic covenant, and if this is indeed an eternal covenant than the nations today are just liable to the terms that God set out in that arrangement as well.

You remember that the primary responsibility that is placed on humanity in the Noahic covenant in Genesis 9:5-6, is that there is a restraint placed on bloodshed and violence. The Noahic covenant says that God is putting a new system into place that “whoever sheds man’s blood by man shall his blood be shed.” God is holding the nations on the earth accountable for their violence and their blood shed. So when God pictures the judgment of the earth, when the prophet Isaiah speaks of that in chapter 24:1-5, he says the whole world is swaying and reeling under God’s judgment. Why is God bringing this judgment? Because they have violated the everlasting covenant, and again that doesn’t seem to be the Mosaic Law because that’s a specific law, a specific covenant that God has made with Israel. The everlasting covenant most likely goes back to the arrangement that was established in the days of Noah. In Isaiah 26:19 in that same context, Isaiah says that in the future as God prepares to bring that judgment the earth will disclose its bloodshed. So what specifically is God going to judge the nations for? Their violations of the Noahic covenant.

In Jeremiah 46-51, often the specific reasons why God is judging these particular nations is not always laid out, but the underlying theology of the oracles against the nations I believe is that God is holding these nations accountable for their responsibilities that were established under the Noahic covenant.

In Amos 1-2, which the Lord is roaring in judgment and he goes out like a lion from the city of Zion, the first six judgment oracles there before God turns to Judah in Israel are against the nations that surround Israel and Judah. In that passage the prophet Amos is going to lay out the specific reasons for the judgment
that God is going to bring against these nations. Sometimes it’s because of the violence and atrocities they have committed against Israel and our whole principle of: if you stick your finger in God’s eye, God’s going to react to that. God reacts to the mistreatment and abuse of his people. One of the other things we see in those judgment oracles against the nations, is that they are often held accountable for the atrocities and the violence that they committed against nations other than Israel. So Amos says in chapter 2:1-2 that God is going to judge the king of Moab for his crime of burning the bones of the king of Edom. The judgment, the anger of the Lord, the sentence of God against that king has nothing to do with Israel, it has something to do with the violence that’s been perpetrated against another people, and you see the underlying accountability to the Noahic covenant there.

Habakkuk 2:12 speaks of the judgment that God is going to bring against Babylon and it says, “Woe to Babylon,” and “woe” is a death sentence, death is coming. Babylon is as good as dead. Why? Because it is a city that is built on bloodshed.

The prophet Nahum 3:1, there is going to be this terrible judgment of the city of Nineveh because of its bloodshed. From what we know about the Assyrians in history, they were an incredibly brutal, violent people even by the standards of the ancient Near East. So the Lord is going to hold them accountable for that. The next 2 verses in Nahum 3 picture the army that is going to come into Nineveh and is going to do the same thing to them that they have done to other people: there is prophetic justice here.

So the underlying theology of the oracles against the nations is that these nations are just as responsible, just as accountable to God as Israel is, but for different covenantal reasons. So that’s kind of the underlying theology of all of this.

List of Nations

Let’s note before we get into further explanation of what these oracles are about, let’s note the nations that are specifically referenced in these judgment
oracles that are found in the book of Jeremiah. Chapter 46, the judgment there is
going to be against the nation of Egypt, and the Lord is going to bring them down.
Chapter 47, the Philistines, and they were neighbors of Israel and Judah and they
had been enemies since the time of the Judges. Chapter 48, the Moabites, chapter
the capital city of the Arameans and someone that Israel had been engaged either
in conflict or partnership with throughout their history. In chapter 49:28-33 the
Arab tribes of Kadar and Hazor, not the Hazor in Israel, but the one that appears to
be in Arabia. The Elamites chapter 49:34-39 are again a kingdom that was
hundreds of miles to the east of Mesopotamia, or to Babylon. Then in chapters 50
and 51, the final oracle is against Babylon.

What we notice about this list is that it begins and ends with a superpower
and someone that had been an empire. Egypt, in chapter 46, is not the empire that
it once had been but Israel’s great oppressor in the past, and still a significant
player in what’s going on in the political scene in Jeremiah’s day, at the end
Babylon, chapters 50 and 51. So it’s racketed between these references to these
two superpowers. In between you have these judgment speeches against all of the
nations that are immediately surrounding Israel. It reminds us that no nation is too
great to avoid the judgment, but no nation is too small that God is going to ignore
them either.

When will Judgments Occur

So that’s the list of the nations. When you turn over to Ezekiel and you look
at the nations that are mentioned there – the nations that are listed: Ammon, Moab,
Edom, Elam, Philistia, Tyre, Sidon and Egypt, so with just a couple of differences,
the nations are essentially the same. What do we know and what have we come to
understand about these judgments, as we look at what God is doing in judging
these specific groups of people. Notice that they’re in a specific geographical
location. They’re in the immediate area surrounding Israel. This is an important
thing to understand about these passages. These are judgments as they are
announced on these different nations are judgments that take place primarily in history. These are not judgments that I think are describing for us the great tribulation or final days of the second coming of Christ. These are judgments that are being carried out in the historical circumstances in situations of Jeremiah’s day.

In fact, most of these judgments are going to be carried out by the Babylonian army. In the message of judgment against Egypt, look at what we have here, “The word of the Lord,” chapter 46:1, “that came to Jeremiah the prophet concerning the nations. About Egypt. Concerning the army of Pharaoh Neco, the king of Egypt, which was by the river Euphrates at Carchemish, and which Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon defeated in the fourth year, of Jehoiakim, the son of Josiah.” So when is this judgment going to take place? This judgment is connected to the battle where Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians defeated the Egyptians in 605 BC. That was the battle that established Babylon as the dominant power in the ancient Near East but in the prophetic ministry of Jeremiah, Jeremiah had announced the outcome of that battle before it ever takes place. Look I know what’s going to happen here.

Chapter 46:13 says this: “The word that the Lord spoke to Jeremiah the prophet about the coming of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, to strike the king of Egypt.”

Chapter 46:26, prophet says there, “I will the deliver them [the Egyptians] into the hand of those who seek their life, into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon and his officers.” So at the beginning, middle and end in the oracle against Egypt, who’s the one that carries this judgment out? Nebuchadnezzar. It does not say “In the days of the great tribulations, I will hand them into the hands of the anti-Christ.” This is a historical judgment that happened hundreds of years even before the time of the coming of Jesus.

We have a judgment speech against the tribe if Kedar, this Arab group in chapter 49:30, and notice what it says there in terms of judgment, when is it going
to happen, when is this judgment going to be carried out. It says in verse 30
“Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon has made a plan against you and formed a
purpose against you.” How is the judgment of Kedar going to happen? Is this,
again, the battle of Armageddon or the second coming? No, it’s the judgments that
were carried out in Jeremiah’s day that were part of the historical situation.

So one of the things that often happens in popular treatments of Old
Testament prophesy, is that we often go to the Old Testament prophets trying to
explore things about contemporary events or what’s going to happen in the last
days before the second coming of Jesus. Often we’re looking for specific
references, was this event promised, is this event in Scripture, is this showing us
that the end is near? These passages are not describing the end times. They are
describing things that actually occurred in history.

Now there are parallels and patterns here that will definitely be reflected
again in the judgments that are being carried out in the end times, and we’re going
to talk more about that. It really is a faulty hermeneutics to go to these passages
and to try and find these specific references either to contemporary political
events, or to things that are going to happen in the future and we recurrently see
popular treatments of prophesy doing this. And often, it’s a good way to sell a
book or to make some videos that are going to be popular, or to gain an audience,
but it’s really not valid hermeneutics. You have to look at the historical context
and setting of the passage. There’s a very popular book called *The Harbinger* that
tries to show that the judgment of America is prophesied in Isaiah 9 and 10. But
when I look at the context of Isaiah 9 and 10, it’s talking about Israel and Judah in
Isaiah’s day 800 years before the time of Jesus; it’s not talking about 20th century
or 21st century America. So these are not judgments that will fall in the last days.
These are judgments that are falling and being carried out in Jeremiah’s day, in the
historical setting of that time.

Day of the Lord: Near and Far

Now the judgment of Egypt is described in Jeremiah 46:10: “That day is
the day of the Lord, God of hosts, a day of vengeance, where God will avenge himself on his foes.” And again, when we hear “day of the Lord” we again are drawn to the end times, the battle of Armageddon, and that kind of context. Remember the way that “day of the Lord” is used in the prophets it can refer to something that is either near or far. All of the individual judgments that God brought against Israel and Judah, and against these foreign nations that are the “day of the Lord.” The “day of the Lord” is when God comes down to defeat his enemies. The Babylonian invasion – that is the “day of the Lord” for the people of Judah. When Nebuchadnezzar defeated the Egyptian army at Carchemish, Jeremiah says that was the “day of the Lord” for Egypt.

Now sometimes in the prophets, it’s really difficult to tell when are they talking about the “day of the Lord” that’s near and the “day of the Lord” that is far. But simply saying “day of the Lord” here does not simply mean this is an eschatological passage. Again, we’re talking about judgments that take place in history.

Zephaniah had said “the day of the Lord is near,” he’s talking about the invasion of Babylon. So, I think it’s an important hermeneutical principle to establish here and I hope that that doesn’t disappoint us here thinking, “I was hoping we’d learn some secrets about biblical prophesy here.”

Why the Nations are Judged: Hubris

One of the other things that we learn in this section is that it’s important for us to reflect on why is God going to judge these particular nations. I think there are a couple of ideas that come out. Again, as I read these many times, Jeremiah is simply going to announce the thing that is coming and it does not give a clear explanation why. You almost have to have an understanding of the history that lies behind all this. But the one thing that I do see come up again and again is that God is going to primarily judge these nations for their hubris and their pride. God has designed this world to be one where he is recognized as King, where he is the one who is honored and glorified and given dominion and honor. What we have
running throughout Scripture though is that humanity is in rebellion against that kingship. Humanity refuses to give God the honor that he deserves. Many times they’ve established their own counter-kingdom, where they are trying the supplant that and establish their own glory. Man’s pride leads him to the point where he even designs and devises his own gods. That’s pride. That’s putting your trust in human resources rather than in God. So yes, the Lord is going to judge even the gods of these nations, but primarily, he’s going to judge them for their hubris and pride that is the foundation and the basis for their idolatry.

So the Lord’s going to say to the Egyptians, and here’s the descriptions for the pride of the Egyptians, “Who is like this? Rising like the Nile? Like rivers whose waters surge? Egypt rises like the Nile, like rivers whose waters surge. And he has said I will rise and I will cover the earth and I will destroy the cities and their inhabitants.” A really effective image here. Egypt views itself like the Nile that flooded its banks every year. Egypt says, in my strength and in my might with my armies I am going to flow throughout the earth, I am going to overwhelm them. The Lord says you are going to find out the limitations of your armies and the limitations of your strength because God is going to judge your pride.

Against the Moabites in Jeremiah 48:7, and as we think about the nations of today, if God is judging these ancient nations on the basis of their hubris and their pride, think of the accountability that gives to us today. But God says about Moab, “For because you have trusted in your works and in your treasures, you shall also be taken; and Chemosh your god shall also go into exile with his priest and his officials.”

So is there any relevance at all to us today about a nation coming under God’s judgment because of their pride over their wealth and their treasures? Just to reflect, there’s nothing in the Old Testament prophets that’s relevant to us today, right? No nation ever... No, this is why all of this really matters. In the same way God judged the pride of Egypt, and its imperial power; in the same way God even judged a smaller nation like Moab that we probably wouldn’t even pay
attention to, God doesn’t ignore their pride and their hubris that’s caused them to devise their own gods and to put their trust into their own resources.

The Lord says about Moab, in 48:26, “Make him drunk,” talking about the judgment that’s going to come on Moab, “because he has magnified himself against the Lord, so that Moab shall wallow in his vomit, and he too shall be held in derision.” So you’re going to exalt yourself against the Lord, you’re going to vaunt yourself up, you’re going to glorify yourself and your pride and your accomplishments? The Lord will humiliate you by causing you to wallow in your vomit as you experience this devastating judgment that he’s going to bring against you. So the recurring thing that’s going to be said about these enemies is that the Lord is going to judge them for their pride.

Judgment on the Nations for the Mistreatment of Israel

One of the other things that’s going to bring judgment on these nations is their mistreatment of the people of Israel. We were just looking at the Moabites; they are going to be judged for their mistreatment of Israel. And it says this in 48:27, “Was not Israel a derision to you? Was he found among thieves, that whenever you spoke of him you wagged your head?” You mocked Israel during the time that they were experiencing a national crisis. The Lord is going to bring the same thing against you. The tables are going to be turned in the very near future. The Ammonites, again, one of Israel’s neighbors to the east of them, across the Jordan: “Concerning the Ammonites. Thus says the Lord: “Has Israel no sons? Has he no heir?” Or what about Israel’s land? Here’s the point, why then has Milcom, which was the god of the Ammonites, why has he dispossessed Gad? Or did the people of Israel not have descendants to pass their land on to? Is that why you and your gods invaded the land of Israel and took away their territory that belonged to the tribe of Gad? And you had your people settle in its cities. They had stolen territory from the Northern Kingdom of Israel and this went back to the Assyrian crisis before the time of Jeremiah. Here’s what the Lord says, “Therefore, behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I cause the
battle cry to be heard” and there’s going to be a devastation of the Ammonites.”

Edomites

One of the people that are judged in this section are the Edomites. They are the descendants of Esau. They had been rivals of Israel throughout their history. Jeremiah doesn’t really talk about the reasons for the judgment of Edom, but when you go and read the book of Obadiah, one of the things that the prophet Obadiah brings up is that the Edomites actually joined forces with the Babylonians as they were invading the land of Judah. Their troops were mercenaries that fought against Judah with the Babylonians as they were invading Israel, or Jerusalem. Edom to the south had used the Babylonian invasion as an opportunity to take territory away from Judah, which is why there is this angry message of judgment against them. “Whoever touches God’s people is actually touching the apple of God’s eye.” So God is going to bring judgment against them.

Pride

So in terms of lasting theological principle, or lasting message that comes out of this, is it’s a judgment against a group of people that lived a long time ago in lands, in nations, that if we pulled out a biblical atlas, some of us might have a difficult time finding them. But the lasting theological principle that emerges from this is that God is ultimately going to judge every form of human pride. At an individual level, the pride of an individual who says “I can live independently of God, I don’t need him.” It doesn’t matter if you’re an atheist or a theist, if you live pretending that you don’t need God, then practically you are an atheist. That kind of pride will bring you under God’s judgment. But nations that have been lifted up in pride because of their wealth or their accomplishments or their history or their heritage or their military accomplishments. God ultimately is going to bring all of that down. The final judgment that God will execute both on the nations and the individuals will be a judgment that puts an end to all forms of human pride.
Now remember, the day of the Lord that’s being described in Jeremiah 46-51 is the day of the Lord that God has in store for specific nations. Isaiah 2 is talking more of the day of the Lord where God is going to bring judgment against the entire earth. Here is what that judgment is going to be all about, Isaiah 2:11 says, “The haughty looks of man shall be brought low, and the lofty pride of men shall be humbled, and the Lord alone will be exalted in that day. For the Lord of hosts has a day against all that is proud and is lofty, against all that is lifted up—and it will be brought low.” So at the end of this, it says, “Stop regarding man in whose nostrils is breath, for what account is he?”

So this message that we begin to look at this and say “These oracles, what do they have to do with us? They’re about nations that lived a long time ago, why should we care about this?” The same pride that brought God’s judgment against them, is, ultimately, the reason that God will judge all nations in the future. It is the reason why God is actively in the process of judging nations today in the same way that he did in the days of Jeremiah. God is going to put an end to all forms of human pride. So I have to look at this and say “Maybe there are things in these passages that are relevant,” even if these are judgments that were carried out against people a long time ago. Maybe these judgments are relevant to us because God hates human pride. God ultimately in his righteousness and in his justice brings down nations that are lifted up in pride and that shake their fist in God’s face. I think we see that kind of pride in our country. Going back to that quote from Billy Graham, “If God doesn’t judge America, he’ll have to apologize to Sodom and Gomorrah,” and, in light of Jeremiah, to Edom and to Moab, and to the Philistines, and to the Egyptians, and to Babylon because we’re lifted up by the same kind of pride.

Common Mistakes when Interpreting Biblical Prophecy

Now, we already mentioned the fact that in popular treatments of prophecy, we often try to find references to contemporary events. A question that people recurrently ask me about the Prophets: “Is the United States mentioned in biblical
prophecy? Can you find any verses?” “Is there anything about the war in Iraq or Afghanistan?” “Was 9/11 predicted by the biblical prophets?” “Do you know who the Antichrist is?” “Can you give us a date for the Second Coming?” And when I answer “No, I don’t know any of those questions,” they wonder, “And you teach the Prophets? You need to go back to Prophecy U, and learn some things!”

I have looked long and searched hard throughout the Prophets. I don’t see any references to the United States in biblical prophecy. I have not found any references, even in the apocalyptic imagery of the book of Revelation, to the United States.

There’s a simple hermeneutical rule that we need to remember: All of the Bible is for us, but not all the Bible is about us. So these messages they are for us. They are messages that teach and instruct us, but they’re not about us. They’re about these nations that lived a long time ago. But here’s what they teach us: the judgments that God brought then are merely a preview of the judgments that God will continue to execute throughout history, and that God will ultimately bring against all people at the end of history.

Prophecy and America

Another mistake that we often make with biblical prophecy as Americans is taking the promises or things about Israel, and applying them to our own country. We are a Christian nation, we have a lot of Christians and a lot of churches here-so, we’re God’s chosen people; we are a holy nation. As things continue to progress in our day, we realize how far we are from that. But I think we understand, we are not God’s chosen people. God is not working through any nation today in the way he was through ancient Israel in the old economy, not even the modern state of Israel. God’s people are not a national entity anymore. They are the church that’s made up of people from every tribe and nation. So, another mistake we often make is taking prophecies that are given to Israel, and applying them to the United States.

God gives a promise to Israel in 2 Chronicles 7:14, “If my people, which
are called by my name, will humble themselves and call upon me, confess their sin and turn to me, I will heal their land.” The primary application for that passage today is not the United States, it’s to God’s people, the church. If they will humble themselves God will bless them. But there’s not a guarantee for us as Christians in America that God is specifically going to heal our land.

Where do we find the United States in biblical prophecy? It’s not in specific passages; it’s not in specific promises or messages that are given to Israel. I think if we want to find the United States, in a general way, the place that we go are the oracles against the nations. Particularly these powerful and these great empires like Egypt, Babylon and Assyria, and in the ways that our nation has defied God or demonstrated its pride and rebellion against God in the same way that God judged those nations and for the same reasons that God judged them; God will judge us as well.

A writer named Julie Woods had an interesting article about the Minor Prophets several years ago, Assyria as the West, and thinking about the judgment speeches of Nahum and how they apply to us in the Western World to an imperial nation like America. It doesn’t mean that we simply make an equation between Assyria and America, and we’re bad, and we need to get rid of our armies, that’s not the point. But as we look at the reasons why God has brought judgment against those nations in the past, we are reminded that God will do the same thing to our nation at some point in the future. It’s inevitable. If there is not a Great Awakening that takes place in the future, that judgment may be right around the corner; we are living in that kind of society. But the same reasons God judged those people then, are why God has judged nations throughout history, and why God would ultimately judge us. So I don’t go to the book of Nahum and say America equals Assyria, but I go there and see in many of the reasons God judged those proud and defiant empires in the past, God is going to judge us in the future. If we take an honest assessment of the United States of America, you know, we may not say, “The United States equals Syria” or, “The United States equals
Babylon.” But, like Peter Lindert says in his book, we are probably somewhere between Babel and Beast. We’re somewhere between that city that defied themselves as God in Genesis chapter 11, and the Beast at the end of the book of Revelation who declares war on the people of God. We’re somewhere in between there, and because of that, God’s judgment will ultimately fall on us.

The nations that were judged then become a paradigm of God’s judgment in the future. One of these nations that recurrently comes up is the nation of Edom, the descendants of Esau. When I read prophetic text in the book of Isaiah that are talking about the Kingdom of God, or the last days, the judgment of God’s enemies often focuses on that tiny little nation. Isaiah 34, God is going to judge Edom, and then the Kingdom comes. God is going to judge Edom, Ezekiel chapter 35, and then the restoration of Israel comes. Isaiah chapter 63, the Lord is a warrior marching back from battle, coming back from Bozrah which is in the land of Edom. Now, that doesn’t mean God’s got a bull’s-eye painted on the people living where the ancient Edomites do. But what it does mean is that Edom, as the enemy of God and of God’s people, is a paradigm of the nations that will be judged in the future. The Old Testament prophets remind us of the reality of divine judgment, both for us as individuals, but ultimately for nations as well.

Back during the days of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln talking about why he believed that the war happened said in part that he believed that divine justice and divine retribution were part of that. He said: “Every drop of blood drawn by the lash shall be paid for, or paid with-another that is drawn by the sword.” A historian by the name of Steven Keillor, in his book God’s Judgment, does an excellent job talking about this. He said we’ve come to a place as a society where we no longer believe, either because of our secularism, or our technology, so that God is pushed to the margins. Our different political ideologies, we’ve lost this ideal that God can judge and that God does judge nations. The Old Testament prophets and their oracles take us back to the fact that if God judged the nations then for their violations of the Noahic Covenant, then God will judge us. When we
steal other people’s land, we will experience judgment for that. When we murder unborn children by the millions every decade, God holds us accountable. This idea of the Noahic Covenant seems to be: The blood meter is running. But God, both with individual nations, and the world as a whole, eventually has had enough, and judgment falls.

So to close us out: Yes, we’re looking at a section that deals with judgments that happened in history, but they are reminder to us, both as individuals and people of various nations, that God’s judgment will ultimately come on us as well. God’s judgment is a reality, and even if we ignore it or pretend it doesn’t exist, it’s real, and it’s something that the prophets remind us we definitely have to take account of and face up to. Amos said, “Prepare to meet your God.” Both at an individual and national level, that’s something that we need to be more aware of in the culture that we live in.

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