

Politics and Prophecy (Jeremiah 27:1-28:17)



Time: Zedekiah's 4th year ~594-593BC (c.f. 28:1). The events recorded may have happened sometime after a failed coup attempt against Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon.

Content: Ch27 deals with Jeremiah's warning against Zedekiah's plan to form an international coalition to resist Nebuchadnezzar. Ch28 deals with Jeremiah's confrontation with Hananiah, the false prophet (28:1-17)

A. History of Masada

1. Masada was a fortress Herod the Great built for himself to withstand any enemy forces including Jewish revolt. The cisterns carved inside could hold 1.5 million tons of water and enough food to last 5 years. Herod died within 2 years of building this place for himself. In 66AD Jews revolted against Rome and tried to secure independence. When Roman soldiers destroyed Jerusalem in 70AD, some Jews retreated to Masada to hold out against the Romans. General Flavius surrounded this fortress with 12,000 men against only 967 Jews inside. This place was impregnable, so the Romans laid siege to the fortress so that literally no man could come in and out.

The day before the Jewish defense fell, their leader Eliezer ben Yair made a powerful speech to the Jews inside - 'honourable death by suicide.' When the Romans finally got to the top of Masada, they were met by silent dead bodies lying neatly together by the families with their throats cut. Today when the Israeli army recruits cadets, they are taken to Masada. They swear with determination, '*Masada shall not fall again.*'

2. The appeal of Eliezer was for courage over cowardice, to choose death over slavery. But Eliezer could not declare, '**Thus saith the Lord.**' He said, '**I think it is God.**' The sad truth is God was not with their decision for mass suicide. Eliezer's inspirational and persuasive speech moved the Jews to cut their children's and wife's throat, but it was not the word of the Lord. God has never told anyone to commit suicide. It was deeply appealing and even 'heroic', but it was not from the Spirit of God.

Jeremiah faced a similar situation with Babylonian invasion, and he prophesied, '*Thus saith the Lord. Surrender and choose slavery. Why should you die?*'

B. Historical Background (594-593BC)

1. By now Judah was a tiny declining nation. In the east was the growing power of Babylon. In the west Egypt's power was declining. To the south were Edom, Ammon, and Moab. To the North were Tyre and Sidon. In the battle of Carchemish (605BC), Babylonians dealt a decisive blow to the Egyptian army, and Nebuchadnezzar firmly established his supremacy over the middle east. 4 years before (597BC) Babylon had invaded Judah and taken away the cream of the society, and left the poor unskilled population to look after Jerusalem under a weak puppet king Zedekiah in place of Jeconiah.

Zedekiah was not a man of principle but expediency. Instead of listening to God's prophetic word through Jeremiah, he started planning political moves on two fronts:

(i) He sent ambassadors to Edom, Ammon, Moab, Tyre and Sidon to form a new power block, 'The United States of Middle East' against the Babylonians. They had been treaty partners in the past with David and Solomon (c.f. 23 Sam 8:11-12; 1 Kings 5; 7:13-47). The ambassadors from the five nations came to Jerusalem to hold the 'Mediterranean Alliance' conference.

(ii) Zedekiah also wanted to make a fresh alliance with Egypt as a backup for the Mediterranean Alliance against the Babylonians.

2. At this point, God sent Jeremiah to their conference and warned them that their political alliance will blow up in their face. All of them will fall one by one because God was with Nebuchadnezzar for three generations to come, Nebuchadnezzar, and his son Evilmerodach and his grandson Belshazzar (27:6 C.f. Dan 5:1, 30).

Jeremiah has been now preaching to them for 32-33 years, and they did not listen to him. How was he going to get through to them? God told Jeremiah to make a wooden yoke and put it around his neck and

prophecy. Can you imagine Jeremiah wearing this *half-filled yoke as a lopsided burden* walking through the streets of Jerusalem and preaching? Desperate times require desperate measures. This was his 3rd 'prophetic acts' after the 'linen sash prophecy' (underwear saga, 13:1-11) and the 'broken flask prophecy' (potter's house, 19:1-13; c.f. Isa. 20).

C. To the Foreign Ambassadors

Jeremiah warned the alliance nations.

1. He prophesied to the ambassadors from the five neighbouring nations, *'Your Alliance will certainly fail because God who has made the earth and He decides the national boundaries. God has committed your land under His servant Nebuchadnezzar.'* (27:5-11; C.f. Acts 17; Ps 22). If you don't want to be expelled from your land (like Judah would be), do not rebel against Nebuchadnezzar.
2. Then Jeremiah sent a yoke to each of the national representatives to take it home as a reminder to stay submissive to Babylon.
3. Finally, Jeremiah warned them not to listen to their 'pagan prophets', the diviners, dreamers, soothsayers, or sorcerers. Their lies will destroy your future. Put yourselves under the 'Babylonian yoke' and choose life, not death.

D. To King Zedekiah

1. Then Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, *'Abandon your idea of political alliance.'* Jeremiah said, *'You are a stiff-necked people. Come, bring your stiff necks under the yoke of Babylon, and learn to serve him and live! Why should you die, you and your people?'* (27:12-13) Choose 'slavery' and 'life' over 'bravery' and 'death'.
2. Jeremiah kept warning, *'Do not listen to the lies of the false prophets.'* ('lie' x4 in 27:10, 14, 15, 16)

E. To the Priests and the People

It wasn't only the political leaders who were leading their people astray. The religious leaders were fuelling them with their false prophecies. Jeremiah had to fight both the political leaders and religious leaders.

1. The false prophets prophesied, *'Behold, the vessels of the LORD's house will now shortly be brought back from Babylon.'* (27:16). The priests seem more concerned about the vessels of the temple than the people who were taken away.

Jeremiah told the priests and the people, *'Do not listen to this lie. I prophesy to you that these vessels are not coming back soon. In fact, even the two large bronze pillars, and the bronze Sea, the carts and the remaining vessels the Babylonians have left behind will all be taken to Babylon and there the temple treasures will remain until the LORD brings back the people of exile to this land.'* (27:16-22).

The false prophets were supporting nationalism, prophesying 'good news', 'God is with us and we will soon have the national independence.' Jeremiah prophesied 'bad news', 'The only way forward is to accept the exile for 70 years. Which news would you believe?

Jeremiah's words have been fulfilled exactly. Six years later the two bronze pillars the pride of the temple were taken to Babylon (2 Kings 25:13-17; Dan 1:1-2) and all the treasures of the temple remained in Babylon until the Lord brought His people back to their land 70 years later (Ezra 1:7-11).

2. One particular prophet, Hananiah, came to Jerusalem and vehemently opposed Jeremiah. He was from Gibeon, 5 miles northwest of Jerusalem, close to Anathoth, Jeremiah's hometown. 'Hananiah' means 'YHWH is gracious',

(i) Hananiah prophesied boldly in the same temple courtyard (27:16) that within two years the exile will end, and the temple vessels would be returned. The Lord will also bring Jeconiah back to Jerusalem. This was in direct opposition to Jeremiah's prophecy that Jeconiah will die in exile (28:2-4 c.f. 22:24-27). Hananiah's bold prediction pinpointing the specific time frame - two years - bolstered the people's confidence (C.f. 25:11-12; 29:10).

(ii) Jeremiah replied, *'Amen brother. I really hope you are right. But have you noticed that all the prophets of the Lord before you and I have prophesied war, disaster and pestilence against this city? Why do you think it is?'* (28:5-9)

(iii) Hananiah was so incensed that he took the yoke off Jeremiah and smashed it into pieces, and prophesied, *'Thus the Lord: 'Even so I will break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon from the neck of all nations within the space of two full years.'* (28:10-11) This was Hananiah's 'prophetic act' in full and direct opposition to Jeremiah's prophetic act! Jeremiah just quietly walked away.

(iv) Later on, God spoke to Jeremiah that in place of the wooden yoke Hananiah broke, He would bring an iron yoke. Jeremiah prophesied God's judgement upon Hananiah in the 5th month, *'The Lord will remove you from the face of the earth this year,'* (28:16) because he taught the people to rebel against the LORD. Hananiah died in the 7th month. Hananiah who prophesied 'deliverance' within 2 years died within 2 months (c.f. Deut 18:20-22).

God granted Hananiah two months to repent. Jeremiah already warned the prophets previously not to prophesy falsely in His name (Jer. 23:38-40). At last, the consequences of the false prophecies 'caught up' with them. It was a stark lesson for everyone not to take the Lord's name in vain

F. Lessons

1. Lesson 1: God's sovereignty – It is God who settles the fate of the nations and individuals. It is God who draws the world map, and it is God who decides when we die and where we go when we die. The prophetic scriptures foretell where history is going. So, we can be confident in God's control of history and our individual lives.
2. Lesson 2: Discerning times – Jesus said, *'You can forecast the weather patterns, but you can't see the spiritual condition at all! This is hypocrisy.'* These are challenging words. Would you have listened to Jeremiah or Hananiah? Are you able to discern the true prophetic words from the false? Jeremiah got closely involved in national and international issues despite intense persecution. Church in the last 100 years has been reluctant to engage in societal issues, and the foundation of our society steadily eroded from the biblical principles. So how do we strike the right balance between religion and politics?

Extreme view 1: Politics is a dirty business. Leave it to the politicians. We just preach the kingdom of God and get out of this world as fast as we can. It has been 70 years since WWII. Is the free world about to be chastised under 'socialism' and 'communism' for a time? Tension is mounting on all fronts - abortion, destruction of family values, gender confusion - even in the Australian government.

Extreme view 2: Some identify their faith with a particular political party and 'nationalism'. This approach has always been a disaster for the church. When Christianity became the 'state religion' in the Roman empire, and it brought the dark ages for the next millennium. The power abuse of those days came from the merging of 'church' and 'state', and 'religion' and 'politics'. When the two spheres merge into one it chokes the prophetic voice. There is no check and balance. Without clear prophetic voices, we cannot effectively engage in world events with a firm spiritual posture. That is why the army of God rises out of the Bride of Christ. Intimacy with God leads to prophetic clarity, which releases authority in prayer and spiritual governance.

3. Lesson 3: Our submission – Jeremiah's yoke-bearing had a double meaning. (i) It was a visual aid for the people, representing the yoke of Babylon which cannot be resisted by Judah. So, they better bend their neck, submit and live. (ii) Jeremiah was willing to bear God's yoke if it came from the Lord. His prophetic act said, *'If you do not accept the yoke of God, then you will have to wear the yoke of Babylon.'* If you don't accept the yoke of the Lord, you will have to accept man's yoke.

Jesus said, *'Woe to you Chorazin, Bethsaida, Capernaum. For if the mighty works that were done in you were done in Sodom and Gomorrah they would still be here.'* (Those cities are gone today.) Then Jesus said to the people, *'Come unto Me, and learn from Me for I am meek, and you will find rest. My yoke is easy, and My burden is light.'*

Paul was proud to say, 'I am Christ's slave,' because in submission to Jesus, you will find true rest.