

Handout: Jeremiah Lesson 17

If your fellow Hebrew, man or woman, sells himself to you, he can serve you for six years. In the seventh year you must set him free, and in setting him free you must not let him go empty handed. By way of present, you will load his shoulders with things from your flock, from your threshing-floor and from your winepress; as Yahweh your God has blessed you, so you must give to him. Remember that you were once a slave in Egypt and that Yahweh your God redeemed you; that is why I am giving you this order today.

Deuteronomy 15:12-13

Chapter 34 can be divided into three oracles:

- Oracle #1 declares the fate of Jerusalem and King Zedekiah (verses 2-5).
- Oracle #2 reaffirms the law concerning the liberation of Hebrew slaves in Exodus 21:2-6; Leviticus 25:39-43 and Deuteronomy 15:12-13 (verses 13-16).
- Oracle #3 is a judgment oracle against the Jerusalemites for their failure to grant freedom to Hebrew slaves that they swore to liberate in Yahweh's name (verses 17-22).

Between Oracles 1 and 2 is the episode of Zedekiah's covenant ceremony with the Jerusalemites in which they agreed on oath to liberate all Hebrew slaves.

In 34:8-10, King Zedekiah asks the people of Jerusalem to make a covenant promise to liberate their slaves. There are two possible reasons:

1. Zedekiah's conscience bothered him concerning the failure to keep God's commandments concerning the liberation of Hebrew slaves.
2. It was a political move by Zedekiah to orchestrate an increase in the number of fighting men against the Babylonians within the city. If a large number of slaves within the city remained in slavery, the Babylonians might seem more like liberators than the enemy, and the slaves might become a "fifth column" within the city, working for the enemy and a danger to their owners.

Chapter 35 takes place near the end of the reign of King Jehoiakim (reigned 609-598 BC). He was the brother of King Zedekiah, Judah's last Davidic king. The Babylonians deposed Jehoiakim's son and placed Zedekiah on the throne of Judah in his place (2 Kng 24:17). The chapter can be divided into three oracles:

- Oracle #1 condemns the Judahites and Jerusalemites for their disloyalty (verses 13-16).
- Oracle #2 is a judgment oracle against the Judahites and Jerusalemites (verse 17).
- Oracle #3 is a divine blessing for the nomadic clan of the Rechabites (verses 18-19).

The events recorded in Chapter 35, concerning an example of the earlier faithfulness of the Rechabites, displayed within the Temple complex, are placed after Chapter 34 to give a contrast between the loyalty of the Rechabites and the disloyalty of the Jerusalemites who swore an oath within the Temple which they broke. Jeremiah 35:11-19 contain oracles for the obedient and the disobedient.

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35:17 ~ Yahweh says, “*I spoke to them and they would not listen, called to them and they would not answer*” (it is an accusation of covenant failure throughout Israel’s history; see for example: Is 6:9-10; Jer 5:21; Mt 13:14-15; Mk 4:12; Jn 12:40; Acts 28:26-27).

The events in Chapter 36 took place between 605-604 BC. The “fourth year of the reign of Jehoiakim” (36:1), who ruled from 609-598 BC, is calculated by Biblical scholars to be 605 BC. It is a date that brought far-reaching consequences in the ancient Near East:

- It was the first year of Nebuchadnezzar’s reign as king of Babylon.
- It was the year the Babylonians defeated the Egyptians and Assyrians at Carchemish and then delivered another defeat to the Assyrian Empire at Hamath, making Babylon the region’s superpower.
- It was the year, King Jehoiakim capitulated to the Babylonians and agreed to become Nebuchadnezzar’s vassal king of Judah (2 Kng 24:1).
- It was the year Jeremiah received oracles against the nations (Chapter 25), delivering specific judgment for Egypt (Jer 46:2-26).
- It was the year the king and chief priests barred Jeremiah from entering the Temple and when he received a divine word to put into writing all oracles and other utterances made over the years (Jer 36:1-2).

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