

Jer. 37, The Imprisonment of Jeremiah, Part 1
January 9, 1991
H. Van Dyke Parunak

Overview

1. Nobody likes bad news. We saw in the last chapter how Jehoiakim reacted to it, though his nobles inclined to take Jer's position. In these two chapters, we have a parallel situation. Again, Jer presents an unpopular message. Again, the king and his nobles differ in their reaction. This time, though, it is the king who favors Jer, and the nobles who oppose him. You might think this would be a better situation for Jer, but the king is so much a pawn of his nobles that the real picture with which we are left is one of a spineless king who offers no leadership to his nation.
2. Lessons to watch for as we study:
 - a) This week:
 - 1) From Jeremiah: The boldness required of God's prophets.
 - 2) From the princes: The deceitfulness of position and riches.
 - b) Next week:
 - 1) From Zedekiah: The importance of a leader who can lead.
 - 2) From Ebedmelech: Who your friends are: not many wise, not many mighty, not many noble...
3. Structure:
 - a) 37:1-2 provides the link from Jehoiakim to Zedekiah.
 - b) 37:3-10 presents the revelation from God to which king and princes are reacting throughout the chapter (like the scroll in ch. 36).
 - c) 37:11-38:28 gives the story in four acts, each concluding with Jer in jail: 37:16, 21; 38:13, 28. In the first and third acts, we see the animosity of the princes. In the second and fourth, Jer speaks directly with the king. The tension between the princes, who hate him, and the king, who has a fearful respect of him, emerges in his different places of incarceration.
 - 1) 37:16, the princes land him in a cistern-house, perhaps a small shed over the mouth of the cistern to keep things from falling in it.
 - 2) 37:21, the king liberates him to the court of the prison, which is in the king's own house (32:2), a much more comfortable situation.
 - 3) 38:13, the princes get him uncomfortable again. Not just the cistern shed, but now in the cistern itself.
 - 4) 38:28, the king once again returns him to the court of the prison.

A. 37:1-2, The Setting

By way of transition from the last chapter, the writer shows us the relation between the king whom we studied last week and this week's "hero." Notice

1. his *descent*, like J'kim a son of Josiah. Neb. set him up as a puppet, in place of J'kim's son Jeconiah. We will see just how much of a puppet he was. Anybody could pull his strings.
2. his *defect*. He will not heed the word of the Lord.

B. **37:3-10, The Initial Revelation**

Zed sends messengers to ask Jer to "Pray for us." He did this once before, in 21:1,2.

1. The Circumstances

- a) 4, Jer is at liberty; not yet in prison. Perhaps that's why the king had to send messengers. But why not just send for Jer? Certainly the king could summon any of his subjects, and Jer would be eager to preach to him. In fact, he has previously come to the king uninvited to bring God's word (e.g., 34:2). We'll see the real reason in a moment. For now, the writer calls our attention to the change in Jer's life that is about to take place.
- b) 5, Jerusalem is also enjoying some relief. Egypt has brought its army up, perhaps in response to a call for help from Judah, and Neb has lifted the siege for a few months. Everyone is hopeful that in fact this is the end of the problem.

2. The Motive

- a) Note Zephaniah's presence here; he was also part of the delegation in 21:1,2, the only other time that the king sent people to ask Jer to pray for him.
- b) Zephaniah's duty is outlined in 29:25,26. The priests have already managed to put Jer in the stocks for a night (20:2); now they are trying to carry out the other half of Shemaiah's request and get a basis for putting him in prison.
- c) This, I think, is the real reason that the king does not summon Jer for an audience. This is not just or even primarily a request by the king for information. It is a test of Jer by the temple hierarchy. Indeed, the king doesn't like his message at all (32:2-5), but at least seems to recognize him as a prophet of God. The temple takes the lead in the opposition.
- d) The point of the request: Jer, now that you see that Neb has withdrawn, wouldn't you like to agree with the official temple prophets that God really is going to spare the city?

3. Jer's response

- a) 7-8, The Facts.
Neb will drive off Pharaoh, and then return and finish off Jerusalem.

b) 9-10, The Advice.
Don't conclude that you're off the hook. The Bible uses two vivid pictures to show the strength of Babylon and the weakness of Egypt.

- 1) Babylon will destroy you even under the worst of circumstances. Even if every man of the Babylonian army were wounded and lying in his tent, they would still rise up like zombies and destroy the city.
- 2) It is useless to trust in the aid of Egypt. Ezek makes this point to the captives already in Babylon, at this same time, in Ezek. 29:6, when he says that the Egyptians "have been a staff of reed to the house of Israel. When they took hold of thee by thy hand, thou didst break, and rend all their shoulder: and when they leaned upon thee, thou brakest, and madest all their loins to be at a stand." Relying on Egypt for protection against Babylon is like trying to use a cattail as a walking stick on a rough hike. It just won't hold up.

4. *Application*: Note Jer's boldness.

- a) He knows that people are putting pressure on Zephaniah to silence him (29:29).
- b) He has already spent a night in the stocks through the zeal of the priestly clique.
- c) Given Neb's departure from the city, it would be easy to join those who preach peace. A good time to recant of his error.
- d) Yet he persists in presenting the message God has given him.

C. 37:11-16, First Act: Jer Arrested by the Princes

1. 11-13, The Setting

During the first part of the siege, no one has been able to enter or leave the city. Now that the Babylonians have withdrawn, Jer wants to go to his home town of Anathoth to tend to some family business. "separate himself thence" is obscure, but probably refers to some division of property, perhaps related to the deal that Hananiah later comes to offer him once he is imprisoned.

2. 13-14, The Arrest

- a) We don't know who Irijah is or what his rank means. But it is interesting to speculate that his grandfather might be the false prophet with whom Jer had his showdown in ch. 28. He seems to be on the look-out for Jer, has an accusation ready against him, and won't listen to any excuses.
- b) Note the accusation: that Jer is leaving the city in order to desert to the Babylonians. The first time Zed sent a delegation to him, this was exactly what he urged the people to do (21:9). That is, he is advocating surrender, a treasonous position to take in time of war. But at this point

he is being arrested, not for preaching surrender, but for doing it himself.

3. 15-16, Sentencing and Punishment

There is no trial. Irijah takes him to the "princes," the nobles of the city, who vent their anger on him by beating him and detaining him in the cistern shed, which ends the first act.

Jer is imprisoned here "for many days," perhaps long enough for the Babylonians to return, which may be what stimulates the King's question to him in the next act.

4. *Application*: Why are the princes so opposed to him and his message? To the common people it makes little difference whether they are peasants under a Babylonian puppet or under Neb himself. But a noble is only a noble in his own society. His only hope of retaining his prestige and prosperity is in outlasting Neb. If the defenders all defect, as Jer has been preaching, the city will fall, and they will lose their position. Thus it is the deceitfulness of their own riches that blinds them to God's warnings, their only real hope of surviving at all.

D. **37:17-21, Second Act: Zed's First Audience with Jer**

Up until now Zed has let his priests do all the questioning. Finally the prospect of destruction has become so strong that he must know for himself, and so he summons Jer. Both here and in his second audience at the end of ch.38, he does it in secret (v.17); he is afraid to let the nobles know that he is consulting this heretic prophet. Their conversation has two parts. Jer answers Zed's question, and Zed provides some protection to Jer.

1. 17, Zed's Question

A short question, and a short answer, probably stimulated by the return of the Babylonians, who have chased away the Egyptians and returned to the city. Has God said anything? Yes--you're going to be delivered into the hand of Neb. Just what he has been saying all along (e.g., 34:3).

There are two *applications* for us in this.

- a) How ridiculous Zed looks to us here, asking for a word from the Lord when he has over and over again rejected that same word. But are we sometimes like Zed, neglecting the precepts of Scripture when times are comfortable, only to come running to him in time of trouble and asking for what we have previously spurned?
- b) Notice again the boldness of Jer. Recall that earlier, in ch. 32, we had a glimpse of this imprisonment, recognizing that Zed approves of it because he does not like this message of defeat (32:2-5). Jer is about to ask the king for a better situation; you would think he might try to soften his words to the king. But no, he steadfastly delivers the message that God has given him.

2. 18-21, Jer's Request

Conditions are so harsh in the cistern shed that he fears for his life. No doubt he is not being fed; he may suffer from exposure as well.

- a) He pleads his innocence of any crime.
- b) He points out that the prophets to whom the king has listened were wrong. They said that Neb would never come against Jerusalem; in fact, he has. According to Deut. 18:20-22, those prophets, not Jer, deserve to die.
- c) So Zed moves Jer to healthier quarters. The "court of the prison" is in the king's residence (32:2). It might also be translated, "the court of the guard," as the place where the soldiers lived. It has a cistern in it (38:6) and there he has access to the men of war (38:4). There would be a guard at the gate, so that he could not move in and out at will, but otherwise he is comfortable, and receives a regular ration of food.

Summary

Which would you rather be, the princes or Jer? From a worldly perspective, the princes are the ones in control in this chapter. Just as clearly, from a spiritual perspective, they are corrupted by their prestige and position, and Jer shines like a bright star in his boldness for the Lord. As we shall see shortly, God honors him far above them, after the city falls. We, too, should order our lives so as to seek the praise that comes from God, and not from men.

Psalm: 2. The greatest example of this contrast is in the princes of this world setting themselves against the Lord Jesus.

Analysis

37-38, The imprisonment of Jer

Once he is arrested, the account is punctuated by "And Jer. remained ..." This reading prompts interpretation of 37:16 as summary to what precedes, not introduction to what follows. Need to do more work on the role of *kiy* here.

A. Setting

1. 37:1 WA/Y.IM:LFK:-MELEK: CID:QIY.FHW. B.EN-YO)\$IY.FHW. T.AXAT K.FN:YFHW. B.EN-Y:HOWYFQIYM):A\$ER HIM:LIYK: N:BW.KAD:RE)C.AR MELEK:-B.FBEL B.:/)EREC Y:HW.DFH
2. 37:2 W:/LO) \$FMA(HW.) WA/(:ABDFY/W W:/(AM HF/)FREC)EL-D.IB:R"Y Y:HWFH):A\$ER D.IB.ER B.:/YAD YIR:M:YFHW. HA/N.FBIY)

B. 37:3-10, The Initial Revelation

1. interchange p
 - a) IU (messengers): quote p
 - 1) quote f: 37:3 WA/Y.I\$:LAX HA/M.ELEK: CID:QIY.FHW.)ET-Y:HW.KAL B.EN-\$ELEM:YFH W:/)ET-C:PAN:YFHW.

BEN-MA (:A&"YFH HA/K.OH"N)EL-YIR:M:YFHW. HA/N.FBIY) L"/)MOR
2) quote: HIT:P.AL.EL-NF) BA (:AD/"NW.)EL-Y:HWFH):ELOH"Y/NW.

b) setting: coordinate p

1) Jer's condition

a> 37:4 W:/YIR:M:YFHW. B.F) W:/YOC") B.:/TOWK: HF/(FM
b> W:/LO)-NFT:NW.)OT/OW B."YT {HA/K.:LIY} [HA/K.:LW.]]

2) The nation's condition

a> 37:5 W:/X"YL P.AR:(OH YFCF) MI/M.IC:RFYIM
b> WA/Y.I\$:M:(W. HA/K.A&:D.IYM HA/C.FRIYM (AL-Y:RW.\$FLAIM
)ET-\$IM: (/FM
c> WA/Y."(FLW. M"/(AL Y:RW.\$FLFIM P

c) CU (Jer): coordinated quote p

1) quote f: 37:6 WA/Y:HIY D.:BAR-Y:HWFH)EL-YIR:M:YFHW.
HA/N.FBIY) L"/)MOR
37:7 K.OH-)FMAR Y:HWFH):ELOH"Y YI&:RF)"L K.OH TO)M:RW.
)EL-MELEK: Y:HW.DFH HA/\$.OL"XA)ET/:KEM)"L/AY
L:/DFR:\$/"NIY

2) quote:

a> HIN."H X"YL P.AR:(OH HA/Y.OC") L/FKEM L:/(EZ:RFH \$FB
L:/)AR:C/OW MIC:RFYIM
b> 37:8 W:/\$FBW. HA/K.A&:D.IYM
c> W:/NIL:X:AMW. (AL-HF/(IYR HA/Z.O)T
d> W./L:KFDU/HF
e> W./&:RFPU/HF BF/)"\$ S

3) quote f: 37:9 K.OH)FMAR Y:HWFH

4) quote:

a> quote p
1> quote f:)AL-T.A\$.I)W. NAP:\$OT"Y/KEM L"/)MOR
2> quote: HFLOK: Y"L:KW. M"/(FL"Y/NW. HA/K.A&:D.IYM
b> K.IY-LO) Y"L"KW.
c> conditional p 37:10 K.IY
1> if:)IM-
a: HIK.IYTEM K.FL-X"YL K.A&:D.IYM HA/N.IL:XFMIYM
)IT./:KEM
b: W:/NI\$:):ARW. B/FM):ANF\$IYM M:DUQ.FRIYM
2> then:
a:)IY\$ B.:/)FH:FL/OW YFQW.MW.
b: W:/&FR:PW.)ET-HF/(IYR HA/Z.O)T B.F/)"\$

C. 37:11-16, Jer Arrested by the Princes

1. setting

a) 37:11 W:/HFYFH (Jouon art.119z; expect WYHY) B.:/H"(FLOWT
X"YL HA/K.A&:D.IYM M"/(AL Y:RW.\$FLFIM MI/P.:N"Y X"YL P.AR:(OH
S
b) 37:12 WA/Y."C") YIR:M:YFHW. MI/YRW.\$FLAIM LF/LEKET)EREC
B.IN:YFMIN LA/X:ALIQ MI/\$.FM B.:/TOWK: HF/(FM
c) 37:13 WA/Y:HIY-HW.) B.:/\$(AR B.IN:YFMIN
d) W:/\$FM B.A(AL P.:QIDUT W./\$:M/OW YIR:)IY.FYH B.EN-\$ELEM:YFH
B.EN-X:ANAN:YFH

2. interchange p

a) IU (Irijah): quote p

1) quote f: WA/Y.IT:P.O&)ET-YIR:M:YFHW. HA/N.FBIY) L"/)MOR
2) quote:)EL-HA/K.A&:D.IYM)AT.FH NOP"L

- b) CU (Jer): quote p
 - 1) quote f: 37:14 WA/Y.O)MER YIR:M:YFHW.
 - 2) quote:
 - a> \$EQER
 - b>)"YN/EN.IY NOP"L (AL-HA/K.A&:D.IYM
 - 3. W:/LO) \$FMA()"L/FYW
 - 4. WA/Y.IT:P.O& YIR:)IY.FYH B.:/YIR:M:YFHW.
 - 5. WA/Y:BI)/"HW.)EL-HA/&.FRIYM
 - 6. 37:15 WA/Y.IQ:C:PW. HA/&.FRIYM (AL-YIR:M:YFHW.
 - 7. W:/HIK.W.)OT/OW
 - 8. reason p
 - a) text: W:/NFT:NW.)OWT/OW B."YT HF/)"SW.R B."YT Y:HOWNFTFN HA/S.OP"R
 - b) reason: K.IY-)OT/OW (F&W. L:/B"YT HA/K.ELE)
 - 9. Summary (? Function of KY here: temporal? (Num. 33:51f) Summary of preceding (precedents?))
 - 37:16 K.IY
 - a) BF) YIR:M:YFHW.)EL-B."YT HA/B.OWR W:/)EL-HA/X:ANUYOWT
 - b) WA/Y."\$EB-\$FM YIR:M:YFHW. YFMIYM RAB.IYM P
- D. 37:17-21, Zed's First Audience with Jer: Is there a word from the Lord?
- 1. Setting
 - a) 37:17 WA/Y.I\$:LAX HA/M.ELEK: CID:QIY.FHW.
 - b) WA/Y.IQ.FX/"HW.
 - c) WA/Y.I\$:)FL/"HW. HA/M.ELEK: B.:/B"YT/OW B.A/S."TER
 - 2. interchange p
 - a) IU (Zed): quote p
 - 1) quote f: WA/Y.O)MER
 - 2) quote: H:A/Y"\$ D.FBFR M"/)"T Y:HWFH
 - b) RU (Jer): coordinate p
 - 1) WA/Y.O)MER YIR:M:YFHW. Y"\$
 - 2) WA/Y.O)MER B.:/YAD MELEK:-B.FBEL T.IN.FT"N S
 - 3. request-response p
 - a) request: quote p
 - 1) quote f: 37:18 WA/Y.O)MER YIR:M:YFHW.)EL-HA/M.ELEK: CID:QIY.FHW.
 - 2) quote:
 - a> MEH XF+F)TIY L/:KF W:/LA/(:ABFDEY/KF W:/LF/(FM HA/Z.EH K.IY-N:TAT./EM)OWT/IY)EL-B."YT HA/K.ELE)
 - b> 37:19 {W:/)AY.OW} [W:/)AY."H] N:BIY)"Y/KEM):\$ER-NIB.:)W. L/FKEM L"/)MOR LO)-YFBO) MELEK:-B.FBEL (:AL"Y/KEM W:/ (AL HF/)FREC HA/Z.O)T
 - c> 37:20 W:/(AT.FH \$:MA(-NF)):ADON/IY HA/M.ELEK:
 - d> T.IP.FL-NF) T:XIN.FT/IY L:/PFNEY/KF
 - e> W:/)AL-T.:\$IB/"NIY B."YT Y:HOWNFTFN HA/S.OP"R
 - f> W:/LO))FMW.T \$FM
 - b) response:
 - 1) 37:21 WA/Y:CAW.EH HA/M.ELEK: CID:QIY.FHW.
 - 2) WA/Y.AP:QIDW.)ET-YIR:M:YFHW. B.A/X:ACAR HA/M.A+.FRFH
 - 3) W:/NFTON L/OW KIK.AR-LEXEM LA/Y.OWM MI/XW.C HF/)OPIYM (AD-T.OM K.FL-HA/L.EXEM MIN-HF/(IYR
 - 4) WA/Y."\$EB YIR:M:YFHW. B.A/X:ACAR HA/M.A+.FRFH

E. 38:1-13, Zed's Vacillation: contrast p
(Details in next message)

F. 38:14-28, Zed's Second Audience with Jer: What should I do?
(Details in next message)