

Living in Times of Uncertainty – Word from a Prophet and His Scribe: Baruch /Letter of Jeremiah – Summary from Session One

Editor's Note: *The final session of the four-part study of the book of Baruch and the Letter of Jeremiah was held on Monday, February 24, 2020. This is a summary of the first of those sessions. Summaries of the other three sessions will follow in the coming weeks.*

At the time we concluded this series in late February, we were certainly aware that the COVID-19 virus was having a serious impact in China and other parts of the world, but its influence on daily life in the United States had not yet struck home. In the past few days and weeks our lives have altered radically as fear, uncertainty and constantly changing norms have come to dominate our waking moments.

The book of Baruch and the Letter of Jeremiah were written about even more unsettling times – a time of exile into Babylon (597 – 586 b.c.e.), loss of home and life, and even a sense of estrangement from God as the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed along with much of the city. The original readers of these works, however, were not those exiles of the early sixth century, but lived in yet another, later time of loss, fear, and great uncertainty. Perhaps today, in our own current crisis, we can better identify with those people for whom these works were written.

– Charlie Walden (March 23, 2020)

PREFACE

Baruch (pronounced B-uh-roo-k(ah); [roo rhymes with food]) was a scribe of the prophet Jeremiah, who prophesied before and during the exile of the Jews to Babylon. Excluding the exodus from Egypt, the exile is undoubtedly the single most significant event in the history of the Hebrew people. Yet many Christians are not familiar with this story within its context. The stories of David and Goliath, Jonah and the whale, Noah's ark, Daniel and the lion's den, and Job are all far better-known narratives. Even less familiar to most Protestants are the books of the Apocrypha. For those reasons, this summary will begin with some history and background on the Apocrypha and the exile to Babylon. If you are already well acquainted with the Apocrypha and the history surrounding the exile (or not really interested), you may skip over the first two sections below and begin with *Introduction to the Apocrypha – Baruch (Chapters 1 – 2)*.

The Apocrypha

The *Septuagint*, an early Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, included a number of Jewish writings beyond the traditional *Torah, Prophets, and Writings*. The *Septuagint* was completed around 132 b.c.e. (before the common era) and was widely circulated among early Christians. When the Jewish canon was finalized somewhere between 100 and 200 c.e. (A.D.), several of the books included in the *Septuagint* were not included in the Hebrew Bible canon.

These books became known as the *Apocrypha*, a term first used by Jerome to describe this set of books that he didn't think should be included in the Christian canon. (Augustine had persuaded Jerome to include these books in his translation to the Vulgate [Latin] against Jerome's better judgment. The Vulgate was completed around 405 c.e.)

Apocrypha means "hidden things". They were hidden because they contain things that had mysterious or esoteric teachings. – perhaps heretical. This set of books is also referred to as Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical books. This distinguished them from the Protocanon – books (Old Testament) about which there was no (Catholic) debate. The Deuterocanon describes books that were accepted as canonical at the Council of Trent in 1566. (The Council of Trent followed the start of the Protestant Reformation, begun in Germany by Martin Luther in 1517. Luther was adamantly opposed to including any of the books of the *Apocrypha* as part of the canon.)

In his translation, Jerome had followed the Hebrew canon in the Old Testament, but included a preface distinguishing between the Hebrew canon and the apocrypha. After the Council of Trent, the books of the *Apocrypha* were included in sequence with other books in the Catholic bible. For example, *Tobit* and *Judith* came after *Nehemiah*. *The Prayer of Manasseh* and *1 and 2 Esdras* appear in an index after the New Testament – without implying canonical status.

Today, most Protestant churches do not recognize the books of the *Apocrypha* as Scripture or authoritative, therefore they are not included in most Bibles used by Protestants. For United Methodists, however, reading from the *Apocrypha*, while not considered authoritative, is now an option in the commonly used lectionaries.

A Brief History of Israel Prior to and Following Exile

David (born around 1000 b.c.e.) was the second King of Israel following Saul. After David's son and successor as king, Solomon died, the kingdom of Israel was divided into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah.

In 722 b.c.e. the northern kingdom of Israel was defeated in war by the Assyrians. Many of the Hebrews in the northern kingdom were sent into exile all over the Middle East. Some stayed in Samaria – the northern kingdom area – and intermarried with Assyrians and others brought in from the outside. This was effectively the end of the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

In 605, at the Battle of Carchemish, the southern kingdom, Judah was defeated by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon and Israel's King Jehoiakim began paying tribute to Babylon. However, after four years he stopped paying tribute, and in 597 Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem. King Jehoiakim died during the siege and his successor Jeconiah and his court were exiled to Babylon along with many others (including Ezekiel).

Zedekiah, Jeconiah's successor revolted against Babylon because he expected protection from the Egyptians. Jeremiah and others warned against the revolt to no avail. Jerusalem was again besieged and many of the people of Jerusalem starved to death. In 587-586, the city walls were destroyed, many of the houses and much of the city was destroyed including

the Temple. Zedekiah was captured, his sons were killed in front of him; he was blinded and was taken to Babylon. A description of the destruction of Jerusalem is included in the book of *Jeremiah* (Chapter 52:1 – 34).

Some Jewish survivors were allowed to stay in Jerusalem and the surrounding land of Judea, many were killed, and many were carried off to exile in Babylon (modern day Bagdad, Iraq). After Cyrus the Great of Persia attacked and defeated the Babylonians in 539, he allowed some Jews to return to Jerusalem in the following year and begin the rebuilding process. A smaller Temple was built in 515, beginning what is called the Second Temple period. The Ark of the Covenant, housed in the original Temple, was never recovered. The Old Testament books of *Ezra* and *Nehemiah* describe the period after the Jews are allowed to return to Jerusalem.

Although the Jews suffered greatly and faced powerful cultural pressures in a foreign land, they maintained their national spirit and religious identity. Elders supervised the Jewish communities, and Ezekiel was one of several prophets who kept alive the hope of one day returning home. This was possibly also the period when synagogues were first established, for the Jews observed the Sabbath and religious holidays, practiced circumcision, and substituted prayers for former ritual sacrifices in the Temple. The degree to which the Jews looked upon Cyrus the Great as their benefactor and a servant of their God is reflected at several points in the Hebrew Bible—e.g., at Isaiah 45:1–3, where he is actually called God’s anointed.

Introduction to the Apocrypha – Baruch (Chapters 1 – 2)

The book of *Baruch* was attributed to Baruch son of Neriah, the scribe of Jeremiah who wrote at the time of the Babylonian exile in the early sixth century b.c.e. The book is comprised of an introduction, a confession of sin relating to those in exile and those left behind in Jerusalem, a wisdom poem, and a poem of consolation. The oldest existing text of *Baruch* is in Greek, although many scholars believe it may have originally been written in Hebrew and translated into Greek. It was likely written in late in the Second Temple period in the second or first century b.c.e., hence the author could not have *actually* been Baruch, son of Neriah as is claimed in the opening verses of the book.

As part of the *Apocrypha*, *Baruch* is not included in most Protestant Bibles, but is found in Roman Catholic Bibles (see, for example *The New American Bible*). There are a few copies of the *New American Bible* on the shelves of classrooms at Northgate UMC, as well as at least one copy of a *New English Bible with Apocrypha*. If you do not have and are unable to find a copy, there are several online Bible sources. See for example, biblia.com. Or, you can just Google the name of the book, chapters and verses you are looking for. (Example: Baruch 1:1 – 2:35).

The book of *Baruch* provides a context for reflection on maintaining a vital relationship between God and Israel and can serve the same purpose in the twenty-first century with its emphasis on confession of sins and turning to God in prayer.

The *Letter of Jeremiah* claims to be a copy of a letter written by the prophet Jeremiah to Judeans about to be exiled to Babylon in the early sixth century b.c.e. Like the book of *Baruch*, however, it was probably written late in the Second Temple period, prior to 100 b.c.e. but certainly not the sixth century.

The first chapter of *Baruch* begins with an **introduction** to set the historical context. (*Baruch* 1:1 – 9) The author introduces himself as Baruch, son of Neriah, son of Mahseiah, etc. There is a much more extensive genealogy here than was characteristic of the late seventh and early sixth century in which Jeremiah wrote. Long genealogies similar to this were much more common during the Hellenistic period. Perhaps these lines were written in Alexandria where much of the *Apocrypha* is assumed to have been written. The author tells his readers that he is writing in the fifth year after the destruction of Jerusalem, which would be 582 or 581. The author then tells us he read a scroll (book) he had written to the exiles in Babylon.

His listeners responded with acts of contrition, praying and fasting before the Lord. They also took up a collection to send to the high priest in Jerusalem. Along with the collection they returned the silver vessels that the Babylonians had carried off at the time the city and temple were destroyed. (*Ezra* 1:7 – 11, tells us, by contrast, that Sheshbazzar returned the gold and silver vessels to Jerusalem after the Persian King Cyrus allowed Jews to return in 538 b.c.e.)

Along with the money that had been collected and the silver vessels, our author tells us that the exiles sent a message to the people of Jerusalem (*Baruch* 1:10 – 12) asking them to use the money to buy sin and grain offerings, and to pray for King Nebuchadnezzar and his son, Belshazzar.*

The message the exiles send asks the people of Jerusalem to pray for them as well. Baruch, next tells his readers that he is sending a scroll for the people of Jerusalem to read aloud (*Baruch* 1:13 – 14). It may be assumed that the scroll is the same as the one he described reading from in Verse 3, but that is not totally clear from the context.

The second major section of *Baruch* is the **Confession of Sin**, which extends from *Baruch* 1:15 through 3:8. Both the form and content of this section are quite different from the first section. It begins with a prayer intended for the community in Judah, and uses material from Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 28, parts of Jeremiah and fits well with Daniel 9:4 – 19.

**Nebuchadnezzar's son was actually Amel-Marduk who reigned from 562 – 560. Belshazzar was the son of Nabonidus, who was king of Babylon from 556 – 539. It is unlikely that Belshazzar had even been born in 581 when the book of Baruch reports to have been written. The book of Daniel, compiled sometime after 164 b.c.e., also refers to Belshazzar as the son of Nebuchadnezzar, and was clearly one of the sources used by the author of Baruch. Thus, another indication that the author of Baruch was writing at a much later date and not totally familiar with the history of the period he was writing about. Though other evidence is plentiful, additional evidence of the late date of this book's authorship will not be presented (a) because it should be unnecessary, and (b) it slows down the narrative.*

The prayer begins “And you shall say: *The Lord our God is in the right, but there is open shame on us today ...*” (*Baruch* 1:15 – 19). The people had been sinners from the time their ancestors were brought out of Egypt – a thousand years before. Parts of the prayer are copied directly from other sources in the Bible, such as those listed above. (Much like most of *I & II Chronicles* is taken directly from *I & II Kings* or other earlier *Old Testament* sources.) The shame is on their kings, their priests, their prophets, and other ancestors because they did not listen to the Lord our God. The people have been disobedient and negligent. The terrible things that have happened to this people are a direct result of their failure to listen to the prophets (*Baruch* 1:20 – 22). The people had followed their own wicked ways.

In Chapter 2 the prayer goes on to say that the Lord has carried out the threats he had promised over and over (*Baruch* 2:1 – 5). “We brought this on ourselves” in today’s language. It has been theorized that a primary goal of the editors and redactors of *I & II Samuel* and *I & II Kings*, is to convince the Hebrew people that that their ancestors made a horrible mistake in demanding of Samuel that he give them a king (*I Samuel* 8). God had been their king; but they wanted a human king to do battle against their enemies. The hope of the compilers of these books of the *Old Testament* was that now that their kings were all dead or in exile, the Jewish people would never have a king again. Consistent with this idea, Baruch blames the kings and rulers, their ancestors and the people themselves for the destruction of their homes, their city, their temple and the exile of so many of their people.

The author then turns to what appears to be a prayer for the Jewish exiles in Babylon (*Baruch* 2:6 – 26). Verse 6 begins the same way as Chapter 1, verse 15, “*The Lord our God is in the right, but there is open shame on us and our ancestors this very day ...*” The next few verses (*Baruch* 2:6 – 10) mimic the verses in Chapter 1:15- 16 without the reference to Judah or Jerusalem. The same sentiment is found in *Daniel* 9:7 – 10, and appear to reflect *Ezra* 9:7 as well, “*From the days of our ancestors to this day we have been deep in guilt, and for our iniquities we, our kings, and our priests have been handed over to the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plundering, and to utter shame, as is now the case.*”

The supplication and confession begin and the perspective shifts with, “*And now, ...*” (*Baruch* 2:11 – 15). Now, for the first time, the community addresses God directly, using “Lord” and “God of Israel”, or “Lord God of Israel” and “O Lord, our God”. Until this point it has been narrative of what **we** have done – how **we** have failed, and God is described in the third person. Again, we find evidence of *Deuteronomy*, *Leviticus*, *Jeremiah*, *II Kings* and *Daniel*. As the author asks for deliverance (*Baruch* 2:16 – 18), he also reminds God that it is not the dead ancestors or kings who will declare His glory, but those servants he now has in Babylon and Jerusalem. The author is making the case that God needs Israel; they are all he has – so he best not wipe them all out.

Baruch again accepts the blame on behalf of the people of Judah, for not obeying God’s voice (*Baruch* 2:19 – 25). But there is hope yet for restoration. The Lord of Israel is a compassionate God (*Baruch* 2:27 – 28). Repentance and restoration illustrate God’s compassion for Israel. Baruch quotes Moses’ prophecy from God (*Baruch* 2:29 – 35), “*If you will not obey my voice, this very great multitude will surely turn into a small number among the nations, where I will scatter them. For I know that they will not obey me, for they are a stiff-necked people ...*” Not exact quotes from anywhere in the Hebrew Bible but this resembles phrases from *Deuteronomy* and *Jeremiah*. “*...I will bring them again into the land that I swore to give to their ancestors, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob ...*” **And we are left with hope.**

As we have discovered, *Baruch* was written, not in 581, as the author tells us, but much later in the Second Temple period. The author has several historical errors in his narrative and makes extensive use of other books of the Old Testament with which he is familiar. This is a complex book with four distinct sections that could easily have been written by four different authors. But much of the message discussed in this first session is straight forward and can be meaningful for those of us living today. Baruch read his book to a community of exiles gathered on the shores of a river in Babylonia. His listeners ask to have the book sent to the priests in Jerusalem along with a collection and some silver vessels. Further, they ask for a liturgy to be celebrated there. In recognition that Jerusalem is their point of orientation, they want the book to be read aloud. The second section of the book is a prayer of confession of sin and a plea for reconciliation.

Next Session

In Session 2, we will read *Baruch* 3:1 – 4:4. The first eight verses of Chapter 3 complete the *Prayer of Confession (Cry for Mercy)*. Then we will read the *Wisdom Poem (Baruch 3:9 – 4:4)*. In Session 3 we will discuss the *Poem of Consolation (4:5 – 5:9)*, and Session 4, the *Letter of Jeremiah*. In the coming sessions we will also look at these works from a feminist viewpoint, using Marie-Theres Wacker’s commentary. We will also look at alternative viewpoints, different than those taken by the authors of *Baruch* and the *Letter of Jeremiah*.

At Northgate, we opened our worship service on January 12 with a prayer of repentance, followed by words of assurance. Are our failures comparable with those of the exiles in Babylon or those left behind in Judah? What will be the consequence of our failures?

Who are our prophets today?

Have we ignored them to our peril?

How do we recognize the false prophets in the age of a highly polarized society reinforced by our choice of social media that only parrots back what we have already decided is our truth?

How can we hear someone else’s truth?

Do we not choose our own rulers and kings?

Do we choose based on what we think is best for us, or what we think is best for all?

In the Civil War, the bloodiest and most devastating conflict in American history, somewhere between 620,000 and 750,000 soldiers died. But civilians suffered also. During the siege of Vicksburg, about 4,000 soldiers died (Union and Confederate combined). But the siege and battle ended when General Pemberton surrendered after 47 days because both his troops and the civilian population in Vicksburg had nothing left to eat. First, the people killed their milk cows for food, then their mules, and finally they discovered that rats tasted a lot like squirrel.

Lamentations tells us that during the siege of Jerusalem which lasted between 18 and 30 months, parents ate their children (*Lamentations* 4:10). We do not know that is true, but we know that many people starved to death during siege and that there was terrible destruction and death at the end. Many of the survivors were hauled away to a foreign land.

Can we compare our current struggle with the Coronavirus with the death and destruction in Jerusalem during and following the siege? Can we compare it with the American Civil War?

A month ago, when COVID-19 was in China, or maybe Italy, it was sad, concerning, unfortunate perhaps. But now it is at our doorstep. We are told to stay home. Some people are losing their jobs. There are no games on TV. We can't get a haircut. Today, it is beginning to look like my ox is the one being gored. What will it look like next week or the week after when we may know someone personally who has contracted the virus? Are we beginning to feel like we are the ones under siege?

No man is an island,
Entire of itself.
Each is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.
If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less.
As well as if a promontory were.
As well as if a manor of thine own
Or of thine friend's were.
Each man's death diminishes me,
For I am involved in mankind.
Therefore, send not to know
For whom the bell tolls,
It tolls for thee.

– John Donne

Sources: *The New Oxford Annotated Apocrypha, New Revised Standard Version, Revised Fourth Edition* – Michael D. Coogan, Marc Z. Brettler, Carol A. Newsom, Editors, Oxford University Press, 2010

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