

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

In Session Two, the exiled Jews in Babylon try to fathom and cope with this calamitous event that has engulfed them. What can we learn from them in this crisis of our own time? In Texas there are five times the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths as a week ago, and we are told we are nowhere near the peak of the curve. This session examines a Cry for Mercy, and a Wisdom Poem. How did the Judaism change as a result of the exile in Babylon? How will our world change as a result of the novel coronavirus pandemic?

– Charlie Walden (March 30, 2020)

Review from Session One

In the first session we discussed the first two chapters of the book of Baruch. It began with the author introducing himself as Baruch, son of Neriah, the scribe of Jeremiah writing five years after the destruction of Jerusalem (581 b.c.e.) Baruch tells the reader that he read his book to the community of exiles gathered at the shores of a river in Babylon. The people ask that the book be sent to the priests in Jerusalem and ask for a liturgy to be celebrated there. They also ask for the book to be read aloud to the people of Jerusalem. This is followed by a prayer of repentance, the first portion of which appears to be a confession of guilt intended for the people of Judah (in Jerusalem), followed by a very similar confession of guilt for the exiles in Babylon. The people, their ancestors, their rulers and kings have not listened to the prophets or to the Lord. They have no one to blame but themselves. In the second part, the supplicants remember God's mercy. There is a cry for help, an admission of the guilt of their fathers and rulers, and a remembrance of God's promises. There is yet hope for restoration.

Baruch, A Book About a Book

If you are somewhat confused about what the relationship of the scroll or “book” that Baruch read in Chapter 1 verse 3, is to the “book” sent to the priests in Jerusalem, you are not alone. It is somewhat unclear to most modern readers (as well as most biblical scholars) exactly what the author means when he tells us about his “book”. Many commentators think that the scroll or “book” which Baruch read out loud (according to *Baruch 1:1 – 3*) is identical to *The Prayer of Repentance*, the *Wisdom Poem* and the *Oracle of Hope*, – that is, most of the rest of the book of *Baruch* (*Baruch 1:15 – 5:9*).

Alternatively, the *Prayer of Repentance* (*Baruch 1:15 – 3:8*) could be a separate message sent along with “the book”. “The book” would then be *Baruch 3:9 – 5:9*. (i.e. the *Wisdom Poem* and the *Oracle of Hope*). The exiled community is asking the Jerusalemites to pray for them (the exiles) using the *Prayer of Repentance* as their liturgy and then read the “book” aloud.

If what we would call the *Introduction* (1:1 – 14) is part of “the book” then we have a case similar to Moses narrating his own death at the end of *Deuteronomy*. But it is possible that “the book” may refer to the entire book of *Baruch* as it stands, including *Baruch 1:1 – 14*.

Another alternative – at the end of the *Wisdom Poem* (4:1 – 4), the author refers to “*she is the book of the commandments of God, the law that endures forever. All who hold her fast will live, and those who forsake her will die.*” Here he is describing the *Torah*, or perhaps the

three parts of the bible – the *Torah*, the *Prophets* and the *Writings*. So perhaps the “book” Baruch read refers to the *Torah* or the entire *Hebrew bible*.

Bottom line, nobody really knows.

Prayer of Repentance – Cry for Mercy

Chapter Three begins with a *Cry for Mercy*, the final section of the *Prayer of Repentance*. This section starts with an invocation, an appeal to “O Lord Almighty, God of Israel” (*Baruch* 3:1 – 3). The prayer emphasizes the differences between God and those offering the prayer. God is enthroned forever, and the people are sinners who are perishing forever. Then the petition takes a twist, introducing a new argument (*Baruch* 3:4 – 8). This overture distinguishes between the sinners who did not hear God’s voice and their descendants. Baruch is making the case, not that those currently in exile or suffering in Judah are guilt free, but that it is their ancestors, rulers and kings that failed to listen to the Lord and brought this catastrophe upon Israel. It is the current people of Israel* who are now praising God’s name who are being reproached, cursed and punished for the deeds of their ancestors. They ask that God not just remember the failings of their ancestors, but that He remember His promises, and that he understands who is serving Him now. It is a cry for mercy.

There is a significant cultural change at work in the *Cry for Mercy* similar to that seen earlier in the *Prayer of Repentance*. The author asked that Israel **not** be punished for what their ancestors did. *Exodus* 34: 7 tells us, ... *forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation*. We hear a different story from prophets of the time of exile. *Ezekiel* 18:20 says, “*The person who sins shall die. A child shall not suffer for the iniquity of a parent, nor a parent suffer for the iniquity of a child; the righteousness of the righteous shall be his own, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be his own.*” A similar idea may be found in *Jeremiah* 31:29 – 34.

Jesus reinforced this change in *John* 9:1 – 3: *As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned’, said Jesus, ‘but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.’*

The name **Israel here refers to the people that remain even though they were exiles from Judah. The northern Kingdom of Israel had been destroyed 140 years before these words of Baruch were purported to be written. The people of the southern Kingdom of Judah considered themselves to be Israel, even when the northern kingdom existed. The northern kingdom is also often referred to as Samaria. It is occasionally referred to as Ephraim as well. Ephraim was one of the sons of Joseph, the other being Manasseh. Jacob (renamed “Israel” by God) had twelve sons, whose descendants became the twelve tribes of Israel – each with their own territorial homeland in Canaan. The tribe of Levi became the priests and had no territory of their own. Joseph’s descendants, therefore had two territories (Ephraim and Manasseh), keeping the total number of territories at twelve. By the time the kingdom split, (around 930 b.c.e.) Simeon had been absorbed into Judah. Judah and Benjamin became the southern kingdom. The other nine tribes formed the northern kingdom.*

Wisdom Poem

Wisdom writing was a fairly widespread practice in the ancient Near East. The perspective is often international and sometimes universalist. It raises questions of value, moral behavior, of the meaning of human life, and especially of the right conduct of life. There is little in the three major wisdom books of the Old Testament (*Job*, *Proverbs*, and *Ecclesiastes*) that is specifically Israelite. There are four examples of wisdom literature in the *Apocrypha*: *The Wisdom of Solomon*, *The Wisdom of Jesus son of Sirach* (*Sirach* or *Ecclesiasticus*), *4 Maccabees*, and *Baruch*, only part of which is considered wisdom literature.

The style and content of the three Old Testament books is quite different. *Job* begins and ends with a narrative, but the bulk the book is a series of poetic speeches. The characters are monotheists, though not all Israelites, but “dwellers of the East”. The *Book of Proverbs* is thoroughly pragmatic and consists of a series of sayings or advice. *Ecclesiastes* (or *Qohelet*) consists of a series of reflections on the nature of reality and the human condition, but into which no national considerations enter. Some of the Psalms are also considered wisdom literature. *Song of Songs* (or *Song of Solomon*) is also sometimes included as wisdom literature.

The *Wisdom Poem* of *Baruch* has a completely different form, style and content than the *Introduction* and the *Prayer of Repentance* (or *Confession of Sin*). It certainly could have been written at a different time and by a different author than the first two sections of this book. It is written as poetry, presented in verse. It consists of parallel lines through almost all of the poem. The title, “God” appears almost exclusively in the *Wisdom Poem*, where we saw “Lord”, or “O Lord God of Israel” or “Lord our God”, in the *Prayer of Repentance*. We notice that Wisdom is portrayed as a woman. A female Wisdom is common in Near East wisdom literature. *The Wisdom of Solomon* and *Sirach* both refer to Wisdom as a woman.

Wisdom literature helps describe the yearning we have for something beyond us – for answers – for guidance. The Jews in exile in Babylon and those left behind in Judah both had something missing in their lives that a poem like this might help fill. The *Wisdom Poem* of *Baruch* is fairly short – only thirty-three verses. It may be useful to read the entire poem through once (*Baruch* 3:9 – 4:4) to get a basic understanding of the poem, then come back to continue with this commentary summary. Again, if you do not have a hard copy of the book, you can go to biblia.com and search for these verses.

The poem begins:

*“Hear the commandments of life, O Israel;
give ear and learn wisdom!
Why is it, O Israel, why is it that you are in the land of your enemies,
that you are growing old in a foreign country,
that you are defiled with the dead,
that you are counted among those in Hades?”*
– Baruch 3:9 – 11 (NRSV)

In an echo of Moses in *Deuteronomy* (*Deut.* 5:1, 6:4, 9:1; 20:3; and 27:9), the author invites Israel to listen and learn. Obedience to the commandments of the Torah is merged with learning as a disciple of Wisdom. These verses also connect the *Wisdom Poem* to the *Prayer*

of Repentance/ Confession of Sin. The reference to the “dead” and to “Hades” can easily link to *Baruch* 2:17.

The author goes on in a style typical of wisdom literature, (*Baruch* 3:12 – 14). The fundamental problem is stated in verse 12 – “*You have forsaken the fountain of wisdom.*” The forgone opportunity, “*living in peace*” is identified in verse 13. Verse 14 closes the frame of the entire passage: *Hear* (from v.9), leads to *Learn* (in v.14). Wisdom and God are related as this poem will explain.

It becomes clear that Wisdom is a woman, elusive, but known to God (*Baruch* 3:15 – 19). The reader is asked a series of questions that help personify wisdom and give her a space where she stores her wealth. She would be an advisor to the rulers of the world and to God. There is an underlying design in this argument may be that mere piling up precious jewels and gold is of no value if the intent is to exchange it for wisdom, for the Lady has no need of more wealth. But the schemers who thought they knew it all, and could acquire it all, have done so in vain, because those rich and powerful people along with their wealth have vanished.

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Marie-Theres Wacker’s commentary on *Baruch* included both a feminist perspective on this scripture and a series of observations written by a Korean woman, Kyung-Sook Lee, titled *Which Wisdom? / Whose Wisdom?* In the first of these sketches she compares the situation of the exiled Israelites living in the land of the Babylonians, their historical enemy and a Korean woman living in a country colonized by Japan (1910 – 1945). The Korean “comfort women” who were taken in sexual slavery for the Japanese army during World War II as a part of the inhumane, violent occupation may have found it easy to relate to the *Wisdom Poem* written by Baruch. “*One of the most accessible and easily available means for an oppressed people to seek help, when they are under the rule of another nation, is to pray to God on whom they have always relied. Before requesting deliverance from the other nation, however, reflection and repentance is necessary ... they believe their penitence is required for God to hear and forgive them.*” In Korea, at the time of oppression by a foreign country, the **Dong-Hak** movement arose from the Korean national religion, and the **Maitreya** faith emerged from traditional Korean Buddhism. Kyung-Sook Lee continues, “*To understand the wisdom poem in Baruch, it is essential to comprehend such historical backgrounds.*” This wisdom poem is not a simple routine statement of faith, it is made in a period of anguish and loss. The exile was a pivotal point for the Jewish faith. It changed their understanding of their God and who they were as a people. They could hope to someday go back to Jerusalem, but they could never go back to who they were before.

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Powerful and wealthy rulers are said to have wisdom, but their descendants apparently don’t follow their direction, and have not learned the way. Wisdom hasn’t been seen in Canaan lately (*Baruch* 3:20 – 23). The descendants of Hagar (Ishmaelites/Arabians, but more specifically the queen mother of King Lemuel of Massa [see *Proverbs* 31:10 – 31], and the Queen of Sheba) are thought to be wise, but apparently did not learn the path to wisdom. Nor have the traveling merchants and storytellers. If these seemingly wise people don’t possess wisdom, then who does?

What about the giants, great in stature, born in the house of God? (*Baruch* 3:24 – 28) Living so close to God, shouldn't they be privileged to obtain wisdom? But God did not choose them to obtain wisdom. Wisdom cannot be found by one's own efforts. Wisdom is hidden and is only accessible through revelation by God. A new set of questions asks who knows the way to Wisdom. (*Baruch* 3:29 – 31), and we are given an answer, "No one knows the way to her ..." This answer is similar to *Job* 28:13 which says, "Man does not know the way to it, and it is not found in the land of the living." There is no one who has access to wisdom.

The next verse begins with "But ..." giving us hope. The only one close to wisdom is being revealed (*Baruch* 3:32 – 35). The one who knows all things, the one who prepared the earth, who sends forth the light. "*This is our God*" (verse 35). The author here sings the praises of the One ruling over the earth. It is God who found the way to knowledge and gave it to Jacob and to Israel. And Wisdom appeared on earth and lived with humankind (*Baruch* 3:36 – 37).

Life and death, the two fundamental opponents in wisdom literature, are connected to the "book of commandments of God" (*Baruch* 4:1 – 4). The author compares wisdom to a shining light, which is the Torah. The Torah was not given to the rulers, Israel's neighbors, or the giants. Wisdom through the Torah is being offered to Israel. She is Israel's for the taking. "Happy are we O Israel, for we know what is pleasing to God."

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In the final observation of *Which Wisdom? / Whose Wisdom?* Kyung-Sook Lee explains, "*The God of Israel discovered wisdom and gave it to Jacob and to Israel. This gift of wisdom was contained in a book of his commandments and law. Israel must now follow the laws and commandments in order to walk in the path of wisdom.*" Similarly, in most Asian religions, wisdom can only be acquired from the heavens. However, in Asian religions heaven is the essence of the universe, the origin of finite things which governs everything on earth – gods are not personified beings. Heaven is also a moral system that helps the good while punishing the evil. In Asian religions people have to seek the way to heaven (Tao) and to realize and adhere to the moral system of the universe. If for Israel, the way to wisdom is in the law, in Confucianism, it is in nature and human beings. Clear differences exist between these religions, but the ultimate aim is much the same – to become aware of heaven and live it out in practice on earth. "*This commonality could become a valuable resource to help facilitate mutual and respectful communications between religions.*"

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Upcoming Sessions

In Session 3 we will discuss the *Poem of Consolation* (4:5 – 5:9), and Session 4, the *Letter of Jeremiah*. At times, we will 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*.

The Novel Coronavirus, September 11, and the Exile

September 11, 2001. Early on in this pandemic – that is a week or two ago – the novel coronavirus was being compared to 9/11 with respect to the impact it may have on American life and lives. Most of us have vivid memories of images of planes flying into the twin towers of the World Trade Center. Two thousand nine hundred and ninety-six people died in and around the World Trade Center in New York, the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia, and on a commercial airplane that crashed near Shanksville, Pennsylvania. But that was only the beginning.

Our world began to change that morning of September 11, 2001. While this tragedy unfolded and in the immediate aftermath, people all over the country stopped what they were doing and listened on the radio or watched on television. Parents picked up their children early from school. Many businesses effectively shut down. Airplanes stopped flying almost immediately. Events were canceled and people stayed home. No one knew if this was a one-time event or the beginning of an all-out terrorist attack.

Immediately prior to the attack, the United States was not engaged in war anywhere in the world. After the terrorist group Al-Qaeda was identified as the source of the attack, the United States government responded by sending troops to Afghanistan, in a war that is still going on. As of July 7, 2018, there have been 2,440 U.S. military deaths in the War in Afghanistan. 1,856 of these deaths have been the result of hostile action. 20,320 American servicemembers have also been wounded in action during the war. In addition, there were 1,720 U.S. civilian contractor fatalities. Overall, since 2001, a total of about 157,000 people have been killed in Afghanistan, including 43,000 civilians.

In 2001 crude oil cost about \$22 a barrel. After 9/11 prices surged as high as \$95 a barrel within ten years but then dropped back to about \$50 – 60 a barrel and remained in that range. That is, until this past month when prices have dropped from \$53.98 on February 17 to \$21.84 on March 27.

Since 9/11, people of color, especially Muslim Americans, began to file a rising number of complaints of racially and religiously motivated discrimination, abuse, and attacks.

Perhaps the most noticeable change has been with air travel, especially airport security. We can remember a time when anyone could walk out to a boarding gate to watch as a friend boarded, or to meet a deplaning passenger. Since 9/11, we need an approved form of I.D., a boarding pass and must be physically screened along with all our carry-on bags. We go through metal detectors. We take our shoes and belts off. Only 5 percent of checked bags were screened before 9/11, whereas all are screened today.

What will change as a result of the novel coronavirus? Last Tuesday, our President was talking of things returning to normal by Easter. Since then 87,000 new confirmed cases of the virus have been reported in the U.S. and 1,700 additional deaths have been recorded. The total number of deaths has more than tripled in six days. It should now be clear that we are still in the early stages of this pandemic and won't be back to "normal" for months, not weeks. But what will the new normal look like? We know we have likely entered a recession, the first since the 2007 – 2008. We have been told by Dr. Anthony Fauci, one of our modern-day prophets, to expect millions of coronavirus cases and as many as 200,000 deaths. At the end of this crisis, whenever that is, what else will have changed?

Obviously, no one knows for sure, but following are some possible scenarios of how our world may change:

(1) Deborah Tannen, Professor of Linguistics and Georgetown University: *The loss of innocence, or complacency, is a new way of being-in-the-world that we can expect to change our doing-in-the-world. We know now that touching things, being with other people and breathing the air in an enclosed space can be risky. How quickly that awareness recedes will be different for different people, but it can never vanish completely for anyone who lived through this year. It could become second nature to recoil from shaking hands or touching our faces – and we may all fall heir to society OCD, as none of us can stop washing our hands Instead of asking “is there a good reason to do this online?” we’ll be asking, “Is there a good reason to do this in person.?”*

(2) Mark Lawrence Schrad, Associate Professor of Political Science: *Those on the frontlines of the coronavirus aren’t conscripts, mercenaries or enlisted men; they are our doctors, nurses, pharmacists, teachers, caregivers store clerks, utility workers, small business owners and employees ... many are suddenly saddled with unfathomable tasks, compounded by an increased risk of contamination and death they never signed up for. When all is said and done, perhaps we will recognize their sacrifice as true patriotism, saluting our doctors and nurses and saying, “Thank you for your service,” as we now do for military veterans.*

(3) Peter T. Coleman is a professor of psychology at Columbia University: *The extraordinary shock(s) to our system that the coronavirus is bringing has the potential to break America out of the 50-plus year pattern of escalating political and cultural polarization that we have been trapped in, and help us to change course toward greater solidarity. One reason it may happen is the “common enemy” scenario, in which people begin to look past their differences when faced with a shared external threat.*

Other possible changes: (4) A return to faith in serious experts. (5) Less individualism. (6) Religious worship will look different. (7) Regulatory barriers to online tools will fall. (8) A healthy digital lifestyle. (9) A return to respect for science. (10) The rise of telemedicine. (11) Congress can finally go virtual. (12). Many of the rules we’ve lived by won’t apply anymore.

What changed as a result of the exile?

One change mentioned above was that the prophets taught that no longer were the sins of the father visited upon the son. Everyone became responsible for his own mistakes.

According to 2 Kings 22:3 – 23:3 a law code was discovered in the temple in 621 b.c.e.; this law code was authenticated as the word of the Lord by Hulda the prophetess, and King Josiah aligned the reform he had begun with the terms of this law. It is not certain whether the story of the discovery of the law code reflects an actual event or was a story created to support Josiah’s reform, but whichever is the case, Deuteronomic law and the theology expressed in that law came to the fore in the late seventh century b.c.e. and played a major

role in the shaping of Israel and its Scriptures in the exilic and postexilic periods. It is thought that the Deuteronomic law code of Deuteronomy 12 – 26, though in an earlier form was the law code discovered in the time of King Josiah. It is also speculated that this book was written or compiled by Jeremiah or his scribe, Baruch.

There is evidence that the destruction of the temple in 586 b.c.e. gave rise to synagogues both in Jerusalem and in Babylon after private homes were temporarily used for public worship and religious instruction. The focus shifted from animal sacrifices, which could only be properly performed at the Temple, to the study and eventually teaching of the Torah -- the Jewish Bible -- which became the focal point of worship in the synagogues. The Second Temple was permanently destroyed by the Romans in 70 c.e. and there has been no Temple (nor priests) since that time.

The movement away from placing great importance on justice, as opposed to sacrifice began as early as the time late eighth century and the fall of the northern kingdom and the prophecy of Amos: (Amos 5:21 – 24)

*I hate, I despise your feasts,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them;
and the peace offerings of your fattened animals,
I will not look upon them.
Take away from me the noise of your songs;
to the melody of your harps I will not listen.
But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

This new focus gave rise to a new class of professional clergy within Judaism, the rabbi. The rabbi was and is both a scholar and a teacher, a spiritual leader tasked with explaining God's expectations to the common people. Early rabbis compiled the Talmud, a series of writings that further explain the Torah, beginning during the early exile period.

Even after the Temple was rebuilt, many aspects of Jewish worship that began during the captivity continued as part of Jewish worship. These include the prominent use of the singing of Psalms, prayer and instruction as part of the synagogue service. Synagogue worship and rabbinical teaching continued to operate alongside the newly constructed Temple. For almost seven centuries, Jews came to Jerusalem to participate in the worship, sacrifices and other activities carried on at the Temple, while also engaging in worship in synagogues wherever Jewish communities existed.

Many scholars believe that early Hebrew religion was Henotheistic (one God per nation) or Polytheistic (many gods) before the Babylonian Exile. Simply put, that means that the Jewish people acknowledged the existence of other gods but believed that they should only worship the god of Israel. The Ten Commandments state, "*Thou shalt have no other gods before me*", not "*There is no other God*". At the time the Persian Empire overthrew the Babylonians, many of the Persians practiced Zoroastrianism, a monotheistic religion that worshiped a deity named Ahura-Mazda. Zoroastrianism insisting that only one god exists. Whether the concept came to Judaism through Zoroastrians or not, the teaching -- known as monotheism -- is now the central tenet of Judaism.

Of course, many of the Jews in exile never returned to Israel, making this the beginning of the Diaspora. Judaism was no longer a religion tied to just one geographic area, but ultimately became a world religion.

The exile was the end of the Davidic dynasty. At a much later time kings were imposed on Israel from the outside (e.g. the Romans gave Israel Herod the Great in 37 b.c.e.), but never again a king of their own,

The Jews exposure to Babylonian literature and traditions served to broaden their viewpoint to include new concepts formerly not strongly evident in the literature of ancient Israel, among them:

- The concept of Satan as God's adversary.
- The idea of an angelic hierarchy under God rather than the more ancient idea of an assembly of the gods with YHWH/Elohim as the supreme deity.
- In addition to monotheism, the related idea of universalism: YHWH was the God not only of the Jews, but of all people.

This was the era of the great prophets. Ezekiel, Jeremiah and the majority of the twelve minor prophets wrote just before, during or shortly after the end of the exile. It is thought that much of the *Torah* and the former Prophets (*Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings*) was compiled, edited, and redacted during and immediately following the exile period.

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