

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

In Session Three, Baruch tells Israel to take courage and offers a poem of consolation for them and for a devastated Jerusalem – the mother of Israel. Is there consolation for us as the number of novel coronavirus cases in the U.S. has more than doubled in the last week to over 400,000, and the number of deaths has tripled? Do we dare hope that this week or next will mark the peak of the death curve we have been seeking? We begin to hear about people we know personally who have been afflicted with this virus and its collateral damage. We know some who have lost jobs and most of us have had our lives disrupted. Where is our consolation?

Passover begins today. It is Holy Week.

– Charlie Walden (April 8, 2020)

Review

In the first session we discussed the first two chapters of the book of Baruch. It began with the author introducing himself as Baruch, the scribe of Jeremiah writing five years after the destruction of Jerusalem. Baruch read his book to the community of exiles in Babylon, who ask that the book be sent for priests in Jerusalem to read aloud following the celebration of a liturgy. This is followed by a *Prayer of Repentance*.

In the second session, a *Cry for Mercy* concludes the *Prayer of Repentance*, asking that God no longer punish Israel for the sins of their ancestors and past rulers. The current people of Israel are praising God and asking for His mercy. *Baruch 3:9 – 4:4* is a *Wisdom Poem*. We are told that wisdom is hidden. The powerful rulers in other lands do not have wisdom, nor do the giants of the land have wisdom. God alone has the key to wisdom, and He has offered it to Jacob and to Israel through the law and the commandments (the Torah). Israel has only to follow those laws and walk in the path of wisdom.

Jerusalem, Woman-City and Mother of Israel

The third session began with a reading from the book of *Lamentations*. *Lamentations* was written sometime after 586 and quite possible during the Babylonian Exile. Its writing is traditionally ascribed to Jeremiah, but there is nothing in its style or content that definitively demonstrates Jeremiah to be the author:

How lonely sits the city
that once was full of people!
How like a widow she has become,
she that was great among the nations!
She that was a princess among the provinces
has become a vassal.
She weeps bitterly in the night,
with tears on her cheeks;
among all her lovers

she has no one to comfort her;
all her friends have dealt treacherously with her,
they have become her enemies.
Judah has gone into exile with suffering
and hard servitude;
she lives now among the nations,
and finds no resting place;
her pursuers have all overtaken her
in the midst of her distress.
The roads to Zion mourn,
for no one comes to the festivals;
all her gates are desolate,
her priests groan;
her young girls grieve,
and her lot is bitter.
Her foes have become the masters,
her enemies prosper,
because the Lord has made her suffer
for the multitude of her transgressions;
her children have gone away,
captives before the foe.
From daughter Zion has departed
all her majesty.
Her princes have become like stags
that find no pasture;
they fled without strength
before the pursuer.
Jerusalem remembers,
in the days of her affliction and wandering,
all the precious things
that were hers in days of old.
When her people fell into the hand of the foe,
and there was no one to help her,
the foe looked on mocking
over her downfall.
- *Lamentations 1:1 - 7*

This poem describes Jerusalem after its destruction by the Babylonians and the death and exile of many of its people. Notice that like Wisdom, the city of Jerusalem is referred to as a female. Once a princess, and now a lonely widow; a daughter, a scorned lover, she tragically lost her friends and was overcome by her foes; she is now a vassal; but mostly she is a mother whose children have been taken from her. Zion is the easternmost of two hills upon which the city of Jerusalem was built. In the poetry of *Lamentations*, or *Baruch*, and much of the rest of the Old Testament, *Mount Zion* (or just *Zion*) often refers to the city of Jerusalem, itself. *Daughter of Zion* also refers to Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is not mentioned in the five books of Moses (the *Torah*) nor many other books of the Old Testament. But the city became very important during the Deuteronomic period. Jerusalem was prominent for most of the Twelve Minor Prophets as well as *Isaiah*, *Jeremiah* and *Ezekiel*. It has a major role in the stories of *Second Samuel*, *I & II Kings*, and *II & II*

Chronicles. When David was proclaimed king of Judah, he made Hebron, located near the center of the tribal territory, his capital. But following the death of Saul's son, Ishbaal, David became king of all of Israel and moved his capital to Jerusalem near the northern border of Judah, therefore more central to the new Kingdom of Israel. Jerusalem had not previously been an Israelite city, but was occupied by the Jebusites, a Canaanite tribe. It is told that David captured the city by sending his men through an underground aqueduct that terminated within the city walls (*II Samuel* 5:6 – 10).

David had a palace built for himself in Jerusalem as the capital of the combined kingdom of Israel. He also brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem and covered it with a tent – the Tabernacle (*II Samuel* 6). David chose two chief priests, one from the north and one from the south to serve in Jerusalem.

It was King Solomon however, who built the Temple, where the Ark was ultimately housed. The priests held ceremonies and sacrifices in the courtyard at the entrance to the Temple. The outer room of the Temple was called the Holy and the inner room was the Holy of Holies. It was within this inner sanctum that the Ark was placed containing the tablets of the Ten Commandments. Two winged statues stood over the Ark serving as the throne of YHWH. Only one priest was allowed inside the Holy of Holies, and at that, only one time per year. For the Hebrew people, Jerusalem had become the center of their world. It was in the Temple of Jerusalem, within the Holy of Holies, where their God resided.

It was to the priests and people of Jerusalem that Baruch was sending his prayers and his book.

The Poem of Consolation

The fourth and final section of *Baruch* is a *Poem of Consolation*. It begins with a mood similar to the earlier *Prayer of Repentance*, but with a more hopeful perspective. Once again, the style, content, and structure of the *Poem of Consolation* are unlike any of the writing in the previous three sections of the book. It is possible that *Baruch* was written by three or four different authors, then pasted together by a later editor. Like the poem from *Lamentations*, the central character in this poem is the city of Jerusalem. In much of the poem, it is Jerusalem, herself who is singing a lament. Like the poem from *Lamentations*, Jerusalem is portrayed as daughter of Zion, a young woman dependent on her father, God. She is also the wife of a divine husband. She is an unfaithful adulteress; a widow; a mother of lost children. She has been raped and mistreated, and yet in the end there is hope.

Marie-Teres Wacker points out that all of the metaphors for women used in this poem “*play on the roles of women in patriarchal societies. ... these metaphors use reality and distort it poetically, but poetical distortion might lead to negative perspectives on realities. It is true that the metaphors in question use **female** reality to criticize mainly **male** auditors/readers, but by doing so they actually reaffirm dichotomous images of gender relations.*” While the metaphors in this poem may be intended to condemn abuse of women, the practical result may be to entrench male dominant and female subordinate stereotypes as just the way the world is supposed to be.

The introduction emphasizes that God wished to punish Israel because of its sins – not to destroy Israel (*Baruch* 4:5 – 8). In verse five, Israel is told to, “*Take courage*”. This is the

first of four times in this poem where that phrase is used (see also vs. 20, 27, and 30). There are echoes of *Isaiah* (40, 50, 52) as well as *Deuteronomy*, *Psalms*, and *Genesis* in this passage. In verse 8, Jerusalem is personified as the grieved mother. Also, in verse 8 there is a reference to the “everlasting God”. Later in this poem (e.g. v. 10 and v. 14) we will see God referred to as “the Everlasting”, a contrast to “God” in the *Wisdom Poem*, and “Lord”, “Lord God of Israel”, etc. in the *Prayer of Repentance*, again indicating that this section may have been written by yet another different author than the previous three sections.

But it is the characterization of Jerusalem as a woman that begins to take control of this poem (*Baruch* 4:9 – 11). Half-way through verse nine, Jerusalem begins to speak to her neighbors about the exile of her sons and daughters brought on them by the Everlasting (God). Jerusalem considers herself a widow, left desolate because of her sinful children (*Baruch* 4:12 – 16). She tells her neighbors that a distant nation *led away the widow’s beloved sons and bereaved the lonely woman of her daughters*. Jerusalem is affected by the city’s destruction, but she herself is not guilty as her children were. Because of her innocence, her attempts to intercede and ask for compassion in this lament can be validated.

Jerusalem then speaks directly to the exiles, her children (*Baruch* 4:17 – 20). She takes off the robe of peace and puts on the sackcloth of supplication. As a monotheist, Jerusalem has only one God to pray to – the one who has driven her anger, who is responsible for her loss, is the same one who must come to her rescue. Moving past her mourning, she tells her children (Israel) to “Take courage”, for God will deliver you (*Baruch* 4:22 – 26). There is already joy. There is a series of contrasts in this passage: (1) sent out with sorrow – back with joy; (2) ... seen your capture – will see your salvation; (3) your enemy has overtaken you – you will tread upon their necks.

“Everlasting” is not the only new name for God in this poem. “*O Holy One*” (v. 22) is used as a title for God in the *Poem of Consolation* (see also 4:37 and 5:5) but never in the other three sections of *Baruch*. “*O Holy One*” is also used frequently to refer to God in *Isaiah*, which appears to be a major source document for this poem.

The exiles are again admonished to, “Take courage” (*Baruch* 4:27 – 29) and return to the God who brought the city’s destruction and their capture upon them. God’s salvation is coming – and not necessarily, it seems, dependent on their return to the worship of God. Nor is this expected salvation (or the stomping on their necks) consistent with the prayer for the Babylonians we read in the first section (*Baruch* 1:11 – 12). But Jerusalem gives comfort that this ordeal must soon end.

The balance of the *Poem of Consolation* is a response to Jerusalem’s song. “*Take courage, O Jerusalem*”, begins the next passage (*Baruch* 4:30 – 35). In contrast to the promise given Jerusalem and Israel, there is a message of doom for those cities who have been responsible for Jerusalem’s misery. Although unnamed, Babylonia is the primary culprit, but perhaps Edom is included as well. The reference to “demons inhabiting” Babylon in verse 35 invokes Israel’s sin, now abandoned, of “*sacrificing to demons and not to God*”, in *Baruch* 4:7.

Finally, Jerusalem is told to look to the east, toward Babylon, to see your children coming home (*Baruch* 4:36 – 37). The view is broadened to include all the diaspora. The sackcloth that Jerusalem put on in verse 20, should now be replaced with the robe of righteousness.

God has given Jerusalem a new name: "Righteous Peace, Godly Glory" (*Baruch* 5:1 – 4). This new name can possibly be traced to *Jeremiah* 33:16, "In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness." Ezekiel had his own new name for Jerusalem, "The circumference of the city shall be eighteen thousand cubits. And the name of the city from that time on shall be, **The Lord is There**," (*Ezekiel* 48:35). Righteousness was a characteristic that belonged to God alone according to Isaiah (see for example *Isaiah* 32:17 and 60:17), yet God was giving that name to Jerusalem, even though her inhabitants had rejected it in the past.

Jerusalem is called to arise, to stand up, as her children will be carried back "as on a royal throne," (*Baruch* 5:5 – 9). The exiles will be brought home. God's mercy will save Jerusalem and her children:

*For God will lead Israel with joy,
In the light of his glory,
With the mercy and righteousness that
come from him.*

Healing a Distorted Community

The book of *Baruch* claims its intent is to heal a distorted community. As we have said early on, we know that community was not in Babylon or Jerusalem during the period of exile. It was written much later and undoubtedly was meant to deal with another situation in which the people of Israel were oppressed and felt disoriented. The author felt the people had drifted away from God and needed inspiration to get back on track. From our twenty-first century perspective, the situation was unlikely as dire as the Babylonian Exile, but we weren't there. There was always a dominant threat to Israel's existence. After Assyria in the late eighth century, it was Egypt, then Babylon. The Persians dominated the area after defeating the Babylonians in 539 b.c.e. Alexander the Great conquered the Persian Empire in 334. After Alexander's death in 323, his empire was divided among his generals Lysimachus, Cassander, Ptolemy and Seleucus. The Greeks ruled Israel until Pompey conquered Jerusalem for Rome in 63 b.c.e. Roman rule lasted for several more centuries.

It is likely that the *Baruch* was written during the period of Greek rule. The Maccabean revolt in 167 to 160 was led by the Maccabees against the Seleucid Empire. But there was oppression of Jews all over the Diaspora during this period. Greek culture had tremendous influence on Jews outside of Israel during this period, often leading them to forget their heritage and downplay their own God. We may never know the specific issue that the author(s) was concerned with, but his (their) hope clearly was that the message of the Babylonian Exile would help lead the Jewish people back to their own God, YHWH.

The primary problem, according to the author was that the people of Judah had not been listening to God. They, their rulers, their kings and their ancestors were not listening to God or his prophets. They committed sin; they had lost their way. The solution, according to the author was to repent and to begin again to follow the law. There were however, very few specifics. For example: there was no insistence on keeping the Sabbath; no mention of the four commandments that Jeremiah wrote about in his temple speech (stealing, murder, committing adultery, swearing falsely); nothing about regulating the social life of the community (unlike Ezra he doesn't blame foreign women for cults or idolatry); and he

doesn't demand divorce for mixed marriages (Israelite men and foreign women). Was the book effective for its intended audience?

We will probably never know.

Next Session

In Session 4 we will discuss the *Letter of Jeremiah*. Most often, *The Letter of Jeremiah* is published as Chapter Six of *Baruch*. We will continue to consider the feminist viewpoint presented by Marie-Theres Wacker. We will also look at alternative viewpoints, different than those taken by the author of the *Letter of Jeremiah*.

Before we begin that letter, however, a short introduction to the book of *Jeremiah* may be helpful. Jeremiah's call came in the 13th year of Josiah's reign (626 b.c.e.) and his writing continued down to the exile of Jerusalem, in the fifth month (586). It is difficult to tell what prophecies were made when during this period, because they are not written in the book of *Jeremiah* in chronological order. The book contains poetic oracles, some biographical stories about the prophet and some additions from Deuteronomist compilers. The heart of his message is found in Chapters 1 – 25. Oracles against the nations (46 – 51) are also poetry but may not have been written by Jeremiah. The biographic stories are traditionally attributed to Baruch but may have been written by others. Jeremiah wrote primarily during the pre-exilic period – but the book seems to have later been shaped to address the exiles and those in the post exilic period.

Most of the book of Jeremiah reflects the period of Babylonian dominance over Judah, especially during the reigns of Jehoiakim and Zedekiah. This was a period of turmoil that resulted from conflicting political policies in the royal court of Judah. Jehoiakim had been placed on the throne by the Egyptian pharaoh Necho II who deposed Jehoahaz. Jehoahaz assumed the throne of Judah upon the death of Josiah in 609 b.c.e. Josiah had attempted to prevent the Egyptians from assisting the Assyrians against the Babylonians, but he was slain in battle at Megiddo (2Kings 23:29). Jehoiakim began his reign as a vassal to Egypt, but when Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon defeated the Egyptians at the Battle of Carchemish (605 b.c.e.), he became a vassal of Babylon. Jehoiakim was caught between two factions: those who sought to throw off Babylonian rule and those who sought to remain loyal vassals of Babylon. Jeremiah's position is consistent with the latter group. Jehoiakim's policy of vacillation between these factions brought the Babylonian army to Jerusalem in 597 b.c.e. Jehoiakim died before feeling the full wrath of the Babylonians. Though the Babylonians did not destroy the city at this time, they did take the new king, Jehoiachin, into exile with several thousand leading citizens and they put Zedekiah on the throne of Judah. Zedekiah's reign was marked by the same divided policies of Jehoiakim and, as a result, the Babylonians laid siege against Jerusalem in 588 b.c.e.; the city and its temple were destroyed in August of 587 b.c.e. (or 586). Zedekiah attempted to escape but was captured by the Babylonians. They killed his family in his presence, then he was blinded and taken to Babylon. Jeremiah was most active as prophet during the reigns of Jehoiakim and Zedekiah. – Pauline A. Viviano (from Jeremiah Baruch: New Collegeville Bible Commentary)

Jeremiah is a fairly long book, comprising fifty-two chapters. (The Greek version of *Jeremiah* (from the *Septuagint*) is 1/8 shorter than the Hebrew version.). If you would like to have a taste of *Jeremiah*, without reading the entire book, try reading *Jeremiah* 3:1 – 18.

Letter of Jeremiah

The Letter of Jeremiah is supposed to be a letter from Jeremiah sent, at God's command, to the people who had been carried into exile, either the exile of 597 or the exile of 587/586. It starts by stating the reason for the exile – sinfulness. It gives the duration of the exile – up to 7 generations (140 years) which would take us to the time when Ezra read from the Bible. (around 446). In reality it was only forty-seven years from destruction of temple until Jews were allowed back in 538.

The remainder of the letter is poetry warning against idolatry. This was an issue that Jeremiah was concerned with in Jerusalem early on. The temptation would have been much greater in Babylon where there were plenty of idols to choose from.

The Black Plague, Novel Coronavirus, and Baruch of the Second Temple Period

The Black Death was a devastating global epidemic of bubonic plague that struck Europe and Asia in the mid-1300s. The plague arrived in Europe in October 1347, when 12 ships from the Black Sea docked at the Sicilian port of Messina. Thomas Cahill quoted the fourteenth century writer Giovanni Boccaccio (*Decameron*) extensively on the plague: *“In the face of this pestilence no human precaution or remedy was of any avail, writes Boccaccio. Its first symptom in both men and women were swellings in groin or armpit, which soon would grow to the size of an egg or apple, then spread throughout the body, turning black or sometimes livid. Few of the sick recovered, and almost all died after the third day ... Not only did talking to or keeping company with the sick induce infection and he death that spread everywhere, but also touching the clothes of the sick or touching anything that had come in contact with them or been used by them seemed to communicate the disease ... There were those who thought that abstemious living and the avoidance of any extravagance might do the trick. They shut themselves up in houses where there were no sick people and even refused to speak to outsiders (social distancing – 14th century style) or listen to any news of the sick and the dead who lay outside ... Others thought otherwise: they believed that drinking to excess, enjoying themselves, singing their hearts out ... was the best medicine. Reverence for law, whether divine or human ... virtually disappeared, since the ministers of religion and the magistrates of secular law were all dying off, just like everyone else.*

“... one citizen avoided another, almost no one took care his neighbor, relatives seldom, if ever visited one another ... brother deserted brother, uncle forsook nephew, sister left brother, and very often wife abandoned husband, and worse, almost unbelievable – fathers and mothers stopped caring for their children as if they were not their own.”

“The pandemic killed off about half of Europe's population, worldwide possibly as many as a hundred million ... Wherever the plague struck waves of accusation and intolerance seemed to strike in its wake. Sinners were responsible, or heretics, or foreigners, or beggars, or lepers – whoever was Other... In early 1349, the Jews of Strasbourg were slaughtered, later that year all the Jews of Mainz and Cologne.”

The Black Death (the Black Plague) was the end of medieval European civilization. When Europe recovered, and it did not do so quickly, the world had changed. The Renaissance, begun in the early 1300's took off in the late 1300s. A hundred years after the Black Death, movable type made the printing press possible, which made books available to a large portion of the population. Christopher Columbus sailed to America in 1492. The Protestant Reformation beginning in the early 1500's radically altered the face of religion in Europe. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries men like Rene Descartes and John Locke changed the way the world thought about science. The Black Death marked not only the end of the Middle Ages. It marked the beginning of the modern world.

The coronavirus of 2020 will not likely have this kind of impact. Currently there are over one and a half million known cases of COVID-19 in the world. In the United States the number is over 431,000 with 14,600 deaths so far. There were at least 779 new deaths in New York today. More people have now died in New York of novel coronavirus (6,268) than died on 9/11. We are told there are still shortages of tests, masks, gloves, eye protection, ventilators, and potentially hospital beds throughout the country. The President finally enacted the Defense Production Act last week giving the federal government broad authority to direct private companies to meet the needs of national emergencies, such as manufacture of ventilators. There is hope that the level of new deaths in the U.S. will peak this week or next week as a result of nearly nationwide stay-at-home and social distancing orders. We don't yet know when this will end or what permanent changes we will see as a result. We expect the shelter in place restrictions will not end soon.

We don't even know what specific problem "Baruch" of the Second Temple period was trying to alleviate when he wrote his book. We know that long after the penning of *Baruch*, most of the Jews were expelled from Palestine by the Romans as a result of wars from 66 to 136 c.e. We know Jews have been persecuted at various times throughout history. The slaughtering of Jews during the Black Death mentioned above is one example. Cahill tells us that "by 1351, more than two hundred Jewish towns and urban neighborhoods across Europe had been obliterated." Jews did not return to their homeland in Palestine in large numbers until 1948 when the modern Jewish State of Israel was established following the end of World War II. Over six million Jews were killed in concentration or death camps like Auschwitz during the final years of that war.

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

Baruch and the Letter of Jeremiah (Wisdom Commentary – Volume 31) by Marie-Theres Wacker, Carol J. Dempsey, OP, Volume Editor, Barbara E. Reid, OP, General Editor, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN., 2016

Jeremiah, Baruch -New Collegeville Bible Commentary, by Pauline A. Viviano, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN., 2013

Who Wrote the Bible? Second Edition, Richard Elliott Friedman, HarperCollins, 1987, 1989, 1997

Heretics and Heroes: How Renaissance Artists and Reformation Priests Created Our World, Thomas Cahill, Anchor Books, New York, 2013, 2014