

Literary Prophecy: Micah, Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Jeremiah

Lecture 18 Transcript

<https://oyc.yale.edu/religious-studies/rlst-145/lecture-18>

Overview

Micah, eighth-century southern prophet and contemporary of Isaiah, is discussed. Structurally, the book of Micah alternates three prophecies of doom and destruction and three prophecies of hope and restoration. Micah attacks the doctrine of the inviolability of Zion and employs the literary form of a covenant lawsuit (or *riv*) in his denunciation of the nation. Several short prophetic books are also discussed: Zephaniah; the Book of Nahum, depicting the downfall of Assyria and distinguished for its vivid poetic style; and the book of Habakkuk, which contains philosophical musings on God's behavior. The final part of the lecture turns to the lengthy book of Jeremiah. A prophet at the time of the destruction and exile, Jeremiah predicted an end to the exile after 70 years and a new covenant that would be inscribed on the hearts of the nation.

1. Structure of the Book of Micah

[1] *Professor Christine Hayes:* We were talking last time about prophets of the Assyrian crisis. We've talked about two of the northern prophets, Amos and Hosea, and we started talking about Isaiah who was a southern prophet, a prophet in Judah; and we'll be talking now about the second southern prophet of the Assyrian crisis. That is Micah, or Micah [pronunciation difference]. And he is said to come from the town of Moreshet, which is about 25 miles southwest of Jerusalem. So he's in Judah, and he's the last of the eighth-century prophets. He's quite different from the city-bred Isaiah. He seems to have been a rural prophet who spoke for the poor farmers. Now, he's prophesying in the second part of the eighth century, so 740 to about 700. He's attacking the northern kingdom, although he's a southern prophet. He attacks Israel for idolatries and says that the kingdom will surely fall because of these. So he also follows the other prophets, as we've seen, in condemning the people for their moral failings. The greedy landowners, the dishonest merchants, the aristocracy, they're all targets of his denunciations as are other leaders: the priests, the judges, royalty, the royal house as well as other false prophets.

[2] But the greatest contrast between Isaiah and Micah — if you want to differentiate these two southern prophets of the Assyrian crisis in your mind — the greatest contrast lies in his view of the city as inherently corrupt. It's inherently sinful; it's inherently doomed to destruction. Isaiah had preached the inviolability of Zion and Micah is sharply critical of the Davidic dynasty. He ridicules the idea of the inviolability of Zion. He ridicules the belief that the presence of the sanctuary in Jerusalem somehow protects the city from harm. He says, on the contrary, that God will destroy his city and his house if need be. Micah 3:9-12:

Hear this, you rulers of the House of Jacob,

You chiefs of the House of Israel,

Who detest justice

And make crooked all that is straight,

Who build Zion with crime,

Jerusalem with iniquity!

Her rulers judge for gifts,

Her priests give rulings for a fee,

And her prophets divine for pay;

Yet they rely upon the Lord, saying,

“The Lord is in our midst;

No calamity shall overtake us.”
 Assuredly, because of you
 Zion shall be plowed as a field,
 And Jerusalem shall become heaps of
 ruins,
 And the Temple Mount
 A shrine in the woods.

Israel’s conduct in response to this continuous
 benevolence on God’s part is appalling.

[3] A stark contrast then between Isaiah who trusts
 and has confidence that God will never allow
 His holy city to be destroyed, his sanctuary to
 be destroyed. His presence in the midst of the
 city is a guarantee that it will survive. And
 Micah says: it’s no guarantee of anything.

[4] One of the most famous passages in the Book
 of Micah is in chapter 6 — eight verses in
 chapter 6 — and this is a passage that takes the
 form of a covenant lawsuit, which we’ve talked
 about before, and the structure is as follows
 (I’ve put it up on the white board there): The
 first two verses are the issuing of the summons,
 the summons to the case. So the prophet here is
 acting as God’s attorney and he summons the
 accused and he summons the witnesses —
 those would be the mountains, who are to hear
 the case against Israel, God’s case against
 Israel:

Hear what the Lord is saying:
 Come, present [My] case before the
 mountains,
 And let the hills hear you pleading.
 Hear, you mountains, the case of the Lord
 —
 You firm foundations of the earth!
 For the Lord has a case [=a lawsuit]
 against His people,
 He has a suit against Israel.

[5] So those are the opening verses and in verses 3
 to 5 we then move on to the plaintiff’s charge,
 God’s charge or accusation. And this is given,
 again, through the attorney. He appeals to
 Israel’s memory of all of the events that have
 manifested his great love for her. That begins
 with the exodus of course and continues with
 the entry into the Promised Land and he says
 Israel seems to have forgotten all of these deeds
 that God has performed on her behalf, and the
 obligations that those deeds obviously entail.

[6] In verses 6 to 7 you have the defendant’s plea.
 This is Israel speaking, but Israel really, of
 course, has no case to plead. And Israel knows
 that her only choice is to try to effect
 reconciliation but she doesn’t know where to
 begin. Verses 6-7:

With what shall I approach the Lord,
 Do homage to God on high?
 Shall I approach Him with burnt offerings,
 With calves a year old?
 Would the Lord be pleased with thousands
 of rams,
 With myriads of streams of oil?
 Shall I give my firstborn for my
 transgression,
 The fruit of my body for my sins?

[7] And the prophetic attorney — because the
 prophet is here acting as the attorney — in
 verse 8, responds to this.

“He has told you, O man, what is good,
 And what the Lord requires of you:
 Only to do justice
 And to love goodness,
 And to walk humbly with your God.” [See
 note 1]

[8] And the word that has been translated here as
 goodness, is this word *hesed*. This is a word
 that we discussed last week in relation to
 Hosea, and it’s a word that seems to refer to
 that covenantal loyalty, the loyal love of
 covenantal partners. This is a classic passage
 that really typifies the prophetic emphasis on
 morality or the primacy of morality in
 prophetic thought.

2. *Common Paradoxes in Prophetic Writings*

[9] The book of Micah itself structurally alternates
 three prophecies of doom with three prophecies
 of restoration or hope. So it’s doom,
 restoration, doom, restoration, doom,
 restoration. These last prophecies tell of the
 glory of Zion to come in the future. These
 restoration passages may seem a little out of

keeping or out of step with the scathing denunciations or condemnations of Judah in the other parts of Micah's prophecy, and so some scholars have suggested that those restoration passages and those references to God's unconditional promise to preserve the Davidic kingdom, and the optimistic predictions of universal peace — these must be interpolations by a later editor. And it's true that certain parts we see again in Isaiah. But this is always a very difficult case or issue, because we know that the prophetic writings do fluctuate wildly between denunciation and consolation. So I think that a shift in theme alone is not ever a certain basis for assuming interpolation — outright contradiction perhaps — but a shift in theme or tone is never a solid basis for assuming interpolation.

[10] Anachronism is a very good guide to interpolation. So Micah explicitly refers to the Babylonian exile, of course, and that's going to be in 586 and he's in the eighth century. He's also going to refer to the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. The walls of Jerusalem aren't even destroyed until 586 for anyone to even speak about rebuilding them, so those little units or passages may of course represent late editorial interpolations. But in its present form — in that nice structure of alternation of denunciation, restoration, denunciation, restoration, a pattern that happens three times — that structure, is I think typical of the common paradox that we find in the prophetic writings where they try to balance God's stern judgment on the one hand, his punishment, with his merciful love and salvation of his people.

[11] A further paradox lies in the very preservation of prophecies like Micah's prophecy. These prophecies were probably preserved by priests in the temple, even though priests were very often among the targets of the prophets in their denunciations, particularly Micah.

[12] Alright, so we've talked about the prophets who responded to the Assyrian crisis towards the end of the eighth century, two in the north, two in the south. Jerusalem survived the siege of 701 when the Assyrians laid siege in 701. And that gave credence to the royal ideology, the idea that God was with Zion, was with Jerusalem, and was with the House of David and would preserve them, but even so Judah moves into the next century, into the 600s in a

considerably weakened state after the siege. And it's during that century — the first half of the next century — that Assyria reached the zenith of its power.

[13] In Judah, you have King Manasseh reigning. Now, King Manasseh reigned for nearly 50 years. We're not sure of exact dates, but somewhere around the 690s to the 640s, about 640: 50 years. Now remarkably, the Deuteronomistic historian devotes only 18 verses to this king who reigned for 50 years and all of those verses are entirely negative. And that's in great contrast to their treatment of his father, Hezekiah, and his grandson who follows him, Josiah. Manasseh was apparently a loyal vassal of Assyria, and according to the biblical writer he reversed the reforms of his father Hezekiah who is said by the writer to have destroyed idolatry and so on. But he is said to have reversed that and to have adopted Assyrian norms. As we move through this century and move towards the latter half of this century, Assyria, which has overextended itself is beginning to decline and some of the other states in the Ancient Near East are able to break away.

[14] First Egypt breaks away; Babylon breaks away. Josiah comes to the throne in Judah in 740 [correction: Professor Hayes meant to say 640]. He sees Assyria's weakness. He decides to take advantage of that and asserts Judean independence, carries out a series of reforms — we've talked about several times — in 622, which include purging the cult perhaps of Assyrian religious influences, centralizing worship of Yahweh only and in Jerusalem, and so on. So this centralization of the cult served probably a political agenda as well, of asserting independence from Assyria. Assyria is continuing to decline towards the end of this century and in 612 the capital Nineveh will fall. The Babylonians manage to conquer the Assyrians by destroying Nineveh; it's actually an alliance of Medes and Babylonians. So things are going quite well. Josiah is king; he's a favored king, but just a few years later he will die in a battle against the Egyptians at Megiddo. So [that's] a little bit of historical background for you as we talk about the next prophets. Alright, so Josiah, the king who's highly favored will die in 609.

3. *The Book of Zephaniah*

[15] Now, Zephaniah was a Judean prophet who prophesied during the reign of King Josiah. So we're going to be moving on now to Zephaniah and Jeremiah, as the prophets of the Babylonian crisis — and we're going to throw in a couple of prophetic characters along the way, but they will be the two main prophets of the Babylonian crisis, obviously in the south — all we have now is a southern kingdom, Judah — but I'll be picking up on two other prophets in a moment as well.

[16] So he prophesied during the time of King Josiah. Some of his prophecies seem to date to the time, we think, before Josiah's reforms in 622. And those prophecies tend to be very pessimistic and very grim. Judah is condemned. It's condemned for apostasy; it's condemned for decadence, all of the things that flourished under King Manasseh. God is wrathful and his wrath is imminent. There will be a universal destruction according to Zephaniah. All life, animal and human, will be exterminated. So, as we saw in the book of Amos this Day of Yahweh, this Day of the Lord, which has been so eagerly awaited, will not in fact be a day of triumph, but a day of dark destruction and despair. Zephaniah 1:15-18,

That day shall be a day of wrath,
A day of trouble and distress,
A day of calamity and desolation,
A day of darkness and deep gloom,
A day of densest clouds,
A day of horn blasts and alarms —
Against the fortified towns
And the lofty corner towers.
I will bring distress on the people
And they shall walk like blind men,
Because they sinned against the Lord;
Their blood shall be spilled like dust,
And their fat like dung.
Moreover, their silver and gold
Shall not avail to save them.
On the day of the Lord's wrath,
In the fire of his passion,

The whole land shall be consumed;
For He will make a terrible end
Of all who dwell in the land.

[17] You can see why people didn't enjoy listening to these prophets, but at the same time, like the other prophets, Zephaniah also offered hope. There will be a humble remnant which will seek refuge in God. These Jewish exiles, he says, will be delivered from their oppressors and even Gentiles will join in the worship of God. Zephaniah 3:11-13:

“In that day,
You will no longer be shamed for all the deeds
By which you have defied me.
For then I will remove
The proud and exultant within you,
And you will be haughty no more
On my sacred mount.
But I will leave within you
A poor, humble folk,”

— this idea of purging the dross and leaving the pure remnant —

“And they shall find refuge
In the name of the Lord.
The remnant of Israel
Shall do no wrong
And speak no falsehood;
A deceitful tongue
Shall not be in their mouths.
Only such as these shall graze and lie down,
With none to trouble them.”

[18] There will also be an ingathering of any exiled. Verse 20:

“At that time I will gather you,
And at [that] time I will bring you [home];
For I will make you renowned and famous
Among all the peoples on earth,
When I restore your fortunes

Before their very eyes.”

[19] There’s one passage in particular that seems extraordinarily joyous. It seems to announce the salvation as happening now, as present and so a lot of scholars think that this was Zephaniah’s reaction to Josiah and Josiah’s reform which seemed to him to perhaps be the very salvation for which the nation was longing.

[20] Chapter 3:14 and 15:

Shout for joy, Fair Zion,

Cry aloud, O Israel!

Rejoice and be glad with all your heart,

Fair Jerusalem!

The Lord has annulled the judgment against you,

He has swept away your foes.

Israel’s Sovereign the Lord is within you;

You need fear misfortune no more.

[21] So, this sounds very much like a reaction to these reforms initiated by Josiah. This is hailed as the very restoration of God’s presence in the community of Judah that was desired. The judgment has been annulled; these terrible things I’ve been prophesying will not happen.

4. *The Book of Nahum*

[22] Another short prophetic book we should mention now is the Book of Nahum. It’s very different from the other prophetic books. It doesn’t really contain prophecies and it doesn’t really upbraid the people for their failings, which are two things that most of the other prophets do. The Book of Nahum is a short little book and it’s really a series of three poems and the first one is an acrostic poem, an alphabetical poem — each line beginning with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet — and these poems rejoice over the fall of Nineveh in 612, the capital of the cruel Assyrian empire. The Assyrians were actually quite widely hated in the Ancient Near East. They were noted for their exceptional brutality, their inhumanity, particularly in their conquests and empire building. They deported populations wholesale; they were guilty of all sorts of atrocities like mutilating their captives;

they would butcher women and children — all sorts of horrendous deeds. We have lots of testimony about this, both in Assyrian sources but other Ancient Near Eastern sources [too], texts as well as artwork.

[23] So Nahum, in this poem, is celebrating the avenging and wrathful God who has finally turned around to destroy this terrible enemy of Israel and indeed the world. According to Nahum, it’s quite true that God had used Assyria as his tool. He had used Assyria to discipline the kingdom of Israel — they did destroy Israel — and to discipline Judah for Judah’s sins. But God is ultimately the universal sovereign and so Assyria’s savagery — even if it was part of God’s disciplining of his children is — Assyria’s savagery is itself something that must be punished. So for Nahum, the fall of Nineveh is God’s vengeance upon Assyria for her barbaric inhumanity.

[24] The Book of Nahum has often been praised for its very vivid poetic style. It describes these armed legions that march against Nineveh and plunder its treasure, and some of the most exciting archaeology that’s been going on has been the digging up of Nineveh. I think the dig has obviously stopped for reasons having to do with the [political] climate in that part of the world, but the findings of Nineveh and the sacking of Nineveh — how shallow pits were dug and treasures thrown into them and covered over by the gates of the city as people were fleeing, and many of these things — when you read the description of Nineveh and look at some of the archaeological data, it’s quite fascinating.

[25] But Nahum looks forward to a happy era of freedom for Judah and he says in 2:15 [correction: meant to say 1.15]: “For never again shall the wicked come against you.” Well, this isn’t true, and in fact, in a few years Josiah’s going to be killed. Judah’s going to be made subject to Egypt and in fact Babylon. By 605 Babylon manages to extract tribute from Judah as a vassal. So in a way, we have here really a glaring error and it’s important to note that this error in Nahum — it wasn’t updated, it wasn’t repaired in order to protect his prophetic reputation.

[26] So we see this interesting tension. We sometimes see prophetic books being edited, revised, having interpolations put into them,

partly out of this conviction that their words must be relevant and continue to have some relevance; and other times, there seems to be good evidence that prophetic oracles were preserved rather faithfully.

[27] But with the fall of Nineveh, national confidence was probably boosted and then things quickly turned sour with the death of Josiah in 609, which was a terrible shock. You have Judah lying trapped, as it were, between two great powers: Egypt in the southwest, Babylon in the northeast. And in 605, as I said, Babylon managed to defeat Egypt and reduce Judah to the status of a tributary vassal under the King Jehoiakim.

[28] King Jehoiakim rebels and in response, the Babylonians lay siege to Jerusalem. There will be two sieges of Jerusalem by the Babylonians just as we've had two sieges earlier — two sieges: one in 597, one in 587, both under Nebuchadnezzar. He lays siege to Jerusalem in 597, and doesn't destroy Jerusalem. He kills the king, takes the king's son into captivity in Babylon and installs a puppet king, still under the assumption that things could be kept under control. So the puppet King Zedekiah is on the throne but he also decides to rebel and assert Judah's independence against the Babylonians. So Nebuchadnezzar returns, and this is in 587. And now the city is in fact captured, the sanctuary is completely destroyed, and the bulk of the population is exiled and this is what brings to end nearly 400 years of an independent Hebrew nation.

5. *The Book of Habakkuk*

[29] The Book of Habakkuk was written during this period, so 600 to the destruction — somewhere in those years. That's the period in which the Babylonians attacked Jerusalem twice. Habakkuk is another unusual prophetic book. It doesn't contain prophecies, so much as it contains philosophical musings on God's behavior. And we're going to see this increasing now as we move into the next section of the Bible when we complete the prophetic section. We'll be encountering writings of very different genres and some of them do contain these philosophical musings on God's conduct.

[30] Habakkuk 1 and 2 are a kind of poetic dialogue between the prophet and Yahweh, and the

prophet complains bitterly about God's inaction. Verses 2 and 3 of the first chapter:

How long, O Lord, shall I cry out
And You not listen,
Shall I shout to you "Violence!"
And you not save?
Why do You make me see iniquity
[Why] do You look upon wrong? —
Raiding and violence are before me,
Strife continues and contention goes on.

[31] And skipping down to verses 13 and 14,

You whose eyes are too pure to look upon
evil,
Who cannot countenance wrongdoing,
Why do you countenance treachery.
And stand by idle
While the one in the wrong devours
The one in the right?
You have made mankind like the fish of the
sea,
Like creeping things that have no ruler.

[32] Well, God responds to these charges by saying that the Babylonians are the instruments of his justice even though they ascribe their might and their success to their gods, rather than to Yahweh. Now, we've already seen in other books the idea that a conquering nation is serving as the instrument of God's punishment.

[33] But Habakkuk is a little bit unusual because he doesn't couch this idea in the larger argument that Judah deserves this catastrophic punishment. There's a great difference between Habakkuk and the Deuteronomistic historian, for example, because Habakkuk doesn't assert that the people are suffering for their sins. Habakkuk is struggling with what appears to him to be a basic lack of justice. The Deuteronomistic historian wants to assert God's justice, and whatever suffering happens is justifiable. Habakkuk is resisting that idea and we're going to see that resistance really come to a climax next week when we talk about the Book of Job.

[34] Habakkuk in 1:4 struggles with this, “...decision fails / And justice never emerges. / For the villain hedges in the just man — / Therefore judgment emerges deformed.” It’s not merely that the wicked and the righteous suffer the same fate, it’s that the wicked really seem to fare better than the just and that reduces humankind to the level of fish and creeping things for whom sheer power and not morality is the principal consideration. Now, having made this charge, Habakkuk awaits God’s answer. In chapter 2:1-5 he says,

I will stand on my watch,
Take up my station at the post,
And wait to see what He will say to me,
What He will reply to my complaint.
The Lord answered me and said:
“Write the prophecy down,
Inscribe it clearly on tablets,
So that it can be read easily.
...the righteous man is rewarded with life
For his fidelity.
How much less then shall the defiant go
unpunished,...

[35] Not a terribly deep answer. The righteous simply have to have faith that justice will prevail and this faith has to sustain them through the trials that challenge that very idea. We’ll see a deeper answer to this same problem in the Book of Job.

[36] The third chapter then shifts gears. So much so that once again scholars say it must be an interpolation. But again, I would warn that dramatic shifts in tone and theme are not that uncommon in the prophetic books and we have to be careful. But in this third chapter, God is described as a warrior god. He thunders from the east, he hurls his spear, he seeks vengeance on Israel’s oppressors. It may be that this is some editor’s attempt to respond to Habakkuk’s skepticism that Yahweh will bring justice — and bring it soon — [so] that he’s waiting: how long? why is this taking you so long? Why are you not acting? And this image of an avenging warrior God answers Habakkuk’s opening question: How long will God stand by and watch while the Babylonians rape and pillage? But on the other hand, it’s

possible that it’s Habakkuk himself and again the book exhibits that same paradoxical tension we’ve seen through so many of the prophetic books.

[37] Specifically, he holds out the paradoxical view that God’s justice is slow in coming but the righteous must have complete faith in its ultimate execution. But he’s raised the issue of theodicy, the problem of evil, the problem of suffering. Ultimately, he sees the problem’s resolution only in some vision of the future — an avenging God, when justice will be done. That is typical of some texts that we will see later, particularly apocalyptic literature, which is going to emphasize patient waiting for an end time when there will be a cataclysmic final act that will bring justice and judgment.

6. *Structure and Features of the Book of Jeremiah*

[38] Now the prophet, who lived at the time of the final destruction of Judah, [and] saw the fall of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians in 587 was the prophet Jeremiah, another long prophetic book. So we have our three long prophetic books, Isaiah of the Assyrian crisis, Jeremiah of the Babylonian crisis, and Ezekiel writing from exile in Babylon.

[39] Jeremiah was born of a priestly family in a village near Jerusalem, Anathoth, and he began prophesying while he was still a boy. Now, he was a contemporary of King Josiah and so he saw the renaissance that briefly occurred under his guidance: the sweeping reform, the eradication of Assyrian influences that had been welcomed by King Manasseh, the renewal of the covenant, all of these activities that are so highly favored by the biblical writer. And when Josiah died, Jeremiah also lamented his passing, along with the rest of the nation.

[40] Jeremiah witnessed the final destruction and the exile. The Book of Jeremiah is a collection of very different types of material. There’s really no clear organization, there’s no clear chronological order, not the kind of thing you can just sort of sit down and read from beginning to end and hope it’ll make sense. There are prophecies, there are oracles and diatribes against foreign nations, there are stories, biographical narratives, there’s some poetry, and at the very end a little brief historical appendix which really resembles 2 Kings: 24 and 25.

- [41] So the literary history of the book itself is also quite complex because there's great variation in our ancient witnesses. The Septuagint, which is the Greek translation of the Bible — third century BCE Greek translation of the Bible — its Jeremiah is much shorter than the Hebrew version of Jeremiah and it's arranged differently; internally, the arrangement is different. There are also significant differences between the Hebrew text that we have now and some fragments of Jeremiah that have been found among the Dead Sea scrolls. So this attests to the very open-ended nature of written compositions in antiquity.
- [42] We find three main types of material, however, in Jeremiah. (1) The poetic oracles that generally are attributed to Jeremiah; Then (2) biographical anecdotes and narratives about him, which are attributed to his amanuensis and assistant whose name I don't think I put up here. Baruch ben Neriah, ben simply meaning son of, so Baruch, the son of Neriah, whose name comes up quite a bit in the Book of Jeremiah. And he is a scribe who assists Jeremiah, and it's thought that perhaps the biographical narrative sections were composed by Baruch ben Neriah. Then we also have (3) certain editorial notes about Jeremiah that are in the style of the Deuteronomistic historian, Deuteronomistic editor. Jeremiah, in general, seems to have very close connections with the language and the ideology of Deuteronomy.
- [43] So if we look quickly at the structure of the book, for the most part, the first 25 chapters, Jeremiah 1 through 25 contain an introduction and an account of Jeremiah's call, but then also poetic oracles with some biographical snippets thrown in there as well. Not snippets [but rather] narratives — biographical narratives as well as poetic oracles. In 26 to 29 we have stories of his encounters — I should say run-ins — with other prophets and with authority figures of various types. Chapters 30 to 33 are oracles of hope and consolation; 34 to 45 are more prose stories, and these stories center around and after the time of the final destruction.
- [44] Then we have several chapters, 46 to 51 that contain oracles against nations. Some of these, scholars think, might be from other writers and then again, as I say, it concludes with this historical appendix about the fall of Jerusalem that's extracted from 2 Kings.
- [45] Now, Jeremiah preached the inevitable doom and destruction of the nation because of its violation of the covenant, which was the very charter for her existence, and his descriptions were quite vivid and quite terrifying. He denounced Israel's leaders, the professional prophets in particular with whom he has many encounters. The professional prophets are liars, he says, because they prophesy peace. He has some negative references to priests as well, but he's especially critical of King Jehoiakim who's the son of Josiah.
- [46] He can be compared to Micah because he also attacked this idea, this popular ideology of the inviolability of Zion. As long as injustice and oppression are practiced in Judah, the presence of the temple is no guarantee of anything. Judah will suffer the fate that she deserves for failure to fulfill her covenantal obligations. So God tells Jeremiah to go stand at the gate of the temple and speak these words, and this is a passage that's often referred to as the "Temple Sermon." It's from chapter 7:
- Thus said the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel: Mend your ways and your actions, and I will let you dwell in this place. Don't put your trust in illusions and say, "The Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord are these buildings." No, if you really mend your ways and your actions; if you execute justice between one man and another; if you do not oppress the stranger, the orphan, and the widow...
- [47] You hear the language of Deuteronomy, right? Those three are always together in Deuteronomy, drawing very heavily on the same language.
- If you do not oppress the stranger, the orphan, and the widow; if you do not shed the blood of the innocent in this place; if you do not follow other gods, to your own hurt — then only will I let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers for all time. See, you are relying on illusions that are to no avail. Will you steal and murder and commit adultery and swear falsely,...
- [48] Again, allusion to the Decalogue, right? Those four terms in the Decalogue.

Will you steal and murder and commit adultery and swear falsely, and sacrifice to Baal, and follow other gods whom you have not experienced, and then come and stand before Me in this house, which bears My name and say, “We are safe”? [Safe] to do all these abhorrent things! Do you consider this House, which bears My name, to be a den of thieves? As for Me, I have been watching — declares the Lord.

Babylonian forces. This is acceptance of God’s will, the forces that are surrounding Jerusalem.

- [49] So he attacked this doctrine of the inviolability of Zion and that would have been iconoclastic to say the least. But he pointed to history as proof for his assertion. He cites the example of Shiloh as an example. You remember during the period of the Judges when the Ark of the Covenant was peripatetic and would stay at different places, but for some time it came to rest at Shiloh with the priest Eli and his sons. And in that time, the Philistines managed to destroy the sanctuary and capture the Ark and carry it off into Philistine territory. So the presence of the Ark of the Covenant is no guarantee of anything, and the belief that God would not allow his temple, his city, his anointed ruler to be destroyed, Jeremiah says, is a deception. It’s an illusion.
- [50] His political message resembles very much the message of his predecessors. He says that the nation’s pathetic attempts to resist the great powers and to enter into alliances with the one against the other — these were all completely futile. And to dramatically illustrate the destruction and the slavery that were inevitable, he paraded around Jerusalem, first in a wooden yoke and then in an iron yoke. He does this in chapters 27 and 28. This is a symbol of the slavery, the yoke of the master that is to come.
- [51] In chapter 27:6 he claims that God has power over all the Earth and has given the Earth to Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, God’s servant. As you can imagine, referring to the destroyer of the nation as God’s servant would have been shocking, not to say dangerous. You can imagine parallels in our own time, where people would see the God most commonly understood to be the God of most Americans being the one who orchestrated attacks against us. It would have that same kind of feel and power to people, and in several passages Jeremiah exhorts the king to submit to the

- [52] To ensure the preservation of his words, which were not popular, Jeremiah had his amanuensis Baruch write down everything that God spoke to him. Chapter 36 gives us an insight into this process. It’s kind of interesting because Jeremiah’s words are transcribed. God specifically tells Jeremiah how to do this. “Get a scroll,” he says, “and write upon it all the words that I have spoken to you — concerning Israel and Judah and all the nations — from the time I first spoke to you in the days of Josiah to this time” (36:2). Now it’s the time of King Jehoiakim and then in verse 4 we read, “So Jeremiah called Baruch son of Neriah; and Baruch wrote down in the scroll, at Jeremiah’s dictation, all the words which the Lord had spoken to him.”
- [53] Now, Jeremiah is in hiding at this time because he’s politically very unpopular, so he instructs Baruch to take the scroll to the temple and to stand there and to read it to the people. The king’s officials are there. They report to the king about the subversive message which has been delivered by Baruch. So Baruch goes into hiding; the scroll is torn into strips and burned. God orders Jeremiah to get another scroll and repeat the process, and he does. Verse 32 of chapter 36, “So Jeremiah got another scroll and gave it to the scribe Baruch son of Neriah. And at Jeremiah’s dictation, he wrote in it the whole text of the scroll that King Jehoiakim of Judah had burned; and more of the like was added,” — so, and then some. They came back with even more.
- [54] So it’s possible — some scholars suggest — that what was written, would have been the contents of chapters 1 to 25 which really contains the oracular material, the oracles. But in any event, this story gives us some insight into the process of prophecy. It doesn’t appear to have been really off the cuff. The compositions of the prophets were literary compositions that were committed to memory; they could then be dictated again.
- [55] And on an archaeological note, I should point out that one of the most exciting finds, I think, is a clay — in 1975 they found a clay bulla which is like a clay imprint of Baruch son of Neriah, the scribe — that’s what it says on the clay imprint. Another one was found in 1996.

It was said to be found in a burnt house in Jerusalem, which would have been around the time of the destruction. And it just showed up on the antiquities market, so some question whether it's genuine or not. The second one that was found has a fingerprint on it and people say, well, that could be the fingerprint of Baruch son of Neriah. Anyway, this is the fun stuff you get to do if you do archaeology, but there are plenty of people who think that these probably are the seals of the scribe Baruch son of Neriah, that he would have used to stamp anything that he would have transcribed or written.

[56] So Jeremiah was rejected; he was despised; he was persecuted by fellow Judeans. Naturally, they would have seen him as a traitor. He was flogged, he was imprisoned. Often in his life he was in hiding, he was a very troubled person and he lived in very difficult times. But we also get an insight into his emotional state which we don't from any of the other prophets. He suffered immensely; he weeps over Jerusalem in chapter 8 and 9. We get a sense of the turmoil that he suffers, particularly because of a group of passages that are referred to as the Confessions of Jeremiah and these are sort of scattered throughout — some in chapters 11 and 12, 15, 17, 18, 20, but these are passages that reveal his inner state. Some people question their authenticity, but in any event they paint a very fascinating portrait of the prophet. He curses the day that he was born; he accuses God of deceiving him, of enticing him to act as God's messenger only to be met with humiliation and shame, but he can't hold it in. God's words rage inside him and he must prophesy. It would be better had he not been born at all than to suffer this ceaseless pain.

[57] Chapter 20:7-18, just selections from there:

You enticed me, O Lord, and I was enticed;
 You overpowered me and You prevailed.
 I have become a constant laughingstock,
 Everyone jeers at me.
 For every time I speak I must cry out,
 Must shout, "Lawlessness and rapine!"
 For the word of the Lord causes me
 Constant disgrace and contempt.

I thought, "I will not mention Him,
 No more will I speak in His name" —
 But [His Word] was like a raging fire in
 my heart,
 Shut up in my bones;
 I could not hold it in, I was helpless.
 I heard the whispers of the crowd —
 Terror all around:
 "Inform! Let us inform against him!"
 ...Accursed be the day
 That I was born!
 ...Accursed be the man
 Who brought my father the news
 And said, "A boy / Is born to you,"
 And gave him such joy!
 Let that man become like the cities
 Which the Lord overthrew without
 relenting!
 ...Because he did not kill me before birth
 So that my mother might be my grave,
 And her womb big [with me] for all time.
 Why did I ever issue from the womb,
 To see misery and woe,
 To spend all my days in shame!

[58] Nevertheless, despite all of his very harsh criticisms of the establishment authorities, the royal house and even scribes, other prophets who are labeled as liars by Jeremiah, his words were preserved by scribes, by the Deuteronomistic editors. Shortly after the fall of Judah, Jeremiah was taken forcibly to Egypt. And he lived his final years out in Egypt. He didn't give up his job though. He kept denouncing people. We have records of his denouncing his fellow Judean exiles down in Egypt for worshipping the Queen of Heaven and as before, it seems very few heeded him there.

7. Unique Features of Jeremiah's Message of Consolation

[59] But like the earlier prophets, Jeremiah also balanced his message with a message of consolation, and there are some very

interesting and unique features of Jeremiah's message of consolation. These passages are found particularly in chapters 30 to 33 where we have more hopeful prophecies. He envisages a restoration; the exile will come to an end, and in fact Jeremiah is the first to actually set a time limit to what we might refer to as the dominion of the idolaters; the idolaters holding sway over God's people, and that time limit he says is 70 years.

new covenant would be made with Israel as well. And this time, Jeremiah says, it's a covenant that will be etched on the heart, encoded as it were into human nature.

[64] Jeremiah 31:31-34:

See, a time is coming — declares the Lord — when I will make a new covenant with the House of Israel and the House of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers, when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, a covenant which they broke, so that I rejected them — declares the Lord. But such is the covenant I will make with the House of Israel after these days — declares the Lord: I will put My Teaching into their inmost being and inscribe it upon their hearts. Then I will be their God, and they shall be My people. No longer will they need to teach one another and say to one another, "Heed the Lord"; for all of them, from the least of them to the greatest, shall heed Me — declares the Lord.

[60] Jeremiah writes a letter to the first group of deportees, so remember the first siege in 597? You have the king killed, his son and many people taken into exile in Babylon. Jeremiah, from Jerusalem, writes a letter to that first group of exiles and it's quite remarkable, it's found in chapter 29, and it's quite remarkable for its counsel, its advice to the exiles to settle down in their adopted home and just wait out the time. There is an appointed end. He warns the people not to listen to prophets who say you will return shortly, it's just a lie. The Israelites have to serve the king of Babylon and by doing so they will live.

[61] So in Jeremiah 29:4-7, "Thus said the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel, to the whole community which I exiled from Jerusalem to Babylon," — he's writing to the exiles:

Build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat their fruit. Take wives and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons, and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters. Multiply there, do not decrease. And seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you..." Instead of seek the welfare of Jerusalem, seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you "and pray to the Lord in its behalf; for in its prosperity you shall prosper.

[62] In other words, you're in for the long haul. And you shouldn't be deceived by the idle dreams or the false prophets who tell you that return is imminent. God has other plans. They are plans for welfare, not for evil, and they will give you a future and a hope.

[63] At the end of 70 years, Jeremiah said, there will be a great war of all the nations and Judah and Israel will be returned to their land. Zion, he declared, would be acknowledged as the Holy City and a new Davidic king would reign. A

[65] So this is a remarkable idea. It seems to express some dissatisfaction with the element of free will, which is otherwise so crucial to the biblical notion of covenant and morality: the idea that humans freely choose their actions. After all, when you think about some of the major themes set out in the Hebrew Bible at the very beginning in the opening chapters, this would seem to be a cardinal principle: choice. But free choice does mean of course that there will be bad choices and there will be disobedience and evil, and people can get tired of that and Jeremiah was. So his utopian ideal is inspiring, but it does eliminate the element of free will. It seems to describe a situation in which humans are almost hardwired to obey God's covenant. That's a tension that will also be developed in some later texts. I just note it here.

[66] In a very beautiful passage, Jeremiah describes a future restoration of the temple, the bringing of offerings again, the singing of psalms and praise, and this is in contrast to chapter 25. There, in chapter 25, he warned that God will banish "the sound of mirth and gladness, the voice of bridegroom and bride," leaving the land a desolate ruin. Now in his oracle of consolation Jeremiah says,

Again there shall be heard in this place... in the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem that are desolate, without man, without inhabitants, without beast — the sound of mirth and gladness, the voice of bridegroom and bride, the voice of those who cry, “Give thanks to the Lord of Hosts, for the Lord is good, for His kindness is everlasting!” as they bring thanksgiving offerings to the House of the Lord. For I will restore the fortunes of the land as of old — said the Lord [Jer 33:10-11].

[67] So just to kind of summarize these prophets leading up to the time of the destruction (because next time we’ll be talking about the exile and later the return): The fall of Jerusalem shattered the national and territorial basis of Israel’s culture and religion. The Babylonians had burned the temple to the ground, they carried away most of the people to exile, to live in exile in Babylon, leaving behind mostly members of the lower classes to eke out a living as best they could. And it was the completion of a tragedy that had begun centuries earlier and it was interpreted as a fulfillment of the covenant curses. It was the end of the Davidic monarchy, although the Deuteronomistic historian does close with this note, that the son of Jehoiakim was alive and living in Babylon, kind of holding out hope that the line hadn’t actually been killed out, hadn’t been completely wiped out.

[68] But the institution seemed to have come to an end for now. It was the end of the temple, the end of the priesthood, the end of Israel as a nation, as an autonomous nation, and so the Israelites were confronted with a great test. As I’ve stressed before, one option would be to see in these events a signal that Yahweh had abandoned them to, or had been defeated by, the god of the Babylonians, and Marduk would replace Yahweh as the Israelites assimilated themselves into their new home. And certainly there were Israelites who went this route, but others who were firmly rooted in exclusive Yahwism did not, and they’re the ones who left us their literature.

[69] How could this faith survive outside the framework of Israelite national culture, away from the temple and the land, uprooted and scattered? Could Israelite religion survive without these national foundations and institutions and on foreign soil, or would it go

the way of other national religions? You hear the pain and the despair that would have been experienced at this time in the words of the Psalmist, Psalm 137 which is written at this time:

By the rivers of Babylon,
there we sat,
sat and wept,
as we thought of Zion.
There on the poplars
we hung up our lyres,
for our captors asked us there for songs
our tormentors, for amusement, “Sing us
one of the songs of Zion.”
How can we sing a song of the Lord
on alien soil?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither;
let my tongue stick to my palate
if I cease to think of you,
if I do not keep Jerusalem in memory
even at my happiest hour.

[70] It was the message of the prophets that helped some Israelites make sense of their situation in a manner that kept them distinct and invulnerable to assimilation. And this was probably the reason for the preservation of the prophetic writings, even though they had often been despised or unheeded in their own lifetimes.

[71] Yahweh hadn’t been defeated, they claimed. The nation’s calamities were not disproof of His power and covenant, they were proof of it. The prophets had spoken truly when they had said that destruction would follow if the people didn’t turn from their moral and religious violations of God’s law. So that rather than undermining faith in God, the defeat and the exile when interpreted in the prophetic manner, had the potential to convince Jews of the need to show absolute and undivided devotion to God and His commandments, so that paradoxically the moment of greatest national despair could be transformed by the prophets into an occasion for the renewal of religious faith.

[72] The great contribution of the prophets was their emphasis on God's desire for morality as expressed in the ancient covenant. The great contribution of Jeremiah was his insistence on God's everlasting covenant with his people, even outside the land of Israel and despite the loss of national religious symbols — the temple, the Holy City, the Davidic king. And this insistence that the faithful person's relationship with God wasn't broken, even in an idolatrous land, when added to Jeremiah's notion of a new covenant, provided the exiles with the ideas that would transform the nation of Israel into the religion of Judaism.

[73] Next time we're going to turn to two post-destruction prophets who also helped the nation formulate a viable response to the tragedy that had befallen them. This is a point at which we can begin to use words like "Judaism."

[74] [end of transcript]

[75] Notes

[76] 1. This is a modification of the JPS translation from "And to walk modestly with your God."

[77] References

[78] Unless otherwise noted, all biblical citations have been quoted from "Tanakh: The New JPS Translation According to the Traditional Hebrew Text." Copyright (c) 1985 by The Jewish Publication Society. Single copies of the JPS biblical citations cited within the transcripts can be reproduced for personal and non-commercial uses only.

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