

CHAPTER 34

INTRODUCTION TO JEREMIAH 34

In this chapter is a prophecy of the taking and burning of Jerusalem; of the captivity of Zedekiah king of Judah; and of the destruction of the whole land, because of their breach of covenant to let servants go free. The time of this prophecy is observed, (^{2841D}Jeremiah 34:1,6,7); the taking and burning of the city, (^{2841B}Jeremiah 34:2); the carrying captive the king, who yet should not die a violent death, but in peace, and should have an honourable funeral, (^{2841B}Jeremiah 34:3-5); the covenant the king, princes, and people entered into, to let their servants go free, according to the law of God, which was at first observed, and afterwards retracted, (^{2841B}Jeremiah 34:8-11); which conduct is taken notice of and resented, (^{2841B}Jeremiah 34:13-16); and they are threatened with the sore judgments of God, sword, famine, pestilence, and captivity, the king, princes, priests, and people; and with the destruction, not on of Jerusalem, but of the rest of the cities of Judah, (^{2841F}Jeremiah 34:17-22).

Ver. 1. *The word which came unto Jeremiah from the Lord*, etc.] This prophecy came to Jeremiah, and was delivered by him, when he was at liberty, and before his imprisonment, and was the occasion of it, as appears from (^{2841D}Jeremiah 32:2-5); compared with (^{2841D}Jeremiah 34:2,3); the prophecies not standing in the proper order in which they were given out; for the prophecy, in this first part of the chapter at least, was delivered out before that in the thirty second chapter:

when Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and all his army, and all the kingdoms of the earth of his dominion, and all the people, fought against Jerusalem; when this mighty monarch appeared before Jerusalem with a numerous army, consisting of Chaldeans, the natives of his own kingdom, and with the auxiliary troops of each the kingdoms he had subdued and made tributary to him, even people of almost every nation under the heavens; and invested it, and laid siege to it, and lay against it:

and against all the cities thereof; the rest of the cities of Judah, which were as daughters of Jerusalem, the metropolis or mother city:

saying; as follows:

Ver. 2. *Thus saith the Lord, the God of Israel*, etc.] Who, though the covenant God of Israel, yet provoked by their sins, sends the following message to their king:

go and speak to Zedekiah king of Judah, and tell him: alone; and tell it to no other but him, at least at present; the message being more peculiar to him, and must, had it been told to the people, been very disheartening to them:

behold, I will give this city into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall burn it with fire; (see ^{248B}Jeremiah 32:3); which was exactly accomplished, (^{248B}Jeremiah 52:13).

Ver. 3. *And thou shalt not escape out of his hand*, etc.] Though he would, and did attempt to do it, (^{248B}Jeremiah 52:8,9);

but shall surely be taken, and delivered into his hand; he was taken on the plains of Jericho, and delivered into the hands of the king of Babylon at Riblah; as may be seen in the place just referred to:

and thine eyes shall behold the eyes of the king of Babylon; and that was all; for they were quickly put out by him:

and he shall speak with thee mouth to mouth, and thou shalt go to Babylon; (see ^{248B}Jeremiah 32:3 52:9,11).

Ver. 4. *Yet hear the word of the Lord, O Zedekiah king of Judah*, etc.] Which, though a king, he ought to hearken to; and, besides, what follows was for comfort, being a mitigation of his sentence, and containing in it mercy, as well as judgment:

thus saith the Lord of thee, thou shalt not die by the sword: of the king of Babylon; or a violent death; and therefore fear not to deliver up thyself and city into his hands; which he might be twelfth to do, fearing he would put him to death immediately.

Ver. 5. [*But*] *thou shalt die in peace*, etc.] Upon his bed, a natural death, and in good friendship with the king of Babylon; and, it may be, in peace with God; for before his death, some time in his captivity, he might be brought to true repentance for his sins:

and with the burnings of thy fathers, the former kings which were before thee: so shall they burn [odours] for thee. The sense is, that he should have an honourable burial; and that sweet odours and spices should be burned for him, as were for the kings of Judah his predecessors, particularly Asa, (~~4464~~ 2 Chronicles 16:14). Josephus says^{f652}, that Nebuchadnezzar buried him in a royal manner; though this seems to refer to what the people of the Jews in Babylon would do in honour of him, by burning for him. The Rabbins say, as Jarchi, Kimchi, and Ben Melech observe, that they burned their beds and ministering vessels, or household goods^{f653}, as was usual on such occasions. The Talmudist^{f654} say, all this honour was done him for that single act of ordering Jeremiah to be taken out of the dungeon; for this was done honour to persons: so, when Gamaliel the elder died, Onkelos the proselyte burned for him seventy Tyrian pounds^{f655}; not such a quantity of money, but goods that were worth so much; and this was a custom with the Heathens, who used to burn the bodies of the dead, to burn their garments with them, and their armour, and whatever were valuable and esteemed of by them life; and particularly odoriferous things, as frankincense, saffron, myrrh, spikenard, cassia, and cinnamon^{f656}; and which seem to be meant here, by comparing the passage with the case of Asa before mentioned; for though the word “odours” is not in the text, it seems rightly enough supplied by us, as it is by other interpreters^{f657}. The Vulgate Latin version very wrongly translates it, “and shall burn thee”; for it was not the manner of the Jews to burn the bodies of the dead, but to inter them in the earth; and so Tacitus^{f658} observes, it was the custom of the Jews not to burn, but after the manner of the Egyptians to bury in the earth nor does it appear to have been the custom of the Babylonians or Chaldeans, as should seem from the account that is given of the death and burial of the Babylonian monarch in (~~2344~~ Isaiah 14:4-11);

and they will lament, [saying], Ah lord! alas! our lord the king is dead. The form of lamentation said over him, as the Jews record^{f659}, was,

“alas! King Zedekiah, who is dead, drank the dregs of all ages;”

was punished for the sins of men in all generations past:

for I have pronounced the word, saith the Lord; both that which respects his captivity, and that which refers to his death; the manner of it, and his honourable interment, which shall be accomplished.

Ver. 6. *Then Jeremiah the prophet spake all these words,* etc.] The threatening, as well as the consolatory ones; he kept back no part of the message he was sent with, but faithfully delivered the whole:

unto Zedekiah king of Judah in Jerusalem; though he knew it would displease him, and bring himself into trouble, as it did; for upon this he was put into prison.

Ver. 7. *When the king of Babylon's army fought against Jerusalem,* etc.] Had laid close siege to it, and still continued it:

and against all the cities of Judah that were left; unconquered by him; when he invaded the land, he fought against, and took, and ravished all the cities that lay in his way; and it seems there were none that stood out against him but Jerusalem, now besieged by him, and two others, next mentioned:

against Lachish, and against Azekah; for these defenced cities remained of the cities of Judah; two cities that had been fortified by Rehoboam, (^{<4100>}2 Chronicles 11:9); and were the only ones besides Jerusalem, which as yet had not fallen into the hands of the king of Babylon.

Ver. 8. [*This is*] *the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord,* etc.] Here begins a new prophecy, which was delivered some time after the former; that was given out while the king of Babylon was besieging Jerusalem; this after he had quitted the siege for a while, and was gone to meet the king of Egypt, who was coming to the relief of the city, as appears from (^{<2400>}Jeremiah 34:21,22); though the Jews^{f660} say this was delivered in the seventh year of Zedekiah, in the first month, and tenth day of the month; at the same time that the elders of Israel came to Ezekiel, to inquire of the Lord by him, (^{<2500>}Ezekiel 20:1); which was two years before the king of Babylon came against Jerusalem; but this seems not likely. It is said to be

after that the King Zedekiah made a covenant with all the people that [were] at Jerusalem, to proclaim liberty unto them; not unto the people, or to themselves, the king and the people; unless the sense is, that the king and the people entered into an agreement among themselves to make proclamation, that liberty would be granted by them to their servants; for the liberty proclaimed was to the servants, and not to them. This seems to confirm it, that it was while the city was besieged that this covenant was made; since it was made only with the people at Jerusalem, which were pent up in it; for otherwise it would in all probability have been made with

all the people of the land; and seems to have been done with this view, to obtain this favour of the Lord, that they might gain their freedom from the enemy, and come not under the yoke and into the servitude of the king of Babylon: and very probable it is that they did not do this of their own accord, but were exhorted to it by Jeremiah; who perhaps, among other sins, had reproved them for the breach of the law respecting the liberty of servants.

Ver. 9. *That every man should let his manservant, and every man his maidservant, [being] an Hebrew, or an Hebrewess, go free, etc.*] This is the proclamation that was agreed to be made, that every manservant and maidservant, that serve six years an apprenticeship, should be freed from their servitude, according to the law in (^{<4210>}Exodus 21:1,2); a law founded upon justice and equity, mercy and compassion; done for the honour of the Jewish nation, that they might be a free people, and in commemoration of their deliverance from their servitude in Egypt. This law, as it seems, had been long neglected, and servants had been retained in bondage beyond their due time, through the oppression and covetousness of their masters, and the neglect of the civil magistrates; who should have took care that such a law was put in execution, and that servants were not oppressed. Some have thought that it was at the beginning of the sabbatical year that this proclamation was made, when, according to the law, there should be a release of servants, (^{<6150>}Deuteronomy 15:1); but that was not a release of servants, but of debts; for if a servant had not served out his time, the sabbatical year, or year of release, did not discharge him; though the year of jubilee did, according to Maimonides^{f661}, who says,

“if the year of release happens in any of the six years, he (the servant) serves in it; but if the year of jubilee happens within the time, even though he has been sold but one year before it, he is free;”

that none should serve himself of them, [to wit], of a Jew his brother; or cause them to serve him, oblige them against their will to continue in his service; or by any means avail himself of them, and receive to himself any profit or advantage by their service, they being Jews and brethren; which seems to be added, both as the reason of the law, because they were brethren of the same nation and religion with them, and to distinguish them from other servants, who notwithstanding this law might be retained as such.

Ver. 10. *Now when all the princes, and all the people, which had entered into the covenant,* etc.] The king had made with the people. Here the princes are mentioned, who were not before, but included in the people; they and the rest of the people are here meant, who having agreed to the covenant,

heard that everyone should let his manservant, and everyone his maidservant, go free, that none should serve themselves of them any more; or any longer, which they had done, contrary to law: when they understood that this was the sum of the covenant they had entered into, and this the intent of the proclamation they agreed unto; or when they heard the law read and explained by the prophet, concerning the manumission of the Hebrew servants, when the time of their servitude was expired,

then they obeyed, and let [them] go; dismissed them from their service, in obedience to the law of God, agreeably to their own covenant, and the proclamation of liberty they assented to. The whole might be rendered thus, “and all the princes and all the people obeyed, which had entered into the covenant, to let everyone his manservant, and everyone his maidservant, go free, not to serve themselves of them any more, and they obeyed, [I say], to let [them] go”; so far they did well, and were praiseworthy, that they kept the law of God, and their own covenant.

Ver. 11. *But afterwards they turned,* etc.] From the law of God, and their own agreement, and returned to their former usage of their servants; they changed their minds and measures. This seems to be done, when the king of Babylon, hearing the king of Egypt was coming to break up the siege of Jerusalem, quitted it, and went forth to meet him, as appears from (^{<34D>}Jeremiah 34:21 37:5); the Jews now finding themselves at liberty, and out of danger as they imagined, wickedly rebelled against the law of God; perfidiously broke their own covenant, repenting of what they had done, and returned to their former ways of oppression and cruelty; which shows they were not hearty and sincere in their covenant:

and caused the servants and the handmaids, whom they had let go free, to return, and brought them into subjection for servants and for handmaids; which was done by force, contrary to the will of their servants and handmaids, and in violation of the law of God, and their own solemn oath and covenant.

Ver. 12. *Therefore the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah from the Lord,* etc.] The word of Jehovah the Son, from Jehovah the Father, because of this transgression of the princes and people, and as soon as it was committed by them; for it is plain, from (²⁶²Jeremiah 34:21), that it was before the Chaldean army returned to Jerusalem, after its departure from it: *saying*; as follows:

Ver. 13. *Thus saith the Lord, the God of Israel,* etc.] The covenant God of Israel, their Creator, Redeemer, and Benefactor:

I made a covenant with your fathers; gave them a system of laws, among which was that of release of servants:

in the day that I brought them forth out of the land of Egypt; that is, at that time, quickly after, when they were come to Mount Sinai; this shows what fathers are meant, the Jewish ancestors that came out of Egypt, brought from thence by the mighty hand of God, and indulged with many favours by him, both in the wilderness, and in the land of Canaan, where he brought and settled them:

out of the house of bondmen; where they were bondmen, servants, and slaves: this is mentioned, to put them in mind of their former state and condition; to observe unto them the foundation and ground of the law concerning servants, how equitable and merciful it was, and to aggravate their sin; who though their fathers had been bondmen, and they must have been so too, had they not been released, yet acted such a cruel part to their servants, who were their brethren, in not discharging them in due time:

saying; giving out the following law, as a part of the covenant made with their fathers.

Ver. 14. *At the end of seven years,* etc.] Not when seven years were elapsed and fully completed; but within the compass of seven years, or as soon as the seventh year was began; for this term of seven years is the term of the seventh year coming in, and not going out, as appears from the law itself, (¹²⁷Exodus 21:9); and from an after clause in this verse, “when he hath served thee six years”; at the end of which, and the beginning of the seventh: and so Maimonides^{f662} interprets this law,

“he whom the sanhedrim sold served six years from the day of his sale, and at the beginning of the seventh year he was free.”

though the Vulgate Latin version very wrongly renders it, “when seven years are completed”; which version Sanctius takes a good deal of pains to reconcile to the original law. A Hebrew might sell himself for more years than six; he might sell himself for ten or twelve, as the above Jewish writer says, and nothing could release him but the year of jubilee; and that would do it, if he had served but one year^{f663};

let ye go every man his brother, an Hebrew, which hath been sold unto thee; or, “hath sold himself unto thee”^{f664}; to be a servant; for money was not given with apprentices to their masters, as is usual with us; but masters gave money for their servants, and bought them either of themselves, or of the magistrates; hence it is said, “if thou buy an Hebrew servant”, etc. (⁽¹²⁾Exodus 21:2). A Hebrew servant was sold either against his will, or with it; if a man committed a theft, and he had not wherewith to make restoration, the sanhedrim or magistrates said him: if he was exceeding poor, the law gave him liberty to sell himself; but he might not sell himself as long as he had anything left, even a covering; and after that was gone, he might sell himself; and he was bought with silver or the value of silver or by contract or bond^{f665};

and when he hath served thee six years, thou shall let him go free from thee; or “from with thee”^{f666}; from being with thee, from being in thy house, as well as from being in thy service; he was to be dismissed, so as to go where he pleased, and work for himself, or another, as he thought fit;

but your fathers hearkened not unto me, neither inclined their ear; to obey the laws of God, and particularly this concerning servants. This is not to be understood of the fathers with whom the covenant was first made, and to whom this law was first given; but their posterity in later times, who yet lived long before the present generation, and so might with great propriety be called their fathers; and by which it appears that this law had been long neglected.

Ver. 15. *And ye were now turned*, etc.] Or, “today indeed ye were turned”^{f667} some little time ago, indeed, it must be owned, that ye turned from the evil ways of your fathers, for which you were to be commended, as having acted a better part than they:

and had done right in my sight; what was acceptable to the Lord, approved of by him, being agreeably to his law; and it would have been well if they had continued so doing:

in proclaiming liberty every man to his neighbour; for a manservant, or maidservant, was his neighbour, and to be treated as such, and loved as himself, especially a Hebrew one, of the same nation and religion; and not to be used as a slave, or retained for ever in bondage:

and ye made a covenant before me in the house which is called by my name; this circumstance is mentioned as an aggravation of the breach of the covenant they had made, to dismiss their servants according to law; it was made in a very solemn manner, in the presence of God, appealing to him as a witness; it was done in the temple, a sacred place, devoted to him and his worship; which was called by his name, the temple of the Lord, and where his name was called upon, and where were the symbols of his presence.

Ver. 16. *But ye turned and polluted my name*, etc.] Changed their minds, and turned from their resolutions they had entered into, and the good ways they were walking in, and returned to their former evil practices; and so polluted the name of God by taking it in vain, and breaking the covenant they had agreed to:

and caused every man his servant, and every man his handmaid, whom he had set at liberty at pleasure: or, “according to their soul”^{f668}; according to their souls’ desire, what was very agreeable and acceptable to them, and gave them a real pleasure; which did not last long, since they caused them

to return to their former service and bondage under them:

and brought them into subjection: forced them to come back to their houses, and into their service, and be subject to them, and obey their commands as formerly:

to be unto you for servants and for handmaids; to do the business of such, as they had done before.

Ver. 17. *Therefore thus saith the Lord*, etc.] This being the case, and this their crime, which was provoking to the Lord;

ye have not hearkened unto me in proclaiming liberty everyone to his brother, and everyone to his neighbour; for though they did proclaim liberty, they did not act according to it; they did not give the liberty they proclaimed, at least they did not continue so to do; as soon almost as they

had granted the favour, they took it away again; and because they did not persevere in well doing, it is reckoned by the Lord as not done at all:

behold, I proclaim liberty for you, saith the Lord; or rather against them; he dismissed them from his service, care, and protection, and consigned them to other lords and masters: he gave them up

to the sword, to the pestilence, and to the famine; to rule over them; and gave them liberty to make havoc of them, and destroy them, that what was left by the one might be seized on by the other:

and I will make you to be removed into all the kingdoms of the earth: or, “for a commotion”^{f669}; to be moved, and wander from place to place in great fear and terror, not knowing where to settle or live comfortably. This was a liberty to go about in foreign countries where they could, for relief and shelter, being banished from their own land; but this was a liberty very miserable and uncomfortable; and indeed no other than captivity and bondage; and so it is threatened that what remained of them, who were not destroyed with the sword of the Chaldeans, or perished not by pestilence and famine, should be carried captive, and be miserable vagabonds in each of the kingdoms and nations of the world.

Ver. 18. *And I will give the men that have transgressed my covenant*, etc.] The covenant the king, princes, and all the people made, to let their servants go free, is called the Lord’s covenant, because made in his name, in his presence, and before him as a witness; and very probably the calf that was cut in pieces on this occasion, after mentioned, was sacrificed to him, which made him a party concerned; unless this is to be understood of the covenant of God in general made with Israel on Mount Sinai; and so is distinct from the other covenant, which may be more especially designed in the next clause:

which have not performed the words of the covenant made before me; did not perform what they promised to do in the presence of the Lord, as in (²³⁴¹⁵Jeremiah 34:15);

when they cut the calf in twain, and passed between the parts thereof; which was a rite or custom used in making and confirming covenants; a calf, or some other creature, were cut in pieces, and the parts laid in order, and the covenantees passed between these parts; signifying thereby, that if they did not fulfil the engagements they entered into, they imprecated to be cut to pieces as that creature was. Some footsteps of this practice are to be

seen as early as the times of Abraham, (¹⁵⁹Genesis 15:9,10,17); upon which place Jarchi observes, that it was the way of making a covenant to divide a beast, and pass between the parts of it; and this custom obtained among the Chaldeans, Greeks, and Romans; or what was very similar to it. Cyril^{f670} says this custom was by the Chaldeans, who might take it from Abraham. A people called Molotti had something of this kind among them: for they confirmed the covenants they swore to by cutting oxen into little pieces^{f671}; and Homer seems to have a respect to such a practice when he says that the priest, after he had prayed to Apollo, slew the sacrifice, and flayed it, and cut it in pieces, making duplicates^{f672}, alike to one another. Cicero^{f673} is thought to have the same custom in view; and likewise Virgil^{f674}, when he speaks of the covenant made between Romulus and Tatius king of the Sabines, whom he represents as standing armed before the altar of Jupiter, holding caps, and joining in covenant by killing a swine, and cutting it in pieces; in like manner Livy^{f675} describes the covenant made between the Romans and Albanians, when the herald at arms, reciting the conditions, called aloud

““hear, O Jupiter”, etc.”

if the Roman people first fail in observing these,

“strike them as I now strike this hog; and so much the more, as thou art more able and mighty;”

which being said, he struck it with a flint stone; hence the phrase, “ferire foedus”, to strike or make a covenant; and, in allusion to the above custom, making a covenant is commonly called, in the Old Testament, “cutting a covenant”. Some versions, as the Syriac interpreter, render it, “I will make the men as the calf they cut in twain”, etc. they shall be cut in pieces as that is; (see ¹⁶⁵Matthew 24:51).

Ver. 19. *The princes of Judah, and the princes of Jerusalem*, etc.] Here is a particular enumeration of the persons that had made the covenant, and transgressed it, and that should suffer for so doing; the princes of Judah, distinguished from the princes of Jerusalem, design such princes as lived without Jerusalem, in the cities of Judah, and presided over them, though now at Jerusalem, having fled thither, upon the invasion of the king of Babylon, for their safety; as the princes of Jerusalem, or the magistrates of that city, are distinguished from the princes of the blood, and from the courtiers, both in this and (¹⁶²Jeremiah 34:21);

the eunuchs, and the priests, and all the people of the land; that is, as many as had got into Jerusalem to secure themselves from the common enemy: the “priests” also were concerned herein, who had menservants, and maidservants, as well as others; and, besides, were persons doubtless concerned in drawing up the covenant and the form of an oath, as well as in slaying the sacrifice, and cutting it into pieces, and laying the parts in order: it is more surprising that there should be “eunuchs” here; that such should be in the court of the king of Judah, and have offices in it, and preside in them, as among the Gentiles. The Targum renders the word “princes”:

which passed between the parts of the calf; signifying their assent to the covenant, and wishing they might be so used if they broke it.

Ver. 20. *I will even give them into the hand of their enemies*, etc.] The Chaldeans, who were the enemies of the Jews, that were come from a far country to invade, dispossess, ravage, and plunder them; and what can be a greater punishment than to be given up into an enemy’s hand, to be in his power, and at his mercy?

and into the hand of them that seek their life; not their wealth and substance only, but their lives also; nothing less will content them:

and their dead bodies shall be for meat unto the fowls of the heaven, and to the beasts of the earth; not only such should be the cruelty of their enemies that sought their lives, that they should slay them with the sword, and give them no quarter; but such their inhumanity, that they should not suffer their carcasses to be buried, but leave them exposed to birds and beasts of prey; of the princes of Judah, (see ²⁶²⁰Jeremiah 52:10).

Ver. 21. *And Zedekiah king of Judah, and his princes*, etc.] These were either the princes of the blood, the sons of Zedekiah, and his nobles and courtiers, as distinct from the princes in (²⁶⁴⁹Jeremiah 34:19); these shall not be spared, neither the king, nor his sons, nor those of the privy council: but those

will I give I to the hands of their enemies, and into the hand of them that seek their life; as in (²⁶⁴⁰Jeremiah 34:20);

and into the hand of the king of Babylon’s army; or, “even into the hand”¹⁶⁷⁶ etc. and so this is an explanation of the former, and shows who

their enemies were, and those that sought their life. The accomplishment of this may be seen in (²⁶¹⁹Jeremiah 52:9-11);

which are gone up from you; departed from Jerusalem, as the Chaldean army did upon hearing that Pharaoh king of Egypt was marching with his army to raise the siege of Jerusalem; upon which they left it, and went forth to meet him; and this encouraged the wicked Jews to break their covenant, and reduce their servants to bondage again, they had let go free; (see ²⁶¹⁶Jeremiah 37:5).

Ver. 22. *Behold, I will command, saith the Lord, and cause them to return to this city*, etc.] The Lord of hosts, or armies, was “Generalissimo” of Nebuchadnezzar’s army, had it at his command, and could direct it as he pleased, and order it to march and countermarch as he thought fit: it was under the direction of his providence that it departed from Jerusalem, to try the inhabitants of it; and now, by a secret instinct, he would so powerfully work upon it, and by the ordering of external causes so manage it, that it should return to Jerusalem again, and carry on the siege with redoubled rigour:

and they shall fight against it, and take it, and burn it with fire; they fought against it by shooting arrows from their bows, casting stones from their engines, and by beating down the walls with their battering rams; with which making breaches, they entered in and took the city; and burnt the temple, palaces, and other houses, with fire; of all which see the accomplishment in (²⁶¹⁴Jeremiah 52:4,7,13);

and I will make the cities of Judah a desolation without an inhabitant: many of them were already; the king of Babylon having taken, ravaged, and plundered them before he came to Jerusalem; and whither the inhabitants of them, that escaped the sword, fled for security; and others of them, that were not, now should be made desolate upon the taking of Jerusalem, as Lachish and Azekah, (²⁶¹⁷Jeremiah 34:7); which should fall into the hands of the enemy, and the inhabitants thereof be forced to flee into other countries, or would be carried captive; so that they would be without any, or have but few to dwell in them.