

CHAPTER 37

INTRODUCTION TO JEREMIAH 37

This chapter makes mention of the reign of Zedekiah, and what happened in it; of his message to Jeremiah, to pray for the kingdom; of the king of Babylonian's raising the siege of Jerusalem, on hearing the king of Egypt was coming to its relief; of the assurance the prophet gave that the Chaldean army would return again, and destroy the city; of the prophet's attempt to depart the city, his imprisonment, conversation with Zedekiah, and his clemency to him. A short account is given of Zedekiah, and of the disobedience of him and his people to the word of the Lord, (^{2450B}Jeremiah 37:1,2); of the message sent by him to the prophet to pray for them, (^{2450B}Jeremiah 37:3); the time, when Jeremiah was at liberty, and the siege of Jerusalem was raised, (^{2450B}Jeremiah 37:4,5); the prophet's answer to them from the Lord, assuring them the Chaldeans would return and burn the city, (^{2450B}Jeremiah 37:6-10); the prophet attempting to go out of the city is stopped, and charged as a deserter to the Chaldeans; is had before the princes, and beat and imprisoned, (^{24571B}Jeremiah 37:11-15); but the king sending for him out of prison, and having some private discourse with him, upon the prophet's expostulation and intercession, his confinement was mitigated, and bread allowed him, (^{24576B}Jeremiah 37:16-21).

Ver. 1. *And King Zedekiah the son of Josiah reigned*, etc.] The brother of Jehoiakim, whose untimely death, and want of burial, are prophesied of in the preceding chapter. The name of Zedekiah was Mattaniah before he was king; his name was changed by the king of Babylon, who made him king, (^{12247B}2 Kings 24:17);

instead of Coniah the son of Jehoiakim: the same with Jehoiakim, or jeconiah, called Coniah by way of contempt; he reigned but three months, and so was not reckoned as a king, not being confirmed by the king of Babylon, but was carried captive by him, and his uncle placed in his stead:

whom Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylon made king in the land of Judah; to whom he became tributary, and swore homage and fealty, (^{14663B}2 Chronicles 36:13).

Ver. 2. *But neither he, nor his servants, nor the people of the land,* etc.] The king, his courtiers and subjects the royal family, nobility, and common people; they were all degenerate and corrupt. Jarchi observes, that Jehoiakim was wicked, and his people righteous; and that Zedekiah was righteous, and his people wicked but he seems to found his character on that single action of taking Jeremiah out of prison; whereas, according to this account, king and people were all wicked: for neither one or other

did hearken unto the words of the Lord, which he spake by Jeremiah the prophet; neither those which were spoken in the former nor in the latter part of his reign, concerning the destruction of the city by the Chaldeans. This short count is given to show how just it was to give up such a prince and people to ruin.

Ver. 3. *And Zedekiah the king sent Jehucal the son of Shelemiah, and Zephaniah the son of Maaseiah the priest,* etc.] That is, Zephaniah the priest, as the accents shew; though his father Maaseiah was doubtless a priest too; according to the Syriac version, both Jehucal, called Jucal, (²⁴⁸⁰Jeremiah 38:1); and Zephaniah, were priests; since it reads in the plural number, “priests”: these the king sent as messengers

to the Prophet Jeremiah, saying, pray now unto the Lord our God for us. This message was sent either upon the rumour of the Chaldeans coming against Jerusalem, as some think; or rather when it had departed from the city, and was gone to meet the army of the king of Egypt; so that this petition to the prophet was to pray that the king of Egypt alight get the victory over the Chaldean army, and that that might not return unto them. Thus wicked men will desire the prayers of good men in times of distress, when their words, their cautions, admonitions, exhortations, and prayers too, are despised by them at another time.

Ver. 4. *Now Jeremiah came in and went out among the people,* etc.] Was at full liberty, and could go out of the city, and come in, when he pleased; or go into any part of it, and converse with the people, and prophesy to them; which he could not do in the latter part of Jehoiakim’s reign, who sent persons after him and Baruch to take them, and they were obliged to hide themselves, yea, the Lord hid them, (²⁴⁸¹Jeremiah 36:19,26); but now he was under no restraint, as least as yet:

for they had not put him into prison; not yet; they afterwards did, (²⁴⁷⁵Jeremiah 37:15).

Ver. 5. *Then Pharaoh's army was come forth out of Egypt,* etc.] At the time the above message was sent to Jeremiah. Zedekiah, though he had took an oath of homage to the king of Babylon, rebelled against him, and entered into a league with the king of Egypt, to whom he sent for succour in his distress; and who, according to agreement, sent his army out of Egypt to break up the siege of Jerusalem; for though the king of Egypt came no more in person out of his land, after his defeat at Carchemish by Nebuchadnezzar, in the fourth year of Jehoiakim, (^{244D}Jeremiah 46:2 ^{1240E}2 Kings 24:7); yet he sent his army to the relief of Jerusalem:

and when the Chaldeans that besieged Jerusalem; which was in the ninth year of Zedekiah's reign that they first besieged it, and is the time here referred to, (^{2490E}Jeremiah 39:1);

heard tidings of them; the Egyptian army, and of its coming out against them; the rumour of which might be spread by the Jews themselves, to intimidate them; or which might come to them by spies they had in all parts to give them intelligence of what was doing; and what they had was good and certain, and on which they acted:

they departed from Jerusalem: not through fear, but to meet the Egyptian army, and give them battle, before they could be joined by any considerable force of the Jews. It was at this time the covenant was broken about the manumission of servants, (^{2490E}Jeremiah 34:10); which conduct ill agrees with their desire of the prophet's prayer.

Ver. 6. *Then came the word of the Lord unto the Prophet Jeremiah,* etc.] At the time when the messengers came to him from the king to pray for them; for (^{2450E}Jeremiah 37:4,5) are to be included in a parenthesis:

saying; as follows: which is an answer to the messengers.

Ver. 7. *Thus saith the Lord, the God of Israel,* etc.] Which are the usual titles and characters the Lord takes to himself, when he spake by the prophet; (see ^{244D}Jeremiah 34:2,13);

thus shall ye say to the king of Judah, that sent you unto me, to inquire of me; in an oracular way; for by this it seems that they were not only sent to desire the prophet to pray for them, but to obtain an oracle from the Lord, confirming it to them, that the Chaldean army which was gone would not return any more; this they were willing to believe, but wanted to have a confirmation of it from the Lord; and so the Targum,

“to seek an oracle from me;”

or to ask instruction or doctrine from me: now these messengers are bid to go back and tell the king, his nobles, and all the people of the land, what follows:

behold, Pharaoh's army, which is come forth to help you, shall return to Egypt, into their own land; being afraid to face the Chaldean army; or being defeated and driven back by it. Josephus^{f699} says there was a battle fought between the Egyptians and Chaldeans, in which the latter were conquerors, and put the former to flight, and drove them out of all Syria. Jarchi relates a fable, how that the Egyptian army came by ships, and that at sea they saw strange appearances, upon which they said one to another, what means this? they replied, these are our fathers, whom the fathers of those we are going to help drowned in the sea; and immediately returned to their own land.

Ver. 8. *And the Chaldeans shall come again*, etc.] To Jerusalem, after they have defeated or drove back the Egyptian army:

and fight against this city; with fresh rigour and resolution; being exasperated by the methods taken to oblige them to raise the siege:

and take it, and burn it with fire; as they did, (²³⁰⁸Jeremiah 39:8).

Ver. 9. *Thus saith the Lord, deceive not yourselves*, etc.] Or, “your souls”; with a false opinion, a vain persuasion and belief of the departure of the Chaldeans never to return; which they would have confirmed by the Lord; or, “lift not up your souls”^{f700}; with vain hopes of the above things: self or soul deception is a dreadful thing; and sad is the disappointment when men are elated with a false and vain hope:

saying, the Chaldeans shall surely depart from us; they had departed from Jerusalem; but they were persuaded they would depart out of the land of Judea, and go into their own land, the land of Babylon, from whence they came, and never return more:

for they shall not depart; out of the land of Judea, into their own land; at least not till they had done the work they were sent about.

Ver. 10. *For though ye had smitten the whole army of the Chaldeans that fight against you*, etc.] Supposing the whole army of the Chaldeans had been vanquished and slain by the Egyptians, the confederates of the Jews;

or should they be slain by them in a second siege of them, excepting a few next mentioned:

and there remained [but] wounded men among them; and supposing that those of them that were left, that were not slain, were everyone of them wounded men, and so disabled for fighting, as might be thought:

[yet] should they rise up every man in his tent; where he was smitten, and lay wounded; or where he was carried to be cured of his wounds; such should rise up like persons from the dead almost, and fight with such strength and spirit, that they should soon take the city, though in such a condition:

and burn this city with fire; this being a thing determined by the Lord, and nothing should hinder it; for it matters not what the instruments are; though ever so impotent and disabled, they shall do the work allotted to them. Wherefore all the hopes of the Jews, founded upon the departure of the Chaldean army, were vain ones.

Ver. 11. *And it came to pass, that when the army of the Chaldeans were broken up from Jerusalem*, etc.] When the siege of the city was broken up and raised: or, when they “went up from Jerusalem”^{f701}; were gone from it;

for fear of Pharaoh’s army; or rather “because of Pharaoh’s army”^{f702}. The word “fear” is not in the text; nor did they leave Jerusalem for fear of his army, but to meet it, and give it battle, as they did; however, by this means there was a freer egress and regress from and to the city.

Ver. 12. *Then Jeremiah went forth out of Jerusalem*, etc.] At least he attempted to do so, taking the opportunity of the siege of the city being broke up: what were his reasons for it are not certain; whether that he might not be put into prison, which he might fear for what he had just prophesied of concerning the return of the Chaldean army, that should take the city, and burn it; or to save himself from the destruction which he was sure would come upon it; or because he found he could do no good by his preaching and prophesying in it: however his view was

to go into the land of Benjamin; his native country, the tribe he belonged to; and very likely to Anathoth in that tribe, where he was born, and had lived. Josephus^{f703} is express for it, which he says was twenty furlongs from Jerusalem:

to separate himself thence in the midst of the people: or, “to slip away thence in the midst of the people”^{f704}; the siege being raised, the people that had fled to Jerusalem for safety crowded out again to go into their own countries, which the prophet thought to take the advantage of, and slip away in a crowd unobserved; though the words may be rendered, “to take part from thence in the midst of the people”^{f705}; either to take part of the spoil left there by the Chaldean army; or with the priests there, of what belonged to them, of whose number he was, (~~200~~ Jeremiah 1:1). The Targum is,

“to divide an inheritance which he had there in the midst of the people;”

and to the same sense are the Vulgate Latin and Syriac versions^{f706}.

Ver. 13. *And when he was in the gate of Benjamin,* etc.] One of the gates of the city so called, either because it stood in the tribe of Benjamin, as part of Jerusalem did; or because it led to the land of Benjamin, whither the prophet was going: and just as he had got to that gate, and was going through it, he was stopped by

a captain of the ward there; who was placed at this gate, that none should go out to the Chaldeans, according to Kimchi; but rather he was the keeper of the gate, not at this time only, but always; Josephus^{f707} calls him one of the rulers:

whose name [was] Irijah, the son of Shelemiah, the son of Hananiah: the grandson as some think, of that Hananiah the false prophet, of whose death Jeremiah the prophet prophesied, (~~248~~ Jeremiah 28:16); and the Jews have a tradition that Hananiah ordered his son Shelemiah, that if he ever had an opportunity to bring Jeremiah to ruin, to do it; and the same charge Shelemiah gave to his son Irijah, who, having this opportunity, laid hold on him; Jarchi, Kimchi, and Abarbanel, make mention of it:

and he took Jeremiah the prophet, saying, thou fallest away to the Chaldeans; it looks as if, though he might not have a family grudge against him, as the Jews suggest, yet had a hatred of him for his prophecies, and therefore fixes this calumny on him; for otherwise, why did he suffer the people to pass in great numbers without any such charge?

Ver. 14. *Then said Jeremiah, [it is] false,* etc.] Or a “falsehood”^{f708}; as undoubtedly it was;

I fall not away to the Chaldeans; for the Chaldean army was gone from the city; nor did Jeremiah like so well to be with an idolatrous people; for after the city was taken, when Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard gave him his choice, either to go with him to Babylon, where he promised to take care of him; or to go to Gedaliah, who was made governor of Judah; he chose rather to be with him, and his poor company:

but he hearkened not to him; would not hear his defence, or however would not give any credit to it, being unwilling to let slip this opportunity of doing him ill will:

so Irijah took Jeremiah, and brought him to the princes; the princes of Zedekiah's court, or the princes of the people, the civil magistrates; or it may be the great sanhedrim, who he knew had no good disposition towards the prophet.

Ver. 15. *Wherefore the princes were wrath with Jeremiah*, etc.] For attempting to depart the city, and go off to the Chaldeans, as Irijah had suggested to them, and to whom they hearkened; and perhaps would not hear what the prophet had to say for himself; and if they did, it had no weight with them:

and smote him; either with their fists, or with rods, or a scourge; perhaps he underwent the punishment of forty stripes save one, according to the law; and they may be said to smite or beat him, because they ordered it to be done:

and put him in prison, in the house of Jonathan the scribe; or secretary of state; such an one as Elishama was in Jehoiakim's time, who had a house or apartment at court as he had, who was now dead or removed, (²⁸⁶²Jeremiah 36:12);

for they had made that the prison; which had not used to be; but by the courtiers, and with the consent of this scribe, secretary, or chancellor, it was made a prison; not for common malefactors, but for state prisoners; and a bad prison it seems it was. Very probably this scribe was a very cruel wicked man, who used those very ill that were his prisoners; and indeed, if he had not been of such a character, he would scarcely have suffered his house to have been made a prison.

Ver. 16. *When Jeremiah was entered into the dungeon*, etc.] Or, "into the house of the pit"^{f709}; a dungeon, like a pit or ditch, dark, dirty, or dismal:

and into the cabins; or “cells”^{f710}; into a place more inward than the cells, as the Targum; into the innermost and worst part in all the prison, where a man could not well lie, sit, nor stand:

and Jeremiah had remained there many days; in this very uncomfortable condition; very probably till the Chaldean army returned to Jerusalem, as he foretold it should.

Ver. 17. *Then Zedekiah the king sent and took him out*, etc.] After Jeremiah had been in prison for some time; and the Chaldean army being returned, and having renewed their siege, the king is frightened; and knowing the prophet was in prison, sends a messenger to take him out from thence, and bring him to him; which was accordingly done:

and the king asked him secretly in his house; he took him into some private apartment, and there alone conferred with him, for fear of his princes and courtiers; who he knew bore no good will to the prophet, and would be ready to charge him with timidity;

and said unto him,

is there [any] word from the Lord? he means any particular word of prophecy, any late one, and what concerned their present circumstances, showing what would be the issue of the return of the Chaldean army; for prophecy did not come at all times, nor even according to the will of man, but always according to the will of God, and when he thought fit; this the king knew very well, and he wanted a comfortable word, some good news of the failure of the present attempt:

and Jeremiah said, there is; but not such an one as he wanted; it was of the same strain with the former, and confirmed all that the prophet had from time to time told him and his predecessor what would certainly be the case:

for, said he, thou shall be delivered into the hand of the king of Babylon; which was boldly and faithfully said, to be said to the face of the king himself, risking his life in so doing; or, at least, exposing himself to severer treatment, if severer could be used.

Ver. 18. *Moreover, Jeremiah said unto King Zedekiah*, etc.] Having this opportunity with him alone, and perhaps observing the king was melted and softened with what he had said; however, finding liberty in his own

mind, he enlarges his discourse, and freely expostulates with him in the following manner:

what have I offended against thee, or against thy servants, or against this people, that ye have put me in prison? or, “what have I sinned?” have I been guilty of treason against thee, O king? or of scandal and defamation of any of thy nobles and courtiers? have I done any injury to any of the king’s subjects? has there been any falsehood in my prophecies? has not everything appeared to be true that I have spoken, concerning the coming of the Chaldeans to invade the land, and besiege the city? and concerning the return of the Chaldean army when broken up? why then should I be cast into prison, and detained there? is it not a clear case that what I have said comes from the Lord? and therefore ought not to be used in this manner.

Ver. 19. *Where [are] now your prophets that prophesied unto you,* etc.] Your false prophets, as the Targum; what is become of their prophecies? where is the truth of them, to which general credit has been given? where are they? let them appear and defend themselves, if they can, from the charge of lying, and of being false prophets? or where are they? tacitly suggesting the different circumstances of him and them; he, who was a true prophet, was laid in a prison; they, who were false prophets, were caressed in the palaces of the king and his nobles, and in favour with the people in general:

saying, the king of Babylon shall not come against you, nor against this land? gave out that the king of Babylon would never invade the land of Judea, or besiege the city of Jerusalem, which proved false; and still they had the front to say, that when the siege was raised, he would never come again; whereas he was then returned to it, and was now besieging it; so that here were notorious falsehoods delivered out by them.

Ver. 20. *Therefore hear now, one pray thee, O my lord the king,* etc.] When the prophet spoke in the name of the Lord, and the words of the Lord, it was with great boldness and majesty; but when he spoke for himself, and on his own behalf, it was with great submission, as it became a subject to his king; and whom he owns as his sovereign lord, though a wicked prince, and whose destruction he knew was at hand:

let my supplication be accepted before thee; or, “fall before thee”: (see  Jeremiah 36:7); which was as follows:

that thou cause me not to return to the house of Jonathan the scribe; but that he might be discharged from his confinement; or however be removed into another prison, not so uncomfortable and disagreeable as this man's house or prison was; and which perhaps was still the worse through his cruel and ill natured carriage to him; and which all together endangered his life: wherefore he adds,

lest I die there; for though he had continued there many days, yet the place was so exceedingly noisome, that he thought he could not long continue there, was he remanded back to it.

Ver. 21. *Then Zedekiah the king commanded that they should commit Jeremiah into the court of the prison*, etc.] He did not think fit to discharge him entirely, lest it should give offence to the princes, who had committed him; but he ordered him to be put in a court belonging to the prison, where he might breathe in a freer air, and have liberty of walking to and fro, where his friends might be admitted to come and see him:

and that they should give him daily a piece of bread out of the bakers' street; it seems there was a street in Jerusalem so called, where the bakers lived; and perhaps the king's bakers; who had orders to deliver to the prophet every day a piece or loaf of bread, as much as was sufficient for a man; or, however, as much as the scarcity of provisions in a siege would allow. Kimchi makes mention of a Midrash, which interprets this of bread made of bran, which was sold without the palace; as if it was coarser bread than what was eaten at court:

until all the bread in the city was spent; that is, as long as there was any. These were the king's orders:

thus Jeremiah remained in the court of the prison: until the city was taken; unless a small time that he was in the dungeon of Malchiah, out of which he was taken again, and restored to the court of the prison, and there continued; (see ²³¹⁶Jeremiah 38:6,13, 28).