

# **4. ISRAEL MUST LEARN TO LISTEN**

**JEREMIAH 34-35**

<sup>1</sup>The word that came to Jeremiah from YHWH, when King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon and all his army and all the kingdoms of the earth and all the peoples under his dominion were fighting against Jerusalem and all its cities:

<sup>2</sup>"Thus says YHWH, the God of Israel: Go and speak to King Zedekiah of Judah and say to him: Thus says YHWH: I am going to give this city into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall burn it with fire. <sup>3</sup>And you yourself shall not escape from his hand, but shall surely be captured and handed over to him; you shall see the king of Babylon eye to eye and speak with him face to face; and you shall go to Babylon. <sup>4</sup>Yet hear the word of YHWH, O King Zedekiah of Judah! Thus says YHWH concerning you: You shall not die by the sword; <sup>5</sup>you shall die in peace. And as fires were lit for your ancestors, the earlier kings who preceded you, so they shall be lit for you and lament for you, saying, "Alas, lord!" For I have spoken the word, says YHWH. <sup>6</sup>Then the prophet Jeremiah spoke all these words to Zedekiah king of Judah, in Jerusalem, <sup>7</sup>when the army of the king of Babylon was fighting against Jerusalem and against all the cities of Judah that were left, Lachish and Azekah; for these were the only fortified cities of Judah that remained.

<sup>8</sup>The word that came to Jeremiah from YHWH, after King Zedekiah had made a covenant with all the people in Jerusalem to make a proclamation of liberty to them, <sup>9</sup>that all should set free their Hebrew slaves, male and female, so that no one should hold another Judean in slavery. <sup>10</sup>And they obeyed, all the officials and all the people who had entered into the covenant that all would set free their slaves, male or female, so that they would not be enslaved again; they obeyed and set them free. <sup>11</sup>But afterward they turned around and took back the male and female slaves they had set free, and brought them again into subjection as slaves.

The setting is the beginning of Babylon's invasion of Judah and the siege of Jerusalem (early 588; see verses 1 and 7). The content reveals the interests of a post-exilic community.

Verses 2-3 return to oracles from Jeremiah with which we are familiar: Jerusalem will be captured and burnt, and King Zedekiah will be taken into exile in Babylon.

The scroll indicates that Jeremiah's messages to Zedekiah changed as the siege developed, and Zedekiah failed to heed the prophetic word (compare 21:1-7; 37:3-10; 37:17-21; 38:14-28). What actually happened when Jerusalem fell in 587 is recounted in Jeremiah 39:5-7; 52:10-11; and 2Kings 5:7.

Verses 4-5 suggest that at the beginning of the siege Jeremiah saw the possibility of Zedekiah enjoying a peaceful burial in Jerusalem with all the appropriate pomp and ceremony due to a king. This was conditional on Zedekiah making the right religious and political decisions.

Verses 8-22 describe a commitment to release slaves which the inhabitants of Jerusalem made, probably in January 588, at the beginning of the siege) and then reneged on, probably when the Egyptian army broke the siege (for a short period) a few months later.

This act of perfidy is linked here with laws found in the Torah (see Exodus 21:2; Deuteronomy 15:12).

How can they enslave each other when YHWH's act in the Exodus was a liberation of slaves?

The catastrophe of 587 is presented as divine punishment for their failure to carry out their commitment.

The dividing of the calf (see Genesis 15:9-10) was a way of calling down upon oneself the same fate in the event of failing to honour a covenant.

The final words of verse 21 refers to the temporary withdrawal of the Babylonian army because of the intervention of Egypt. Soon afterwards the siege recommenced and the city fell in mid 598.

<sup>12</sup>The word of YHWH came to Jeremiah from YHWH: <sup>13</sup>Thus says YHWH, the God of Israel: I myself made a covenant with your ancestors when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, saying, <sup>14</sup>"Every seventh year each of you must set free any Hebrews who have been sold to you and have served you six years; you must set them free from your service." But your ancestors did not listen to me or incline their ears to me. <sup>15</sup>You yourselves recently repented and did what was right in my sight by proclaiming liberty to one another, and you made a covenant before me in the house that is called by my name; <sup>16</sup>but then you turned around and profaned my name when each of you took back your male and female slaves, whom you had set free according to their desire, and you brought them again into subjection to be your slaves. <sup>17</sup>Therefore, thus says YHWH: You have not obeyed me by granting a release to your neighbours and friends; I am going to grant a release to you, says YHWH – a release to the sword, to pestilence, and to famine. I will make you a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth. <sup>18</sup>And those who transgressed my covenant and did not keep the terms of the covenant that they made before me, I will make like the calf when they cut it in two and passed between its parts: <sup>19</sup>the officials of Judah, the officials of Jerusalem, the eunuchs, the priests, and all the people of the land who passed between the parts of the calf <sup>20</sup>shall be handed over to their enemies and to those who seek their lives. Their corpses shall become food for the birds of the air and the wild animals of the earth. <sup>21</sup>And as for King Zedekiah of Judah and his officials, I will hand them over to their enemies and to those who seek their lives, to the army of the king of Babylon, which has withdrawn from you. <sup>22</sup>I am going to command, says YHWH, and will bring them back to this city; and they will fight against it, and take it, and burn it with fire. The towns of Judah I will make a desolation without inhabitant.

<sup>1</sup>The word that came to Jeremiah from YHWH in the days of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah: <sup>2</sup>Go to the house of the Rechabites, and speak with them, and bring them to the house of YHWH, into one of the chambers; then offer them wine to drink. <sup>3</sup>So I took Jaazaniah son of Jeremiah son of Habazziniah, and his brothers, and all his sons, and the whole house of the Rechabites. <sup>4</sup>I brought them to the house of YHWH into the chamber of the sons of Hanan son of Igdaliah, the man of God, which was near the chamber of the officials, above the chamber of Maaseiah son of Shallum, keeper of the threshold. <sup>5</sup>Then I set before the Rechabites pitchers full of wine, and cups; and I said to them, "Have some wine."

<sup>6</sup>But they answered, "We will drink no wine, for our ancestor Jonadab son of Rechab commanded us, 'You shall never drink wine, neither you nor your children; <sup>7</sup>nor shall you ever build a house, or sow seed; nor shall you plant a vineyard, or even own one; but you shall live in tents all your days, that you may live many days in the land where you reside.' <sup>8</sup>We have obeyed the charge of our ancestor Jonadab son of Rechab in all that he commanded us, to drink no wine all our days, ourselves, our wives, our sons, or our daughters, <sup>9</sup>and not to build houses to live in. We have no vineyard or field or seed; <sup>10</sup>but we have lived in tents, and have obeyed and done all that our ancestor Jonadab commanded us.

<sup>11</sup>But when King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon came up against the land, we said, 'Come, and let us go to Jerusalem for fear of the army of the Chaldeans and the army of the Arameans.' That is why we are living in Jerusalem."

We know nothing of the nomadic Rechabite community apart from this account. Their founder, Jehonadab, is mentioned in 2Kings 10:15-23, and in 1Chronicles 2:55 we hear of 'the House of Rechab'. They abstained from wine, lived in tents and did not engage in agriculture.

Just before the siege, and just before the death of Jehoiakim, Nebuchadrezzar dispatched bands of Chaldeans, Arameans, Ammonites and Moabites to harass Judah (2Kings 24:2). This emergency forced the Rechabites to take refuge in Jerusalem, and so move out of their tents, but they refused the temptation to break their vows.

After a thorough examination of the text of chapter 35, McKane writes (page 895):

If the assumption is made (and this is my assumption) that the prophet Jeremiah is responsible for most of the poetry in chapters 1-25, I cannot conceive that an individual capable of writing poetry which is so full of feeling, so economical and taut (e.g. 9:9-10; 13:15-17; 15:5-9) that grammar dissolves into interjection (4:19), would perpetuate such tedious prose.

As with much of the Jeremiah scroll (especially the second part), while Jeremiah himself is not the writer, it is possible that this account gives us access to an actual experience of Jeremiah, who found the fidelity of the Rechabites a useful example to contrast the infidelity of the general community to their covenant with YHWH.

The point of introducing this narrative here is to underline the infidelity of Judah. It is this that brought about the capture of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army in 597, and its eventual destruction ten years later.

Israel must learn to listen, to the Torah, but also to the word communicated through the prophets.

**<sup>12</sup>Then the word of YHWH came to Jeremiah:**

**<sup>13</sup>Thus says YHWH of hosts, the God of Israel: Go and say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, Can you not learn a lesson and obey my words? says YHWH.**

**<sup>14</sup>The command has been carried out that Jonadab son of Rechab gave to his descendants to drink no wine; and they drink none to this day, for they have obeyed their ancestor's command. But I myself have spoken to you persistently, and you have not obeyed me. <sup>15</sup>I have sent to you all my servants the prophets, sending them persistently, saying, 'Turn now everyone of you from your evil way, and amend your doings, and do not go after other gods to serve them, and then you shall live in the land that I gave to you and your ancestors.' But you did not incline your ear or obey me. <sup>16</sup>The descendants of Jonadab son of Rechab have carried out the command that their ancestor gave them, but this people has not obeyed me. <sup>17</sup>Therefore, thus says YHWH, the God of hosts, the God of Israel: I am going to bring on Judah and on all the inhabitants of Jerusalem every disaster that I have pronounced against them; because I have spoken to them and they have not listened, I have called to them and they have not answered.**

**<sup>18</sup>But to the house of the Rechabites Jeremiah said: Thus says YHWH of hosts, the God of Israel: Because you have obeyed the command of your ancestor Jonadab, and kept all his precepts, and done all that he commanded you, <sup>19</sup>therefore thus says YHWH of hosts, the God of Israel: Jonadab son of Rechab shall not lack a descendant to stand before me for all time.**

