

NOTES ON JEREMIAH 28:1-17

Richard D. Weis

The lectionary includes only excerpts from this chapter, but that excerpting undermines the integrity of the story in Jeremiah 28, and the whole story is important to understanding the excerpts. Thus the first important step in interpreting this passage. Therefore these notes will focus on the entire story, not the excerpts found in the Revised Common Lectionary. In addition, this story is the second act in a narrative that begins in Jeremiah 27, so it behooves you to read chapter 27 before setting to work on chapter 28. The events and dialogue of chapter 28 will make more sense if you have chapter 27 in mind.

The most important thing to understand this story in the time of Jeremiah is to forget how it turns out. We know that Hananiah was wrong and in the end Babylon destroyed Jerusalem, but when Jeremiah and Hananiah are having their debate about the future of Jerusalem and Judah, NO ONE – not Hananiah, not Jeremiah, not Zedekiah, not Nebuchadnezzar, knows which of the two prophets is right. So the debate is real, the options are real, and the audience who hears the two prophets has to decide which one to believe.

The debate between Jeremiah and Hananiah occurs during the reign of king Zedekiah. This means it follows the Babylonian capture of Jerusalem in 597 BCE. When the Babylonians captured Jerusalem on that occasion, they did not destroy it or the Temple. They deported king Jehoiachin and some of the leadership and levied a heavy tribute by taking many of the gold and silver objects from the Temple. They made Zedekiah, another descendant of David, king and let him rule under their supervision. The question before king and people in this period is whether to accept Babylonian rule and thus keep what they have – a Davidic king, the Temple, some of its equipment, and a degree of freedom and autonomy, or to resist to the max and try to throw off Babylonian rule through reliance on God's miraculous intervention since in ordinary military terms the Babylonians were a massively superior force. This is what Jeremiah and Hananiah are addressing.

In chapter 27 Jeremiah has already laid out his view, namely, that God has entrusted rule of the world to Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and therefore the way for Judah to live is to submit to Nebuchadnezzar because this is actually to submit to the rule of God. This in itself has problems because in Babylonian eyes to acknowledge the rule of the king of Babylon was to acknowledge the superiority of Babylon's chief god, Marduk, an obvious problem for any loyal follower of Israel's God. Jeremiah does not see things this way because he describes Nebuchadnezzar using a title reserved for the Davidic king, the servant of Yahweh. In Jeremiah's eyes to acknowledge the rule of Nebuchadnezzar is to acknowledge the rule of Yahweh, not Marduk, but also in Jeremiah's eyes the king of Babylon, a pagan, has now taken over the role of the king descended from David, namely, to be the instrument of God achieving God's purposes in the world. To his audience Jeremiah would have sounded like a heretic and a traitor, or more simply "crazy" (and he actually is called a crazy man by the author of a letter in chapter 29).

Hananiah on the other hand, comes from the perspective of hard-core Biblical theology such as we find throughout the Old Testament, namely, that God will always come to the aid of his chosen servant, the Davidic king (e.g., 2 Samuel 7, Psalm 2), that God will protect the holy city, God's dwelling place, Jerusalem (e.g., Psalm 46). He is so confident in God's trustworthiness and power that he "names it and claims it," i.e., that in two years the deported king, the other exiles, and the temple equipment taken to

Babylon in 597 will be back in Jerusalem in two years. This is so attractive and so in keeping with everyone's deeply held convictions about God that even Jeremiah hopes Hananiah is right.

To the audience standing in front of Jeremiah and Hananiah, Hananiah would have been much more believable because his prophecy agreed with all of the best theology of the day, theology that we still regard as part of an authoritative picture of God. Jeremiah even knows that his view of things is a hard sell, so he concludes the debate with a "sign." Among the prophets of the Old Testament a "sign" was a small and immediate demonstration of divine power and validation of prophetic insight that an audience could expect to see occur relatively soon. The idea was that if the sign came true, that validated the larger prophecy that require difficult changes and might take a long time to prove true. The "sign" gave people a basis for making the difficult leap to trust a message that at first glance would seem unworthy of credence. The "sign," of course is the prediction that Hananiah would be dead within a year, and the narrator faithfully tells us that indeed Hananiah died within two months, validating the reliability of Jeremiah's message. While some believed Jeremiah, after all someone preserved his speeches, the leadership and most of the people of Judah did not accept his view of things even after this sign. His view of things was really upside down from everything they had been taught and believed. It was too big a stretch.

The first readers of the book of Jeremiah are alive one to two generations after Jeremiah and Hananiah had this debate. They know what we know, namely, that Hananiah's prophecy did not come true, but rather the revolt it ultimately inspired led to the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple, the depopulation of Judah and the end of the rule of descendants of David.

Paradoxically, in this upside down world, Jeremiah's upside down theology and prophecy – that seemed so crazy in his day – sustained faith among the survivors of that total disaster. The disaster validated Jeremiah's prophecy. That had the effect of affirming that indeed God had appointed Nebuchadnezzar as God's servant to rule the world. Thus even though the deportees and those left in the land suffered under Babylonian rule, Jeremiah's theology allowed them to see that as God's rule, not Marduk's, so God was still in charge and thus they had reason to keep the faith and to hope in a future when God would restore them.