

May 22, 2022

The Bible Story Journey: The Fall of Jerusalem

Lamentations 2:1-3, 7-8, 12-13

To set the stage for today's story: King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon conquered Jerusalem and took everything of value back to Babylon with him, but he left the city and its great temple standing. It was stripped of its gold and silver, but otherwise intact. Along with the city's treasure, he also took back to Babylon all the powerful and educated and skilled Judeans, up to and including the king. These captives were the beginning of the Babylonian exile.

One of those exiles was a young Jerusalem priest. He was, I think it safe to say, an odd fish, but no one was more devout than he, or knew the scriptures better. So if he sometimes didn't answer when people spoke to him, or if at other times he talked too much and too fast, or if he wandered off alone into the desert at times, no one said anything. Then one day, in the fifth year of the exile, this young priest came back from the desert, and you could tell just by looking at him that something had happened. Then he opened his mouth.

I was I was by the River Chebar just out there and I was I saw I saw I saw the Lord. The Lord. The Lord like fire surrounded by fire by creatures of fire and the creatures of fire they had they had four faces a man a lion an ox an eagle and wings wings and eyes and eyes on the wings and hands they had hands have you ever looked at hands hands that make that create hands that serve they had hands and eyes and wings. And torches moved among the creatures of fire and wheels and wheels inside of wheels right and left and straight and tall and above the torches and wheels was a vast sky a firmament a dome of crystal and they had wings like thunder and they sounded like incense and smelled like song. And above them . . . like pure light . . . there was the Lord and I saw him I saw him and I fell on my face and I knew I had died. But then a spirit entered me and it was fire and it raised me and it gave me a scroll and a great voice that smelled of cedars in the heights called to me and said, "Son of Dirt! Son of Dirt! This is my word to exiled Israel. Eat it!" and I ate the scroll and it became me and I became it. I became God's word became it became it. I am Ezekiel, I am dirt, I am born of man, but now I am God's watchman, God's sign to Israel. I became God's word.

And then Ezekiel was silent. For weeks at a time, as if he no longer had words of his own, but only those given to him. That did not stop him from speaking in other ways, though. One day he took a sword into the marketplace of his small community of exiles, and with it he shaved his head. Then he divided his bloody hair into three piles. One of the piles he set on fire. One he began hacking at with the sword. The other he threw into the wind to scatter. Only a few stray hairs did he save, tucking them into his belt.

"Ezekiel, what are you doing?"

"These are the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Some will die in famine. Some will die by the sword. Some will be scattered to the winds. Maybe a few will remain."

Another time he went to the marketplace and began building a city out of mud bricks. The city had walls and a building in the middle that looked like the temple. People gathered to watch. Then Ezekiel took stones and smashed his mud brick city into dust.

“No, Ezekiel, that can’t happen. Not the City of God. Not the temple.” Ezekiel just looked them. “Ezekiel, there are prophets among us who are saying that God is about to return us to the land and restore the vessels of the temple.”

“Your prophets lie.”

“What makes you think you know more than a prophet? Are you a prophet?”

“I am a son of dirt. But I am a watchman. I am a sign.

For seven years, Ezekiel taught that God was about to destroy Jerusalem. Sometimes he went months in silence; other times he spoke in violent, unrestrained, angry, vulgar outpourings of barely coherent word salad. His words were shocking, extreme. For a century at least, since the time of the prophet Hosea, God’s messengers had compared idolatrous Israel to an unfaithful wife to the Lord. Ezekiel didn’t. He called Israel a “*Shut!* Spreading her legs at every street corner to every passerby!” His words. In a diagnostic manual of mental illness, I suspect you could find Ezekiel on most pages somewhere. It doesn’t matter. God chose him. He gave himself wholly to God, and God used him.

About the only thing about Ezekiel that softens his harsh persona was his love for his wife. He was passionately devoted to her, and she was desperately ill. In the eleventh year of the exile, God spoke to Ezekiel. “Son of dirt, I am about to take away the light of your eyes. Your wife is about to die. And I don’t want you to mourn.”

“What?”

“You will wash your face and go on with your life, and I will still be with you.”

“Why?”

“Because you are my sign to Israel.”

That night Ezekiel’s wife died. And shortly thereafter a messenger arrived with news. Jerusalem had been destroyed, and the temple smashed into dust. Ezekiel washed his face and went about his life, because the Lord was still with him.

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How did this happen? Well, when Nebuchadnezzar took the king into exile, he left another king on the throne in Jerusalem, King Zedekiah, who promised to be loyal to his Babylonian overlords. But Zedekiah was not a strong man. He was unsure of himself and easily manipulated. Himself barely more than twenty years old, he was easily swayed by impetuous young Judeans who wanted him to throw off the yoke of Babylon. So shortly into his reign, Zedekiah called a huge regional conference in Jerusalem, bringing together all the conquered nations of Palestine, along with representatives from Egypt, to discuss forming an alliance and rising up against their common oppressor.

One other who had been left in Jerusalem, though, was the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah vehemently warned that rebelling against Babylon could only end in disaster. At one point, he made himself a yoke of wood and paraded about the city as a sign that Judah needed to wear the yoke of Babylon. But another prophet – named Hananiah – stopped him in the street, tore the

yoke off his neck, and broke it into pieces before the crowds, who cheered enthusiastically. So Jeremiah went and made a yoke of iron.

Nobody listened. Zedekiah rebelled, and Nebuchadnezzar sent his armies down to put an end to this irritating fleabite of a nation once and for all. They laid siege to Jerusalem. Jeremiah counseled them to surrender and was thrown in prison. At one point, some of those young firebrands tried to shut him up permanently, leaving him to die in a cistern filled with mud, but an African servant named Ebed-melech rescued him. The siege lasted two years. No one had food. Disease swept the city. Children died, and with nowhere to bury them, bodies lined the streets. At last, frantic to save his own family, Zedekiah and his royal guard tried to slip out of the city in the middle of the night by going through the back wall. They were caught, of course. The king's family was executed before his eyes, and then he was blinded and sent in chains to die a slave in exile. Then the Babylonian army went back to finish off the city.

One eyewitness of the siege and destruction of Jerusalem – perhaps even Jeremiah himself – poured out his grief in a book we know as Lamentations but whose title in Hebrew is simply “How?” We read selections from the book of Lamentations, chapter 2. Verses 1-3, 7-8, and 12-13:

*2 How the Lord in his anger has humiliated daughter Zion!
He has thrown down from heaven to earth the splendor of Israel;
he has not remembered his footstool on the day of his anger.*

*2 The Lord has destroyed without mercy all the dwellings of Jacob;
in his wrath he has broken down the strongholds of daughter Judah;
he has brought down to the ground in dishonor the kingdom and its rulers.*

*3 He has cut down in fierce anger all the might of Israel;
he has withdrawn his right hand from them in the face of the enemy;
he has burned like a flaming fire in Jacob, consuming all around.*

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*7 The Lord has scorned his altar, disowned his sanctuary;
he has delivered into the hand of the enemy the walls of her palaces;
a clamor was raised in the house of the Lord as on a day of festival.*

*8 The Lord determined to lay in ruins the wall of daughter Zion;
he stretched the line; he did not withhold his hand from destroying;
he caused rampart and wall to lament; they languish together.*

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*12 They cry to their mothers, ‘Where is bread and wine?’
as they faint like the wounded in the streets of the city,
as their life is poured out on their mothers’ bosom.*

*13 What can I say for you, to what compare you, O daughter Jerusalem?
To what can I liken you, that I may comfort you, O virgin daughter Zion?
For vast as the sea is your ruin; who can heal you?*