

Reading Guide for Jeremiah 29

This chapter records Jeremiah's two letters (and the circumstances surrounding the sending of them) to the exiles taken in 597 B.C. by the Babylonians. The first letter (vv. 1-23) is to inform the exiles that they should prepare for a long stay in Babylon, as well as to provide hope for the future. The second letter (vv. 24-32) is a reply to a false prophet named Shemaiah, who responded negatively to Jeremiah's first letter.

JEREMIAH'S FIRST LETTER (29:1-23)

THREE ORACLES TO THE EXILES

Superscription: Address, date, and couriers (29:1-3)

The chapter begins with details surrounding the letter (vv. 1-3). It was written to all the exiles taken to Babylon in 597 B.C. and delivered by Elasah and Gemariah.

First Oracle to the Exiles: Prepare for a long stay (29:4-7)

The first oracle (vv. 4-7) instructs the exiles to prepare for a long stay in Babylon by settling down and living peacefully with those around them. Jeremiah's message was contrary to the message of the false prophets, who claimed it would only be a few years before the exiles would return to the supposed safety and blessing of Jerusalem (*cf.* Jer 28:2-4).

Second Oracle: Beware of the false prophets (29:8-9)

The second oracle is a warning to not listen to the false prophets who are deceiving people through divination and dreams.

Third Oracle: Promise of return and restoration (29:10-14)

This next oracle is meant to encourage the people that, although their return is not imminent, there will indeed be a time when the people's fortunes will be restored by the Lord.

JUDGMENT ORACLE AGAINST THE FALSE PROPHETS

The Reason for Judgment on the False Prophets (29:15)

Verse 15 serves as a setup for the following judgment oracle on the false prophets. The reason for judgment is because many in the exilic community see them as true prophets of God and are believing in their false messages of hope. The judgment oracle itself is not given until vv. 21-24.

An Oracle to Those who Remained in Jerusalem (29:16-20)

Before the actual judgment oracle to the prophets, there is a digression which turns the attention to those who had not been exiled: Zedekiah and the others living in Jerusalem. The Lord's message is that He has not completed His judgment upon those in Jerusalem—they are still to suffer judgment, and severe judgment at that. This oracle then serves to convey that 1) although it may appear that those in Jerusalem escaped judgment by not being taken into exile in 597 B.C., their judgment is coming, and 2) the exiles should not seek a speedy return to Jerusalem, for in reality, they escaped a far worse judgment that will befall the city and those who dwell there.

Verse 20 is a transitional verse, redirecting what will follow back to the exiles ("you"), as well as picking up the flow of thought begun in v. 15 before the temporary digression, and back to judgment on the false prophets.

Judgment Oracle to the False Prophets (29:21-24)

Continuing from the thread begun in v. 15, because the exiles believe in and find hope in the false prophets' message, God Himself will bring judgment on two (likely) well-known offenders, Ahab and Zedekiah. This judgment will be before the eyes of all the exiles as evidence that what they speak is false. In this oracle, the pronouncement of judgment (vv. 21-22) precedes the reason (v. 23), which reveals that they are not only false prophets, but adulterers as well.

JEREMIAH'S SECOND LETTER (29:24-31)

A Message to Shemaiah (29:24-29)

The second part of this chapter records Jeremiah's reply to a negative response to his first letter. A man named Shemaiah, after receiving Jeremiah's letter and its message of a long exile, took it upon himself to send an urgent note to Zephaniah, the overseer of the temple, reminding him of his God-given obligation to protect the worshippers against false prophets, of whom, he claims, Jeremiah is one. He then suggests an appropriate punishment.

The content of Shemaiah's letter (vv. 26-28) is contained within a greater judgment oracle, containing 1) a command for Jeremiah to utter a pronouncement against him (v. 24), 2) a reason for judgment, in this case because of Shemaiah's letter (v. 25), and 3) a parenthetical note recording that Zephaniah did meet with Jeremiah to discuss the charges against him.

A Message to all the Exiles (29:30-31)

Although the expectation of a pronouncement of judgment on Shemaiah is anticipated immediately after the given reason in v. 25, what followed was rather a citation of his letter. Now we see the judgment oracle, but only after a second reason is given in v. 31, namely, that Shemaiah is also a false prophet.

Like the first letter, this letter is to be addressed to the exiles. Also like the first letter, which pronounced judgment on false prophets, Shemaiah, who is himself guilty of leading the exilic community astray, will face severe judgment. Ironically, because of Shemaiah's false message that he would return to Jerusalem after a short time, now, when the exiles do eventually return, he will have no descendants to take part in that promise.