

**5. THE FALL OF JERUSALEM
& ITS AFTERMATH**

JEREMIAH 36-45

Introduction to 36-45

It is clear from Jeremiah's oracles that he was critical of the political and religious leadership in Jerusalem under King Jehoiakim in the years that preceded the capture of the city by the Babylonian army in 597, and under his brother Zedekiah, the puppet ruler in the years between 597 and 587, when Jerusalem was sacked. Jeremiah's focus was not political, though he saw the collapse of Jerusalem as divine punishment for the failure of the leaders and the people to obey the Torah. They gave mouth service to Yahwism, but neglected to obey the Torah, and so showed their failure to grasp the essence of what it means to be in a covenant relationship with YHWH.

Clearly there were those in Jerusalem at this time who favoured resistance to Babylon and who favoured throwing in their lot with Egypt. There was also a minority group who favoured submitting to what they saw as inevitable. They were in favour of avoiding resistance to Babylon. They failed to win the day, but the calamitous events of 597 and 587 demonstrated the abysmal failure of the official ideology. Judah was ravaged, Jerusalem and its temple destroyed, and the Promised Land lost. It was this group that favoured submitting to Babylon that came into its own in exile.

The prophet Jeremiah was largely ignored and persecuted during the reigns of Jehoiakim and Zedekiah, but the pro-Babylonian (or perhaps better, the not-contra Babylonian) party was happy to claim him as one of them, once his oracles were proved true by events.

This is especially clear in the section of the scroll we are about to investigate. The central section from chapter 37 to chapter 44 focus on Jeremiah's last months in Jerusalem, from mid 588 to the end of 587. They follow on from chapters 34 to 35, which also take place during the siege. There are three parts in this section. In the first part (37:1 - 40:6) Jeremiah is portrayed as urging surrender to Babylon. In the second part (40:7 - 41:18) Jeremiah is not mentioned. Rather we have a record of the events after 587 that led to the assassination of the governor, Gedaliah. In the third part (42:1 - 44:30) we have harsh criticism of those who continued to resist Babylonian control and who expressed this by leaving Judah and fleeing to Egypt, taking Jeremiah with them.

Chapter 36 and chapter 45 take us back to the fourth year of the reign of king Jehoiakim, 604. They link with chapter 26, which also refers to the reign of Jehoiakim. These chapters establish that it was the king's rejection of YHWH's word that was the key cause of the catastrophe that befell Jerusalem.

As noted on page 252, chapter 36 focuses on the king's rejection of YHWH's word as the main cause of the catastrophe that befell Jerusalem.

Building on chapters 7 and 26, this chapter shows Jeremiah as being ostracised by the Jerusalem establishment. We witness a confrontation and the inscribing of Jeremiah's oracles in a first, and then a second, scroll. One thinks of Moses and the two copies of the decalogue (see Exodus 34:1).

We are in the year 605, the year of the victory of Babylon over the combined force of Assyria and Egypt at Carchemish. This was a blow to Jehoiakim who was a vassal of Egypt. Jeremiah has Baruch write and read out his oracles because he is restricted from delivering them personally.

Jehoiakim is introduced in this account as the 'son of Josiah', and one of the aims of the narrative is to make a contrast between the two men. When Josiah was presented with a scroll that recorded YHWH's will he 'rent his clothes' (2Kings 22:11), and determined to bring about a religious reform. Here, Jehoiakim spurns the scroll and destroys it.

In verses 3 and 7 hope is held out that the city could have avoided capture if only the king, his advisers and the populace had listened and repented as in the days of King Josiah. It was their rejection of the prophetic oracles that left YHWH no option but to punish the city.

¹In the fourth year of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah, this word came to Jeremiah from YHWH: ²Take a scroll and write on it all the words that I have spoken to you concerning Jerusalem and Judah and all the nations, from the day I spoke to you, from the days of Josiah until today. ³It may be that when the house of Judah hears of all the disasters that I intend to do to them, all of them may turn from their evil ways, so that I may forgive their iniquity and their sin. ⁴Then Jeremiah called Baruch son of Neriah, and Baruch wrote on a scroll at Jeremiah's dictation all the words of YHWH that he had spoken to him. ⁵And Jeremiah ordered Baruch, saying, "I am prevented from entering the house of YHWH; ⁶so you go yourself, and on a fast day in the hearing of the people in YHWH's house you shall read the words of YHWH from the scroll that you have written at my dictation. You shall read them also in the hearing of all the people of Judah who come up from their towns. ⁷It may be that their plea will come before YHWH, and that all of them will turn from their evil ways, for great is the anger and wrath that YHWH has pronounced against this people." ⁸And Baruch son of Neriah did all that the prophet Jeremiah ordered him about reading from the scroll the words of YHWH in YHWH's house.

⁹In the fifth year of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah, in the ninth month, all the people in Jerusalem and all the people who came from the towns of Judah to Jerusalem proclaimed a fast before YHWH. ¹⁰Then, in the hearing of all the people, Baruch read the words of Jeremiah from the scroll, in the house of YHWH, in the chamber of Gemariah son of Shaphan the secretary, which was in the upper court, at the entry of the New Gate of YHWH's house.

¹¹When Micaiah son of Gemariah son of Shaphan heard all the words of YHWH from the scroll, ¹²he went down to the king's house, into the secretary's chamber; and all the officials were sitting there: Elishama the secretary, Delaiah son of Shemaiah, Elnathan son of Achbor, Gemariah son of Shaphan, Zedekiah son of Hananiah, and all the officials. ¹³And Micaiah told them all the words that he had heard, when Baruch read the scroll in the hearing of the people.

¹⁴Then all the officials sent Jehudi son of Nethaniah son of Shelemiah son of Cushi to say to Baruch, "Bring the scroll that you read in the hearing of the people, and come." So Baruch son of Neriah took the scroll in his hand and came to them. ¹⁵And they said to him, "Sit down and read it to us." So Baruch read it to them. ¹⁶When they heard all the words, they turned to one another in alarm, and said to Baruch, "We certainly must report all these words to the king."

¹⁷Then they questioned Baruch, "Tell us now, how did you write all these words? Was it at his dictation?" ¹⁸Baruch answered them, "He dictated all these words to me, and I wrote them with ink on the scroll."

¹⁹Then the officials said to Baruch, "Go and hide, you and Jeremiah, and let no one know where you are."

²⁰Leaving the scroll in the chamber of Elishama the secretary, they went to the court of the king; and they reported all the words to the king. ²¹Then the king sent Jehudi to get the scroll, and he took it from the chamber of Elishama the secretary; and Jehudi read it to the king and all the officials who stood beside the king.

It is one thing for Jeremiah to utter his oracles as he is inspired to do so, and we have seen from chapters 1-25 that the oracles oppose the king's pro-Egyptian stand and carry a divine threat of destruction. It is another for them to be put in writing and publicly read out. Micaiah is aware of the threat to morale posed by these oracles and decides to bring the matter to the king's advisers gathered in the palace. They include Elishama (possibly the grandfather of Gedaliah's assassin, see 41:1), and the king's father-in-law, Elnathan (see 26:22).

Baruch (see already 32:12-16) is summoned and told to read out the scroll in the presence of leading officials of the state. They are alarmed and judge that the matter must be brought to the attention of the king.

From verse 19 it emerges that some of the officials are sympathetic to Jeremiah, and suspect that the king will not be pleased.

The scroll is read out for the third time in the presence of the king and his court.

This is good drama and one of the better attempts at storytelling in the prose of the Jeremiah scroll. King Jehoiakim treats the oracles with complete disdain.

The advisers, one of whom is Gemariah, the son of Shaphan, and a brother of Ahikam (see 26:24) and Gedaliah (39:14), urge that the scroll be taken seriously (verse 25).

Jehoiakim is determined to eliminate all opposition, but YHWH is protecting his prophet (verse 26).

Jehoiakim has rejected YHWH's offer of salvation and ignored YHWH's threat of punishment. 'They would not listen' (verse 31) and the threats will be carried out. The fact that Jehoiakim's son, Jehoiachin, was technically king for the three months of the siege is not seen as a contradiction of 'he shall have no offspring to sit upon the throne of David' (verse 30).

As commanded by YHWH Jeremiah has Baruch produce a copy of the scroll that the king had burnt (see verses 28 and 32). We may ignore YHWH's revealed word, but YHWH will not be silenced.

²²Now the king was sitting in his winter apartment (it was the ninth month), and there was a fire burning in the brazier before him. ²³As Jehudi read three or four columns, the king would cut them off with a penknife and throw them into the fire in the brazier, until the entire scroll was consumed in the fire that was in the brazier. ²⁴Yet neither the king, nor any of his servants who heard all these words, was alarmed, nor did they tear their garments. ²⁵Even when Elnathan and Delaiah and Gemariah urged the king not to burn the scroll, he would not listen to them. ²⁶And the king commanded Jerahmeel the king's son and Seraiah son of Azriel and Shelemiah son of Abdeel to arrest the secretary Baruch and the prophet Jeremiah. But YHWH hid them.

²⁷Now, after the king had burned the scroll with the words that Baruch wrote at Jeremiah's dictation, the word of YHWH came to Jeremiah: ²⁸Take another scroll and write on it all the former words that were in the first scroll, which King Jehoiakim of Judah has burned. ²⁹And concerning King Jehoiakim of Judah you shall say: Thus says YHWH, You have dared to burn this scroll, saying, Why have you written in it that the king of Babylon will certainly come and destroy this land, and will cut off from it human beings and animals? ³⁰Therefore thus says YHWH concerning King Jehoiakim of Judah: He shall have no one to sit upon the throne of David, and his dead body shall be cast out to the heat by day and the frost by night. ³¹And I will punish him and his offspring and his servants for their iniquity; I will bring on them, and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and on the people of Judah, all the disasters with which I have threatened them—but they would not listen.

³²Then Jeremiah took another scroll and gave it to the secretary Baruch son of Neriah, who wrote on it at Jeremiah's dictation all the words of the scroll that King Jehoiakim of Judah had burned in the fire; and many similar words were added to them.

No one is 'listening'

¹Zedekiah son of Josiah, whom King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon made king in the land of Judah, succeeded Coniah son of Jehoiakim. ²But neither he nor his servants nor the people of the land listened to the words of YHWH that he spoke through the prophet Jeremiah.

³King Zedekiah sent Jehucal son of Shelemiah and the priest Zephaniah son of Maaseiah to the prophet Jeremiah saying, "Please pray for us to YHWH our God." ⁴Now Jeremiah was still going in and out among the people, for he had not yet been put in prison. ⁵Meanwhile, the army of Pharaoh had come out of Egypt; and when the Chaldeans who were besieging Jerusalem heard news of them, they withdrew from Jerusalem.

⁶Then the word of YHWH came to the prophet Jeremiah: ⁷Thus says YHWH, God of Israel: This is what the two of you shall say to the king of Judah, who sent you to me to inquire of me, Pharaoh's army, which set out to help you, is going to return to its own land, to Egypt. ⁸And the Chaldeans shall return and fight against this city; they shall take it and burn it with fire. ⁹Thus says YHWH: Do not deceive yourselves, saying, "The Chaldeans will surely go away from us," for they will not go away. ¹⁰Even if you defeated the whole army of Chaldeans who are fighting against you, and there remained of them only wounded men in their tents, they would rise up and burn this city with fire.

I find convincing McKane's conclusion that chapter 37 is composed in a non-historical genre. He describes verses 1-10 as 'a late, midrashic composition' (page 941). It focuses on the fundamental sin: no one would listen to YHWH (verse 2).

The approach of the Egyptian army and the raising of the siege (verse 5) would have been seen by King Zedekiah as proof of the success of his policies (policies constantly opposed by Jeremiah). The portrayal of Zedekiah as seeking guidance and intercession from Jeremiah is 'history shaped to satisfy the dreams of piety rather than sober political history' (page 942).

In fact the Egyptian force backed off when faced by the Babylonian army. Verses 6-9 portray the hero of this piece, Jeremiah, as receiving word from YHWH that this would happen, and conveying this message to the king via Jehucal and Zephaniah. In verse 10 YHWH states that, even if the people of Jerusalem were to defeat the whole army of the Chaldeans, Jerusalem would still be burned down by the few remaining wounded Babylonians. Militarily this is an impossible scenario. The destruction of the city is being portrayed as a matter of divine determination. Military power is a secondary consideration. This is typical of the Jeremiah scroll.

In verses 11-16 Jeremiah is portrayed as taking the occasion of the lifting of the siege to flee the city to attend to the purchase of land (see chapter 32). He is caught, flogged and incarcerated.

¹¹Now when the Chaldean army had withdrawn from Jerusalem at the approach of Pharaoh's army, ¹²Jeremiah set out from Jerusalem to go to the land of Benjamin, slipping out of the city among a crowd of other people. ¹³When he reached the Benjamin Gate, a sentinel there named Irijah son of Shelemiah son of Hananiah arrested the prophet Jeremiah saying, "You are deserting to the Chaldeans." ¹⁴And Jeremiah said, "That is a lie; I am not deserting to the Chaldeans." But Irijah would not listen to him, and arrested Jeremiah and brought him to the officials. ¹⁵The officials were enraged at Jeremiah, and they beat him and imprisoned him in the house of the secretary Jonathan, for it had been made a prison. ¹⁶Thus Jeremiah was put in the cistern house, in the cells, and remained there many days.

We are not told why King Zedekiah whisked Jeremiah away to have a secret encounter with him. Perhaps we are meant to understand that this was occasioned by the renewal of the siege?

Jeremiah continues to announce the fall of the city and, rather unrealistically, follows this with a petition for an amelioration of the conditions of his imprisonment.

In spite of what King Zedekiah could have seen only as Jeremiah's stubborn and unsettling repetition of his forecast of doom, the king sees fit to grant Jeremiah's request.

It is with good reason that McKane, in his Introduction, sees this and the following chapter as the 'end of the pre-exilic period as seen by the men of a later age' (page cxlviii).

¹⁷Then King Zedekiah sent for him, and received him. The king questioned him secretly in his house, and said, "Is there any word from YHWH?" Jeremiah said, "There is!" Then he said, "You shall be handed over to the king of Babylon." ¹⁸Jeremiah also said to King Zedekiah, "What wrong have I done to you or your servants or this people, that you have put me in prison? ¹⁹Where are your prophets who prophesied to you, saying, "The king of Babylon will not come against you and against this land"? ²⁰Now please hear me, my lord king: be good enough to listen to my plea, and do not send me back to the house of the secretary Jonathan to die there." ²¹So King Zedekiah gave orders, and they committed Jeremiah to the court of the guard; and a loaf of bread was given him daily from the bakers' street, until all the bread of the city was gone. So Jeremiah remained in the court of the guard.

¹Now Shephatiah son of Mattan, Gedaliah son of Pashhur, Jucal son of Shelemiah, and Pashhur son of Malchiah heard the words that Jeremiah was saying to all the people, ²Thus says YHWH, Those who stay in this city shall die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence; but those who go out to the Chaldeans shall live; they shall have their lives as a prize of war, and live. ³Thus says YHWH, This city shall surely be handed over to the army of the king of Babylon and be taken. ⁴Then the officials said to the king, "This man ought to be put to death, because he is discouraging the soldiers who are left in this city, and all the people, by speaking such words to them. For this man is not seeking the welfare of this people, but their harm." ⁵King Zedekiah said, "Here he is; he is in your hands; for the king is powerless against you."

⁶So they took Jeremiah and threw him into the cistern of Malchiah, the king's son, which was in the court of the guard, letting Jeremiah down by ropes. Now there was no water in the cistern, but only mud, and Jeremiah sank in the mud.

⁷Ebed-melech the Ethiopian, a eunuch in the king's house, heard that they had put Jeremiah into the cistern. The king happened to be sitting at the Benjamin Gate, ⁸So Ebed-melech left the king's house and spoke to the king, ⁹"My lord king, these men have acted wickedly in all they did to the prophet Jeremiah by throwing him into the cistern to die there of hunger, for there is no bread left in the city." ¹⁰Then the king commanded Ebed-melech the Ethiopian, "Take three men with you from here, and pull the prophet Jeremiah up from the cistern before he dies." ¹¹So Ebed-melech took the men with him and went to the house of the king, to the *basement* of the storehouse, and took from there old rags and worn-out clothes, which he *tossed* down to Jeremiah in the cistern *along with* ropes. ¹²Then Ebed-melech the Ethiopian said to Jeremiah, "Just put the rags and clothes between your armpits and the ropes." Jeremiah did so. ¹³Then they drew Jeremiah up by the ropes and pulled him out of the cistern. And Jeremiah remained in the court of the guard.

Once again the theme is that Jerusalem would be wise (and would be acting according to YHWH's will) if it were to acknowledge the dominance of Babylon, accept it and live with it.

In verse 1 we are introduced to Gedaliah, who will govern Judah after the destruction of Jerusalem in 587.

The oracle in verse 3 is consistent with the constant theme of Jeremiah's oracles as found in chapters 1-25.

King Zedekiah is portrayed as weak and dithering. In verse 5 he has no choice but to give in to his 'advisers', but then he gets the Ethiopian eunuch to rescue Jeremiah from the cistern (verses 7-10). Nothing is impossible to God who works unexpectedly through the eunuch to preserve the instrument of YHWH's word.

The narrative has been building up to this: the direct encounter between Zedekiah and Jeremiah. The meeting is intense. From the point of view of the authors, Jeremiah is conveying the information to which the king needs to listen (and the same goes for any future leader).

The oracle in verses 17-18 fits uneasily with 34:2-3 and 37:8 and with the constant tenor of Jeremiah's oracles. This is just one more of the many indications in the Jeremiah scroll of the diverse points of view that are included in the scroll.

Zedekiah is portrayed as being afraid of the pro-Babylonian party. Jeremiah's response in verses 20-23 is devastating.

We have seen Jeremiah stuck in the mud in the cistern. Now the lament (taunt?) of the women in Jeremiah's vision see the king deserted by his advisers and left 'stuck in the mud' (verse 22).

¹⁴King Zedekiah sent for the prophet Jeremiah and received him at the third entrance of the temple of YHWH. The king said to Jeremiah, "I have something to ask you; do not hide anything from me." ¹⁵Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, "If I tell you, you will put me to death, will you not? And if I give you advice, you will not listen to me." ¹⁶So King Zedekiah swore an oath in secret to Jeremiah, "As YHWH lives, who gave us our lives, I will not put you to death or hand you over to these men who seek your life."

¹⁷Then Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, "Thus says YHWH, the God of hosts, the God of Israel, If you will only surrender to the officials of the king of Babylon, then your life shall be spared, and this city shall not be burned with fire, and you and your house shall live. ¹⁸But if you do not surrender to the officials of the king of Babylon, then this city shall be handed over to the Chaldeans, and they shall burn it with fire, and you yourself shall not escape from their hand."

¹⁹King Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, "I am afraid of the Judeans who have deserted to the Chaldeans, for I might be handed over to them and they would abuse me." ²⁰Jeremiah said, "That will not happen. Just obey the voice of YHWH in what I say to you, and it shall go well with you, and your life shall be spared. ²¹But if you are determined not to surrender, this is what YHWH has shown me— ²²a vision of all the women remaining in the house of the king of Judah being led out to the officials of the king of Babylon and saying, 'Your trusted friends have seduced you and have overcome you; Now that your feet are stuck in the mud, they desert you.' ²³All your wives and your children shall be led out to the Chaldeans, and you yourself shall not escape from their hand, but shall be seized by the king of Babylon; and this city shall be burned with fire."

Jeremiah remains under guard

²⁴Then Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, "Do not let anyone else know of this conversation, or you will die. ²⁵If the officials should hear that I have spoken with you, and they should come and say to you, 'Just tell us what you said to the king; do not conceal it from us, or we will put you to death. What did the king say to you?'

²⁶then you shall say to them, 'I was presenting my plea to the king not to send me back to the house of Jonathan to die there.'" ²⁷All the officials did come to Jeremiah and questioned him; and he answered them in the very words the king had commanded. So they stopped questioning him, for the conversation had not been overheard. ²⁸And Jeremiah remained in the court of the guard until the day that Jerusalem was taken.

Chapter 38 reinforces the idea that the political leadership is on a collision course with YHWH's will, we are left with the impression that even if the king were now to listen it is too late.

There are good reasons for reading chapter 39 as a late addition to the Jeremiah scroll, included with the aim of portraying Nebuchadrezzar as having a deep respect for the prophet of YHWH, Jeremiah - the hero of the scroll (see verses 11-12).

Verses 1-2 parallel Jeremiah 52:4-6 (see 2Kings 25). In the first draft verse 3 was followed by verse 14. Verses 4-12 were inserted later, and verse 13 was added to link back to verse 3. This judgment is reinforced by the absence of verses 4-13 from the Septuagint Version. The inserted verses are compiled from Jeremiah 52 (see 2Kings 25).

¹In the ninth year of King Zedekiah of Judah, in the tenth month, King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon and all his army came against Jerusalem and besieged it; ²in the eleventh year of Zedekiah, in the fourth month, on the ninth day of the month, a breach was made in the city. ³When Jerusalem was taken, all the officials of the king of Babylon came and sat in the middle gate: Nergalsarezer of Simmagir, Nebushazban, the chief eunuch (Nergalsarezer the Rab Mag), with all the rest of the officials of the king of Babylon.

⁴When King Zedekiah of Judah and all the soldiers saw them, they fled, going out of the city at night by way of the king's garden through the gate between the two walls; and they went toward the Arabah. ⁵But the army of the Chaldeans pursued them, and overtook Zedekiah in the plains of Jericho; and when they had taken him, they brought him up to King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon, at Riblah, in the land of Hamath; and he passed sentence on him. ⁶The king of Babylon slaughtered the sons of Zedekiah at Riblah before his eyes; also the king of Babylon slaughtered all the nobles of Judah. ⁷He put out the eyes of Zedekiah, and bound him in fetters to take him to Babylon. ⁸The Chaldeans burned the king's house and the houses of the people, and broke down the walls of Jerusalem. ⁹Then Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard exiled to Babylon the rest of the people who were left in the city, those who had deserted to him, and the people who remained. ¹⁰Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard left in the land of Judah some of the poor people who owned nothing, and gave them vineyards and fields at the same time.

¹¹King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon gave command concerning Jeremiah through Nebuzaradan, the captain of the guard, saying, ¹²"Take him, look after him well and do him no harm, but deal with him as he may ask you."

¹³So Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard, Nebushazban the chief eunuch, Nergalsarezer the Rab Mag, and all the chief officers of the king of Babylon sent¹⁴and took Jeremiah from the court of the guard. They entrusted him to Gedaliah son of Ahikam son of Shaphan to be brought home and he enjoyed complete freedom of movement.

¹⁵The word of YHWH came to Jeremiah while he was confined in the court of the guard: ¹⁶Go and say to Ebed-melech the Ethiopian: Thus says YHWH of hosts, the God of Israel: I am going to fulfill my words against this city for evil and not for good, and they shall be accomplished in your presence on that day. ¹⁷But I will save you on that day, says YHWH, and you shall not be handed over to those whom you dread. ¹⁸For I will surely save you, and you shall not fall by the sword; but you shall have your life as a prize of war, because you have trusted in me, says YHWH.

Verses 15-18 refer back to 38:7-13. YHWH is not only seeing to the saving of Jeremiah. He is also rewarded the kind act of Ebed-melech. He is a symbol of God's graciousness if only people would trust and obey.

Ramah in Benjamin is 9ks north of Jerusalem (compare 31:15).

Verses 1-3 offer, once more, a statement of the theological significance of the destruction of Jerusalem. This is done through the words of a military officer of the conquering Babylonian army, Nebuzaradan. He delivers a homily in which he displays an acceptance of the theology of Yahwism (verses 2-3). The literary form is that of an historical novel.

The effect of verses 4-6 is to portray Jeremiah as a hero even in the eyes of the conquering Babylonians. Jeremiah chooses not to go with the 'important' people into exile, but rather to remain in Judah. He supports the provisional government of Gedaliah.

Mizpah was probably located 8ks north-west of Jerusalem.

¹The word that came to Jeremiah from YHWH after Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard had let him go from Ramah, when he took him bound in fetters along with all the captives of Jerusalem and Judah who were being exiled to Babylon.

²The captain of the guard took Jeremiah and said to him, "YHWH your God threatened this place with this disaster; ³and now YHWH has brought it about, and has done as he said, because all of you sinned against YHWH and did not obey his voice. Therefore this thing has come upon you.

⁴Now look, I have just released you today from the fetters on your hands. If you wish to come with me to Babylon, come, and I will take good care of you; but if you do not wish to come with me to Babylon, you need not come. See, the whole land is before you; go wherever you think it good and right to go. ⁵If you remain, then return to Gedaliah son of Ahikam son of Shaphan, whom the king of Babylon appointed governor of the towns of Judah, and stay with him among the people; or go wherever you think it right to go." So the captain of the guard gave him an allowance of food and a present, and let him go. ⁶Then Jeremiah went to Gedaliah son of Ahikam at Mizpah, and stayed with him among the people who were left in the land.

⁷When all the leaders of the forces in the open country and their troops heard that the king of Babylon had appointed Gedaliah son of Ahikam governor in the land, and had committed to him men, women, and children, those of the poorest of the land who had not been taken into exile to Babylon, ⁸they went to Gedaliah at Mizpah—Ishmael son of Nethaniah, Johanan son of Kareah, Seraiah son of Tanhumeth, the sons of Ephai the Netophathite, Jezaniah son of the Maacathite, they and their troops. ⁹Gedaliah son of Ahikam son of Shaphan swore to them and their troops, saying, “Do not be afraid to serve the Chaldeans. Stay in the land and serve the king of Babylon, and it shall go well with you.

¹⁰As for me, I am staying at Mizpah to represent you before the Chaldeans who come to us; but as for you, gather wine and summer fruits and oil, and store them in your vessels, and live in the towns that you have taken over.” ¹¹Likewise, when all the Judeans who were in Moab and among the Ammonites and in Edom and in other lands heard that the king of Babylon had left a remnant in Judah and had appointed Gedaliah son of Ahikam son of Shaphan as governor over them, ¹²then all the Judeans returned from all the places to which they had been scattered and came to the land of Judah, to Gedaliah at Mizpah; and they gathered wine and summer fruits in great abundance.

¹³Now Johanan son of Kareah and all the leaders of the forces in the open country came to Gedaliah at Mizpah¹⁴and said to him, “Are you at all aware that Baalis king of the Ammonites has sent Ishmael son of Nethaniah to take your life?” But Gedaliah son of Ahikam would not believe them. ¹⁵Then Johanan son of Kareah spoke secretly to Gedaliah at Mizpah, “Please let me go and kill Ishmael son of Nethaniah, and no one else will know. Why should he take your life, so that all the Judeans who are gathered around you would be scattered, and the remnant of Judah would perish?” ¹⁶But Gedaliah son of Ahikam said to Johanan son of Kareah, “Do not do such a thing, for you are telling a lie about Ishmael.”

The text does not indicate the length of Gedaliah's leadership. 2Kings 25:23-24 gives a more succinct account. The Septuagint Version is longer than 2Kings but briefer than the text as in the Masoretic Hebrew on which we are commenting. These additions appear to post-date the Septuagint.

It appears that generation after generation of scribes added to the Jeremiah scroll in order to bring out the providence of YHWH in ways that appealed to the piety of their contemporaries.

Jeremiah is absent from 40:7-16. These verses fill in the background for Jeremiah's being taken to Egypt. In particular they introduce Johanan (verse 13).

Verses 10-12 paint a picture of those who remained behind in Judah. Gedaliah, who was appointed as governor in Judah and who set himself up at Mizpah in Samaria, is warned of a conspiracy to assassinate him - a warning he dismisses.

The narrative of Chapter 41 appears to be a filling out of the brief material found in 2Kings 25:22-26. Here again, the Septuagint narrative is briefer and tighter. The genealogical expansions and the repetitious padding in the Masoretic text was added later. Jeremiah is not mentioned. The authors are continuing to fill in the background to Jeremiah being taken into Egypt.

The motive for Ishmael's assassination of Gedaliah (which is the historical core of the narrative) appears to have been nationalistic fervour and personal jealousy, since Ishmael was 'of the royal family'(verse 1).

The pilgrims from the north (verse 4) are possibly coming for the festival of Booths ('the seventh month', verse 1) – something made necessary by Josiah's reform, when an attempt was made to reclaim the north, and when the only authorised sanctuary was in Jerusalem.

The cistern (verse 7) was part of the system which aimed to safeguard the city water supply (see 1Kings 15:22)..

The story pictures the incursion by Ishmael as a kind of guerilla attack. He struck and then retired back to the safety of Ammon across the Jordan. His motives are not given.

¹In the seventh month, Ishmael son of Nethaniah son of Elishama, of the royal family, one of the chief officers of the king, came with ten men to Gedaliah son of Ahikam, at Mizpah. As they ate bread together there at Mizpah, ²Ishmael son of Nethaniah and the ten men with him got up and struck down Gedaliah son of Ahikam son of Shaphan with the sword and killed him, because the king of Babylon had appointed him governor in the land. ³Ishmael also killed all the Judeans who were with Gedaliah at Mizpah, and the Chaldean soldiers who happened to be there.

⁴On the day after the murder of Gedaliah, before anyone knew of it, ⁵eighty men arrived from Shechem and Shiloh and Samaria, with their beards shaved and their clothes torn, and their bodies gashed, bringing grain offerings and incense to present at the temple of YHWH. ⁶And Ishmael son of Nethaniah came out from Mizpah to meet them, weeping as he came. As he met them, he said to them, "Come to Gedaliah son of Ahikam." ⁷When they reached the middle of the city, Ishmael son of Nethaniah and the men with him slaughtered them, and threw them into a cistern. ⁸But there were ten men among them who said to Ishmael, "Do not kill us, for we have stores of wheat, barley, oil, and honey hidden in the fields." So he refrained, and did not kill them along with their companions. ⁹Now the cistern into which Ishmael had thrown all the bodies of the men whom he had struck down was the large cistern that King Asa had made for defense against King Baasha of Israel; Ishmael son of Nethaniah filled that cistern with those whom he had killed. ¹⁰Then Ishmael took captive all the rest of the people who were in Mizpah, the king's daughters and all the people who were left at Mizpah, whom Nebuzaradan, the captain of the guard, had committed to Gedaliah son of Ahikam. Ishmael son of Nethaniah took them captive and set out to cross over to the Ammonites.

A decision to seek refuge in Egypt

¹¹But when Johanan son of Kareah and all the leaders of the forces with him heard of all the crimes that Ishmael son of Nethaniah had done, ¹²they took all their men and went to fight against Ishmael son of Nethaniah. They came upon him at the great pool that is in Gibeon.

¹³And when all the people who were with Ishmael saw Johanan son of Kareah and all the leaders of the forces with him, they were glad.

¹⁴So all the people whom Ishmael had carried away captive from Mizpah turned around and came back, and went to Johanan son of Kareah.

¹⁵But Ishmael son of Nethaniah escaped from Johanan with eight men, and went to the Ammonites.

¹⁶Then Johanan son of Kareah and all the leaders of the forces with him took all the rest of the people whom Ishmael son of Nethaniah had carried away captive from Mizpah after he had slain Gedaliah son of Ahikam—soldiers, women, children, and eunuchs, whom Johanan brought back from Gibeon. ¹⁷And they set out, and stopped at Geruth Chimham near Bethlehem, intending to go to Egypt ¹⁸because of the Chaldeans; for they were afraid of them, because Ishmael son of Nethaniah had killed Gedaliah son of Ahikam, whom the king of Babylon had made governor over the land.

Ishmael is discredited, and with the death of Gedaliah, Johanan emerges as a leader. However, Judah is in shambles. Johanan decides to escape to Egypt, to avoid the inevitable response of Babylon to the assassination of the governor they appointed.

Jeremiah delivers a message from YHWH that the 'remnant' left in Judah by the Babylonians must stay behind in Judah. He assures them that whereas previously YHWH was resolved to punish Judah for its obstinate infidelity, now YHWH wishes them well.

In words borrowed from 1:10, we hear YHWH say: 'If you will only remain in this land, then I will build you up and not pull you down; I will plant you, and not pluck you up' (verse 10). YHWH goes on: 'I am sorry for the disaster that I have brought upon you.'

Jeremiah repeats a theme that has been a constant one in all his oracles: their hope lies in accommodating to Babylon (not seeking refuge in Egypt).

However, having sought Jeremiah's intercession, they determine to go to Egypt. They want to escape war, the collapse of order, and famine, but they will not achieve this by going back to Egypt. We are reminded of the desire of the Israelites as they faced the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. Salvation can come only from YHWH, not Egypt.

¹Then all the commanders of the forces, including Johanan son of Kareah and Azariah son of Hoshai-ah, and all the people from the least to the greatest, approached ²the prophet Jeremiah and said, "Be good enough to listen to our plea, and pray to YHWH your God for us—for all this remnant. For there are only a few of us left out of many, as your eyes can see. ³Let YHWH your God show us where we should go and what we should do."

⁴The prophet Jeremiah said to them, "Very well: I am going to pray to YHWH your God as you request, and whatever YHWH answers you I will tell you; I will keep nothing back from you." ⁵They in their turn said to Jeremiah, "May YHWH be a true and faithful witness against us if we do not act according to everything that YHWH your God sends us through you. ⁶Whether it is good or bad, we will obey the voice of YHWH our God to whom we are sending you, in order that it may go well with us when we obey the voice of YHWH our God."

⁷At the end of ten days the word of YHWH came to Jeremiah. ⁸Then he summoned Johanan son of Kareah and all the commanders of the forces who were with him, and all the people from the least to the greatest, ⁹and said to them, "Thus says YHWH, the God of Israel, to whom you sent me to present your plea before him: ¹⁰If you will only remain in this land, then I will build you up and not pull you down; I will plant you, and not pluck you up; for I am sorry for the disaster that I have brought upon you. ¹¹Do not be afraid of the king of Babylon, as you have been; do not be afraid of him, says YHWH, for I am with you, to save you and to rescue you from his hand. ¹²I will grant you mercy, and he will have mercy on you and restore you to your native soil. ¹³But if you continue to say, 'We will not stay in this land,' thus disobeying the voice of YHWH your God¹⁴and saying, 'No, we will go to the land of Egypt, where we shall not see war, or hear the sound of the trumpet, or be hungry for bread, and there we will stay'.

Do not go to Egypt

¹⁵Then hear the word of YHWH, O remnant of Judah. Thus says YHWH of hosts, the God of Israel: If you are determined to enter Egypt and go to settle there, ¹⁶then the sword that you fear shall overtake you there, in the land of Egypt; and the famine that you dread shall follow close after you into Egypt; and there you shall die. ¹⁷All the people who have determined to go to Egypt to settle there shall die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence; they shall have no remnant or survivor from the disaster that I am bringing upon them.

¹⁸“For thus says YHWH of hosts, the God of Israel: Just as my anger and my wrath were poured out on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so my wrath will be poured out on you when you go to Egypt. You shall become an object of execration and horror, of cursing and ridicule. You shall see this place no more. ¹⁹YHWH has said to you, O remnant of Judah, Do not go to Egypt. Be well aware that I have warned you today²⁰that you have made a fatal mistake. For you yourselves sent me to YHWH your God, saying, ‘Pray for us to YHWH our God, and whatever YHWH our God says, tell us and we will do it.’ ²¹So I have told you today, but you have not obeyed the voice of YHWH your God in anything that he sent me to tell you. ²²Be well aware, then, that you shall die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence in the place where you desire to go and settle.”

Verses 15-22 add nothing to the account. They are a late insert introduced by editors who have a predilection for spelling everything out with repetitious detail. We have seen a lot of this in the Jeremiah scroll.

The disaster threatened in verses 15-22 did not eventuate. We are in the realm of theological reflection here, not history. The authors are making three points. The first is that life is not found in Egypt, but in the land given to the people by YHWH. The second is that the future of Judaism rests exclusively with those in exile in Babylon. The remnant left behind in Judah refused to obey YHWH and chose to go back to the land of slavery. The third is that the key to the future lies in obedience to YHWH.

It would seem best to read verses 1-7 as underlining a theme that has already occurred: the assertion that those who emigrated to Egypt rejected YHWH in doing so. Here they are pictured as justifying their decision by accusing Jeremiah of being a false prophet.

Verse 3 is only the third time that Baruch has appeared in the Jeremiah scroll (see 32:12-16 and chapter 36). The key role given him here may indicate that he held an important position in the pro-Babylonian group in Judah. It is likely that it was the party of the same persuasion in exile that had significant influence on the development of the Jeremiah scroll.

¹When Jeremiah finished speaking to all the people all these words of YHWH their God, with which YHWH their God had sent him to them, ²Azariah son of Hoshaiah and Johanan son of Kareah and all the other insolent men said to Jeremiah, "You are telling a lie. YHWH our God did not send you to say, 'Do not go to Egypt to settle there'; ³but Baruch son of Neriah is inciting you against us, to hand us over to the Chaldeans, in order that they may kill us or take us into exile in Babylon." ⁴So Johanan son of Kareah and all the commanders of the forces and all the people did not obey the voice of YHWH, to stay in the land of Judah. ⁵But Johanan son of Kareah and all the commanders of the forces took all the remnant of Judah who had returned to settle in the land of Judah from all the nations to which they had been driven – ⁶the men, the women, the children, the princesses, and everyone whom Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard had left with Gedaliah son of Ahikam son of Shaphan; also the prophet Jeremiah and Baruch son of Neriah. ⁷And they came into the land of Egypt, for they did not obey the voice of YHWH. And they arrived at Tahpanhes.

⁸Then the word of YHWH came to Jeremiah in Tahpanhes: ⁹Take some large stones in your hands, and embed them in the clay pavement that is at the entrance to Pharaoh's palace in Tahpanhes. Let the Judeans see you do it, ¹⁰and say to them, Thus says YHWH of hosts, the God of Israel: I am going to send and take my servant King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon, and he will set his throne above these stones that I have embedded, and he will spread his royal canopy over them. ¹¹He shall come and ravage the land of Egypt, giving those who are destined for pestilence, to pestilence, and those who are destined for captivity, to captivity, and those who are destined for the sword, to the sword. ¹²He shall kindle a fire in the temples of the gods of Egypt; and he shall burn them and carry off the images of the gods, and will wrap up the land of Egypt, as a shepherd wraps up his garment; and he shall depart from there safely. ¹³He shall break the obelisks of Heliopolis, which is in the land of Egypt; and the temples of the gods of Egypt he shall burn with fire.

Verses 8-13 constitute a separate unit, unrelated to what goes before or to what comes after. It bears no historical relationship to Jeremiah. Note that the threat is against Egypt, not against the exiles from Judah who are in Egypt.

Nebuchadrezzar did make a punitive expedition into Egypt in 568, but it was no more than that. Destruction of temples is associated rather with Cambyses (525). Even so, Heliopolis was not in ruins when visited by Herodotus in the mid-fifth century. The description would appear to come from later Jewish observers when Heliopolis was in a state of decline.

Verses 8-13 represent a fanciful story retrojected back to the time of Jeremiah.

We are accustomed to the often verbose and repetitious style of those responsible for a lot of the supplementary material found in the Third Part of the Jeremiah scroll. Chapter 44 is no exception. Here again the Greek Septuagint (second century BC) is considerably tighter and briefer, and points to a Hebrew manuscript that is shorter than the Hebrew Masoretic text of which our English text is a translation.

Jeremiah is portrayed as addressing a general assembly of the émigré Judaeans (the Septuagint does not include Memphis).

Verses 1-6 repeat a constant theme of Jeremiah's oracles: YHWH instigated the destruction of Jerusalem as punishment for the infidelity of the people.

In verses 7-10 the focus turns to the Judaeans in Egypt. They continue to disobey YHWH, by going to Egypt in the first place, and by idolatry. Judah must listen to YHWH.

Once again the Jewish community in exile in Babylon is claiming for itself the key role in the development of post-exilic Judaism.

¹The word that came to Jeremiah for all the Judeans living in the land of Egypt, at Migdol, at Tahpanhes, at Memphis, and in the land of Pathros, ²Thus says YHWH of hosts, the God of Israel: You yourselves have seen all the disaster that I have brought on Jerusalem and on all the towns of Judah. Look at them; today they are a desolation, without an inhabitant in them, ³because of the wickedness that they committed, provoking me to anger, in that they went to make offerings and serve other gods that they had not known, neither they, nor you, nor your ancestors. ⁴Yet I persistently sent to you all my servants the prophets, saying, "I beg you not to do this abominable thing that I hate!" ⁵But they did not listen or incline their ear, to turn from their wickedness and make no offerings to other gods. ⁶So my wrath and my anger were poured out and kindled in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem; and they became a waste and a desolation, as they still are today.

⁷And now thus says YHWH God of hosts, the God of Israel: Why are you doing such great harm to yourselves, to cut off man and woman, child and infant, from the midst of Judah, leaving yourselves without a remnant? ⁸Why do you provoke me to anger with the works of your hands, making offerings to other gods in the land of Egypt where you have come to settle? Will you be cut off and become an object of cursing and ridicule among all the nations of the earth? ⁹Have you forgotten the crimes of your ancestors, of the kings of Judah, of their wives, your own crimes and those of your wives, which they committed in the land of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? ¹⁰They have shown no contrition or fear to this day, nor have they walked in my law and my statutes that I set before you and before your ancestors.

¹¹Therefore thus says YHWH of hosts, the God of Israel: I am determined to bring disaster on you, to bring all Judah to an end. ¹²I will take the remnant of Judah who are determined to come to the land of Egypt to settle, and they shall perish, everyone; in the land of Egypt they shall fall; by the sword and by famine they shall perish; from the least to the greatest, they shall die by the sword and by famine; and they shall become an object of execration and horror, of cursing and ridicule. ¹³I will punish those who live in the land of Egypt, as I have punished Jerusalem, with the sword, with famine, and with pestilence, ¹⁴so that none of the remnant of Judah who have come to settle in the land of Egypt shall escape or survive or return to the land of Judah. Although they long to go back to live there, they shall not go back, except some fugitives.

¹⁵Then all the men who were aware that their wives had been making offerings to other gods, and all the women who stood by, a great assembly, all the people who lived in Pathros in the land of Egypt, answered Jeremiah: ¹⁶“As for the word that you have spoken to us in the name of YHWH, we are not going to listen to you. ¹⁷Instead, we will do everything that we have vowed, make offerings to the queen of heaven and pour out libations to her, just as we and our ancestors, our kings and our officials, used to do in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem. We used to have plenty of food, and prospered, and saw no misfortune. ¹⁸But from the time we stopped making offerings to the queen of heaven and pouring out libations to her, we have lacked everything and have perished by the sword and by famine.” ¹⁹And the women said, “Indeed we will go on making offerings to the queen of heaven and pouring out libations to her; do you think that we made cakes for her, marked with her image, and poured out libations to her without our husbands’ being involved?”

Verses 11-14 threaten annihilation on the Judaeans in Egypt, though verse 14 is added in light of the fact that some did in fact escape to return to Judah.

Otherwise the threat is fanciful. The Jewish migrants in Egypt were never wiped out.

Verses 15-19 appear to allude to the reforms of Josiah. Jeremiah’s thesis has been that it was because the people failed to worship YHWH that the disaster of 587 came upon them. The women are offering a counter-perspective. They consider that disaster came upon them because Josiah forbade offerings to be made to the ‘queen of heaven’ (Astarte).

Jeremiah is pictured as contradicting the women. Verses 21-23 are a brief repetition of verses 2-14. Idolatry was the culprit.

20Then Jeremiah said to all the people, men and women, all the people who were giving him this answer: **21**“As for the offerings that you made in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem, you and your ancestors, your kings and your officials, and the people of the land, did not YHWH remember them? Did it not come into his mind? **22**YHWH could no longer bear the sight of your evil doings, the abominations that you committed; therefore your land became a desolation and a waste and a curse, without inhabitant, as it is to this day. **23**It is because you burned offerings, and because you sinned against YHWH and did not obey the voice of YHWH or walk in his law and in his statutes and in his decrees, that this disaster has befallen you, as is still evident today.”

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24Jeremiah said to all the people and all the women, “Hear the word of YHWH, all you Judeans who are in the land of Egypt, **25**Thus says YHWH of hosts, the God of Israel: You and your wives have accomplished in deeds what you declared in words, saying, ‘We are determined to perform the vows that we have made, to make offerings to the queen of heaven and to pour out libations to her.’ By all means, keep your vows and make your libations! **26**Therefore hear the word of YHWH, all you Judeans who live in the land of Egypt: Lo, I swear by my great name, says YHWH, that my name shall no longer be pronounced on the lips of any of the people of Judah in all the land of Egypt, saying, ‘As the Lord YHWH lives.’ **27**I am going to watch over them for harm and not for good; all the people of Judah who are in the land of Egypt shall perish by the sword and by famine, until not one is left. **28**And those who escape the sword shall return from the land of Egypt to the land of Judah, few in number; and all the remnant of Judah, who have come to the land of Egypt to settle, shall know whose words will stand, mine or theirs! **29**This shall be the sign to you, says YHWH, that I am going to punish you in this place, in order that you may know that my words against you will surely be carried out: **30**Thus says YHWH, I am going to give Pharaoh Hophra, king of Egypt, into the hands of his enemies, those who seek his life, just as I gave King Zedekiah of Judah into the hand of King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon, his enemy who sought his life.”

Another repetition of the threat

The Judeans in Egypt are ‘few in number’ (verse 28), as were their ancestors in Egypt at the time of Moses (Deuteronomy 10:22; 26:5).

Pharaoh Hophra lost the throne of Egypt in 570, two years before Nebuchadrezzar’s punitive expedition into Egypt.

¹The word that the prophet Jeremiah spoke to Baruch son of Neriah, when he wrote these words in a scroll at the dictation of Jeremiah, in the fourth year of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah: ²Thus says YHWH, the God of Israel, to you, O Baruch: ³You said, "Woe is me! YHWH has added sorrow to my pain; I am weary with my groaning, and I find no rest." ⁴Thus you shall say to him, "Thus says YHWH: I am going to break down what I have built, and pluck up what I have planted—that is, the whole land. ⁵And you, do you seek great things for yourself? Do not seek them; for I am going to bring disaster upon all flesh, says YHWH; but I will give you your life as a prize of war in every place to which you may go."

Many scholars agree that 'these words' of verse 1 refer back to the scroll dictated by Jeremiah and written by Baruch, and featured earlier in chapter 36. The dating is identical with that given in 36:1.

It is also suggested that chapter 44 was, at some stage, the end of the Jeremiah scroll, and that this note was appended here so that the faithful Baruch would be held up as a counter to the unfaithful leaders and people of Judah and Jerusalem.

In verses 4-5 the catastrophe is portrayed as still in the future. That God is 'going to bring disaster on all flesh' echoes the literature of the great flood (see Genesis 6:12; 9:15). It also prepares the way for the oracles against the nations' which the authors of the Hebrew Version upon which we are commenting chose to place here in the scroll. We have preferred to comment on these oracles in the position they hold in the Greek Version (see Part Two).

The disaster will certainly come, but Baruch is assured by YHWH that he will be spared.

One reason for the editors choosing to finish the scroll with a word from Jeremiah to Baruch may be to acknowledge the man who was the first to inscribe YHWH's words to Jeremiah in a scroll. We first met Baruch as the person to whom Jeremiah entrusted a deed of purchase (see 32:12-16). Then came the occasion when he was instructed by Jeremiah to write a scroll of 'all the words that YHWH had spoken to him' (36:4).

Another reason may be that, even though this scene is dated before the destruction of the city, we have just heard that Baruch was taken with Jeremiah into exile in Egypt (see 43:6). As we read this passage inevitably we read it against that background. Perhaps the editors are portraying Baruch as a symbol of 'the wandering Jew'. The words of Jeremiah are realistic and dire, but they do hold out ultimate hope: 'I will give you your life'.

However bleak to scene, those over the centuries to whom the scroll of Jeremiah is addressed can hold on to the hope that the faithful YHWH will, indeed, give life if they continue to trust in him. We who heed the words of YHWH revealed through Jeremiah can hope for the same grace.