

Jeremiah 49:1-39 “Politics and the Kingdom of God III: God and the Gods” Aug 14, 2016

The oracles concerning the nations are a collection of Jeremiah’s sermons against the nations.
They come from a variety of periods of his ministry:

Chapter 46:1-12 – concerning Egypt –

was after the battle of Carchemish in the 4th year of Jehoiakim (around 605 BC)

Chapter 46:13-28 – also concerning Egypt – was after the exile (after 586 BC)

Chapter 47 – concerning Philistia – was before Pharaoh struck down Gaza (date unknown)

Then chapters 48-49 – Moab in chapter 48, and the various nations of chapter 49 –
we are not given any clear sense of *when* these oracles were spoken.

Until at the end, with Elam,

we are told that this was at the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah.

What about the rest of these oracles?

We are not told – so we do not know for certain.

What this tells us is that we do not need to know about the particular context.

Rather, these oracles are designed *for the people of God*.

They are not sermons for the nations to hear.

They are sermons for Israel to hear – for *us* to hear –

so that we might know how to think about the surrounding nations.

As we have seen, the oracle against Egypt taught us how to think about a fading superpower –
perhaps how to think about a nation like the United States:

“Nations, know your limits!”

Egypt was a proud nation – a powerful nation –

who thought that they could influence the tide of history.

God tells Israel that Egypt will fall –

so do not put your trust in Egypt.

The nations are noisy – but they are powerless to control history.

Then last time the oracle against Moab taught us how to think of petty nations –
little nations that still think too highly of themselves!

Whether great or small, all nations should learn humility before the LORD God!

But we also saw that the judgment against Moab included a judgment against Chemosh –
the god of Moab.

Tonight, our text includes five short oracles against five small nations.

The first and the last oracles include promises of salvation.

The middle three only focus on judgment.

What is Israel supposed to do with this?

As Walter Brueggemann puts it,

this book “has the powerful capacity to cause us to rediscern our own situation,
to experience our situation in quite new ways,
and to participate in our own historical situation
with new liberty and fresh passion –
liberty and passion that arise in and with faithfulness.

Such a text, when read critically,
characteristically assaults every ‘structure of domination’
with its self-serving and misrepresenting propaganda,
including our own military, technological, consumer-oriented establishment.

Such a text, when read imaginatively,
issues a forceful invitation to an alternative community of covenant,
including a risky invitation in our own time
to practices of justice, risks of compassion, and sufferings for peace.” (18)

To put it simply:

the United States of America stands under God’s judgment –
and there is *nothing* that you can do to prevent that!

As we’ll see in most of the oracles tonight,
we don’t know *when* judgment will fall –
but it *will fall* – and there is really no way to predict how soon that will be!

It doesn’t matter how good or bad a nation is –
no nation is good enough to avoid God’s common wrath.

Sure, some are worse than others – but there is no guarantee that the worst will be first!

Why is the United States the most powerful nation in the world?

Was it because we were so good, so faithful, so righteous?

No, it is because we managed to dispossess all the nations that lived on this continent,
gaining access to unimaginable resources and creating such a powerful economy
that no nation on earth could *possibly* compete with us!

1. Yahweh, Milcom, and the Ammonites (49:1-6)

a. When the Gods of the Nations Dispossess God’s People (v1-2)

49 Concerning the Ammonites.

Thus says the LORD:

“Has Israel no sons?

Has he no heir?

*Why then has Milcom dispossessed Gad,
and his people settled in its cities?*

²*Therefore, behold, the days are coming,
declares the LORD,*

*when I will cause the battle cry to be heard
against Rabbah of the Ammonites;*

*it shall become a desolate mound,
and its villages shall be burned with fire;
then Israel shall dispossess those who dispossessed him,
says the LORD.*

The theme of verses 1-2 is that of inheritance and dispossession.

If Israel had no sons – if there was no one left to inherit the east side of the Jordan –
then Ammon could have taken possession of the land.
But Israel *did* have sons.

The context is important.

In the days of Moses,
Israel had dispossessed Sihon, king of the Amorites, and Og, king of Bashan.
And Reuben, Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh settled on the east side of the Jordan.

This meant that the River Arnon became the border (more or less)
between Israel and the Ammonites.
And there was long warfare between Israel and Ammon –
since Ammon claimed all the east side of the Jordan,
but Israel argued that since *they* had defeated Sihon and Og,
they deserved to keep the land.

From the time of the Judges through the post-exilic era –
this border conflict continued for around a thousand years.

Think about the border conflicts today in Ireland – or the middle east –
or South Sudan, or between India and Pakistan – or between Russia and Ukraine –
or many other places in the world.

We often think that negotiation can resolve this.

It's simple! Just divide the land like this...

But if you dig deep into the causes of border conflicts,
you often find so many issues intertwined –
that you throw up your hands in despair.

It would take a war to resolve this!

But of course, the war only adds new fuel to the fire.

Once in every few generations someone dares to propose the ultimate answer:
ethnic cleansing – the killing – or at least physical removal of the “other” –
which will once and for all remove the conflict!

The Indian Removal Act of 1830 did this to the Cherokee
and the rest of the “Five Civilized Tribes.”

The entirety of the westward expansion of this country can be summarized in this way.
We said to the Indians:

“We can use your land better than you can –
so if you don’t sign this treaty and leave,
we will make it harder and harder for you to live here,
until the only option is a war that you can’t win.”

Those who dispossess their neighbors – effectively stealing their land –
are under the wrath and curse of God.

You and I are in possession of Indian land.

What should we do?

Notice that God does not prescribe a system of reparations.

Rather, he says that he will take care of it – by destroying the Ammonites.

b. Those Who Trust in Treasure Will Be Exiled with Their Gods (v3-5)

³ *“Wail, O Heshbon, for Ai is laid waste!*

Cry out, O daughters of Rabbah!

Put on sackcloth,

lament, and run to and fro among the hedges!

For Milcom shall go into exile,

with his priests and his officials.

⁴ *Why do you boast of your valleys, [a]*

O faithless daughter,

who trusted in her treasures, saying,

‘Who will come against me?’

⁵ *Behold, I will bring terror upon you,*

declares the Lord GOD of hosts,

from all who are around you,

and you shall be driven out, every man straight before him,

with none to gather the fugitives.

Part two of the oracle concerning Ammon calls for the Ammonites to lament and wail.

The cities of Ammon are called to cry out.

(Since Rabbah is the capital city of Ammon,

the “daughters of Rabbah” are the cities and villages of Ammon).

Ammon had trusted in her valleys –

the deep ravines and almost impenetrable fortresses of the canyons.

(The ancient city of Petra is in this region)

But Milcom, the god of Ammon, cannot protect his people.

Milcom shall go into exile with his priests and officials.

You may notice a lot of parallels with Moab from chapter 48:7 –

“For, because you trusted in your works and your treasures, you also shall be taken;
and Chemosh shall go into exile with his priests and his officials.”

Now in 49:3-4, the same things are said of Milcom and the Ammonites.

And in verse 5, the LORD speaks to Ammon very much in the way he spoke to Israel:

“Behold, I”

God calls the Ammonites to look at *him*.

“I will bring terror upon you, declares the LORD God of hosts,
from all who are around you, and you shall be driven out,
every man straight before him, with none to gather the fugitives.”

The gods of the nations cannot protect them –
the wealth of the nations cannot protect them –
the fortresses of the nations cannot protect them.

Who can?

c. Milcom Will Not Save You, Yahweh Will (v6)

⁶ “*But afterward I will restore the fortunes of the Ammonites, declares the LORD.*”

Milcom, the god of the Ammonites, cannot save the Ammonites.
But Yahweh, the God of Israel, *can* – and *will* – save them.

Yahweh – the LORD – is the God of all nations.
His purposes begin with Israel –
but they do not end there!
God is working out his salvation – to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.

But this is what he had promised to Abraham!

The Tibetans may be Buddhists – and their Buddhism cannot save them –
but the LORD our God *is* the God who will save them as well.

Nations may rise and fall – and rise again! –
but the rise and fall of nations is in the hand of God.

Verses 7-22 then turn to the Calamity of Esau.

2. The Calamity of Esau: The Irresistible Purposes of God (v7-22)

a. The Vanishing Wisdom of Edom: What Will You Do When God Comes? (v7-11)

⁷ *Concerning Edom.*

Thus says the LORD of hosts:

“Is wisdom no more in Teman?

Has counsel perished from the prudent?

Has their wisdom vanished?

Obadiah 8 tells us that Edom was famous for its wise men.

Indeed, one of the three comforters in the book of Job was Eliphaz the Temanite –
which identifies him as an Edomite.

There is a sort of wisdom that exists in this world by common grace.

People study the world around them

and they figure out all sorts of useful ways of doing things.

And this “common grace” wisdom will get you a long way in life.

If you do everything just right –
if you follow all of this wisdom –
you will last longer than most!

You might even win an Olympic gold medal!

But as in the days of Job,
there comes a time when this common grace wisdom falls short.

Now the Edomites face the same lesson as Job – yet without the wisdom of Job!
(verse 10)

⁸ *Flee, turn back, dwell in the depths,
O inhabitants of Dedan!*

*For I will bring the calamity of Esau upon him,
the time when I punish him.*

⁹ *If grape gatherers came to you,
would they not leave gleanings?*

*If thieves came by night,
would they not destroy only enough for themselves?*

¹⁰ *But I have stripped Esau bare;
I have uncovered his hiding places,
and he is not able to conceal himself.*

*His children are destroyed, and his brothers,
and his neighbors; and he is no more.*

There is but one faint glimmer of hope in this oracle.
And that is found in verse 11:

¹¹ *Leave your fatherless children; I will keep them alive;
and let your widows trust in me.”*

When judgment falls – when the LORD *comes* in judgment against Edom –
the LORD calls the widows of Edom to trust in him.

This reminds us of what the LORD did for the Sidonian widow in the days of Elijah.

In the days of Elijah, when the Sidonian princess, Jezebel, was wreaking havoc on Israel,
leading them into the worship of Baal –
the LORD rescued a widow and her son *from Jezebel’s home city*.

This is what God does.

He protects the weak and the helpless.

But on the other hand, God brings judgment against those who oppose him.

b. The Cup of Wrath: Who Deserves It? (v12-13)

¹² For thus says the LORD: “If those who did not deserve to drink the cup must drink it, will you go unpunished? You shall not go unpunished, but you must drink. ¹³ For I have sworn by myself, declares the LORD, that Bozrah shall become a horror, a taunt, a waste, and a curse, and all her cities shall be perpetual wastes.”

What is the LORD saying here?

Think back to chapter 25:

In chapter 25, verses 15-29, Jeremiah was given the cup of God’s wrath,
and he was sent to the nations:

to Jerusalem first – but then to Egypt,
the Philistines, Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre and Sidon,
and several other nations – including Elam and Media.

And finally he was sent to take the cup of the LORD to Babylon.

Here we are told that Edom must drink the cup.

“If those who did not deserve to drink the cup must drink it, will you go unpunished?”

There *are* those who do not deserve the cup of wrath.

Remember Job?

Have you considered my servant Job?

There is no one who is like him –

who does what is right and turns away from evil.

Job was innocent.

He did not deserve the cup of wrath.

And yet he drank it.

When war and destruction fall upon the earth, there are some who do not deserve it.

We speak of common grace to refer to God’s gracious disposition toward all that he has made –
how the rain falls on the just and the unjust – how the sun shines on all people.

In the same way, we speak of common wrath to refer to God’s judgment upon all creation –
the hurricane that comes against the just and the unjust –
the cancer that afflicts all sorts of people, saved or unsaved alike.

Likewise, not everyone deserves the same cup of wrath.

Our Shorter Catechism says that “every sin deserves God’s wrath and curse,
both in this life, and that which is to come.”

But the very next question says that “some sins, in themselves,
and by reason of several aggravations,
are more heinous in the sight of God than others.”

That odd juxtaposition is precisely the point of verse 12.

Not every nation deserves precisely the same amount of wrath.

Some nations deserve worse punishments than others.

And particularly in the light of verse 11 –

where God promises that he will protect the widows and orphans of *all* nations –
we can see that God is merciful to the helpless and weak.
How should we understand this?
In one sense, yes, the wages of sin is death –
so everyone deserves death.
And yet, not every suffering is deserved –
not every affliction can be attributed to your sin.

c. The LORD Gathers the Nations against Edom (v14-16)

¹⁴ *I have heard a message from the LORD,
and an envoy has been sent among the nations:
“Gather yourselves together and come against her,
and rise up for battle!
¹⁵ For behold, I will make you small among the nations,
despised among mankind.
¹⁶ The horror you inspire has deceived you,
and the pride of your heart,
you who live in the clefts of the rock,^[b]
who hold the height of the hill.
Though you make your nest as high as the eagle's,
I will bring you down from there,
declares the LORD.*

Verses 14-16 then echo the language of Obadiah 1-4.
God is gathering the nations against Edom –
so that Edom will be made small among the nations.

It's not an exact quote from Jeremiah – but it's very close.
Given it's position at the beginning of Obadiah's prophecy,
it is probably a loose quotation from Jeremiah
that Obadiah uses to set up his vision.

d. “Who Is Like Me?” Edom Shall Become a Horror (v17-22)

¹⁷ *“Edom shall become a horror. Everyone who passes by it will be horrified and will hiss because of all its disasters.*

In verse 13, the LORD says that Bozrah (a key city in Edom) will become a horror.
Then in verse 16, the LORD says that “the horror you inspire has deceived you.”

In verses 17-22, the LORD explains what this horror is like with three powerful images:
First (v18):

i. Like Sodom and Gomorrah (v18)

¹⁸ *As when Sodom and Gomorrah and their neighboring cities were overthrown, says the LORD,
no man shall dwell there, no man shall sojourn in her.*

When God says this sort of thing to Israel –

we are to hear a warning to the *church*.
But when God says this to *Edom* – we are to hear a warning to the nations.
Now – again – remember that Jeremiah never went to Edom to preach this.
This message is given to Judah – to the church.

How should *we* think about the devastation of the nations?
When you see Edom devastated by their foes,
remember Sodom and Gomorrah.

When you see Germany devastated after World War I,
remember Sodom and Gomorrah.
When you see the devastation of Iraq and Syria today,
remember Sodom and Gomorrah.
For that matter, when you see many of the inner cities in our own country,
remember Sodom and Gomorrah.
The horror of war and famine and disease *is* God’s judgment against the nations.

In other words, *whenever* you see depopulation and devastation,
you should remember Sodom and Gomorrah –
because Sodom and Gomorrah was a picture
of God’s final judgment against rebellious humanity.

(How should you respond to this?
Yes, the nations will be horrified and will “hiss because of all its disasters,”
but we do not take our cues from the nations!
We respond like the LORD teaches us in verse 11:
“Leave your fatherless children; I will keep them alive; and let your widows trust in me.”
We respond with the compassion of our God and Savior.)

Why do I say that Israel and Judah should respond to this with compassion?
Because they *know* how this feels!
The language of judgment in these verses is language that Jerusalem has just experienced!
As the exiles read and hear the book of Jeremiah being read,
they hear of the experience of their neighbors
in the language of their own experience of judgment.

You know how it feels for your city to be turned into Sodom and Gomorrah (Jer 23) –
so you should have compassion on your neighbors
when they fall under judgment as well.

The second image in verses 19-21 is that of a Lion devastating a sheepfold –
a picture that would cause any heart to weep:

ii. Like a Lion against the Flock (v19-21)

¹⁹ Behold, like a lion coming up from the jungle of the Jordan against a perennial pasture, I will suddenly make him^[e] run away from her. And I will appoint over her whomever I choose. For

who is like me? Who will summon me? What shepherd can stand before me? ²⁰ Therefore hear the plan that the LORD has made against Edom and the purposes that he has formed against the inhabitants of Teman: Even the little ones of the flock shall be dragged away. Surely their fold shall be appalled at their fate. ²¹ At the sound of their fall the earth shall tremble; the sound of their cry shall be heard at the Red Sea.

Yes, it is the LORD himself who brings judgment against the nations.

“Who is like me? Who will summon me? What shepherd can stand before me?”

No shepherd – no king – can stand before the LORD.

No ruler can withstand the plans and purposes of God.

iii. Like a Woman in Labor before the Eagle (v22)

²² Behold, one shall mount up and fly swiftly like an eagle and spread his wings against Bozrah, and the heart of the warriors of Edom shall be in that day like the heart of a woman in her birth pains.”

The final image is of an eagle spreading his wings against Bozrah,
and the heart of the warriors of Edom becoming like the heart of a woman in labor.

3. Feeble, Fearful, and Fallen: Damascus, the City of God’s Joy (49:23-27)

²³ Concerning Damascus:

“Hamath and Arpad are confounded,

for they have heard bad news;

they melt in fear,

they are troubled like the sea that cannot be quiet.

²⁴ Damascus has become feeble, she turned to flee,

and panic seized her;

anguish and sorrows have taken hold of her,

as of a woman in labor.

²⁵ How is the famous city not forsaken,

the city of my joy?

²⁶ Therefore her young men shall fall in her squares,

and all her soldiers shall be destroyed in that day,

declares the LORD of hosts.

²⁷ And I will kindle a fire in the wall of Damascus,

and it shall devour the strongholds of Ben-hadad.”

Verses 23-27 speak of Damascus (the capital city of Syria).

In one respect this is a very typical oracle of disaster.

“bad news” – “they melt in fear” – “she turned to flee” –

“anguish and sorrows have taken hold of her, as of a woman in labor.”

That’s why I titled it “Feeble, Fearful, and Fallen.”

But verse 25 is the unusual verse:

“How is the famous city not forsaken, the city of my joy.”

In Jeremiah 33, God had said that *Jerusalem* would be “to me a name of joy, a praise, and a glory before all the nations of the earth.” (33:9)

But here, Damascus is called “the city of my joy.”

Yes, for now, God is bringing judgment against Damascus.
But he will not be angry with Damascus forever.

Indeed, 600 years later, before the gates of Damascus,
the Lord Jesus would call the apostle Paul to himself.
And 600 years after that, one of the greatest theologians in the history of the church,
John of Damascus, would arise in the “city of my joy”!

When you are tempted to think that nothing good can arise from a particular city or region,
remember Damascus – remember the “city of my joy”!

4. “I Will Bring Calamity” – God Sends Nebuchadnezzar against Kedar and Hazor (v28-33)

²⁸ *Concerning Kedar and the kingdoms of Hazor that Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon struck down.*

Kedar refers to the nomadic peoples – the Bedouins of the desert.
And verses 28-33 describe a people who live in tents – a nation that has no gates.

Thus says the LORD:

*“Rise up, advance against Kedar!
Destroy the people of the east!
²⁹ Their tents and their flocks shall be taken,
their curtains and all their goods;
their camels shall be led away from them,
and men shall cry to them: ‘Terror on every side!’*

³⁰ *Flee, wander far away, dwell in the depths,
O inhabitants of Hazor!*

declares the LORD.

*For Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon
has made a plan against you
and formed a purpose against you.*

³¹ *“Rise up, advance against a nation at ease,
that dwells securely,*

declares the LORD,

*that has no gates or bars,
that dwells alone.*

³² *Their camels shall become plunder,
their herds of livestock a spoil.*

I will scatter to every wind

*those who cut the corners of their hair,
and I will bring their calamity
from every side of them,
declares the LORD.*

³³ *Hazor shall become a haunt of jackals,
an everlasting waste;
no man shall dwell there;
no man shall sojourn in her. ”*

Usually nomadic peoples are safe from invasion.
But Nebuchadnezzar has a plan!
Capture their camels – take their livestock –
and they have no future.

Even the nomads of the desert are not safe.
There is no place where you can escape from God’s judgment.

5. “I Will Set My Throne in Elam”: The Direct Rule of God (in This Age) Means Death (v34-39)

³⁴ *The word of the LORD that came to Jeremiah the prophet concerning Elam, in the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah king of Judah.*

I suspect that this is why Elam comes *last* in this list.
All the other nations on the list are neighbors of Jerusalem.
All the others had done something to Israel.
All the others were enemies of Jerusalem.

But Elam?

Elam really hadn’t done *anything* to Israel.
Indeed, the last time Elam was mentioned in the OT
was in the days of *Abraham* –
when Chedorlaomer, the king of Elam, made war against Sodom and Gomorrah.

Back in the days of Abraham, Elam was a major power to the east of Babylon – towards Persia.
But since the days of Abraham, Elam doesn’t come into the biblical story.
The Elamites were still *there* –
but they were ruled by the Babylonians – or by the Assyrians.
Historians speak of a “neo-Elamite” revival in the century before Nebuchadnezzar
(under the rule of the Medes, Elam appears to have developed
quite a sphere of influence
along the *northern* part of modern Iran, Iraq, and Turkey)

But rather than call them “Medes” Jeremiah uses the older name: “Elam.”
Perhaps he does so in order to remind us of the days
when Elam had invaded Sodom and Gomorrah!
After all, Jeremiah is *very* interested in the Abrahamic promise of blessing to the nations!

What has Elam done to deserve this?

There is no hint of why.

Elam is not an enemy of Israel.

Elam is just a nation – out there – far away to the east.

When God's judgment comes upon the nations

it is not just the particular enemies of Israel who will be judged.

All nations will fall under God's wrath.

That's why we call it *common* wrath!

No nation is exempt!

If even Jerusalem – God's own city – fell under God's judgment,
then all cities – all nations – will fall as well.

What can you do to prevent it?

Nothing.

God's purposes for history cannot be thwarted!

³⁵ Thus says the LORD of hosts: "Behold, I will break the bow of Elam, the mainstay of their might. ³⁶ And I will bring upon Elam the four winds from the four quarters of heaven. And I will scatter them to all those winds, and there shall be no nation to which those driven out of Elam shall not come. ³⁷ I will terrify Elam before their enemies and before those who seek their life. I will bring disaster upon them, my fierce anger, declares the LORD. I will send the sword after them, until I have consumed them, ³⁸ and I will set my throne in Elam and destroy their king and officials, declares the LORD.

In many ways, this is a very standard oracle against the nations.

It is very simple –

with a driving rhetorical force produced by the repetition of God's purposes:

I will break the bow...

I will bring upon Elam the four winds...

I will scatter them...

I will terrify Elam...

I will bring disaster...

I will send the sword...

I will set my throne in Elam and destroy their king and officials, declares the LORD.

God refers to no agent – no "Nebuchadnezzar" who will do this –
only "the four winds from the four quarters of heaven."

God will establish his own *direct rule* over Elam.

You might think that the direct rule of God would be a good thing.

But the direct rule of God – in this age – only brings judgment.

After all – humanity is in rebellion.

The only way that the direct rule of God can be a *good thing* –

is if humanity is reconciled to God.

³⁹ “*But in the latter days I will restore the fortunes of Elam, declares the LORD.*”

There is nothing you can do to prevent God’s judgment from coming.

But you *know* that’s God’s *long-term plan* – God’s eschatological plan –
is to restore the fortunes of the nations.

Only when God’s throne has been established –

and all other claimants and usurpers have been denied –

only then will the rule of God bring peace and salvation to the nations.

And in the latter days?

What happened?

Listen to Acts 2!

⁵ Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven.

⁶ And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. ⁷ And they were amazed and astonished, saying,

“Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?” ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? ⁹ Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, ¹¹ both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God.” ¹² And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?”

Elamites.

God is faithful.

He does what he promises.

He promised that in the latter days he would restore the fortunes of Elam –
and so he did!

God’s judgment is coming – on this nation, like every other.

Therefore, let the *compassion* of God direct your path.

We tend to think, “Oh no, judgment is coming – so we need to shape up!”

But when you think about the judgment against the nations in Jeremiah 49,

the proper response is:

“Oh no, judgment is coming – where are the widows and orphans?”

How can we imitate our gracious Savior in looking out for the weak and helpless?