

THE TRIAL OF JEREMIAH AND THE KILLING OF URIAH THE PROPHET

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THE TEMPLE SERMON

The editing and composition of the Book of Jeremiah have been a matter of debate among scholars. They agree, however, that Jeremiah 7 and 26 are two accounts of Jeremiah's Temple sermon. Chapter 7:1-5 details his sermon in the Temple and chapter 26 provides a summary of the sermon and the audience's response.

According to Jeremiah 26:1, the Temple sermon occurred *At the beginning of the reign of Jehoiakim, son of Josiah, king of Judah.*¹ Jehoiakim became king in succession to Jehoahaz, Josiah's second son, who was deported to Egypt after reigning in Jerusalem for three months. Jehoiakim was placed on the throne by Egypt's ruler, Pharaoh-Neco (II Kgs. 23:34; II Chron. 36:4).

In his sermon, Jeremiah declared that the people had violated the demands of the covenant by not living according to God's Torah (Jer. 26:4), by breaking several of the stipulations of the Decalogue (Jer. 7:9), and by believing that they were safe from the consequences of their actions (Jer. 7:10). As a result of their continual rejection of God's Torah and their belief that the Temple would guarantee their safety, Jeremiah announced that the Lord would destroy the Temple of Jerusalem in the same way he had allowed the sanctuary at Shiloh to be destroyed. Like the Temple in Jerusalem, Shiloh was God's house, the place where he chose to put His name and make His habitation (Jer. 7:12). However, because of the wickedness of the people, God allowed His house at Shiloh to be destroyed.

Jeremiah warned the people that they had failed to obey the injunctions of the Torah, and, for this reason, the Lord could no longer guarantee the safety of the city and deliver the people from the threat posed by the enemies of Judah. In the view of the religious authorities, however, Jeremiah's sermon was blasphemous and treasonable.

Chapter 26 mentions three prophets: Jeremiah, Micah, and Uriah (called *Uriyyahu* in the Hebrew text). One significant aspect of this chapter is the attempt to legitimate Jeremiah as a true prophet and validate his word as true

prophecy. Jeremiah twice defended himself as a prophet by affirming that the Lord had sent him to proclaim his message to Judah. *'It was the Lord who sent me to prophesy against this House and this city', he declared (Jer. 26:12), and 'in truth the Lord has sent me to you, to speak all these words in your ears' (Jer. 26:15).* By declaring that it was none other than God who sent him, Jeremiah set a seal of authenticity on his mission and message.

The confrontation between Jeremiah and the authorities of Judah occurred at a time when the nation was facing a political crisis precipitated by the death of Josiah. Among Jeremiah's opponents were the optimistic prophets, whom the Septuagint explicitly calls "false prophets." These seers were proclaiming a message about the threat faced by the nation, a threat brought about by the fall of the Assyrian empire and the rise of Babylon. They told the people that the Babylonian threat to Jerusalem would not materialize because the presence of the Lord in the Temple guaranteed Jerusalem's security. According to Jeremiah, these seers were proclaiming a deceitful message to the people: *'You shall not see the sword, nor shall famine come upon you, but I will give you unfailing security in this place'* (Jer. 14:13).

Chapter 26 also shows that the proclamation of Jeremiah and Uriah contradicted the message of the optimistic prophets. The message conveyed by Jeremiah and Uriah offered a different perspective of the nation's current political and religious situation, one that did not suit those prophets who were trying to defend the status quo. Jeremiah proclaimed that the Temple was threatened with destruction and that the people were in danger of being cast out of the land unless they repented and returned to the Lord.

THE TRIAL OF JEREMIAH

In his sermon preached *in the court of the House of the Lord* (Jer. 26:2), Jeremiah proclaimed that if the people continued to ignore God's warning, He would destroy Jerusalem and the Temple, even as He had destroyed Shiloh. In addition, Jeremiah declared that Jerusalem would become the object of a curse among the nations. In foretelling the destruction of the Temple, Jeremiah went against the popular view that the presence of the Temple safeguarded the city of Jerusalem. The people believed that "Jerusalem had a privileged place with God and so was immune from the fate of Shiloh."²

It is possible that the people who heard Jeremiah's sermon were divided

about the validity of his message. References to "the people" appear in Jeremiah 26:7-9, 11-12, 16, and 24. In verses 7-9, the people supported the priests and the prophets and opposed Jeremiah; but in verses 11-12 and 16, they sided with the officials who supported Jeremiah and declared him not guilty of being a false prophet. In verse 24, the people tried to have Jeremiah put to death.

As a result of his sermon, the people seized Jeremiah and threatened him with the death penalty. The angry reaction of the audience was based on their belief that no true prophet would ever announce the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.

Jeremiah was placed on trial to decide whether he had committed blasphemy by speaking about the destruction of the Temple and against Jerusalem. Should he be found guilty of blasphemy, he would be put to death as the priests and the prophets had requested. They made that demand because of the injunction that any prophet who spoke falsely in the name of the Lord should be executed (Deut. 18:20). The trial of Jeremiah took place, in accordance with the stipulations of Deuteronomy 18:20-22, in order to determine whether Jeremiah was a true prophet and whether he had been sent by the Lord.³

During the trial, only the priests and prophets accused Jeremiah of blasphemy. The charge lodged against Jeremiah was that he had prophesied against Jerusalem (Jer. 26:11). The people who had formerly opposed Jeremiah now adopted a neutral position, awaiting the decision of Judah's leaders.

The court was convened *at the entrance of the New Gate of the House of the Lord* (Jer. 26:10). The royal officers were not present when the religious officials declared that Jeremiah should be put to death. The palace officials were summoned to hear the case and decide whether or not the prophet deserved to die. Some scholars believe that Jeremiah's accusers misrepresented his actual words to the royal officers.⁴ Jeremiah had not merely prophesied against the city: he had condemned widespread violation of the covenant and the people's false sense of security. He gave the people a chance to avert the divine judgment, but their rejection of his message ensured that what he had predicted would become a reality.

In their case against Jeremiah, the priests and the prophets accused him of preaching against both the Temple and Jerusalem, ignoring the people's vio-

lation of the Decalogue. The real issue between Jeremiah and the religious authorities was his message of impending judgment, which negated the ideology behind their views and therefore posed a threat to their political power as well.

When Jeremiah began to defend himself, he addressed his words to the royal officials and the people rather than to his accusers, the priests and the prophets (Jer. 26:12). Jeremiah declared that he was innocent of the charges leveled against him, for the Lord had sent him to proclaim His message and to warn the people of the consequences of their disobedience. The words spoken in that proclamation were not his own, but those he had received from God. In conclusion, Jeremiah stated that putting him to death would result in the shedding of innocent blood.

After Jeremiah presented his defense, the royal officers and the people declared that Jeremiah was not guilty. He had proclaimed an authentic message and they acquitted him of the charge of being a false prophet. They told the priests and the prophets: *'This man does not deserve the death penalty, for he has spoken to us in the name of the Lord our God'* (Jer. 26:16).

THE MESSAGE OF MICAH

Following Jeremiah's acquittal, another group of people arose to speak on his behalf (Jer. 26:17-19). The reason why the elders of the land came to defend Jeremiah was probably because declaring him to be a true prophet was not sufficient to convince everyone of his innocence. The fact that, after the trial, Ahikam ben Shaphan had to use his influence to keep Jeremiah from being handed over and executed by the people (Jer. 26:24) is evidence that the threat to Jeremiah's life had still not been removed.

In their defense of Jeremiah, the elders cited a precedent from the nation's history. They reminded those present that a century earlier, in the days of King Hezekiah, Micah the Morashtite, a prophet from a small village in Judah, had also prophesied about the Temple and Jerusalem, and had warned the people of a coming judgment. Micah's proclamation, quoted by the elders (Jer. 26:18), was similar to that of Jeremiah in his Temple sermon, declaring that Zion would be plowed like a field, that Jerusalem would become a pile of rubble, and that the Temple Mount would become a hill overgrown with trees (Mic. 3:12). The elders concluded that although Micah's words were as

harsh as Jeremiah's, he had not incurred the death penalty. The elders rendered an impartial decision, since they were not connected with the Temple's religious establishment or with the political leadership of Jerusalem.

This quotation of an oracle by a prophet in another prophetic book is something unique in the Bible. The elders repeated almost verbatim Micah's words against the Temple and the city. They praised Hezekiah and the people of Judah for sparing Micah, even though – like Jeremiah – he had prophesied the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem. King Hezekiah gave heed to the prophetic word. On the basis of the historical precedent cited by the elders, Jeremiah was not put to death. The reaction of Hezekiah to Micah's message serves as an indictment of Jehoiakim. Brueggemann states that Jehoiakim "is the model of disobedience." From the outset of his reign, the word of the Lord was unwelcome, "systematically rejected and resisted."⁵

By mentioning Hezekiah's decision about Micah's prophecy, the elders implied that the religious and political officials in Judah should imitate the action taken by Hezekiah. The elders affirmed that a prophet's word spoken against the city was not sufficient reason for his execution. In contrast to Jeremiah, who offered salvation for Jerusalem if the people abandoned their evil ways, Micah's words against the city and the Temple offered no way out. The text does not say whether the words of the elders persuaded Jehoiakim to accept Jeremiah's message. The execution of another prophet, Uriah, clearly indicates that in the past the king did not accept the validity of Jeremiah's preaching.

THE KILLING OF URIAH

In his Temple sermon, Jeremiah declared that the Lord had sent prophets who urged the people to obey the Torah's injunctions. The way the words of Jeremiah are constructed in verse 26:5, '*the prophets whom I have been sending to you persistently*', indicates that in the days of Jehoiakim there were other prophets urging the people to obey the Law, and Uriah was one of them. We are now told in four verses (Jer. 26:20-23) the story of one such prophet who was put to death, Uriah.

It is hard to place the story of Uriah's death within the chronological framework of Jeremiah's trial. The extent to which the killing of Uriah is related to the trial of Jeremiah is unknown. Nor do we know when that

prophet's execution took place. It can be inferred from the narrative that Jehoiakim had Uriah executed at the beginning of his reign.

Uriah ben Shemaiah was an unknown prophet from Kiriath-jearim, one of the four Gibeonite cities (Josh. 9:17). There is no information about him in the Bible other than these few verses. We are told that Uriah proclaimed a message identical with Jeremiah's. The linking in the text of Uriah with Micah and Jeremiah is an attempt to place Uriah's ministry within the prophetic tradition represented by these two seers (Jer. 28:8). It was also an affirmation that the content of his message was consistent with the one proclaimed by the true prophets. Jeremiah, Micah, and Uriah came from small villages that preserved and promoted the ancient religious traditions of Israel.⁶ By informing us that Uriah came from Kiriath-jearim, the narrative links Uriah to the traditions associated with the Ark of the Covenant and the destruction of the sanctuary at Shiloh.

When Jehoiakim was told about Uriah's message, he summoned his officials and military men and decided to have Uriah killed (Jer. 26:21). The expression, *the king sought to put him to death*, clearly "denotes killing done by someone in authority, very often the king."⁷

How Uriah came to hear of this royal decision is uncertain. Like Jeremiah, he may have had supporters within the government. Fearing for his life, Uriah took refuge in Egypt. Jehoiakim was then a vassal of Pharaoh Neco and there may well have been a formal suzerain-vassal treaty between Egypt and Judah that included the extradition of fugitives. This was standard practice at the time. A peace treaty between Hattušili III, king of the Hittites, and Rameses II of Egypt (1284 BCE) thus included a clause stating that fugitives would be extradited to their country of origin.⁸

At Jehoiakim's command, Elnathan ben Achbor went to Egypt with a detachment of men to secure Uriah's return. Elnathan belonged to a prominent Judean family. He was among the royal officers present when Baruch read Jeremiah's scroll (Jer. 36:12) and one of the officials who urged Jehoiakim not to burn it (Jer. 36:25). If he is the same Elnathan who was the father of Nehushta and the grandfather of Jehoiachin (II Kgs. 24:8), then he was also Jehoiakim's father-in-law.

The execution of Uriah took place on the king's authority. Uriah was denied burial in a family sepulcher: he was interred instead in one of the graves

meant for the common people – *benei ha-am*. According to II Kings 23:6, this burial ground was located in the Kidron Valley. It may be that Jeremiah's execration of Jehoiakim, who had an ignominious burial (Jer. 22:18-19), was the prophet's response to the disgraceful treatment of Uriah.

Uriah was put to death by Jehoiakim because he had prophesied against the Temple and the city in the same way Jeremiah had done. The death of Uriah is another reminder of the strong opposition that Jeremiah faced during his long ministry. It seems clear that the narrative of Uriah's death was not cited at Jeremiah's trial: it was added by the compiler of Jeremiah's book, traditionally Baruch ben Neriah, to tell his readers about another prophet who spoke in the Lord's name, but who did not escape Jehoiakim's wrath as Jeremiah had done. Although the *Tosefta* (*Sotah* 9:5-6) indicates that the Uriah episode was in fact mentioned at the trial by Jeremiah's opponents, thus serving as a precedent for the killing of a prophet, other traditional Jewish commentators (such as Mahari Kara and Malbim) accept that it was a later addition, although they feel that Jeremiah himself added it to the narrative so as to emphasize the danger threatening him. The fact that the Uriah episode does not begin with a statement naming the relater surely indicates that this is a narrative section and not part of the dialogue at the trial.

The reference to Uriah's death may have been a veiled warning to Jeremiah. Jehoiakim may have wanted Jeremiah to realize that his message was unacceptable and could lead to his death. If the messenger could be silenced, the threat enunciated by the prophet would be nullified. The death of Uriah shows how little regard Jehoiakim had for the prophets and for the message they proclaimed, demonstrating the king's attitude toward those who objected to his policies. The silencing of Uriah indicates the kind of opposition Jeremiah faced both from the king and from the religious leaders of Judah. When Jehoiakim was challenged by the words of Uriah, no one interceded with the king on Uriah's behalf, so he was free to vent his wrath against the prophet.

The final verse of the chapter (26:24) presents another twist to Jeremiah's trial. Ahikam ben Shaphan rescued Jeremiah from death at the hands of the people. Ahikam was the son of Shaphan the scribe, a high official in King Josiah's court. When the book of the covenant was discovered during the renovation of the Temple, *Shaphan read it before the king* (II Kgs. 22:8-10). Josiah then sent Shaphan, Ahikam and other envoys to Huldah the prophet-

ess, asking for her evaluation of the book's significance (II Kgs. 22:12-20). Gedaliah, Ahikam's son, was chosen by the Babylonians to serve as governor of Judah after the fall of Jerusalem (II Kgs. 25:22; Jer. 40:5-6). This indicates that Ahikam was a man of considerable political influence in the last days of Judah.

The placing of verse 24 after the account of Uriah's death suggests that some people were not convinced by the verdict of the royal officials. They believed that Jeremiah deserved to die for his words against the Temple and Jerusalem. Ahikam's action shows that the threat against Jeremiah's life had not ended with the decision of the royal officials. There is no way of knowing if the campaign for Jeremiah's death took place immediately after the trial or whether some people, influenced by Jehoiakim's past decision to execute Uriah, were bent on killing Jeremiah as well, thus necessitating Ahikam's intervention to save the prophet. The reference to Ahikam in this context is important, because it shows that Jeremiah found support among the king's own officials.

CONCLUSION

The slaying of the prophet Uriah is mentioned in connection with Jeremiah's to emphasize the wickedness of King Jehoiakim. His rejection of the message of Jeremiah and Uriah constituted a rejection of God's message for the nation. As Walter Brueggemann notes, the only hope for Judah, the message Jeremiah was preaching, was viewed "as an unnecessary threat." God's Torah, which held the promise of life for Judah, was now "intolerable."¹⁰

The murder of prophets is a rare occurrence in the Bible. Jezebel, a Tyrian princess and the wife of King Ahab, persecuted and killed many prophets (I Kgs. 18:4, 13; 19:1-2). Apart from the execution of Uriah ben Shemaiah, there is only one other example of a prophet being killed by his own people: the stoning of Zechariah ben Jehoiada at the behest of King Joash (II Chron. 24:20-22). The general charge against Israel of killing prophets appears only once in the Tanakh: *'Nevertheless they were disobedient and rebelled against You and cast Your law behind their backs and killed Your prophets, who had warned them in order to turn them back to You, and they committed great blasphemies'* (Neh. 9:26, NRSV). While many of the prophets encountered some opposition in the discharge of their ministry and even faced threats to

their lives, none of them were put to death. The story of Uriah's execution in Jeremiah 26 is an anomaly that reflects the spiritual condition of Judah in the years before its exile to Babylon.

NOTES

1. All references will be taken from The Jewish Publication Society Bible translation (TNK), unless otherwise indicated.
2. Walter Brueggemann, *Jeremiah 26-52: To Build, To Plant* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) p. 7.
3. A description of the trial procedure is found in Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985) pp. 245-7.
4. Kathleen M. O'Connor, "'Do Not Trim a Word': The Contributions of Chapter 26 to the book of Jeremiah," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 51 (1989) pp. 617-630; Brueggemann, p. 7, note 6.
5. Brueggemann, p. 5.
6. Mark Leuchter, "The Cult at Kiriath Yearim: Implications from the Biblical Record," *Vetus Testamentum*, 58 (2008) pp. 526-43.
7. Gerald L. Keon, Pamela J. Scalise and Thomas G. Smothers, *Jeremiah 26-52* [(Word Biblical Commentary)] (Dallas: Word Books, 1995) p. 30.
8. James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near East Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955) p. 203.
9. William Holladay, *Jeremiah 2* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989) p. 103.
10. Brueggemann, p. 12.



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