

Part 8: Was Jeremiah Imprisoned in Zedekiah's Reign?

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The book of Jeremiah is the principal source for matters relating to Jeremiah, but the book of Jeremiah does not claim to be a biography of his life. John Bright noted that “we know far more of his life than we do of that of any other [Hebrew] prophet,” but from the biographical narratives, we have just an “outline of Jeremiah’s career after the year 609” B.C.¹ Scholars have identified the reign of Zedekiah with numerous undated and dated sayings and biographical narratives in the book of Jeremiah.² These passages indicate that Zedekiah ruled in a complex situation. False prophets in Jerusalem proclaimed the imminent return of Jehoiachin and all of the exiles and thus, they proclaimed “the abdication of Zedekiah.”³ Jeremiah battled against this false expectation (Jeremiah 28). Frauds in Babylonia denounced Jeremiah’s prophecies of an extended exile (Jeremiah 29:4-14, 24-32). Zedekiah’s “position was ambiguous in that his nephew Jehoiachin was still regarded as the legitimate king by many of his subjects and, apparently, by the Babylonians as well.” This ambiguity “undoubtedly undercut whatever authority he may have had. At the same time, there were probably, among Zedekiah’s nobles who had profited from the deportation of their predecessors, those who regarded themselves as the true remnant of Judah to whom the land rightfully belonged” (Ezekiel 11:14-17; 33:23-29). Some nobles “apparently began to attach dynastic hopes to Zedekiah” (Jeremiah 23:5-8). “As long as such notions were abroad, whether attached to Jehoiachin or Zedekiah, a continual ferment was inevitable.”⁴

Zedekiah appears to have considered seriously a rebellion against Nebuchadnezzar when reports of revolt in Babylon, involving part of the Babylonian army and some of the Jewish exiles, reached Judah (Jeremiah 29:7-9, 20-23). According to the Babylonian chronicle, in the tenth year of Nebuchadnezzar’s reign, “there was a revolt in Babylon that lasted from the month of Kislev to the month of Tebeth (from mid-December 595 to mid-February 594 B.C.E.). This revolt was suppressed only after Nebuchadnezzar ordered the execution of many in his own army and when he had personally trapped the leader of the revolt, whose identity is not known.”⁵ The rebellion in

¹ John Bright, *The Anchor Bible: Jeremiah* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1965), LXXXVI-LXXXVII.

² See, e.g., Bright, *Jeremiah*, CIII-CX; Alexander Rofé, “Jeremiah,” in Paul J. Achtemeier, ed., *The HarperCollins Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996), 490-91.

³ William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 2: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah Chapters 26-52* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 128. The false prophet, Hananiah, was “in defiance of Zedekiah, the court and the Babylonians.” Robert P. Carroll, *Jeremiah: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 543. Jeremiah “condemns Hananiah as a false prophet, even when Hananiah’s message of salvation for Jerusalem corresponds to that of Isaiah a century before ([Jeremiah] 28).” Marvin A. Sweeney, “Jeremiah, Book of,” in Freedman, Myers, and Beck, eds., *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, 688. In such a context, Jeremiah’s prophecy of an extended exile would have been seen as pro-Zedekiah, if the king would be faithful to the Lord and his covenant with Nebuchadnezzar.

⁴ John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 4th edition (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 328-29.

⁵ Oded Lipschits, *The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem: Judah under Babylonian Rule* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 62-63. See also Donald J. Wiseman, *Chronicles of Chaldean Kings (626-556 B.C.) in the British Museum* (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1956), 36-37; Albert Kirk Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles*, Texts from Cuneiform Sources, A. Leo Oppenheim, ed., vol. 5 (Locust Valley, New York: J.J. Augustin, 1975), 102; Jean-Jacques Glassner, *Mesopotamian Chronicles*, Benjamin R. Foster, ed. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), 231.

Babylon, “although rather quickly suppressed, raised hopes in Palestine. Within the year (594/3) ambassadors of Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre, and Sidon [Jeremiah 27:3] met in Jerusalem to discuss plans for revolt.”⁶ Prophets in Babylonia and Jerusalem (Jeremiah 29:20-23; 28:1-4) were “encouraging revolt,” as being the will of the Lord.⁷ In Jerusalem, Jeremiah “denounced such talk as a lie” spoken in the Lord’s name. He also “wrote a letter to the exiles ... bidding them forget their wild dreams and settle down for a long stay. The plot, whether because the Egyptians were unwilling to support it, or because saner counsel prevailed, or because the conspirators could not agree among themselves, did in fact come to nothing.”⁸

Kathleen M. O’Connor did not discuss the Jerusalem conference directly, but instead viewed the prophetic conflict about when the exiles would return as a battle that began in Zedekiah’s first year “immediately after the first invasion of Judah by Babylon.” This battle set Jeremiah against the false prophets of the surrounding nations (Jeremiah 27:1-11), against the false prophets of Judah who were counseling Zedekiah and the people (Jeremiah 27:12-22) and against Hananiah in a personal showdown at the temple (Jeremiah 28).⁹ Similarly, S. Kent Brown and David Rolph Seely proposed that discord between Zedekiah and Jeremiah concerning the conference (Jeremiah 27-28) was “an early spark in the conflict that grew up between Zedekiah and Jeremiah and would have offered the king an excuse to punish the already intractable Jeremiah at the beginning of Zedekiah’s reign.”¹⁰

The exile of Jehoiachin and enthronement of Zedekiah by Nebuchadrezzar certainly raised questions about when the exile would end and when, if ever, Jehoiachin would return. Differing prophetic views would have been in conflict immediately. However, the conflict between prophets does not mean Zedekiah and Jeremiah were in conflict. Jeremiah’s views of a lengthy exile actually supported Zedekiah’s continued kingship, if he would remain faithful to the Lord.¹¹ One might, of course, speculate that Zedekiah rejected Jeremiah’s prophetic views and preferred those that predicted Jehoiachin’s rapid return. On the other hand, it seems unlikely that Zedekiah and his court wanted to be removed from power and punished for cooperating with the Babylonians.

The date of the Jerusalem conference, when the prophetic conflict reached a climax, appears to be given twice in the book of Jeremiah. In the Masoretic text of Jeremiah 27:1, the date is the accession year of the reign of Jehoiakim. This date is “incorrect and apparently an erroneous recopying” of Jeremiah 26:1. The date does not appear in the Septuagint text and it is “certainly not original.” The original chapter probably began like Jeremiah 13 and 19.¹² The

⁶ Bright, *A History of Israel*, 329. See also Bright, *Jeremiah*, L-LI, 210-211; J. Arthur Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, R.K. Harrison, ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1980), 25, 531; James Hastings, ed., *Dictionary of the Bible*, Rev. ed., Frederick C. Grant and H. H. Rowley, eds. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1963), 1054-55 (“Zedekiah”).

⁷ Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, 25.

⁸ Bright, *A History of Israel*, 329.

⁹ Kathleen M. O’Connor, “Jeremiah,” in John Barton and John Muddiman, eds., *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 511.

¹⁰ S. Kent Brown and David Rolph Seely, “Jeremiah’s Imprisonment and the Date of Lehi’s Departure,” *The Religious Educator* 2/1 (2001): 19.

¹¹ See footnote 3 above.

¹² Bright, *Jeremiah*, 195, 199. Oded Lipschits also noted that the date in Jeremiah 27:1 “is a mistake and, apart from the historical illogic in assigning it to the days of Jehoiakim, it also does not accord with the contents of the prophecy (compare v. 3).” Lipschits, *The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem*, 64 n.98.

Masoretic text for Jeremiah 28:1 states an impossibility: the conference occurred in both the accession year of Zedekiah and in his fourth year. The reference to the accession year of Zedekiah is probably a mistaken attempt to correct the inaccurate Masoretic text of Jeremiah 27:1. A further attempt is made to harmonize the corrected reading with the actual date of the conference (the fourth year of Zedekiah) by noting that Jeremiah 27 and 28 relate to the “same year.” In the Septuagint text of Jeremiah 28:1, the events of chapter 28 are dated to the fourth year of Zedekiah and his accession year is not mentioned.¹³ When these textual inconsistencies are viewed in the light of the Babylonian chronicle, the fourth year of Zedekiah (which followed the revolt in Babylon) appears certain to have been the year of the Jerusalem conference.

The conflict at the temple between Hananiah and Jeremiah is dated to the fifth month of Zedekiah’s fourth year (Jeremiah 28:1). As a consequence of Hananiah’s false prophecy in the Lord’s name (see Deuteronomy 18:20), Jeremiah proclaimed to Hananiah, “Therefore, thus saith the Lord; Behold, I will cast thee from off the face of the earth: this year thou shalt die, because thou hast taught rebellion against the Lord. So Hananiah the prophet died the same year in the seventh month” (Jeremiah 28:16-17). Surely, Zedekiah paid attention to that event.

After the conference, an official delegation from Judah (perhaps including Zedekiah) went to Babylonia to confirm Judah’s faithfulness (Jeremiah 29:3; 51:59).¹⁴ “In 593 BCE Zedekiah was summoned by Nebuchadrezzar to Babylon, presumably to account for his actions and to renew his loyalty oath. Zedekiah’s planned rebellion and subsequent reprimand by Nebuchadrezzar may have formed the occasion for Ezekiel’s inaugural vision and call to speak against the ‘rebellious nation’ of Israel ([Ezekiel] 2:3). Ezekiel considered Zedekiah’s oath of loyalty to Babylon binding. According to 2 [Chronicles] 36:13, the oath had been sworn in the name of God ... and thus its abrogation violated [the Lord’s] honour and constituted rebellion against [him].”¹⁵

In interpreting these matters, one cannot ignore or overlook the textual inconsistencies between the Masoretic text and the Septuagint text involving the dates given in Jeremiah 27:1 and 28:1, without violating the principle of thoroughness. Similarly, one cannot ignore or overlook the evidence of the Babylonian chronicle, which is consistent with a conference in Zedekiah’s fourth year. And one cannot ignore or overlook the fact that while others were falsely prophesying a quick return for Jehoiachin and the other exiles, Jeremiah was predicting the opposite – in favor of Zedekiah’s continued reign. One might assume that Jeremiah’s specific warning to Zedekiah (Jeremiah 27:12-15) was resisted by Zedekiah and thereby caused an “early spark” leading Zedekiah to imprison Jeremiah early in the young king’s reign. However, Jeremiah 29:3 and 51:59 indicate that Zedekiah sent envoys to Babylonia and if the Masoretic text of Jeremiah 51:59 is correct, went himself to secure his position as king and to assure Nebuchadrezzar of his loyalty.¹⁶ Jeremiah was free to come and go before the conference because he confronted the ambassadors, Zedekiah and Hananiah as commanded by the Lord (Jeremiah 27-28). If Zedekiah

¹³ Bright, *Jeremiah*, 195, 199-200. See also Holladay, *Jeremiah 2*, 112.

¹⁴ One official was Seraiah, the brother of Jeremiah’s scribe, Baruch (see Jeremiah 32:12). His title is uncertain. The Masoretic text indicates “official of the resting-place” or bivouac (hence “chief quartermaster”). The Septuagint text indicates the title is “chief of tribute” or “officer of the tribute gifts,” such gifts as would be conveyed to a foreign overlord. The two texts also differ as to whether Seraiah was sent by Zedekiah (Septuagint) or went with Zedekiah (Masoretic). Bright, *Jeremiah*, 210; Carroll, *Jeremiah: A Commentary*, 854; Holladay, *Jeremiah 2*, 432-34.

¹⁵ Julie Galambush, “Ezekiel,” in John Barton and John Muddiman, eds., *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 534.

¹⁶ Bright, *Jeremiah*, 210, 212.

threw Jeremiah into prison after the conference, that action would have sent a message of rebellion to Nebuchadnezzar, just the opposite of the message Zedekiah sought to convey.

When all of that evidence is not overlooked or ignored, the supposed “early spark” mentioned by Brown and Seely (if, indeed, there was such a flash of direct conflict between king and prophet) seems most likely to have occurred more than two years after the end of Zedekiah’s first year. Lehi’s family probably did not languish by the Red Sea for three years before seeking to bring Ishmael’s family down to their base camp. Brown has stated elsewhere that the sojourn at the base camp lasted “certainly no more than a year.”¹⁷ Thus, the “early spark” appears to have occurred nearly three years too late to support a speculative proposal that Jeremiah was imprisoned in, or shortly after, Zedekiah’s first regnal year.

Within about five years after the Jerusalem conference (by Zedekiah’s ninth year) and after the accession of a new pharaoh in Egypt, Judah was in open rebellion against Babylonia. Some understanding may have been reached with pharaoh Hophra (also known as Apries, who ruled Egypt from 589 to 570 B.C.). The kingdoms of Ammon and Tyre joined the rebellion. However, based on Zedekiah’s continued communication with Jeremiah (Jeremiah 21:1-7; 37:3-10, 17; 38:14-23), the king “was far from assured in his own mind, but unable to withstand the enthusiasm of his nobles.”¹⁸

Even more to the point, when Zedekiah began to reign, Jeremiah’s enemies who remained in Jerusalem, had just been spared from exile or execution. However, nine years later (Jeremiah 52:4), after Zedekiah finally chose rebellion, enemies of Jeremiah again faced imminent exile or death. With the army of Nebuchadnezzar besieging the city, the rebellious nobles and false prophets found themselves in a highly stressful situation. Even so, Zedekiah kept communicating with Jeremiah, asking for his help.

And Zedekiah the king sent Jehucal the son of Shelemiah and Zephaniah the son of Maaseiah the priest to the prophet Jeremiah, saying, Pray now unto the Lord my God for us. Now Jeremiah came in and went out among the people: for they had not put him into prison. Then Pharaoh’s army was come forth out of Egypt: and when the Chaldeans that besieged Jerusalem heard tidings of them, they departed from Jerusalem (Jeremiah 37:3-5).

In other words, at this time of immense stress, Jeremiah’s enemies had not yet convinced Zedekiah to imprison the prophet. The implication of this statement extends from the tenth year of the king’s reign (when the siege apparently was lifted) all the way back to the beginning of Zedekiah’s reign when stresses were much less intense—the king and his officials had not yet¹⁹

¹⁷ S. Kent Brown, “A Case for Lehi’s Bondage in Arabia,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6/2 (1997): 206.

¹⁸ Bright, *A History of Israel*, 329. See also Bright, *Jeremiah*, 195-203; Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, 25.

¹⁹ Many translations so render this passage. Jeremiah had not “yet” been imprisoned. See, e.g., Jeremiah 37:4 in Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1002; Bright, *Jeremiah*, 221; *God’s Word* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: World Publishing, 1995), 1006; *The Holy Bible: New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982), 324; *Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 926; *The Jerusalem Bible* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1966), 1312; *The New American Bible* (New York: P.J. Kenedy & Sons, 1970), 1145; *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: Revised Standard Version* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 964.

imprisoned Jeremiah.²⁰ Hence, in my search for sources suggesting an imprisonment of Jeremiah early in Zedekiah's reign, what I have found are texts in the book of Jeremiah and Babylonian chronicle indicating that his imprisonment probably did not occur until the king's tenth year.

Why was Jeremiah finally cast into prison by Zedekiah? About the time when the Babylonian encirclement of Jerusalem was nearly complete (Jeremiah 34:6-7), Zedekiah proclaimed a covenant to the people of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 34:8-10) ostensibly to implement the ancient sabbatical law of liberation for their Hebrew slaves (Exodus 21:2-6; Deuteronomy 15:12-18). The Hebrew scriptures provide no indication that the law of release was ever faithfully kept by slave owners²¹ and Jeremiah noted that the law had been long ignored (Jeremiah 34:13-14). Conforming to the covenant made in the temple, the besieged slave owners freed their Hebrew slaves (in actuality, perhaps, to avoid an uprising within the walls of the city and to make service in defense of the city the *quid pro quo* for shelter, food and drink).²² On the surface, the release seemed to indicate that the king and his people were repentant (Jeremiah 34:15), but when the Babylonian army withdrew from the gates of the city (Jeremiah 34:21-22), the liberated slaves were forced back into slavery (Jeremiah 34:11, 16). This re-enslavement brought a stinging rebuke from Jeremiah against the slave owners. Although the Babylonians had withdrawn, they would return and the Lord would liberate the unrepentant slave owners "to the sword, to the pestilence, and to the famine;" their dead bodies would become meat for the beasts and fowls; and Zedekiah and his nobles would be delivered into the hands of their enemies (Jeremiah 34:17-22).

At the same time, Jeremiah called on the populace to listen to the words of the Lord and leave the city (Jeremiah 21:1-10; 38:1-3). Even at this late date, Jeremiah continued to work, convincing some of the people of Jerusalem to see the error of rebellion. Perhaps many were finally willing to listen to the prophet and the Lord, and to escape from the city (Jeremiah 38:19; 39:9; 52:15) because court officials became furious with Jeremiah for weakening the morale of the soldiers (Jeremiah 38:4).²³ He was wrongly thought to be a Babylonian sympathizer (compare Jeremiah 37:11-15 with 51:59-64). Nonetheless, the book of Jeremiah is clear that even after the siege was lifted, Jeremiah was free to come and go among the people in the city because the authorities had not yet imprisoned him (Jeremiah 37:1-5).

Then Jeremiah attempted to leave the city. He was arrested at the gate on a charge of desertion (literally, falling to the Babylonians).²⁴ He was brought before court officials, beaten and taken to "one of the vaults in the cistern house"²⁵ beneath the home of Jonathan the scribe

²⁰ David Rolph Seely and JoAnn H. Seely claimed that "[t]he book of Jeremiah is silent about Jeremiah's activities during the first year of Zedekiah's reign. If Jeremiah was imprisoned at that time ... we would not expect to find a reference to this imprisonment in the Bible." David Rolph Seely and JoAnn H. Seely, "Lehi & Jeremiah: Prophets, Priests & Patriarchs," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/2 (1999): 28. They either ignored or overlooked Jeremiah 37:4 and contrary to the principle of rational reserve, supplanted that void with their own subjective expectation.

²¹ Hastings, ed., *Dictionary of the Bible*, 867 ("Sabbatical Year").

²² Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, 610.

²³ "In a time of war such seditious preaching must be regarded as a capital offence, and Jeremiah is to be considered fortunate that he was not executed summarily (cf. [Jeremiah] 26:20-23)." Carroll, *Jeremiah: A Commentary*, 679. See also Bright, *Jeremiah*, 226, 230-231; Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, 92-94, 637-38.

²⁴ Holladay, *Jeremiah 2*, 288; Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, 632.

²⁵ Bright, *Jeremiah*, 225, 230. See also Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, 634. Holladay noted that, "It is unclear whether 'cistern house' ... is a separate house or a cistern used for a prison (so Exod 12:29), and it is

(Jeremiah 37:11-16). After some time, he was summoned secretly by Zedekiah and interviewed. Jeremiah requested that he not be sent back to the makeshift dungeon because he believed he would die there. Perhaps seeking to gain the Lord's favor for himself and his city, Zedekiah ordered that Jeremiah should be held in the court of the guard house attached to the palace²⁶ and given a piece of bread daily (Jeremiah 37:17-21). Although restrained to the court of the guard house, Jeremiah was not alone there and evidently could receive visitors (Jeremiah 32).

Apparently, Jeremiah continued to prophesy to any who might listen about the city's pending destruction. His ability to preach to the city through visitors to the court seems to have further infuriated Zedekiah's officials, who demanded that the king authorize them to execute Jeremiah for sedition (Jeremiah 38:1-4). Zedekiah authorized the officials to cast Jeremiah into a cistern under the court of the guard house. The cistern was partially filled with mud, into which Jeremiah sank, and there the prophet was abandoned (Jeremiah 38:5-6). Ebed-melech, an Ethiopian servant of Zedekiah, learned of Jeremiah's plight. The servant may have assumed the officials had acted without the king's consent. Ebed-melech begged Zedekiah to release the prophet and Zedekiah granted the request. Thus authorized, Ebed-melech took thirty (or perhaps just three) men²⁷ with him and they used ropes to lift Jeremiah up into the court, where he was again available for another secret meeting with the king. Jeremiah remained in the court of the guard house until released when the city fell to the Babylonians (Jeremiah 38:7-28; 39:11-14).

likewise unclear whether the second expression, 'in the cells' ... is intended as a hendiadys (Bright: 'in one of the vaults of the cistern house'; similarly Rudolph), or is intensive ('indeed in the cells,' so Volz)... One has the impression, then that [Jeremiah] was confined to an underground dungeon in which he might have died (Thompson): compare [Jeremiah 37:] 18, 20." Holladay, *Jeremiah 2*, 288.

²⁶ Bright, *Jeremiah*, 230; Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, 640. "The 'court of the guard' was in the palace, and at least on a similar occasion ([Jeremiah] 37:21) [Jeremiah] was confined there in honorable circumstances, a kind of 'protective custody.' At least he had more freedom than when he was put into the cistern there ([Jeremiah] 38:6)." Holladay, *Jeremiah 2*, 213.

²⁷ Bright, *Jeremiah*, 231, conjectured and cited other commentators to the effect that the number *thirty* is mistaken because "that is far more men than would have been needed" to lift Jeremiah from the muddy cistern. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, 640, agreed, but with the caveat that thirty men might have been "needed for protection," presumably from the officials who had thrown Jeremiah into the cistern.