

JEREMIAH 29:4-14. A PROPHETIC LESSON FOR MODERNITY?

Abstract

The prophetic text of Jeremiah 29:4-14 is not strictly theological, but very concrete and immediately applicable. It is a social, cultural, and political program, appropriate for the new realities—the people of Israel, who would be taken into Babylonian captivity. Unlike the experience of Egyptian captivity, Babylonian slavery would be characterized by more leniency on the part of the authorities, a real chance for the Israelites to survive as a nation, and even to assert themselves as a people united around the same values. This research

aims to identify and enhance the relationship between the biblical past, characterized by the chosen people's history under divine providence, and modernity. This relationship is facilitated by the topical nature of the biblical message, which, although referring to the times of biblical antiquity, is full of meaning and significance for contemporaneity, if we believe that ancient history is another one of God's pedagogical lessons for us.



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Introduction

My introduction is facilitated by the academic contribution of Rev. Prof. John Behr, from the University of Aberdeen (UK), who, at the inaugural conference of ROOTS, stated: "To speak about Scriptures (the Old Testament) as events that took place before Christ and about the Gospels as what followed is a misunderstanding of the Scriptures, of the Gospel, and Christ Himself". As Rev. Dumitru Stăniloae stated (Stăniloae 1993, 34-7), there are two dimensions of history: a horizontal dimension of history, the history of man any time and everywhere, of the past, present and future, marked by the events of humanity; and a vertical dimension of history, marked by the

intervention and presence of God, Lord of time, which He created, but to which he descends to meet a man as his Savior. Each meeting of the two axes, horizontal and vertical, is an epiclesis, a meeting between God and man.

The history of man's salvation is, therefore, the history of the elevation of man, by divine grace and personal efforts, to the status of God, the new history of the resettlement of man in the "before" state, because history is no longer old or new, but always updated.

What we call "history" is living as if moving in a line. For us, every moment is the last one, which always passes, a present that can also be the "fullness of time" (Gal 4:4), when revealed: every moment which is revealed is thus open to the "coming" of Christ. We are always standing still at the foot of the Cross and, at the same time, we are moving (temporally, not spatially) along the horizontal and vertical axes, from Adam to Christ. The same movement of our intellect descending into our soul takes place while reading of revealed Scripture, as events from ancient history, which are now being revealed, show us new meanings of our existence towards eschatology. In my next research, we intend to decipher this aspect through the exegesis of the text in Jeremiah 29:4-14.

My research has the following objectives: first, a general objective, namely, to identify and fructify the relationship between the biblical past and contemporaneity, because of rereading the holy text on an updated note; second, a specific objective, namely, to understand God's pedagogy in the time of the Jewish biblical diaspora as a lesson for the current Christian diaspora.

The exegesis of Jeremiah 29:4-14

The prophetic synthesis of the preparation of the chosen people for exile is found in "the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem unto the residue of the elders which were carried away captives, and to the priests, and the prophets, and to all the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had carried away captive from Jerusalem to Babylon" (Jer 29:1). The prophetic words are not a simple exhortation, but they are introduced by the standard phrase: "Thus says the LORD". This shows that they are, in fact, a commandment. In addition, their fulfilment is related to God's decision to "relocate" (lit.) Israel to Babylon, which also means changing their lifestyle. However, what we first want to decipher from the prophetic text is its theological significance, after which we will focus on the concreteness and applicability of the commandments.

First, the emphasis is on God, the author of the commandment, and then on its recipient, man, thus highlighting the personal relationship between the Creator and man. God is Alive, Lord of creation and Creator of time. The value of Israel's history is validated by the reference to the Torah, as a verbal and written manifestation of divine authority. God is the content and purpose of history. Therefore, the confession of God is proof of man's religious identity. God is the One who makes "everything new" (Rv 21:5), offering new experiences to man, in new places, while always being the same. Only man distinguishes between here and beyond. For us, the Lord says that He takes us "out of here" and moves us "beyond", even though we often believe and affirm that "We are free to roam; we will come to you no more" (Jer 2:31), "If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord" (Rom 14:8).

Secondly, we are dealing with the call to accept the state of bondage and to move into a "foreign land" (Ps 137:4). God would bring Israel out of His land and move them to Babylon. "I will drive you out of the city and deliver you into the hands of foreigners and inflict punishment on you", says Ezekiel (11:9). The theological idea of "bringing Israel out" by divine power was reminiscent of the Exodus from Egypt, as ground zero for Israel's election and its foundation as a holy nation. The Exodus from Egypt meant offering, entering, and settling in the Promised Land, a land offered as a gift by God. Now, on the contrary, the verb is used to get out of the comfort zone and offer foreignness, the unknown, and insecurity. Nonetheless, this move decided upon and commanded by God, which is accomplished with the instruments of horizontal history, must be freely and obediently accepted by Israel, "Because of the sins which ye have committed before God, ye shall be led away captives into Babylon by Nabuchodonosor king of the Babylonians" (Letter of Jer 1:1).

Thirdly, we are dealing with a temporal prescription: the exile and, consequently, the displacement would last seventy years: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfil my good promise to bring you back to this place" (Jer 29:10). Therefore, the exile will last at least two generations until the One who brought Israel out of his land would bring them out of Babylon. The coming back is like a return of the soul, renewed, to the flesh. According to prophet Ezekiel (37:12-13), it is like a resurrection: "Therefore prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. Then you, my people,

will know that I am the Lord when I open your graves and bring you up from them”. However, while the time of return from captivity is ordained by God from the beginning of the pedagogical decision, and it would be followed, the historical reality would be that “when ye have come unto Babylon, ye shall remain there many years, and for a long season, namely, seven generations: and after that, I will bring you away peaceably from thence” (Letter of Jer 1:2). If the exile in Babylon is determined by God, the exodus to the house would not be the same. Many of the exiles would remain in Babylon, thus constituting the most important Jewish diaspora, a witness to God’s work from afar.

The prophetic text in Jeremiah 29:4-14 is not strictly theological, but also has a high degree of applicability. This is a rather social, cultural, and political program, which is appropriate for the new realities and intended to be put into practice immediately, to be organized and structured. Unlike the experience of Egyptian slavery, Babylonian slavery would be characterized by more leniency on the part of the authorities, a real chance for the Israelites to survive as a nation, and even to assert themselves as a people united around the same values.

The following analysis of the Hebrew text, accompanied by my translation into Romanian, aims to highlight those theological contents that can still substantiate a theological ethic of the relation of foreigners to locals and natives to immigrants.

Hebrew text (BHS)	Romanian translation
בְּנוּ בָתִּים וְשִׁבוּ	“Zidiți case și locuiți-le!” (v. 4)
וְנִטְעוּ גַּנּוֹת וְאָכְלוּ אֶת־פְּרִיָן	“Sădiți grădini și mâncați roadele lor!” (v. 5)
קַחוּ נָשִׁים וְהוֹלִידוּ בָנִים וּבָנוֹת וְקַחוּ לְבָנֵיכֶם נָשִׁים וְאֶת־בְּנוֹתֵיכֶם תְּנוּ לְאִנְשֵׁים וְתִלְדְנָהּ בָנִים וּבָנוֹת וְרַבּוּ־שֵׁם וְאַל־תְּמָעֵטוּ	“Luați-vă soții și nașteți fii și fiice! Fiilor voștri luați-le soții, iar pe fiicele voastre măritați-le, ca să nască fii și fiice; și înmulțiți-vă acolo și să nu vă împutinați!” (v. 6)

<p>וּדְרָשׁוּ אֶת-שְׁלוֹם הָעִיר אֲשֶׁר הִגַּלְתִּי אֶתְכֶם שָׁמָּה וְהִתְפַּלְּלוּ בְּעִדָּה אֵל-יְהוָה כִּי בְשָׁלוֹמָה יִהְיֶה לָכֶם שְׁלוֹם</p>	<p>“Căutați pacea țării în care v-am dus robi și rugați-vă pentru ea Domnului, că de pacea ei depinde și pacea voastră!” (v. 7)</p>
<p>אֶל-יְשׂוּאוּ לָכֶם נְבוֹאֵיכֶם כִּי בְשֶׁקֶר הֵם נְבֹאִים לָכֶם בְּשֵׁמִי לֹא שָׁלַחְתִּים</p>	<p>“Să nu vă lăsați amăgiți de proorocii voștri și de ghicitorii voștri(...)!Că aceia în minciună profetesc vouă în numele Meu. Nu Eu nu i-am trimis.” (vv. 8-9)</p>
<p>וְקִרְאתֶם אֹתִי וְהִלַּכְתֶּם וְהִתְפַּלַּלְתֶּם אֵלַי וְשָׁמַעְתִּי אֲלֵיכֶם וּבְקִשְׁתֶּם אֹתִי וּמְצֵאתֶם כִּי תִדְרָשׁוּנִי בְּכָל-לְבַבְכֶם</p>	<p>“Mă veți chema și veți veni și vă veți ruga Mie, și Eu vă voi auzi! Și Mă veți căuta și Mă veți găsi, dacă Mă veți căuta cu toată inima voastră!” (vv. 12-13)</p>

Building a house is the first and most important sign of stability and durability. The house is a private environment that ensures life security and the development of livelihoods. At the same time, it is the sacred heart of a family's identity, with its traditions, beliefs and customs. Materially and spiritually, the house builds a family. In a home, husbands feel confident to give birth to sons and daughters, to educate and instruct them for life, and to marry them.

In addition to building the house, cultivating the garden is a creative act, reminding us of the Gardener of this world, God, and the fact that the earth is a gift given to man (Gn 1:28). Nonetheless, given the lengthy maturation of some plants, cultivating the land is a long-term concern and, at a spiritual level, it is a cultivation of faith and hope.

If the first three requests refer to the domestic space, and the internal experience of the family, the next ones refer to others and God. Once, through the psalmist, God asked the Israelites to pray for Jerusalem and its leaders: “Pray for the peace of Jerusalem! May those who love you be secure” (Ps 122:6). Therefore, the commandment expressed in the words of the prophet Jeremiah is the most difficult to understand and fulfil. The Israelites should refrain from all curses against non-Jews, especially from the political oppressors. The fact that fulfilling this commandment was difficult is confirmed by the song between the reeds of the waters of Babylon, from

Psalm 137:8-9: “Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is the one who repays you according to what you have done to us. Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks”. Of course, we can see these imprecations as a spiritual slippage of the hopeless man, starting from the conviction that divine justice brings death to those who caused death (Freedman 1980, 318). Maybe that’s why prophet Jeremiah surprises his contemporaries with such a striking request.

This time, in the Babylonian diaspora, the Israelites are being asked to “seek the good of the country” and to “pray for it”, these being rhetorical expressions of obedience to political and administrative authorities, but also invitations to work together and to have a good coexistence with locals. Respect, peace, balance, and dignity are the keys to empathy, tolerance, acceptance, integration, and solidarity. The obedience to the authority of the rulers contains the hidden lesson of humility, godliness, and obedience to God. Denial and disobedience to worldly authority are prerequisites for the annulment of any kind of authority, including the spiritual one. Even after returning from captivity, the priests in Jerusalem are urged to pray for the Persian authorities: “So that they may offer sacrifices pleasing to the God of heaven and pray for the well-being of the king and his sons” (Ezr 6:10). This type of exhortation shows the need to pray for the authorities, for they need the spiritual support of the righteous people, even if they have strayed from the right faith. In addition, if the exiles pray for the local authorities, they become an example for locals and a necessary prayerful intercession of God’s people for those with another faith.

Times of crisis, which cause instability and mistrust among people, are speculated and exploited by those who seek to gain from any circumstance, regardless of the difficulties of others. Therefore, God asks the contemporaries of the prophet Jeremiah to discern between the messages which add to the anxiety and concern of people, and often to their ignorance, on the one hand, and the divine word which gives confidence and hope, on the other hand: “Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the Lord” (vs. 8-9). False prophets, engaged in leadership structures, abuse people’s emotional instability and their willingness to receive only positive news. Their message of peace, coming in the context of discourse about God’s unconditional mercy, is an invitation to lax faith, morality, and worship. Specifically, the speech of the false prophet Ananias is cunning, misinforming, and inciting indifference and ignorance:

“This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: ‘I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon. Within two years I will bring back to this place all the articles of the Lord’s house that Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon removed from here and took to Babylon’ (Jer 28:2-3). God, Himself is the salvation of Israel, not the Temple, as a magical, delimiting, compelling, and manipulative construction of Holiness: “This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. Do not trust in deceptive words and say, ‘This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord!’” (Jer. 7:3-4). The mere physical presence of the Temple amid Zion and of the people of Israel, on the one hand, and of the Israelite (or his sacrifices) amid the Temple, on the other hand, does not authenticate a centrality of faith in human life: “Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, “We are safe”, safe to do all these detestable things?” (Jer 7:9-10). It is not the physical centrality of the sacred that means anything, but the assumption of this centrality of the inner, spiritual living, as God requires through Moses: “But if from there you seek the Lord your God, you will find him if you seek him with all your heart and with all your soul” (Dt 4:29).

Hence the last exhortation: “Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart” (Jer 29:12-13). These words come in the context of the tradition of daily Jewish prayer (Resceanu 2018, 242-3), according to which prayer is a dialogue, a search for, and the finding of God. After the birth of Enos, “people began to call on the name of the Lord” (Gn 4:26); Abraham “built an altar there to the Lord, who had appeared to him” (Gn 12:7); “Exalt the Lord our God and worship at his footstool; he is holy. Moses and Aaron were among his priests, and Samuel was among those who called on his name; they called on the Lord and he answered them. He spoke to them from the pillar of the cloud; they kept his statutes and the decrees he gave them. Lord our God, you answered them; you were to Israel a forgiving God, though you punished their misdeeds”, says the psalmist (Ps 99:5-8). These are just some of the many exhortations to meet God in prayer, highlighting the Old Testament theology of the presence of the Living God near man. God hears and answers (Melniciuc-Puica, Vatamanu, Hârlăoanu 2014) (Gn 3:9-10; Ps 65:2; 116:1-2: “I love the Lord, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy. Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live”).

And even though Israel is far from the Holy Land and the Temple (which would be destroyed) in Jerusalem, they would be heard by the Lord, because, according to Ezekiel's prophecy, "although I sent them far away among the nations and scattered them among the countries, yet for a little while I have been a sanctuary for them in the countries where they have gone" (Ez 11:16). In the absence of the Temple, God Himself would be the Holy Place for the Israelites. In exile, God would constantly be present in prayer through the liturgy of the Word, through the Torah. The true God is the Lord of the revealed Word. And, to remove any fear, the psalmist reinforces the prophetic words: "From Zion, perfect in beauty, God shines forth. Our God comes and will not be silent; a fire devours before him and around him a tempest rages" (Ps 50:2-3).

The re-reading of the prophetic text as the key to national and religious survival

Despite Zedekiah's efforts to save the political independence of the Kingdom of Judah, King Nebuchadnezzar wanted to subdue all military forces in the Levant, and, after an eight-month siege of Jerusalem, he conquered it, ordering the deportation of the people to Babylon (Donner 1995, 402-13). Thus begins the 70-year exile prophesied by Jeremiah. However, the deportation of the Israelites to Babylon was not nearly as tragic as the plunder and destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, the true religious exile of the chosen people. The texts from the Lamentations of Jeremiah (1:6-10; 2:6-8) highlight the unprecedented pain of the people, the destruction of Zion as a spiritual death of a nation, an end allowed by the Lord. But Zion is a place that was destroyed to be recreated (Poulsen 2014, 39).

Against the backdrop of the loss of loved ones and deprivation, it is obvious that the drama of the exile caused a lot of frustration, anger, mistrust, fear, and despair! The texts from the Psalms and the book of Job refer precisely to this suffering that the righteous, an exponent of the enslaved people, cannot immediately explain, but for which God has a meaning. The experience of the Jewish diaspora in Babylon was built on the prophetic foundation of the holy text. The strong faith in the Living God, Who has a special plan with His people, whom he pedagogically and providentially sent to Babylon, further strengthened the theology of Israel's distinction among nations. The despair was turned into hope. Being far from the Holy Land, among non-believers, the Israelites were re-reading the Scripture on a hermeneutic note, to understand the new historical experiences, seeing the exile as a chance to express their faith to everyone.

Of particular significance for their spiritual resurrection in exile was their awareness of the moral state at that time, because they disobeyed God. The key to a redeemed future was to assume the past, to acknowledge the state of decay in which the sin had brought them. They live among dispersed nations, because “there is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed. Because of this, the land dries up, and all who live in it waste away; the beasts of the field, the birds in the sky and the fish in the sea are swept away. (...) My people are destroyed by a lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge” (Hos4:2-3.6). And this is not only an accusation that comes from the Lord, while seeking the guilty elsewhere, outside, among people from another nation and from another faith, but it is an assumed responsibility, among themselves, as the collective guilt of the chosen people. The exiles blame themselves, and the sins which led them to this moral state.

The divine pedagogy of the exile was expected and that is why the Jewish prophets in exile no longer talked about what God’s judgment would make out of them – because that is what they were already experiencing – but about the end of the divine trial: the deliverance, the redemption. For example, as I mentioned above, prophet Ezekiel speaks in Babylon to his compatriots about the end of the exile as a resurrection, as the union of all bones into a new body, having a new spirit (Ez 37:1-14), or as a union of the two parts of the rod, which was once broken (Ez 37:20-28). Jeremiah anticipates a recreation of the time before the exile, or he expects something entirely new. The new covenant in Jeremiah is merely a renewal of the Sinaitic covenant (Lundbom 2004, 466).

Because this theology of resurrection and salvation does not refer only to eschatological times, but prophetically refers to an immediate history, it also contains a political theology. It is another kind of political message, in which the concepts and contents are theological. *Lex operandi* is *lex credendi*. And this is because, behind an obvious religious message, focused on messianism, there is a strong testament to social, and national unity. The literary context of Ez 36:10-12 and Ez 37:21-28 is more than eloquent. Invoking the kingdom of David and the Messianic hope, as restorers of the covenant between God and man, it calls to transform the unity of the diaspora into a centralized unit around the Holy Place of the Lord. The House of the Lord would no longer have the role of a cult place for formal rituals but would be “in their midst”. It would be the cathedral of national unity, a landmark and standard for everyone.

Conclusions: The exile as alienation – meanings for modernity

Returning home should not be only a physical return, but primarily a spiritual return, an inward conversion, a return to the Lord, in response to frequent prophetic calls (Is 44:22; Jer 3:7,12; 4:1; 31:21; Hos 12:7; 14:2; Ps 116:7). “This is what the Lord Almighty says: ‘Return to me,’ declares the Lord Almighty, ‘and I will return to you,’ says the Lord Almighty”, through the prophet Zechariah (1:3). The prophetic call to re-evaluate the status of the exiles’ faith through the spiritual instruments of humility and repentance must bring spiritual renewal and a return to the matrix of God’s redemption: “The days are coming”, declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them”, declares the Lord. “This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,” declares the Lord. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people” (Jer 31:31-33).

The exile and the diaspora are antithetical to the space we call “home”. In the history of the chosen people, the dramatic loss of the homeland strengthened the connection between the exiles and the Holy Land, a relationship which grew stronger at a theological level, becoming a feature of identity, and important for their self-definition. In this context, the theology of the earth as a divine gift is very strong, emphasizing the covenant relationship that exists between God and the people of Israel. The land of Canaan was separated from other geographical areas and it was set aside and sanctified. It was a holy land and the Holy Land because it was the land of promises and the land where they would be fulfilled. Israel is the land “in which milk and honey flow” (Dt 26:15) and the pedagogical space for the trials of faith. The holy land preserves in every stone and dust the memory of a history of redemption, and, whenever he is far from this land, the Israelite longs for the earth received as a gift from God, he longs for “home”, for sitting in the shadow of the Temple.

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