

## Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: February 13<sup>th</sup>: Jeremiah 29: Some Notes

**Themes:** We don't often get an exchange of correspondence in the Bible. Here we do. Across the 800 mile gap between Jerusalem and Babylon, Jeremiah advises the exiles (at all levels) on integration combined with faithfulness (and patience), and Shemaiah writes back trying to undermine Jeremiah and get him silenced by the remainers. We can message/zoom to and fro with Australia in minutes. The Jeremiah correspondence is extraordinary in its time. J had friends in high places, and could get his letters carried effectively by royal messengers along with royal correspondence. The J message itself is striking: make the best of who you are, where you are, with what you've got. Do God's work among the aliens for the common benefit. He doesn't say convert them. He does say show them. He takes it for granted that you can be a God-follower 800 miles from God's home in the Temple – while those still living in Jerusalem beside the Temple continue to mess up and betray their calling.

**Quotes:** *Build houses, and make yourselves at home. Work for the country's welfare. Pray for Babylon's welfare. If things go well for Babylon, they will go well for you. I have plans to give you the future you hope for. When you come looking for me, you will find me. When you get serious about finding me, and want it more than anything else, I'll make sure you won't be disappointed.*

**Clarifications:** We know from archaeology that some of the Jewish exiles were settled in rather swampy down at heel areas; but the Babylonians had taken people they knew could be useful to them, including high status and skilled people. They exploited them, but they gave them space to flourish. Over millennia, Jews have been extraordinarily good, all round the world, at making the best of things: here in the UK, in India, in Europe, in America. Being Jews and also being good citizens. Both their differentness and their success have led to persecution. I know Jews who came here from India, did well, and sponsored welfare projects back in India.

The false prophets in both Jerusalem and Babylon apparently lived badly as well as preaching bad things; but you have to acknowledge that preaching non-co-operation with Babylon, especially in Babylon, was bravely foolish. As this chapter says, some of them paid for it by being burned alive!

The names are confusing: partly because different spellings are used (as the writers move from language to language; mainly because completely different people have the same name. There were kings called Ahab and Zedekiah as well as false prophets. The Hilkiah mentioned here is not the Hilkiah who was Jeremiah's father! Shaphan was a hero from Josiah's reforming days, and his family were among Jeremiah's best allies. It wasn't Jeremiah alone against the world.

Elasah = God has made. Shaphan = Prudent. Shemaiah = Obeys the Lord. Zephaniah = God hides. Zedekiah = God is might (why the Babylonian Emperor should have chosen this name.....!) Ahab – Father’s brother! Hilkaiah = Portion of Jehovah. Folk didn’t always live up to or down to their given names Not a female name in sight!

**Questions: How do we best combine being good citizens and being good Christians?**

**Does it matter having a Christian label on good citizen activities: proclaims the faith/puts people off? Does what the church does have to be seeking converts, or is it enough to be doing good? Can we acknowledge the Godliness of what other faiths and no-faith people do? How do we feel about the JW approach of opting out of political involvement of any kind?**