

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: July 10th: Jeremiah 46 &47

The prophecies about other nations are a reminder that although the Jewish God is sometimes portrayed in nationalistic terms, and is not consistently declared to be the one and only God, the prophets are convinced that He is God of all the nations; and is “in charge” of all nations, and all nations are accountable to Him. Chapter 46 is about Egypt. Chapter 47 is about Philistia, though it lumps in with the Philistine towns the Phoenician Tyre and Sidon. Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Amos have similar other nations prophecies.

The Chapter 46 history turns on two battles: Megiddo in 609 BC saw the Egyptian mercenary army doing rather well, including a successful attack on Philistia, and the defeat of Judah and the killing of King Josiah. Then in 605 BC the Babylonians thrashed the Egyptians, captured Upper Egypt, and ended Pharaoh Neco’s territorial ambitions.

The tailpiece of Chapter 46 mirrors Jeremiah 30: 10-11, and re-assures the Jews that, longer-term, they were still the chosen people. One of the discussion points in these final chapters is the nature of being chosen. Understandably, many Jews saw being chosen by God in conventional success terms: top nation led by top king, flourishing commercially and winning battles. (Just as Christian/Nationalist English/British Victorians happily ran together Christian conversion/Imperial domination/commercial success/everyone speaking English.) Maybe both God and the succession of Imperial Powers (Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Rome) saw little Israel’s role rather differently!

Apis, the sacred bull of the Egyptian deities, is caricatured as a heifer that is no match for Jehovah and His unwitting Babylonian recruits. You may or may not be comfortable with this picture of Jehovah using the non-Jehovah Babylonians to punish the cow-worshipping Egyptians, the renegade Jews, and the Philistines (whose offences are not stated here). The sad reality of War is that people get killed and wounded, lose their loved ones, and lose their homes and livelihoods, irrespective of their beliefs and their behaviour! I tend to sympathise with those who see the dead body of a 9 year old girl, and find it hard to see this being justified by the priests and Levites being a bit slack in keeping up with the requirements of Temple slaughter worship, or even by her parents being a bit deficient in religious practice and moral propriety! The reality is that the innocent do often suffer in an un-just society; but God promoting justice by sending Babylonian hired soldiers to fight Egyptian hired soldiers over the ruins of a village in which nobody cared a fig about either the Babylonian or the Egyptian king??

Maybe the take-away message is one of accountability, of everybody at every level. In an era of commissions of enquiry, it is good that behaviour is scrutinised as a basis for doing better next time. Though we need to be very careful not to highlight a few top people victims and forget universal responsibilities. (If I’d known that X was having a Covid party, I’d have had a Covid party!!) We also need to pay tribute to people who did the best they could with the information they had and the resources they had; rather than blaming them

for not knowing what wasn't knowable, and not deploying resources they didn't have. It is the great strength of our notion of God as Judge that God alone knows exactly what we, or Josiah, or Pharaoh, or Gedaliah, or Jeremiah or.... had to go on when choosing.

A footnote. We do tend to caricature the Philistines as uncivilised intruders. They were actually refugees from their own country, which had been invaded, and quite highly civilised. Judge not that ye be not judged!

In what sense was God in charge then? In what sense is God in charge now? Then, God or gods were very much part of the international discussion. Today? Are we comfortable or embarrassed when national leaders do God talk?