

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: June 26th: Jeremiah 43: Some Notes

The writers of Jeremiah are more concerned with theology and morality, than with the detail of history, so we shouldn't take too seriously the apparent quick and easy jump from Israel to a demonstration outside a public building in Egypt. But pause and reflect on the contrast with today's handling of refugees, or imagine what happened in Chapter 24 in modern terms: "Hebrews whose relatives stole our silver, killed our kids, ruined our crops, and drowned our troops, caught trying to creep into our country. One of them was carrying stones for a violent demonstration. The Government has detained the illegal immigrants, and is considering deportation to Ethiopia."

Some of the detail of this chapter is interesting. Azariah is mentioned before Johanan: perhaps a shift in leadership, and maybe not entirely unanimous in deciding that Jeremiah must have been influenced by Baruch: a pretty lame excuse for rejecting the God message they had asked for. The king's daughters have been abducted into the Egyptian party, despite the fact that their history makes it pretty clear the Babylonians would not have harmed them had they stayed. Jeremiah and Baruch would have been safe in Israel or Babylon, but their frequently publically expressed views on Egypt might well not have endeared them to the Egyptians. Worth noting that a new Pharaoh might have suggested to the exile planners a new opportunity – though if they thought Egypt was safe from Babylon they were kidding themselves.

Israel's God clearly wasn't much bothered about frontiers, and Jeremiah happily carried on with action sermons in alien territory. However, Jeremiah was (rightly) concerned about his countrymen picking up again on the gods of Egypt once they got back to Egypt. There was a territorial aspect to religious thinking at that time: if a country had gods, those entering that country were inclined to take them seriously. (The Old Testament idea of destroying god symbols was unusual.)

Questions: 1) Does our God go with us? 2) How, in today's very mixed society, do we combine being openly Christian with being respectful of other faiths? 3) Is overseas mission more tricky now we can no longer happily sing about rescuing the heathen from bowing down to wood and stone? 4) How do we rate the Promised Land and the Chosen People?