

# **JEREMIAH**

An Introduction and Commentary

Volume 2: Chapters 21–52

**John L. Mackay**

**Mentor**

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## ABBREVIATIONS

- ABD* *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. D. N. Freedman (ed.). 6 volumes. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
- ANET* *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*. J. B. Pritchard (ed.) 3rd edition. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969.
- AV Authorised Version (King James) (1611).
- BDB F. Brown, S. R. Driver and C. A. Briggs (eds.), *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907.
- BHS* *Biblica Hebraica Stuttgartensia*. K. Elliger and W. Rudolph (eds.). Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1977.
- GKC W. Gesenius, E. Kautzsch and A. E. Cowley, *Gesenius Hebrew Grammar*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910 (second edition). (cited by section.)
- GNB Good News Bible (= Today's English Version). Glasgow: Collins/Fontana, 1976.
- HALOT* *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. L. Koehler, W. Baumgartner and J. J. Stamm. 5 volumes. Brill: Leiden, 1994-1999. (cited by page.)
- IBHS* *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*. B. K. Waltke and M. O'Connor. Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1990. (cited by section.)
- ISBE* *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. G. W. Bromiley (ed.). 4 volumes. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979-1988.
- Joüon Joüon, P. *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*. Translated and revised by T. Muraoka. Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1991.
- LXX Septuagint, according to *Septuaginta II*, ed. A. Rahlfs. Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft: Stuttgart, 1982.
- MT Massoretic Text (as in *BHS* above).
- NASB New American Standard Bible. LaHabra, California: The Lockman Foundation, 1995.
- NIDOTTE* *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*. W. A. VanGemeren (ed.). 5 volumes. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997. (cited by volume and page.)
- NIV New International Version. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1988.
- NJPS *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures: The New JPS Translation according to the Traditional Hebrew Text*. Philadelphia: The

Jewish Publication Society, 1985.

NKJV New King James Version. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982.

NLT New Living Translation. Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House, 1997.

NRSV New Revised Standard Version. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.

REB Revised English Bible. Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press, 1989.

RSV Revised Standard Version. London: Oxford University Press, 1963.

*TDOT Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament.* G. J. Botterweck, H. Ringgren and H.-J. Fabry (eds.) 11 volumes, continuing. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974-.

*TWOT Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament.* R. L. Harris and G. L. Archer (eds.). 2 volumes. Chicago: Moody Press, 1980. (cited by entry number.)





## **VIII. KINGS AND PROPHETS DENOUNCED**

**(21:1–24:10)**

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**OUTLINE**

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At the beginning of chapter 21 there is a decided break in Jeremiah, and the following material has a higher proportion of prose, often located in specific historical contexts. More than that, the clock at first moves significantly forwards and we are brought to the closing years of Zedekiah. The change of style has suggested to many that there is an alteration in the way the book was composed. The most reasonable hypothesis regarding this is that Baruch began to take a more active role in assembling the material that Jeremiah gave to him, and that it is Baruch and Jeremiah who are jointly the narrators responsible for this presentation. The interrupted chronological sequence shows that there is a deliberate contrast being made between the earlier ministry of Jeremiah holding out repentance as the way to avert catastrophe coming on the nation and his later ministry when the nation's doom was sealed but the possibility of mitigating the disaster was present if, belatedly, they paid heed to the prophet's exhortation.

This part of the prophecy begins with a formal introductory formula that indicates Jeremiah's warrant for speaking (21:1). Commentators are not agreed as to whether 21:11 marks the start of a new section of material, or not. The view is taken here that it does not, and that the whole of chapter 21 was brought together as a unit during the closing years of Zedekiah's reign. It is followed in chapter 22 by denunciations made of recent kings of Judah, culminating in 23:1-8 with a vision of the Righteous Branch who will be a true and blessed ruler of the covenant people. It is interesting that Zedekiah (the name means, 'The LORD is my righteousness') is not explicitly mentioned among the kings who are criticised, and that Righteous Branch (23:5) is a play on his name. It seems probable that this section of the prophecy was brought together by Baruch in the closing months of the siege to constitute an appeal to Zedekiah to act responsibly as regards the welfare of his people—and as regards his own future. It incorporates a plea for repentance, but not of the sort that Jeremiah gave earlier in his ministry when a return to the LORD would have averted the catastrophe coming upon the land. Now the nation's fate is sealed, but it is possible to lessen their punishment if only they are obedient to Jeremiah's word to surrender to the Babylonians rather than resist them. That was the challenge given to Zedekiah and the people. Submission was considered an act of treason, which at a political level it undoubtedly was, and advocating it brought Jeremiah much suffering in the period leading up to the fall of Jerusalem. It does, however, explain why this section came to be gathered together, and the function it might well have performed. This message would have continued to be of vital relevance to the survivors of the collapse of Judah: Babylon was the

LORD's appointed means of punishing his people. To acquiesce in Babylonian rule was to recognise the divine mandate that lay behind it—for the moment.

The remaining two sections in this part of the prophecy focus on other groups in the land. The pernicious influence of the false prophets is exposed in 23:9-40, and in a concluding postscript chapter 24 relates a vision that sets out the fate of the people in general under the imagery of two baskets of figs. Together these provide a background which reinforces the folly of existing policy in Jerusalem and sets out the future as the LORD sees it. In his earlier messages Jeremiah had not subjected the monarchy to the detailed and personal critique which is built up in this division of his prophecy.

### A. A ROYAL INQUIRY (21:1-14)

The view taken here is that the phrase at the beginning of v. 11 does not mark the start of a new section running through to 23:8, but that there is a threefold response to the royal inquiry made in vv. 1-2. Jeremiah first responds directly to the king with an uncompromising word of warning regarding the destruction that awaits the city (vv. 3-7). But the fate of Jerusalem is not something that concerns the king alone. It is equally a matter for the whole of the nation, who are given advice as to how to mitigate the sentence that has been passed against them (vv. 8-10). There is then a word for the royal household (king and courtiers) regarding the justice of what was to befall them (vv. 11-12) and also of the certainty of the LORD putting into effect the sentence he had uttered against those who had a false sense of their impregnability (vv. 13-14).

#### 1. The Request (21:1-2)

1. The introductory formula, **The word came to Jeremiah from the LORD**, is identical in Hebrew to that found at 7:1 where it is translated, 'This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD'. It marks a major transition in the book by reminding the reader of the source of the prophet's authority. The content of the message is not made clear until v. 4, because first of all further details are provided regarding the occasion on which it was uttered: **when King Zedekiah sent to him Pashhur son of Malkijah and the priest Zephaniah son of Maaseiah. They said.** The request itself is stated in v. 2. Zedekiah was a weak figure with an insecure power base. For further information regarding his character and situation, see on 37:1. When a new

pharaoh, Hophra (also known as Apries, 589–570 BC), came to the throne in Egypt and seemed to favour making trouble for the Babylonians, Zedekiah was induced to break his oath of allegiance to Nebuchadnezzar. The Babylonians did not let such action pass unnoticed, not merely because any rebellion against their dominion was viewed as serious, but because Judah was a key buffer state against Egyptian encroachment northwards and it was a major feature of Babylonian policy to prevent that. So the situation came about where Zedekiah was left in Jerusalem with the Babylonian army encircling the city while no help seemed to be forthcoming from Egypt. Here we find him casting about in any and every direction to work out what to do next, and this is the first of a number of occasions on which he turned to Jeremiah. (For an overview of the sequence of events during the final siege of Jerusalem, see Volume 1, Introduction §4.6.) Zedekiah obviously recognised that the oracles of the peace prophets had been flawed, as had the hopes of his counsellors that Egypt would come to their assistance. Like many before and since, he turned to God as a last resort.

In sending this deputation Zedekiah was unconsciously fulfilling the prophecy of 15:11 that Jeremiah's enemies would plead with him when divine judgment fell on them. In approaching the prophet Zedekiah was showing greater acceptance of his credentials and fidelity than Ahab had been prepared to do in the case of the prophet Micaiah (1 Kgs. 22). Furthermore it was a high level group that Zedekiah sent to the prophet. The Pashhur mentioned here is not the same person as Pashhur the son of Immer (20:1), though it might well be the case that the double occurrence of this name led to this section being placed after chapter 20 when Jeremiah and Baruch brought together the accounts of various episodes in Jeremiah's ministry. The contrast between the two men with the same name, one punishing the prophet and the other coming to seek his help, stressed the extent to which the prophet's credibility had risen in Jerusalem now that the disaster he had long predicted had come upon the nation. Pashhur son of Malkijah was a senior royal counsellor, one of those who at a later stage in the siege were responsible for treating Jeremiah harshly (38:1-6). His descendants are mentioned in Neh. 11:12 and 1 Chron. 9:12.

Zephaniah the priest was also an influential figure in Jerusalem at the time (29:25; 37:3; 52:24). He was 'the priest next in rank' to the chief priest (52:24), and was thus the overseer of the Temple, a successor in that post to the Pashhur of chapter 20. After the fall of the city he was executed by the Babylonians (52:27). He does, however,

seem to have been favourably disposed to Jeremiah. At least he had earlier been accused of not taking the prophet to task and punishing him when he ought to have (29:24-29). He also formed part of a second deputation from Zedekiah to Jeremiah on a somewhat later occasion (37:3). Here he represents the religious leadership of the day, as Pashhur represents the civil leadership.

2. The deputation's task is to petition the prophet that he **inquire now of the LORD for us**. 'Now' (*nā*, 'please' NKJV, NRSV) renders the precative particle, here used to emphasise that the request is made with due respect to the prophet. 'Inquire' (<*√dāraš*, 10:21) is a somewhat different request from 'intercede' (<*√pālal* hithpael, 7:16; 37:3). Of the 165 Old Testament instances of the root *dāraš*, 100 involve seeking or inquiring of God (Balentine 1984:167), often as an expression of general faithfulness or a request for help (Pss. 34:4; 77:2). However, twenty of these occurrences involve approaching a prophet with a request to 'inquire of God'. Other examples include Jehoshaphat asking for a word as to whether he and the king of Israel should engage in battle (1 Kgs. 22:7-8); Josiah sending a group of officials, including Hilkiah the priest, to inquire from Huldah regarding the meaning of the book of the law (2 Kgs. 22:13, 18); the elders of Israel coming to Ezekiel to inquire about the fate of the exiles (Ezek. 20:1, 3). In these instances the prophet acted as a channel of divine communication so that the mind of the LORD for the king and the people in their current situation might be ascertained. So here the thrust of the request is for information regarding what was going to happen next and advice from the LORD as to what they should do.

The reason they were seeking advice was clear enough: it was **because (*kī*) Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon is attacking us**. For the significance and spelling of the name Nebuchadnezzar see on 27:6. It is not totally clear what is indicated by 'attacking us'/'making war against us'. The chronology of the final siege of Jerusalem presents several difficulties, but it would appear that late in 589 BC the Babylonian forces moved south against Judah and began their blockade of the city on the tenth day of the tenth month of Zedekiah's ninth year (2 Kgs. 25:1), that is, 15th January 588 BC. Verse 4 indicates that the enemy has arrived in Judah, and the siege may well have begun. Now the siege probably lasted for two and a half years, interrupted in the early months of 587 BC by belated Egyptian intervention (see Appendix §12). At that point Jeremiah was arrested (37:13) and he was imprisoned. However, there is no suggestion in this passage that Jeremiah is in detention, and so it may be dated just before or during

(depending on one's interpretation of v. 4) the early stages of the siege, probably not long after January 588 BC. When the prophet is approached here, the strength of the army from the north is all too evident, and Egyptian assistance has not yet materialised.

The king through his emissaries puts before the prophet the possibility: **perhaps the LORD will perform wonders for us<sup>1</sup> as in times past so that he will withdraw from us.**<sup>2</sup> 'Wonders' (*nīplā'ōt*) refers to God's acts of astounding power that display his sovereign control of all things. The term is frequently used in the book of Psalms, e.g. Ps. 86:10. It looks back to the redemption the LORD provided at the time of the Exodus when he struck the Egyptians with all the wonders he performed among them (Exod. 3:20). No doubt what was in the mind of the king and his advisers was more especially the way in which the Assyrian siege had been lifted miraculously through the LORD's intervention in the days of Hezekiah in 701 BC (2 Kgs. 19:2). Perhaps they also considered that previous Babylonian approaches to the city in 605 BC and 597 BC had not been as completely disastrous as they might have been. While they do not presume to dictate ('perhaps'), a repeat performance, particularly of 701 BC, was exactly what they really wanted to see. Would Babylon be dealt with in the same way as Egypt and Assyria before that? Would the LORD prove a reliable source of deliverance in the impending crisis? But the request makes clear that the lesson Jeremiah had been trying to teach for nearly forty years had fallen on deaf ears. There was no mention of repentance; there was no acknowledgment that what was happening was the just consequence of their sin. They are still in effect endorsing the one-sided theology of the peace prophets and expecting the LORD to act without any change on their part.

## 2. A Bleak Response (21:3-7)

3-4. Jeremiah's reply is uncompromising. **But Jeremiah said to them, 'Tell (masc. pl.) Zedekiah, "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: I am about to turn against you the weapons of war that are in your hands, which you are using to fight the king of**

1. 'ōtānū, the object marker, for 'ittānū, 'with us'. The expression is literally 'do with us according to all his wonderful acts'. It is omitted in the LXX and the REB.

2. wāyā'āleh (<√'ālā, 'to go up') has a simple *waw*, and so the clause probably expresses intention or consequence. The NIV takes the verb as a *qal*, but the form might equally well be a *hiphil*, 'so that he (the LORD) will make him (Nebuchadnezzar) to go up from upon us (*mē'ālēnū*)'.

**Babylon and the Babylonians who are outside the wall besieging you”.**’ The LORD’s response is a categoric declaration of divine initiative and control, but it offers the people no support. There are two ways of understanding the statement depending upon whether the phrase ‘outside the wall’/‘from outside with respect to the wall’ is taken to refer to the Babylonians (as in the NIV), or to the weapons of war. It would have been obvious to the original hearers which was intended. If it is the Babylonians who are outside the walls, then the siege is already tightly in place and the weapons of war referred to are those that the defenders of the city are using against those outside it. The last clause, **and I will gather them inside this city**, would then, as NLT makes explicit, refer to the Babylonian troops who are envisaged as victorious inside the captured city.

However, it is also possible to read the Hebrew so that it is the defenders’ weapons of war that were located outside the city. If so, the time is an earlier stage of the Babylonian campaign when the blockade of the city was not as tightly enforced as it was later to become. It was still possible for the forces of Judah to make sorties outside the walls. The LORD declares that the weapons they are using outside the city walls in fighting the Babylonians are by his decree going to be brought inside the walls (perhaps the usage is a metonymy for the soldiers who use the weapons), and there they will be used in internal strife: ‘against you’. The last clause of the verse then refers to the arms/soldiers being assembled inside the city. ‘I will pile your soldiers’ weapons in the centre of the city’ (GNB).

‘Babylonians’ here and throughout Jeremiah is literally ‘Chaldeans’ (*kašdīm*; cf. NKJV, NRSV). The Chaldeans were originally a semi-nomadic people inhabiting the area south of Babylon, particularly the marshy zone between the north of Arabia and the Persian Gulf. Over the centuries they mingled with the Aramean tribes of the area, and by the time of Jeremiah Chaldea was used to refer to the whole area around Babylon where there was a common language and writing. People of Chaldean descent were still identifiable as such. They were generally wealthier, being more involved in trade and politics, and were influential in the religion (Dan. 3:8) and administration (Dan. 5:7) of the region in both the neo-Babylonian and Persian eras.

5. The plight of the people of Judah will become intense because they will have to face the opposition not only of the might of Babylon but of the LORD himself. **I myself** (emphatic *’ānī*) **will fight** (the same word is used of the Babylonians in v. 4) **against you with an outstretched hand and a mighty arm**. The phrase ‘with mighty hand and with

outstretched arm’ was traditionally associated with the LORD’s deliverance from Egypt (Deut. 4:34; 5:15; 26:8), with ‘hand’ and ‘arm’ being used of exertion and labour, applied anthropomorphically to God. Here, however, the words in the phrase are unusually reversed to ‘with outstretched hand and with mighty arm’ (compare 27:5; 32:17) and there is a corresponding reversal of what the LORD is going to do. There will be ‘wonders’ (v. 2), extraordinary acts of power, but they will not benefit the people because the LORD will not be fighting for them, but against them. This will be done **in anger** (*ʿap*, 2:35) **and fury** (*hēmā*, 4:4) **and great wrath**. This triplet (32:37; Deut. 29:28) builds in intensity, culminating not merely in wrath (*qesep*, 10:10), itself a strong word, but in ‘great wrath’. The mighty power of the LORD will be made known not in deliverance but in the punishment he brings on his people.

6. The detail of what will be involved is spelled out. **I will strike down** (*nākā*, 2:30; here obviously a fatal blow) **those who live in this city—both men and animals—and they will die of a terrible plague**. Pestilence or plague (*deber*, 14:12) was always one of the possibilities in an overcrowded city undergoing protracted siege, and particularly when the water supply became contaminated or failed entirely. The animals would have been livestock that the people would have brought into the city before the advancing army.

7. ‘**After that,**’ declares the LORD refers to what would happen in the city after it had been taken and the ordeals of the siege had come to an end. The survivors, particularly the king and his advisers, would not be spared by the enemy. **I will hand over Zedekiah king of Judah, his officials and the people in this city who survive<sup>3</sup> the plague, sword and famine, to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and to their enemies who seek their lives**. ‘Officials’ is here *ʾābādīm*, ‘servants’, a wider designation than the higher echelons of advisers (*šārīm*). Again we find the triplet ‘plague, sword and famine’ (14:12) categorising the horrors of siege warfare. These did not end when a city capitulated because surrender was frequently followed by major slaughter. Zedekiah and some of his men tried unsuccessfully to escape from this (39:4-5). ‘To seek the life/soul’ (*bāqas* [piel] *nepeš*) expresses a desire to kill someone (19:7, 9; 22:35; 34:20; 38:16; 46:26;

3. The Massoretic Text has *wəʿet* before ‘survivors’/‘those surviving’, as if to indicate four categories of people, but there is no group who could be called survivors, apart from the king, his officials and the people. The phrase is therefore epexegetic and treated as such in English translations. ‘Who survive’ probably refers to the three groups and not just the people.

49:37). The same expression also occurs frequently in the Psalms (Pss. 35:4; 38:12; 40:14; 54:3; 63:9; 70:2; 86:14). Possibly in this passage which uses triplets for emphasis another is to be found in Nebuchadnezzar, their enemies, and those who seek their lives. **He will put them to the sword**/'to the mouth of the sword' denotes merciless killing (Gen. 34:26). **He will show no mercy or pity or compassion.** Another triplet emphasises the unsparing attitude of Nebuchadnezzar. The same three terms, with the order of the first two switched, are used in 13:14 regarding God's attitude towards his disobedient people.<sup>4</sup> Nebuchadnezzar is going to be the instrument through whom this relentless judgment will be imposed. He too will allow nothing to deflect him from the course of action he has embarked on (52:10, 24-27). What we have here are general statements about the fate of the group as a whole, and they are not necessarily in conflict with what happened to Zedekiah who was not in fact slain. His eyes were put out and he died in exile (39:7; 2 Kgs. 25:6-7; Ezek. 12:13).

It was an act of extraordinary fortitude for Jeremiah to proclaim such a message to Zedekiah and his officials when they were desperately trying to devise some stratagem whereby the invading Babylonian forces would be prevented from bringing their action to such a conclusion.

### 3. A Message for the People (21:8-10)

Jeremiah's proclamation was not confined to a response to the royal inquiries. Verses 8-10 present a message for the people, which, while it may not have been part of the response given to the royal delegation at that moment, was uttered around the same time. These words are particularly significant in that they advise the people how they may ameliorate the impact of the impending catastrophe by submitting to the Babylonians.

8. Jeremiah is instructed to present the people with a choice. **Furthermore<sup>5</sup>, tell (masc. sing.) the people, 'This is what the LORD says: See, I am setting before you the way of life and the way of death.'** They were being told that there was a stark choice to be made. The

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4. Indeed, in this passage the LXX has a doublet, 'I will not show them mercy and I will not show them compassion', omitting the second term found in the Massoretic Text. The change of person is probably a scribal confusion with 13:14, though undoubtedly this reading too make a suitable climax here.

5. 'But' rather than 'and' is the appropriate translation of the conjunction here because it is deliberately followed by a non-verb to indicate a contrast.

language is reminiscent of Deut. 30:15, ‘See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction’ (cf. also Deut. 11:26; 30:19). ‘Way’ refers to their course of life and conduct in general. Is it going to be one that acknowledges the LORD and submits to him, or are they going to continue their wilful disobedience? The people are again being tested because the LORD sets before them a genuine choice, but it is a grimly ironic one. The way of life is no longer one in which the obedient enjoy the blessings of the land. It now consists of submission to Babylon, and the life set before them is one of exile, poverty and enslavement. However, the participial form ‘am setting’ indicates that it is an offer that will remain open until the final catastrophe closes it for the inhabitants of the city.

**9.** On the one hand, **whoever stays in this city will die by the sword, famine or plague.** Again (v. 7) mention is made of the triad of disasters that would occur in the siege. While the siege could not be averted, mitigation of its impact would occur if they were prepared to trust the advice given by the LORD. **But whoever goes out and surrenders to<sup>6</sup> the Babylonians who are besieging you will live.<sup>7</sup>** ‘Go out’ (<√*yāṣā*‘) was a term often associated with the Israelites’ departure from Egypt (Exod. 11:8; 13:3; 20:2; Ps. 114:1), but now ‘departure’ has inverted implications; it is not to freedom but to bondage. ‘Surrender to’/‘fall to’ (<√*nāpal*‘) is the idiom used for going over to the other side (37:14; 39:9; 52:15; 2 Kgs. 25:11), including deserting to an opposing army. The policy of submission to Babylon was one that Jeremiah consistently brought before the people and the king (38:1; 38:17; see also 27:11). It appears that many acted on it (38:19; 39:9; 52:15) in a way that was considered to be treason (37:13; 38:4) by the Jerusalem establishment. But the first loyalty of the people ought to have been to their divine Overlord, and he had told them that Nebuchadnezzar was officially recognised as his agent. Furthermore, even at the level of worldly politics, Zedekiah had rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar, and those defecting to the Babylonians might be construed as acting in accordance with the oath of fealty which Zedekiah himself had reneged on. If an individual acted in accordance with the prophetic advice, **he will escape with his life**/‘shall have his

6. ‘*al* is used for ‘*el*. *Waw*-consecutive perfect after a participle is here used with simple chronological force (*IBHS* §32.2.5b).

7. The kethibh *yihyeh*, ‘he will live’, is correct corresponding to the earlier *yāmūt*, ‘he will die’. The qere *wəḥāyā*, ‘and he will live’ (a *waw* consecutive perfect) is unnecessary, probably due to a misunderstanding of *wənāpal*, ‘and he surrenders’.

life (*nepes̃*, 2:34) as booty'. The origins of this idiom, which is found only in Jeremiah (38:2; 39:18; 45:5), are obscure. It may have begun as a sarcastic comment on a defeated army which rather than returning home as victors carrying the spoils of war had to be content with the fact that the only booty they are able to bring back with them was their own lives. In that case the idiom would imply his life but nothing more. Those who surrendered would remain the subjects of Babylon, probably losing all their possessions but remaining alive. It was for promoting this policy that Jeremiah was labelled a traitor.

**10.** The LORD then shows why this advice was the only way in which individuals could escape the impending disaster. 'For' (*kî*) **I have determined**/'set my face at' (44:11) **to do this city harm and not good, declares the LORD. It will be given into the hands of the king of Babylon, and he will destroy it with fire.** The fact of the LORD's irrevocable intention to destroy the city meant that the only choice open to the people was to surrender, or to face inevitable siege and capture. The city was divinely designated for destruction by fire (52:13). This was not an inevitable outcome to the capture of a besieged city, though it did occur frequently, especially in circumstances such as that of Jerusalem where the Babylonian aim was not merely to capture the city but to punish it for its rebellion. Any possibility of mitigation is ruled out if the people adhere to current policy.

#### **4. A Message for the Royal House (21:11-14)**

This section develops the theme of the royal responsibility for the situation that is going to come upon the land. Verses 11 and 12 are addressed to the 'house of the king of Judah', not so much the royal dynasty, as to the courtiers around the king. They had responsibilities under the covenant for the way the land was administered. Their failure had led to the present catastrophe.

As the threatened judgment is presented in conditional form in v. 12, it is often argued that these words were originally uttered at an earlier, more hopeful period, possibly early in the reign of Jehoiakim. Even if that is so, their repetition here serves to underscore the persistence with which the court had evaded its responsibilities, and this is traced back to the prevailing attitude of arrogance in Jerusalem (vv. 13-14).

**11. Moreover, say to the royal house of Judah, 'Hear (masc. pl.) the word of the LORD.'** 'The royal house'/'house of the king' does not refer to just the royal family, but to the whole royal establishment.

It is difficult to be certain how the transition to v. 11 should be understood. Many interpreters point to the parallel that exists between ‘and concerning the house of the king of Judah’ (*ūlābēt melek yāhūdā*) in this verse and ‘concerning the prophets’ (*lannābī’īm*) in 23:9, though there is no conjunction there, and argue that both function as headings to collections of prophetic sayings about kings and prophets respectively. They identify a section that comprises 21:11–23:8. On the other hand, it is possible to take this as a third section of Jeremiah’s response to the inquiry made in v. 2. Having used ‘and to the people’ in v. 8 makes it probable that ‘and to the house of the king’ in v. 11 follows the same sequence, even though a different preposition is used. This line of interpretation is represented by the NIV expansion of the simple conjunction ‘and’, used disjunctively, to ‘furthermore’ in v. 8 and ‘moreover’ in v. 11. On that basis the NIV also adds the supplement ‘say’ in v. 11.

**12. O house of David** reminds the sorry royal house of Judah of the ideal and standard that was encapsulated in David, the founder of the dynasty. Looking to such a figure from the past set the criterion for assessing the conduct of his descendants, and also reminded them of the Messianic figure who would be the culmination of the LORD’s purposes for the house of David. But here the thought is principally of the gap between their conduct and what was expected of them. The thought is not introduced to suggest that if they reform their civil administration, then even at that late stage there would be divine intervention to avert the peril at their gates, but rather to show them that it was their failure to rule properly that had brought this judgment on them. They should not expect a wonder (v. 2) from the LORD in the light of their flagrant breaches of covenant protocol.

**This is what the LORD says: ‘Administer justice every morning.’**<sup>8</sup> It was the duty of the king and his officials (both ‘administer’ and ‘rescue’ are masculine plural imperatives) to ensure that justice was maintained throughout the land. This was a standard requirement throughout the ancient Near East, because the king was perceived as the one in whose hands justice ultimately lay. In the Old Testament there is the further aspect that this justice is seen as supremely

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8. ‘Every morning’ renders the expression *labbōqer*, ‘to the morning’, possibly a distributive expression as in Amos 4:4. The same sense is conveyed in 1 Chron. 9:27 by repeating the phrase (*NIDOTTE* 1:712). The REB rendering ‘betimes’ is a curiosity, reflecting the fact that this obsolete expression which meant ‘early’ could also imply ‘speedily’, and thus caught the two ideas which were felt to lie behind the Hebrew idiom.

achieved in the coming Messianic king (23:5-6; Pss. 45:4-8; 72:1-4, 12-14; Isa. 9:6-7; 11:1-4). ‘Every morning’ points to the time when law courts usually convened, thus avoiding the heat of the day (2 Sam. 4:5; 15:1-6; Amos 4:4; Ps. 59:16). The idea is that justice should be administered regularly and diligently, so that no sense of grievance would exist in the land and the people would be content with the king’s rule. In fact it was David’s neglect of this duty that gave Absalom the opportunity to foment rebellion (2 Sam. 15:2), though Solomon, at least in the early part of his reign, acted more responsibly (1 Kgs. 3:18).

**Rescue from the hand of his oppressor the one who has been robbed.** ‘Rescue’/‘deliver’ (<√*nāṣal*, 1:8) implies taking action to snatch back from danger. The justice system was intended not merely to give a verdict in favour of those who had been wronged, but also to take effective action to ensure the enforcement of that verdict. The oppressor (<√*āṣaq*, 7:6) was one who used economic pressure and physical force to achieve his ends. ‘One who has been robbed’ (<√*gāzal*) points to the open seizure of property (Judg. 21:23; 2 Sam. 23:21; Mic. 2:2; Isa. 10:2, NKJV) in contrast to the root *gānab*, which emphasises the stealth with which goods are taken (7:9). The justice administered by the king was not to be merely passive, responding to cases brought to his attention, but also to be active, seeking out and rectifying wrongs, particularly if committed against those who were of the lower classes, whose cases might not otherwise ever come for due legal hearing. This responsibility rested with the king who, of course, exercised it through his officials.

The threatened alternative is then set out in words that reflect 4:4b. **Or (pen, ‘lest’) my wrath will break out and burn like fire because of the evil you<sup>9</sup> have done—burn with no one to quench it.** The question arises as to how this fits in with the present context where the enemy was already at the city gates. It may be that the passage comes from earlier in Jeremiah’s ministry when it had truly functioned as a warning, but in this context the logic is reversed. It is not a case of, ‘Do this lest a certain outcome eventuate’, but ‘The outcome is staring you in the face. Can you not see where you have gone wrong?’ Acknowledging that their past conduct had been grievously deficient would have opened the way towards accepting the message Jeremiah was now bringing them. It was not that judgment could be averted, but that its worst consequences might be avoided (v. 10).

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9. The kethibh is *ma’alələhem*, ‘their doings’, a scribal error for the qere, which is also the reading of many manuscripts, *ma’alələkem*, ‘your doings’.