

Jeremiah's Letter

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The natural response to the threat of destruction of Israel at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, was to fight or flee—and many Israelites did one or the other. But Jeremiah's counsel was different (29:4–20).

First, contrary to expectations, he said that they should submit to their Babylonian overlords and that Judah would not suffer chattel slavery. Rather, they would survive and even thrive in exile. They would enjoy a measure of cultural and economic autonomy. Second, they could preserve their distinct ethnic identity and maintain covenantal disciplines. Third, the exile was Yahweh's purpose and provision for the holy remnant. Nevertheless, following the prophet's counsel required enormous courage and faith.

Jeremiah's letter to the exiles explains how they must think and what they must do in Babylon:

Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. (vv. 4–7).



Most importantly, God “sent” them to Babylon. Their present location was not due to unfortunate happenstance. Rather, they were brought there by God’s express purpose. They were, in fact, on a mission.

The readers knew Old Testament history, its worldview, and the covenant. They discerned in the imperatives (“build,” “plant,” “multiply”) allusions to creation, Canaan, and covenant. They recognized that building and planting were activities of creatures made in God’s image and commissioned as his stewards. In fact, human beings construct and build as apprentice architects of God. Jeremiah and his readers knew that God “planted” a garden from which “every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food” flourished (Gen 2:8–9).

In Jeremiah, the word pair “build” and “plant” appears often (1:10; 24:6; 31:4–5, 28; 35:7; 42:10; 45:4). Likewise, the verb “multiply” appears three other times. God promises to multiply his people, “I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply” (23:3; see also 30:19 and 33:22). Indeed, the command to multiply was also given to Adam and

Eve (Gen 1:22, 28) and to Noah (9:1). When God initiated the covenant with Abraham, he promised to “multiply [him] greatly” (17:2; see also Exod 32:13; Lev 26:9).

Later in the letter, God revealed his long-term intention, covenantal affection, and commitment to them: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope” (vv. 10–11). He emphatically foretold restoration and multiplication after the exile (30:18–19).

But, in the meantime, they must cultivate their spiritual identity within an exilic context.

Furthermore, verse 7 commands the exiles to behave in an entirely unexpected and implausible manner: “Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” This demand was partly pragmatic, due their economic dependency and military powerlessness. But the verb “seek” also indicates deliberation and intentionality. The noun “peace” (*shalom*) indicates well-being and wholeness, as well as the concrete conditions for safety and prosperity (Lev 26:6–10; Deut 23:6; 2 Kgs 20:19; Ps 122:7).

In Jeremiah 29:7, therefore, the exiles were commanded to “seek the peace” of their *captors*—for their own good! They were commanded to pursue the well-being, prosperity, and security of *Babylon*.

One author noted the irony: “Prayer for the welfare of Jerusalem is turned into praying for the welfare of the city which is Jerusalem’s conqueror. . . . The place now in which Yahweh is to be found is not in the Jerusalem temple, but in the city of the conqueror, an alien and unclean place.” To add insult to injury, Jeremiah was told *not* to intercede on behalf of Jerusalem (7:16; 11:14; 14:11).

Jeremiah’s counsel was clearly counter-intuitive. What counter-intuitive wisdom can *we* learn from this example for our civic responsibilities in *our* respective nations *today*? Do you feel as if you suffer internal exile in your own nation? What would it mean to seek the peace of your country?

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