

Jeremiah 17:19-27

“Prophetic Rebuke for Violating the Sabbath”

“Thus the LORD said to me, ‘Go and stand in the public gate, through which the kings of Judah come in and go out, as well as in all the gates of Jerusalem; and say to them, “Listen to the word of the LORD, kings of Judah, and all Judah and all inhabitants of Jerusalem who come in through these gates: Thus says the LORD, ‘Take heed for yourselves, and do not carry any load on the sabbath day or bring anything in through the gates of Jerusalem. You shall not bring a load out of your houses on the sabbath day nor do any work, but keep the sabbath day holy, as I commanded your forefathers. Yet they did not listen or incline their ears, but stiffened their necks in order not to listen or take correction. But it will come about, if you listen attentively to Me,’ declares the LORD, ‘to bring no load in through the gates of this city on the sabbath day, but to keep the sabbath day holy by doing no work on it, then there will come in through the gates of this city kings and princes sitting on the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses, they and their princes, the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and this city will be inhabited forever. They will come in from the cities of Judah and from the environs of Jerusalem, from the land of Benjamin, from the lowland, from the hill country and from the Negev, bringing burnt offerings, sacrifices, grain offerings and incense, and bringing sacrifices of thanksgiving to the house of the LORD. But if you do not listen to Me to keep the sabbath day holy by not carrying a load and coming in through the gates of Jerusalem on the sabbath day, then I will kindle a fire in its gates and it will devour the palaces of Jerusalem and not be quenched.’”

Conservative readers of the Book of Jeremiah will place this prophetic oracle to some time within the Sixth Century B.C.E., as a legitimate declaration issued to people coming and going through the public gate of the city of Jerusalem.¹ This prophetic word is issued to the people of Jerusalem, to admonish and rebuke them, for their fragrant disobedience of the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat*. While this is not the only time in the Tanach or Old Testament, where the Lord issues a severe rebuke to His people about their violation of the Sabbath, Jeremiah 17:19-27 is properly regarded as a pre-exilic instance, with a judgment of fire promised to the city that does not turn from its violation.

More critical interpreters of Jeremiah are prone to posit some kind of exilic setting for this oracle, which may or may not be entirely Jeremianic. In the estimation of Stanley Brice Frost, “Probably until Josiah’s reform the sabbath was little observed. It was Deut. which made the sabbath a meaningful institution,”² obviously holding to the critical view that with the emergence of Deuteronomy as the so-called “pious fraud” in the time of Josiah, that the Sabbath began taking on importance for the Southern Kingdom. Not all examiners who hold to critical presuppositions, to be sure, posit an exilic setting for Jeremiah 17:19-27. Marvin A. Sweeney notes it as much in *The Jewish Study Bible*:

“God instructs Jeremiah to stand by the people’s entrance to the Temple and announce that they should observe the Shabbat, i.e., the seventh day of rest and holy service to God which constitutes one of the fundamental signs of the covenant between God and Israel especially in the Priestly tradition (see Gen. 2.1-3; Exod. 20.8-11; 23.12; 31.12-17; 35.2-3; Lev. 23.3; Deut. 5.12-15). Although many modern interpreters consider this passage (and the emphasis on Shabbat) to be exilic or post-exilic, Shabbat observance is mentioned in preexilic prophetic texts (Amos 8.5; Isa. 1.13). It is likely, however, that the Shabbat took on new significance in the exilic period, as holy space (the destroyed Temple) was replaced with holy time.”³

J.A. Thompson, reflecting more of a conservative evangelical approach to Jeremiah 17:19-27, widely adheres to this being genuinely Jeremianic to the pre-exilic period, but does fairly note how there could have been some later expansion or editing as the Book of Jeremiah reached its final form:

¹ If necessary, do consult the entry for the Book of Jeremiah, appearing in the workbook *A Survey of the Tanach for the Practical Messianic*.

² Stanley Brice Frost, “The Book of Jeremiah,” in Charles M. Laymon, ed., *Interpreter’s One-Volume Commentary on the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971), 385.

³ Marvin A. Sweeney, “Jeremiah,” in *The Jewish Study Bible*, 962.

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“Even though Jeremiah does not appear as a legalist, he must have regarded sabbath-breaking as a serious offense, and would have been unlikely to exempt sabbath-keeping from the covenant law. Hence it is altogether likely that Jeremiah made some comments on the keeping of the sabbath. On the other hand it is not impossible that some comments of his on the sabbath were expanded and further developed at the hands of an editor or by someone who knew of Jeremiah’s thinking.”⁴

Jeremiah 17:19-27 is a serious word when it comes to violation of the Sabbath, which necessarily needs to be considered in any analysis of the importance of *Shabbat*. Not only is it witnessed that the people of Jerusalem and the surrounding region were dismissing this holy institution founded by God, but it is witnessed that God decrees the downfall and burning of Jerusalem, if this disobedience does not stop. This can certainly strike modern Bible readers a bit confounded, as normally sins of idolatry and murder and injustice are those which one would naturally think would merit the destruction of a city like Jerusalem. Yet, the Sabbath is placed on a level equal to such heinous crimes. As Tremper Longman III observes,

“God now directs Jeremiah to issue a challenge concerning the **Sabbath**. To many modern readers, Sabbath observance may seem almost trivial in relationship to the other charges God through Jeremiah levels at Judah: murder, child sacrifice, idolatry. However, the Sabbath was considered the sign of the Mosaic covenant (Exod. 31:13, 17). In a sense it was the pinnacle of the law during the Old Testament period. It was established at creation (Gen. 2:1-3) and mandated as the fourth commandment (Exod. 20:8-11; Deut. 5:12-15). To neglect the Sabbath, in short, was a serious affront to God and his authority.”⁵

17:19-20 That the Prophet Jeremiah is directed by God to go to a public place in Jerusalem, is clear enough from the tenor of v. 19: “Thus said the LORD to me: Go and stand in the People’s Gate, by which the kings of Judah enter and by which they go forth, and in all the gates of Jerusalem” (NJPS). There is some variance on how to approach *b’sa’ar bnei-(am) [ha’am]* (בְּשַׁעַר בְּנֵי-אֲמָתַי) (הָאָמָתַי), “at-gate-of sons-of the-people” (Kohlenberger),⁶ a neutral rendering being “public gate” (NASU) or “People’s Gate” (NRSV/ESV). Some are not sure if a specific gate in Jerusalem is being referenced.⁷ Some regard this gate to be the Eastern Gate that led to the Kidron Valley, specifically where leaders would meet (Ezekiel 11:1). Others have concluded this to be “the Benjamin Gate” (RSV),⁸ which does feature later in Jeremiah 37:13; 38:7. The exact setting or gate in Jerusalem, is not as critical as the message to be declared by the Prophet: “Kings of Y’hudah, all Y’hudah and all living in Yerushalayim who enter through these gates, hear the word of *ADONAI!*” (v. 20, CJB).

17:21-22 That inappropriate activities were taking place in the city of Jerusalem on *Shabbat* is a certain thrust of v. 21: “Thus said *HASHEM*: ‘Beware for your souls; do not carry a burden on the Sabbath day to bring it into the gates of Jerusalem’” (ATS). Certainly the Torah did threaten capital punishment for those performing any kind of work on the Sabbath (Exodus 31:14-15). Here, the carrying of a *massa* (מַסָּא), “load, burden” (*HALOT*),⁹ is unspecified, although it is used later in Nehemiah 13:15 to describe agricultural produce for sale. The CJB has the paraphrase, “don’t carry anything,” which goes a little too far. A burden or load associated with people intentionally working

⁴ J.A. Thompson, *New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Jeremiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), pp 427-428; R.E. Clements, *Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Jeremiah* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), pp 109-111 reflects more of a critical approach to this oracle’s origin, and an exilic setting for its application; Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile & Homecoming* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 165 who is widely critical on other matters, does not think it necessary to posit this oracle to the exilic period.

⁵ Tremper Longman III, *New International Biblical Commentary: Jeremiah, Lamentations* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 137.

⁶ Kohlenberger, 4:180.

⁷ Longman, 138.

⁸ Cf. R.K. Harrison, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: Jeremiah & Lamentations* (Madison, WI: InterVarsity, 1973), 107.

⁹ *HALOT*, 1:639.

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on the Sabbath, is specified to be the problem in the further word of v. 22: "And do not carry a burden out of your houses on the sabbath or do any work, but keep the sabbath day holy, as I commanded your ancestors" (NRSV). It is safe enough to conclude that these are not light loads.

17:23 Speaking of the Israelite ancestors of his Sixth Century B.C.E. Judean audience, Jeremiah declares, "But they would not listen or turn their ear; they stiffened their necks and would not pay heed or accept discipline" (NJPS). Unfortunately like their predecessors, Jeremiah's generation did not care to obey the Lord and follow His commandments. And in all probability, Jeremiah's arrival on the scene to rebuke his fellows over their Sabbath violation, was over something that had been allowed or permitted to continue for quite a while, and Sabbath dismissal was not just occurring. Thompson offers the concurring observations,

"[T]he sad fact was that Israel's ancestors did not obey or pay attention but like their descendants *stubbornly refused* either to hear or to accept instruction. Several of the phrases in these verses are strongly reminiscent of phrases in the Decalog where the sabbath law is formulated, e.g., not to do any work on the sabbath, to keep the sabbath day holy. It would seem that profanation of the sabbath had become commonplace—a further demonstration of Israel's rejection of the covenant law."¹⁰

While having to recognize the violation of the Sabbath present, and Jeremiah's rebuke of the population here, Charles L. Feinberg instead focuses on later the strictness for Sabbath observance present during the ministry of Yeshua the Messiah:

"The people carried burdens out of their homes in exchange for the produce brought into the city (v.22; cf. Neh 13:15-18). The prohibition of labor on the Sabbath was so general that later on it became encrusted with absurd restrictions, which the Lord Jesus assailed in the Gospels."¹¹

Of course, one of the major reasons *why* there were significant extra-Biblical regulations and restrictions enacted by the Jewish religious leaders of later centuries, was because of how violation of the Sabbath in this instance was to incur destruction of Jerusalem (v. 27).

17:24 The Lord promises a restoration of His favor, if a return to honoring the Sabbath or *Shabbat* is enacted, and burdens are no longer brought into the city of Jerusalem. V. 24 states, "And it shall be that if you truly listen to Me—the word of HASHEM—not to bring a burden into the gates of this city on the Sabbath day, and to sanctify the Sabbath day, not to do any [manner of] work on it" (ATS). In the view of Longman, "In spite of the past neglect of this important law, God calls on them to begin to observe the Sabbath. This renewed command comes with blessing and curse as the law in general did in the Mosaic period (see Deut. 27-28)."¹²

17:25-26 A renewal of proper Sabbath keeping on behalf of the population, will bring with it a substantial civil blessing: "then through the gates of this city shall enter kings who sit upon the throne of David, with their officers—riding on chariots and horses, they and their officers—and the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And this city shall be inhabited for all time" (NJPS). There will be a permanent establishment of David's monarchy (cf. 23:5-6; 30:9; 33:15; 2 Samuel 7:12-17), and ongoing habitation of the city of Jerusalem (cf. 31:38-40; Zechariah 2:2-12; 8:3; 14:11) and worship. Such promises are paralleled by the wider expectations of the New Covenant foretold by the Prophet (31:33-34). For Jeremiah's more immediate audience, however, they are assured of a great regional blessing to be experienced by all in the wider community of Jerusalem and surrounding area:

"And people shall come from the towns of Judah and from the environs of Jerusalem, and from the land of Benjamin, and from the Shephelah, and from the hill country, and from the Negeb, bringing burnt offerings and sacrifices, meal offerings and frankincense, and bringing offerings of thanksgiving to the House of the Lord" (v. 26, NJPS).

¹⁰ Thompson, *Jeremiah*, pp 428-429.

¹¹ Charles L. Feinberg, "Jeremiah," in *EXP*, 6:489.

¹² Longman, 137.

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Noting the presence of *todah* (תודה) or “thank-offering” (*BDB*)¹³ in v. 26, Jewish commentator H. Freedman makes light of Leviticus 7:11ff,¹⁴ and draws the important conclusion, “These were also peace-offerings, perhaps the most highly esteemed of this class of offerings. ‘In the time to come all sacrifices will cease, but the sacrifice of thanksgiving will not cease’ (Talmud).”¹⁵

17:27 God says that if the Sabbath is not honored by the people, then “I will set fire to its gates, and it will consume the citadels of Jerusalem and not be extinguished” (HCSB).¹⁶ Unfortunately, Bible readers looking at the Scriptural and historical record do know that the city of Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians. But while one would think that sins such as idolatry or child sacrifice would be more likely to merit a downfall of Jerusalem, here the cause is attributed to Sabbath violation. In the estimation of Walter Brueggemann, “If Israel violates the sabbath and so breaks covenant, there will be massive destruction. Everything hangs on the sabbath, because the sabbath is the most dramatic sign that the will of God is honored and the life-giving power of God is trusted. To break sabbath means to violate God’s will and to distrust God’s gifts.”¹⁷

What cannot go overlooked is how even after the Babylonian exile of the Southern Kingdom, it was still difficult to see the offenses associated with Sabbath violation halted. Longman observes, “As we know, the people of Judah did not listen to this warning and they were exiled. It is sad to realize that even after they are restored to Jerusalem that Sabbath observance continued to be a serious problem as Nehemiah notes in Nehemiah 13:15-21.”¹⁸

Jeremiah 17:19-27 application How have examiners of Jeremiah 17:19-27 approached and appropriated the Prophet’s admonition of the Jerusalem population? Jeremiah is very much concerned with the proper observance of the Sabbath on the part of the people, with God decreeing that the city of Jerusalem will be burned with fire if they do not cease their desecration of it. R.K. Harrison associates the Sabbath as being an ethical institution, broadly observing,

“Profanation of the Sabbath (21) had become commonplace, in defiance of God’s commands to keep it holy. If the ethical ideals of the covenant are observed, the legitimate Davidic dynasty will be maintained, and from the north will come only peaceful migrations of people. If not, the complete destruction of Jerusalem is portended (*cf.* 21:14; 49:27; 50:32; Am. 1:3-2:5).”¹⁹

Freedman, reflecting a Jewish perspective that would be highly conscious of the importance of the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat*, stresses the conditional nature of Jeremiah’s oracle, and how a renewal of Sabbath-keeping could be the very reforming action needed to restore the society in view:

“[P]rophesies, no matter how final in tone, are conditional, since God is always ready to receive the repentant sinner. Furthermore, it is the prophet’s duty to indicate the remedy for current evils. It is therefore natural that Jeremiah should stress the importance of the Sabbath, a basic institution

¹³ *BDB*, 392.

¹⁴ “Now this is the law of the sacrifice of peace offerings which shall be presented to the LORD. If he offers it by way of thanksgiving, then along with the sacrifice of thanksgiving he shall offer unleavened cakes mixed with oil, and unleavened wafers spread with oil, and cakes of well stirred fine flour mixed with oil” (Leviticus 7:11-12).

¹⁵ H. Freedman, *Soncino Books of the Bible: Jeremiah* (London: Soncino Press, 1949), 124.

¹⁶ While Jerusalem did fall to the Babylonians, whatever fires were kindled against the city have long since gone out. And the reason for this is obvious: if not provided a continual, terrestrial fuel source, a fire will go out. The memory of fires and judgment issued by God, via the Babylonians, does continue.

Proponents of annihilation will commonly use verses like Jeremiah 17:27 quoted here, and claim that a fire not quenched against the wicked will ultimately go out, and hence that unrighteous sinners will be obliterated (i.e., Jude 7). But does the final judgment against the unredeemed get dispensed to them in this dimension? Are there dimensions of existence where the rules that govern our terrestrial sphere and universe no longer apply—such as a “fire” never being extinguished?

For a further discussion, consult the publication *Why Hell Must Be Eternal* by J.K. McKee.

¹⁷ Brueggemann, *Jeremiah*, 166.

¹⁸ Longman, 138.

¹⁹ Harrison, *Jeremiah & Lamentations*, 108.

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of Judaism. The hallowing of the Sabbath, with its intensive spiritual influence, would tend to wean the people from other malpractices and effect a reformation."²⁰

Brueggemann, perhaps in a similar vein, draws out how keeping the Sabbath is a rejection of self-reliance, and hence facilitates a community that will necessarily have to rely upon its God and Creator. He says,

"Obedience leads to life, though the specific form of obedience takes a different shape in each new generation and circumstance. In this case, sabbath asserts the cessation of destructive self-reliance, which is Judah's prominent temptation. We have seen that self-reliance is a central pathology of this people. Sabbath fidelity is one surrender of such self-reliance."²¹

It is hardly surprising that within evangelical Christian examination of Jeremiah 17:19-27, that some reference to the common tradition of Sunday Church would be made. More or less reflective of some of the sentiments witnessed in the Reformed tradition is the commentary of J. Andrew Dearman, who recognizes that Yeshua of Nazareth kept the Sabbath, but also concludes that some kind of transference took place shifting a Sabbath rest for Christians to the first day of the week:

"Sabbath-keeping is a pattern rooted in divine disclosure (Gen. 2:1-3) and an activity blessed by God. Although Jesus offered severe criticism of a legalistic interpretation of the Sabbath (e.g., Mark 2:24-3:6), he acknowledged its divine origin and purpose.

"The shift on the part of most churches to worship on the first day of the week (Sunday) is an example of bridging the gap between Jeremiah's world and Christian affirmation. Christ's resurrection on...Sunday morning...has given a new orientation to the Sabbath injunctions for rest and holiness."²²

In Dearman's case, his view of a Sabbath-principle to be honored on the first day of the week or Sunday, is one that is based in the resurrection of the Messiah. This, to be sure, will require some consideration for what took place in the Gospel narratives. But, Dearman's words are hardly anti-Sabbath.

More broadly, Patrick D. Miller focuses on themes regarding how properly honoring an institution like the Sabbath requires a surrender of human productivity to the will and loyalty owed to the Lord. A failure to honor the Fourth Commandment, can betray a failure to honor the First Commandment:

"The sabbath...breaks the feeling of economic dependency, underscoring that the community is finally dependent on the Lord. The sabbath is a way of showing that our labor is not our final aim and that its products are not the consuming aim in our lives. Both labor and consumption are regularly to be set aside in favor of rest and non-consumption. And the commitment to productivity is to be set aside in favor of our loyalty to the Lord, who made us and gave us the sabbath. The commandment to honor the sabbath safeguards the first commandment, which reminds us wherein is our ultimate trust."²³

What important point(s) will you take from Jeremiah 17:19-27?

²⁰ Freedman, 122.

²¹ Brueggemann, *Jeremiah*, 167.

²² J. Andrew Dearman, *NIV Application Commentary: Jeremiah/Lamentations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 179.

²³ Patrick D. Miller, "The Book of Jeremiah," in *NIB*, 6:712.