

2014

Proper 8 • Jeremiah 28:5–9 • June 29, 2014

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Recommended Citation

Schumacher, William (2014) "Proper 8 • Jeremiah 28:5–9 • June 29, 2014," *Concordia Journal*: Vol. 40: No. 2, Article 13.

Available at: <http://scholar.csl.edu/cj/vol40/iss2/13>

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On May 13, 1940, Winston Churchill addressed the British parliament as he was about to become prime minister. Hitler's troops had already invaded Poland, and they had just begun their *Blitzkrieg* advance into France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. War was crashing upon the world as Churchill stepped into leadership. And unlike so many politicians, Churchill did not promise a bright, optimistic future; he held out no hope of speedy victory or early peace. Instead, he electrified the parliament and unified his country with famous but difficult words: "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat." No politician today would campaign on a slogan like that.

The prophet Jeremiah delivered a message that was similarly difficult: God's righteous judgment was manifesting itself in the rising power of Judah's enemy, Babylon. The victory of Babylon was inescapable; captivity and long exile loomed. These were not only geopolitical realities, but as Jeremiah proclaimed, Yahweh himself was at work to judge his people and call them to repentance.

This pericope speaks to the difference between false and true prophets, but the narrative is a little hard to understand without the surrounding context. It must be clear that the confrontation between false and true prophets, between human lies and God's truth, is never a merely theoretical exercise. In chapter 27, Yahweh instructs Jeremiah to make and wear a yoke as an object lesson that God is giving Nebuchadnezzar the power to dominate all peoples. The accompanying message made it clear that Babylon would conquer, that such conquest was God's will, and that any would-be prophet who predicted otherwise was simply lying (cf. 27:14–15).

Then, in the opening verses of chapter 28 (vv. 1–4, just before the assigned reading), Jeremiah is confronted by Hananiah with precisely such a "prophecy" of false comfort. Hananiah directly contradicts Jeremiah's prophecy: the temple vessels will be returned, and the captive leaders of Judah will be released. In other words, according to Hananiah, God will break the king of Babylon's yoke of power. In the verses immediately following our text (vv. 10–11), Hananiah enacts his message with an object lesson of his own. He breaks the yoke that Jeremiah was wearing.

Jeremiah's message was completely different: Yahweh was on Babylon's side, using Nebuchadnezzar as an instrument of wrath and judgment. So the stage is set in

our text (and remember this is “in the presence of the priests and all the people,” v. 5) for a confrontation between prophet and prophet. It is obvious which prophetic message, Jeremiah’s or Hananiah’s, would have been more attractive to the audience in Jerusalem. Hananiah was promising, in the name of Yahweh, that the calamity of Babylon’s power was going to pass away quickly, and that the stolen temple vessels and the captive leaders of Judah would be coming home very soon, “within two years” (v. 3). Who would not prefer a quick and easy peace? How much more comforting it was to be told that God was on your side, and that the difficulties would soon be overcome. Hananiah proclaimed Yahweh’s grace without repentance, victory without suffering—in effect, resurrection without the cross.

Jeremiah himself wishes what Hananiah said were true. In verse 6 of our text, he says, “Amen! May the Lord do so; may the Lord make the words you have prophesied come true.” Yet he also reminds Hananiah (and us) that God’s prophets are usually bearers of “bad news”: “war, famine, and pestilence” (v. 8). Still, in the final analysis, we recognize a true prophet by the test of whether or not what he says actually happens. “When the word of that prophet comes to pass, then it will be known that the Lord has truly sent the prophet” (v. 9).

The assigned text leaves the story rather open-ended. (The pericope may have been selected to avoid the somewhat strange and complicated matter of Jeremiah wearing a yoke, which will require some explanation for contemporary audiences.) But Jeremiah knows that peace and victory are not just around the corner. Yahweh did not send or speak through Hananiah (v. 15). The false prophecy will not come true, and the false prophet will die (v. 17).

While one can approach a sermon on this text in several ways, a significant challenge is connecting this text to the gospel. The other pericopes for the day can help. In the Gospel lesson (Mt 10:34–42), our Lord speaks of his own message in a very Jeremiah-esque way. Just as Jeremiah could not agree with the lying prophet’s false comfort, Jesus delivers a startling warning against facile hopes of superficial peace: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” (v. 34). There is no exact parallel between Jesus and Jeremiah, of course: Jeremiah is constrained to announce Yahweh’s judgment, while Jesus is the One who *brings* the sword, forces the choice of loyalty and love—and ultimately bears Yahweh’s wrath himself. The sword of judgment fell on him. It was *his* blood, *his* toil, *his* tears, and *his* sweat that satisfied Yahweh’s judgment and brought us peace. That’s not cheap grace, but the rich, costly freedom of Yahweh’s saving love.

Jeremiah’s word about true and false prophets (Jer 28:9) helps us listen to a greater Prophet. How do we know if a prophet speaks the truth? We know by seeing whether what he said actually happens. The judgment of God really did fall on Christ on the cross. And Yahweh’s grace and victory for us really did dawn with his resurrection.

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