

IS JEREMIAH 39:15-18 OUT OF ORDER?

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Jeremiah 39:15-18 is generally regarded as problematic. The passage appears to be chronologically out of order since it points to Jeremiah's imprisonment, but follows the actual capitulation of the city and the freeing of the prophet by the Babylonians (39:1-14). How could Jeremiah be free and imprisoned at the same time? This has led some commentators to relocate the passage. For instance, J. A. Thompson replaces it after 38:7-14, where Ebed-Melech rescued Jeremiah from the pit.¹ Roland K. Harrison places it after 38:28 when Jeremiah was returned to prison, following his private audience with King Zedekiah.² W. L. Holladay, following Gunther Wanke,³ contends that the emphatic וְאֶל־יִרְמְיָהוּ ("but to Jeremiah"), suggests that "the clause immediately preceding 39:15-18 (in its original position) has another subject than Jeremiah."⁴ He, therefore, opts for a position after 38:27, believing that the "nice play on דָּבָר between 38:27 and 39:15" recommends this.⁵ I argue, however, that the pericope is deliberately placed here for a significant theological reason.

The focal character in this pericope is Ebed-Melech the Cushite, who had earlier risked his life to rescue Jeremiah from the miry pit into which he was thrown on charges of treason (38:1-13). The message of salvation directed to Ebed-Melech in 39:15-18 is what gives it a special character. Couched in remnant language (מְלוֹט),⁶ this passage envelops both judgment and salvation, as portrayed structurally:⁷ historical dateline (v. 15); a message of judgment to

¹J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 649.

²Roland K. Harrison, *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, TOTC (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 1973), 158-159.

³Gunther Wanke, *Untersuchungen zur sogenannten Baruchschift*, BZAW 122 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1971), 111.

⁴W. L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 2*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 268.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Verse 18 reads, "Because I will certainly rescue (כִּי מִלֹּט אֶמְלֹט) you, and you shall not fall by the sword; and your life shall be a prize of war to you, because you trusted in me," says the Lord." See the demonstration of the use of מְלוֹט as an important remnant term in the book of Jeremiah in Kenneth D. Mulzac, "The Remnant Motif in the Context of Judgment and Salvation in the Book of Jeremiah" (Ph.D. dissertation, Andrews University Theological Seminary, 1995), 192-205; 256-280.

⁷The translated passage is provided here to aid the reader in seeing its structure: "The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah while he was shut up in the court of the guard, saying: Go and say to Ebed-Melech the Ethiopian, 'Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Behold I am about to bring my words upon this city for evil and not for good. And they shall be (fulfilled) before you on that day. But I will save you on that

be fulfilled *בְּיוֹם הַהוּא* (“on that day”) (v. 16); and a message of salvation, also to be fulfilled *בְּיוֹם הַהוּא* (“on that day”) (vv. 17-18). Attention is also due to the AB:B'A' structure of v. 18:

A	B
because I will certainly rescue/save you	you will not fall
B'	A'
your life will be a prize	because you trusted in me

Located as it is in the MT, the pericope links the fate of both Jeremiah and Ebed-Melech. Significantly, both men were survivors of the fall of Jerusalem precisely because of their faith. Jeremiah's purchase of a field in Anathoth in the face of impending judgment (32:1-15) demonstrates his faith and strong confidence that YHWH will effect rejuvenation. Indeed, “houses and fields and vineyards will be possessed again in the land” (32:15). As such, he functions as a *proleptic representative* of the remnant who will be revived because of their faithfulness.⁸

The message for Ebed-Melech is that God will fulfill his purposes to destroy Jerusalem. The word of judgment was fulfilled precisely “on that day” (*בְּיוֹם הַהוּא*). This expression functions to show that at the time of the delivery of the message, its fulfillment was yet future. Nevertheless, the location of the pericope in the MT functions to show that the message was indeed fulfilled: judgment had come upon Jerusalem.

But judgment is not the last word; salvation is. The promise of salvation is also fulfilled precisely “on that day” (*בְּיוֹם הַהוּא*) and provides for Ebed-Melech's protection. He is preserved from both the courtiers, who may have intended his demise since he dared to rescue the prophet, as well as from the Babylonian invaders. In this way, he is just like Jeremiah, who escaped from the same two entities. What stands out clearly in this passage, however, is that this salvation is for the Cushite because he trusts God, in stark contrast to the Judeans who did not trust him.

Verse 18 forcefully demonstrates the divine intervention to ensure Ebed-Melech's safety. This is expressed by the emphatic *כִּי מַלֵּט אֶמְלֶטְךָ* (“because I will certainly rescue/save you”). This promise is assured *כִּי בָטַחְתָּ בִּי* (“because you trusted in me”). Ebed-Melech will be a survivor of the imminent judgment because of his trust in YHWH. Robert Carroll rightly comments:

Not his attitude towards Jeremiah but his trust in Yahweh underwrites Ebed-melech's fate.

In the fall of Jerusalem the Ethiopian will survive (i.e., have his life as a spoil

day,' says the Lord. 'And you shall not be given into the hand of the men of whom you are afraid because I will certainly rescue/save you (*כִּי מַלֵּט אֶמְלֶטְךָ*) and you shall not fall by the sword; and your life shall be a prize of war to you, because you trusted in me,' says the Lord."

⁸See Mulzac, 217-219.

of war) because of his trust. Thus is the man who trusts in Yahweh blessed (17:7), and Ebed-melech becomes an example of the pious whose survival in whatever circumstances *depends only upon their trust in Yahweh*. Gone is the option of 38:2, and now only trust in Yahweh is required.⁹

Safety is secured only because of trust in YHWH. The verb נִצַּח is employed here to strongly recommend security that is based on reliance on God alone. Used in this sense, the verb denotes that in times of distress the only way to secure survival and safety is to take refuge in God and place confidence in him. Such was the nature of Ebed-Melech's faith over against the faithlessness of the Judeans.

The example of this non-Judean is placed here in stark contrast to the lack of faith, and hence the hopeless fate, of the "elect people." They trusted in foreign political entities (2:17); in fortified cities and walls (5:17); in human beings (17:5); and especially in the temple, which the false prophets deemed inviolable (7:4, 8; 26:1-15). Hence, they trusted in empty lies (13:25; 28:15; 29:31). They adhered to a false security that resulted in their disappointment and ultimate destruction.

Ebed-Melech's faith demonstrates that "being secure in God is the only certain support for human life."¹⁰ Indeed, "blessed is the person who trusts in the Lord, and whose hope is the Lord."¹¹ As such, his faith became the *criterium distinctionis* between destruction and the hope of survival.¹² Therefore, as with Jeremiah, he may well be regarded as a *proleptic representative* of the remnant whose faith becomes an active factor in salvation.

This pericope demonstrates the dual polarity of doom and salvation. The threat of judgment is directed to those who do not trust in YHWH. However, there is a promise of survival for trusting in YHWH.¹³ Therefore, although the oracle seems to be out of place, its present position "emphasizes the fulfillment of the divine word and the relation between deliverance and trust in Yahweh."¹⁴ And in all this, the Cushite's role is not to be forgotten or underestimated.

⁹Robert Carroll, *Jeremiah*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 697, emphasis added.

¹⁰Alfred Jepsen, נִצַּח, *TDOT* (1974), 2:93.

¹¹Jer 17:7. This is in direct contrast to the curse pronounced on the person who trusts in humankind (Jer 17:5).

¹²Gerhard F. Hasel, *The Remnant: The History and Theology of the Remnant Idea from Genesis to Isaiah*, 3d ed., Andrews University Monographs 5 (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1980), 396. He says: "Faith, as a matter of fact, is the *criterium distinctionis* between the masses that will perish and the remnant that will survive."

¹³See Sheldon H. Blank, who indicates that in a few special and personal words, the book of Jeremiah promised survival to a faithful few: to the Rechabites for their constancy (chap. 35); to Baruch, who shared the prophet's lot (chap. 45); and to Ebed-Melech, who rescued him from the pit ("Traces of Prophetic Agony in Isaiah," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 27 [1956]: 90).

¹⁴Carroll, 696.

Indeed, "At a time when Judah was being judged because of disobedience and covenant violation, a black Cushite was delivered because of his faith."¹⁵ On the one hand, the faithlessness of Zedekiah and Judah determined their fate: judgment and death;¹⁶ on the other hand, the faithfulness of Ebed-Melech the Cushite determined his fate: salvation and life.

¹⁵Daniel J. Hays, "The Cushites: A Black Nation in the Bible," *BSac* 153 (October-December 1996): 406.

¹⁶What a horrible fate it was for Zedekiah that the last thing he saw before being blinded was the execution of his own children, in part because of his own disobedience! That scene was to haunt him for the rest of his life. The stinging irony must not be overlooked either: the same king, who had earlier chosen to "look the other way" and allow his courtiers to try to kill Jeremiah, is now forced to look as the Babylonians killed his own flesh and blood.