

*In the beginning...*

There are only three places in the Old Testament where this construction is used.  
Jeremiah 26, Jeremiah 27, and Genesis 1.

It's entirely possible that Jeremiah didn't think about Genesis 1,  
but even if he didn't, there is a strong thematic parallel  
between the creation of the world –  
with Adam having dominion over the earth and the animals –  
and now the Creator (note verse 5)  
declaring that he is giving dominion over the earth to Nebuchadnezzar.

I am struck by the remarkable coincidence of preaching these chapters of Jeremiah  
at the same time that I preach on the Olivet Discourse in Matthew.  
As we hear Jesus talk about how the destruction of the *second* temple  
will be a sign of his parousia and of the close of the age,  
we also hear Jeremiah talk about how the destruction of the *first* temple  
signals the undoing of creation.

## **1. The Yoke of Nebuchadnezzar: Learning Obedience Through Suffering (27:1-22)**

### **a. A Word to the Nations: Serve Nebuchadnezzar, My Servant (v1-11)**

*In the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah<sup>[a]</sup> the son of Josiah, king of Judah, this word came to Jeremiah from the LORD. <sup>2</sup> Thus the LORD said to me: “Make yourself straps and yoke-bars, and put them on your neck.*

The word for the word for the ‘yoke-bars’ that Jeremiah makes is the word for a human yoke.  
The more general word for yoke is used in verse 8 – “the yoke of the king of Babylon” –  
and that is also the word used by Jesus in Matthew 11.  
So don't think of an animal yoke.  
Think of a yoke designed for a human  
to enable someone to carry or pull heavy burdens.

And from chapter 28, we can see that for some time Jeremiah wore this yoke in public.  
It would have been a powerful image:  
the prophet, standing there with a symbol of slavery around his neck –  
calling the people – the king – even the kings of the nations! –  
to bow their necks to Nebuchadnezzar.

Did you notice how Jeremiah sent word to the surrounding nations?  
Through their ambassadors!

<sup>3</sup> *Send word<sup>[b]</sup> to the king of Edom, the king of Moab, the king of the sons of Ammon, the king of Tyre, and the king of Sidon by the hand of the envoys who have come to Jerusalem to Zedekiah king of Judah.*

Most of the “oracles against the nations” were prophesied *to Israel*.  
For instance, it is highly unlikely that the King of Tyre  
    *ever* heard Ezekiel’s oracle in Ezekiel 26-28.  
It wasn’t written for the King of Tyre.  
It was written *about* the King of Tyre –  
    but the audience was the exilic community in Babylon.

While Jonah was *sent* to Nineveh,  
    the book of Jonah was *written* to Israel.

But here in verses 4-11, Jeremiah gives a message from the LORD  
    to the ambassadors of the kings of the surrounding nations.

So this is a message for the *nations*:

<sup>4</sup> *Give them this charge for their masters: ‘Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: This is what you shall say to your masters:’* <sup>5</sup> *“It is I who by my great power and my outstretched arm have made the earth, with the men and animals that are on the earth, and I give it to whomever it seems right to me.”* <sup>6</sup> *Now I have given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, my servant, and I have given him also the beasts of the field to serve him.* <sup>7</sup> *All the nations shall serve him and his son and his grandson, until the time of his own land comes. Then many nations and great kings shall make him their slave.*

The language of verses 4-7 is the language of creation:

    “I made the earth, with the men and animals that are on the earth” –  
It is also the language of the Exodus (the language of redemption):  
    “by my great power and my outstretched arm” –  
    and the language of “my servant.”

Of course, many have pointed out that the language of the Exodus is “new creation” language.  
But here, creation and new creation alike are given into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar –  
    “my servant.”

What does God mean by identifying Nebuchadnezzar as “my servant”?

There are two parts to this.

The first needs to be seen in terms of God’s regular providence.  
    “I give it to whomever it seems right to me.”  
Nebuchadnezzar is God’s servant simply because he is the king.  
    Paul will pick up on this use of the “servant” language.

In Romans 13:4, Paul identifies rulers as “God’s ministers” (diakonos).

(I should point out that LXX does not call Nebuchadnezzar “my servant” – the LXX says that the nations will be enslaved to Nebuchadnezzar).

But the first point that Jeremiah is making is that in God’s providence, he has given the nations to Nebuchadnezzar, therefore Nebuchadnezzar is his servant by virtue of his office as King.

I mention this because we need to think of our rulers as God’s servants.  
Nebuchadnezzar worshipped the gods of Babylon.  
Nero worshipped the gods of Rome.  
It doesn’t matter whether they believe in the true God or not.  
They may even be wicked and evil men!  
But they are nonetheless God’s servants –  
because God has given these people for them to rule.

I fear that we think too highly of ourselves these days.  
*We* get to vote in American elections –  
so we tend to think that *we* the people control who is king  
(who become President).  
But God says, “*I* give [the earth] to whomever it seems right to me.”

God raises rulers up – and God brings rulers down.

At least the text of Jeremiah that came to the Babylonian exiles says so!  
The text that came to the Egyptian exiles omits verse 7!  
There is no reference to the coming judgment against Babylon.

The point of the Alexandrian text (the LXX)  
is simply that *you need to serve Nebuchadnezzar*.  
Those who are in Babylon *already* serve Nebuchadnezzar.  
They need comfort – they need to know that their servitude has limits!

We live in a world where *everyone* is accountable for their actions.  
Nations are not exempt.  
Empires cannot escape.  
God rules the world!  
It’s not just that God will make all things right at the end of history.  
(He will – but he doesn’t always have to wait!)  
Sometimes God makes things *spectacularly* right in the middle of history!

God’s point *to the nations* is that the nations will only serve Babylon  
“until the time of his own land comes.”

Every nation has its deadline.  
There are no exceptions.

One day the United States will fall from its lofty perch.  
That shouldn't trouble us.  
If we were wise, we would start preparing for it now!  
Think about this way –  
    some of the up-and-coming nations will one day surpass us.  
How we treat them while they are rising  
    may have some effect on how they treat us when we are falling!

Verses 8-11 then give a warning to the nations:

<sup>8</sup> ““*But if any nation or kingdom will not serve this Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and put its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon, I will punish that nation with the sword, with famine, and with pestilence, declares the LORD, until I have consumed it by his hand.* <sup>9</sup> *So do not listen to your prophets, your diviners, your dreamers, your fortune-tellers, or your sorcerers, who are saying to you, ‘You shall not serve the king of Babylon.’* <sup>10</sup> *For it is a lie that they are prophesying to you, with the result that you will be removed far from your land, and I will drive you out, and you will perish.* <sup>11</sup> *But any nation that will bring its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon and serve him, I will leave on its own land, to work it and dwell there, declares the LORD.*””

If you take the yoke the King of Babylon *willingly*,  
    then you may stay in your land and live.  
But if you refuse to serve him *willingly*,  
    then I will punish that nation and destroy it by the hand of Nebuchadnezzar.

Verses 8-11 *clearly* move beyond the realm of “general revelation.”  
Yes, it is true that *all* kings are appointed by God.  
But why should the king of Edom bend his neck to the yoke of Babylon?

This where God's redemptive purposes for history begin to shine forth.  
As we have seen earlier in Jeremiah,  
Judgment begins with the household of God –  
    and if it begins with us, what will become  
    of those who do not obey the gospel of God? (1 Peter 4)

God is merciful to the surrounding nations.  
He had sent his servants the prophets to Jerusalem.  
    Jerusalem refused to listen.  
So now, God sends word by Jeremiah to the nations:  
    don't listen to you prophets, diviners, dreamers, sorcerers, etc.

Serve Babylon and you will live.  
Don't resist.  
Don't fight against them.

God is using Babylon to judge and destroy his people.

Don't get in the way or you will go down with them!

Can you imagine what it would have been like to be the ambassador of Moab?

You know these Jewish prophets are a thorn in the king's side.

But now, here he comes to all the ambassadors

as you are gathered at the palace in Jerusalem.

He's wearing a yoke – and he tells you to give this message to your kings.

Just imagine what Zedekiah must have been thinking!!

I'm trying to negotiate with my neighbors

and this renegade prophet insists on contradicting all my plans!

Indeed, it appears that Zedekiah was present – because Jeremiah then turns to him:

**b. A Word to Zedekiah: Submit to the Yoke of Nebuchadnezzar (v12-15)**

*<sup>12</sup> To Zedekiah king of Judah I spoke in like manner: “Bring your necks under the yoke of the king of Babylon, and serve him and his people and live. <sup>13</sup> Why will you and your people die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence, as the LORD has spoken concerning any nation that will not serve the king of Babylon? <sup>14</sup> Do not listen to the words of the prophets who are saying to you, ‘You shall not serve the king of Babylon,’ for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you. <sup>15</sup> I have not sent them, declares the LORD, but they are prophesying falsely in my name, with the result that I will drive you out and you will perish, you and the prophets who are prophesying to you.”*

In effect, Jeremiah says to Zedekiah,

“Stop listening to prophets who prophesy lies.”

I pity Zedekiah.

There were orthodox prophets on both sides.

Some pointed to the example of godly Hezekiah:

trust God and resist Babylon like Hezekiah resisted the Assyrians!

But Jeremiah said “No.”

Resistance is futile. You will be assimilated into the Babylonian empire:  
either willingly – or by force.

Who do you listen to?

You are the Son of David – the anointed one.

You are the King of Jerusalem – the holy city.

What made Zedekiah a bad king?

He didn't listen to the right prophets.

Of course, neither did “the priests and all the people” (verses 16-22):

**c. A Word to the Priests and the People: Do Not Listen to Lying Prophets (v16-22)**

<sup>16</sup> Then I spoke to the priests and to all this people, saying, “Thus says the LORD: Do not listen to the words of your prophets who are prophesying to you, saying, ‘Behold, the vessels of the LORD’s house will now shortly be brought back from Babylon,’ for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you. <sup>17</sup> Do not listen to them; serve the king of Babylon and live. Why should this city become a desolation?”

The “orthodox” prophets claimed that the exile of 597 was almost over  
(when Jeconiah was taken into exile with Ezekiel and other leaders).  
The vessels of the Lord’s house would shortly be brought back.  
The image is that of restoration from Exile.  
After all, if the King of Babylon allows the vessels of the temple to return,  
it would signify his favor toward Jerusalem and her rulers.

Jeremiah says “it is a lie.”  
You are believing a lie!

<sup>18</sup> If they are prophets, and if the word of the LORD is with them, then let them intercede with the LORD of hosts, that the vessels that are left in the house of the LORD, in the house of the king of Judah, and in Jerusalem may not go to Babylon.

The word used for “intercede” in the LXX is the same word used of the ambassadors in verse 3,  
who had come meet with Zedekiah.

If they are prophets – if the word of the LORD is with them –  
then send them on an embassy to Yahweh Sabaoth himself!  
After all, prophets *are* ambassadors.  
They speak to the people on behalf of God.  
And they speak to God on behalf of the people.

Don’t bother sending ambassadors to Nebuchadnezzar.  
He’s not the one you need to worry about.  
He is the servant of the LORD – he will do Yahweh’s bidding.  
Your problem is *not* Nebuchadnezzar.

Your problem is God.

You need an ambassador – you need a prophet –  
you need someone who can intercede with God.

(And you’re going to send these guys?!!  
This is not going to end well!)

<sup>19</sup> For thus says the LORD of hosts concerning the pillars, the sea, the stands, and the rest of the vessels that are left in this city, <sup>20</sup> which Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon did not take away, when he took into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon Jeconiah the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah,

*and all the nobles of Judah and Jerusalem—<sup>21</sup> thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, concerning the vessels that are left in the house of the LORD, in the house of the king of Judah, and in Jerusalem: <sup>22</sup> They shall be carried to Babylon and remain there until the day when I visit them, declares the LORD. Then I will bring them back and restore them to this place.”*

I should mention that verses 17-22 in the LXX is quite different.

Verse 17 is replaced with – “I did not send them.”

Verse 18 omits reference to the temple vessels.

Verse 19 only includes a brief reference to the vessels (omitting the detailed accounting).

Verse 21 is missing –

and verse 22 is replaced with “shall enter into Babylon, declares the LORD.”

In other words the text sent to Babylon gives greater detail regarding the temple vessels.

This is not surprising – since the temple vessels were taken captive into Babylon!

Further, there is no promise in the LXX.

The text ends with “and they shall enter into Babylon, declares the LORD.”

We already saw that there was no verse 7 in the LXX.

Without verse 7 and verse 22,

there is no hope in this chapter!

But that fits the message of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah has *hope* for the Babylonian exiles because God is finished judging them.

Those who remain in Jerusalem – and those who flee to Egypt –

are running away from God.

Therefore, when Jeremiah edits his text for distribution in Babylon  
he speaks of hope.

When he edits his text for Egypt, he does not.

## **2. The Broken Yoke: The Peril of Prophesying Peace (28:1-17)**

So Jeremiah is going around Jerusalem wearing a yoke,  
telling everyone to submit to Babylon.

This does not sit well with the orthodox party.

And so in that same year – at around the same time –

Hananiah “the prophet from Gibeon” confronted Jeremiah.

### **a. Hananiah: Within Two Years God Will Break the Yoke of Babylon (v1-4)**

*28 In that same year, at the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah king of Judah, in the fifth month of the fourth year, Hananiah the son of Azzur, the prophet from Gibeon, spoke to me in the house of the LORD, in the presence of the priests and all the people, saying, <sup>2</sup> “Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. <sup>3</sup> Within two years I will bring back to this place all the vessels of the LORD's house, which Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon took away from this place and carried to Babylon. <sup>4</sup> I will also bring back to this place*

*Jeconiah the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, and all the exiles from Judah who went to Babylon, declares the LORD, for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon.”*

Hananiah promises that within two years the vessels of the LORD’s house will be returned, and Jeconiah will be restored along with all the exiles, “for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon” – the utterance of Yahweh.

“Hananiah” means “Yahweh is gracious,” and his message is full of grace... but alas, it is not full of *truth*.

I have known many prophets like Hananiah.  
They mean well.  
They are orthodox – at least they *sound* orthodox.  
They are constantly preaching “grace” –  
but while they may make you feel good about yourself,  
they do not prepare you for Judgment Day.

Listen to Jeremiah’s reply:

**b. Jeremiah: How I Wish That You Were Right! (v5-9)**

*<sup>5</sup> Then the prophet Jeremiah spoke to Hananiah the prophet in the presence of the priests and all the people who were standing in the house of the LORD, <sup>6</sup> and the prophet Jeremiah said, “Amen! May the LORD do so; may the LORD make the words that you have prophesied come true, and bring back to this place from Babylon the vessels of the house of the LORD, and all the exiles.*

Oh, how I wish that you were right!!  
If only you were right!!!

*<sup>7</sup> Yet hear now this word that I speak in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people. <sup>8</sup> The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms. <sup>9</sup> As for the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of that prophet comes to pass, then it will be known that the LORD has truly sent the prophet.”*

Notice that this debate takes place before the priests and all the people.

This is a public policy debate that takes place before all the leaders of Jerusalem.  
Jeremiah says,

Well, the prophetic tradition has usually warned of war, famine, and pestilence.  
So by prophesying *peace* you stand outside of the prophetic tradition.

Deuteronomy proposed a test for a prophet:  
does what he prophesies come to pass?

So, in two years we will know whether you are a false prophet or a true one!

Jeremiah appears willing to leave it there.



But Hananiah will not:

**c. Hananiah Breaks the Yoke-Bars from the Neck of Jeremiah (v10-11)**

<sup>10</sup> Then the prophet Hananiah took the yoke-bars from the neck of Jeremiah the prophet and broke them. <sup>11</sup> And Hananiah spoke in the presence of all the people, saying, “Thus says the LORD: Even so will I break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon from the neck of all the nations within two years.” But Jeremiah the prophet went his way.

Hananiah is a bold, powerful preacher of grace.

He takes the yoke from Jeremiah’s neck and breaks it –  
declaring “even so” will God break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar!

“Peace, peace” they say – when there is no peace.

Jeremiah makes no answer.

He simply walks away.

Sometimes that’s the right thing to do.

You don’t have to have an answer all the time!  
And it seems clear that at the time, Jeremiah did not know what God wanted him to say.  
When in doubt, shut up!

What would be the effect of Jeremiah’s walking away?

Undoubtedly everyone thought that Hananiah had won!  
Hananiah had broken Jeremiah’s yoke,  
and Jeremiah had been unable or unwilling to reply.  
“Hananiah no doubt exploited that popular opinion for all it was worth  
and for as long as it lasted – which wasn’t long” (Wright, 286).

Because sometime later (no more than a few weeks), the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah:

**d. Jeremiah: You Have Made This People Trust a Lie – Therefore You Shall Die (v12-16)**

<sup>12</sup> Sometime after the prophet Hananiah had broken the yoke-bars from off the neck of Jeremiah the prophet, the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah: <sup>13</sup> “Go, tell Hananiah, ‘Thus says the LORD: You have broken wooden bars, but you have made in their place bars of iron. <sup>14</sup> For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: I have put upon the neck of all these nations an iron yoke to serve Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and they shall serve him, for I have given to him even the beasts of the field.’”

Jeremiah says that Nebuchadnezzar is the new Adam.

Even the beasts of the field have been given to him.  
God has given Nebuchadnezzar dominion over the earth.

Therefore, rebellion against Nebuchadnezzar is rebellion against the LORD.

In this way, Nebuchadnezzar becomes a picture of Christ.

It is true that Nebuchadnezzar is a flawed and failed picture of Christ!

(But if you think about it – *all* of them failed –  
if they hadn't been flawed and failed, they *would have been* Christ!)

The Sons of David have failed.

And so God is removing dominion from the house of David  
and giving it to the King of Babylon, his servant.

But he too will fail.

This morning we talked about the error of antinomianism.

Antinomianism emphasizes grace – very much like Hananiah!

But the grave danger of antinomianism is that it makes people trust in a lie.

It makes people think that what they do doesn't really matter.

Sure, I *should* obey God, but whether I do or not doesn't really matter.

God is gracious!

The LORD has *never* sent a prophet to say,

“Hey guys, everything's fine.

You don't need to worry about obeying God.

He's good with everything!”

Jesus sent the apostles to make disciples, by baptizing the nations

and by *teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.*

A pastor who says “grace, grace” and never calls you to obedience

does not understand the transforming power of grace!

Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?! Paul asks.

May it never be!

How can we who died to sin continue to live in it?

Grace is far better news than that!

God has triumphed over the powers of sin and death in the resurrection of Jesus.

Your sin is forgiven – there *is no condemnation* for those who are in Christ Jesus!

And the dominion of sin – the power of sin over you – is broken.

<sup>15</sup> *And Jeremiah the prophet said to the prophet Hananiah, “Listen, Hananiah, the LORD has not sent you, and you have made this people trust in a lie. <sup>16</sup> Therefore thus says the LORD: ‘Behold, I will remove you from the face of the earth. This year you shall die, because you have uttered rebellion against the LORD.’”*

The ESV leaves out the parallel in the Hebrew:

“the LORD has not *sent* you...”

“Therefore thus says the LORD:

“Behold, I will *send* you from the face of the earth.”

You want God to send you –

Fine.

He will send you to death.

**e. Hananiah (v17)**

<sup>17</sup> *In that same year, in the seventh month, the prophet Hananiah died.*

There is no commentary.

Jeremiah does not descend into self-promotion or even condemnation of Hananiah.

Hananiah had said that the exile would be over in two years.

But only two months after he broke the yoke from Jeremiah’s neck,

Hananiah was dead.

God said it.

It happened.

Be warned.

Walter Bruegemann puts it well:

“Jeremiah, the messenger of a hard sovereign, bears the message of stern judgment.

No ideology or wishful religion can deny the intention of Yahweh in history  
as Jeremiah has voiced it.

All the world can see is Babylonian imperialism.

The community of this text, however, knows more.

It knows that the real agent is not Nebuchadnezzar, visible as he is,  
but the God who ‘plucks up and tears down.’

And we, long after Hananiah is gone, are left with this relentless text.

We are left to ponder that, in a world of raw imperial power  
and in a world of well-wishing religious passion,  
there is this other claim made upon Jerusalem and every holy operation,  
upon Babylon and every concentration of world power.” (255)

But into this world that is obsessed with power –

into *our hearts* that seek to control and manipulate –

Jesus says, ‘Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart,  
and you will find rest for your souls.

For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.’