

May 23: 35:1-19: Obedience II/II

Preface:

Today's long passage from Jeremiah--all of Chapter 35--is fascinating. It's really, really an interesting moment in the book. It might be one of my favorites. What I want to do is walk through it. We'll check in with Jeremiah's context, remember what's in the air as he's doing what God says to do. I think that we'll be positioned, for the seven-to-nine minutes we remember this message after it ends, to consider how we carry ourselves in the world.

Let's pray!

Prayer:

Walk-Through:

So things start this way:

35 This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord during the reign of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah: 2 "Go to the Rekabite family and invite them to come to one of the

side rooms of the house of the Lord and give them wine to drink.”

We read “Rekabite Family,” here, and will see language that implies that these people are related, a clan, a household. That may not be the whole story. Their founder or forefather was Jonadab, who was the son of Rekab. Jonadab was famous because he helped depose the wicked King Ahab, married to Queen Jezebel, in the Northern Kingdom. The Rekabites were nomadic at a time when the rest of God’s People had settled in cities. They abstained from alcohol, which took work, you know, in a wine-filled world. They also, clearly, survived the fall of Israel, the Northern Kingdom, which has been held up as a negative example for Judah over and over and over again. There are strong hints that they weren’t just a tribe, a family, but were actually a, oh, call it a union, were a trade group, who, yes, were nomadic and tee-totalers, but also were metal-workers, specifically involved in chariot-building. To be a Rekabite could be to have been born into this family tree, descended from Jonadab, but also meant you joined the trade, became a chariot-builder, and the group could have had members who weren’t descended from Rekab, but who still followed their trade-founders’ ideals.

Honestly, both these things can be true; trades were passed on in family groups, and those who were naturally good at the trade, or wanted to learn it, or married into the family, all would have joined in on the trade, moving from city to city, working with metal, being kind of weirdos out in their tents and not drinking wine until they moved on to another place. You don't go to the chariot market, the chariot market--and that family who runs it--comes to you. (cf. Allen C. Myers, *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987, 874–875.)

Jeremiah is told to go get them, take them into a side room of the Temple, and offer them wine.

He obeys.

3 So I went to get Jaazaniah son of Jeremiah, the son of Habazziniah, and his brothers and all his sons—the whole family of the Rekabites. 4 I brought them into the house of the Lord, into the room of the sons of Hanan son of Igdaliah the man of God. It was next to the room of the officials, which was over that of Maaseiah son of Shallum the doorkeeper. 5 Then I set bowls full of wine and some cups before the Rekabites and

said to them, “Drink some wine.”

Again: Sons, household, this same language can be applied to members in a trade guild, so: Family? Co-op Members? Doesn't matter. They're a unit--both--most likely. And Jeremih has the group there--you know, in that one specific room Jeremiah describes at length--and brings in bowls and cups--wine. “Drink some wine!” Jeremiah says.

6 But they replied, “We do not drink wine, because our forefather Jehonadab[a] son of Rekab gave us this command: ‘Neither you nor your descendants must ever drink wine. 7 Also you must never build houses, sow seed or plant vineyards; you must never have any of these things, but must always live in tents. Then you will live a long time in the land where you are nomads.’ 8 We have obeyed everything our forefather Jehonadab son of Rekab commanded us. Neither we nor our wives nor our sons and daughters have ever drunk wine 9 or built houses to live in or had vineyards, fields or crops. 10 We have lived in tents and have fully obeyed everything our forefather Jehonadab commanded us. 11 But when Nebuchadnezzar

king of Babylon invaded this land, we said, 'Come, we must go to Jerusalem to escape the Babylonian[b] and Aramean armies.' So we have remained in Jerusalem."

Look. Jeremiah knows they don't drink wine. Everyone knows this story they're telling, here. They've been living under this life code, this way of life, for like 200 years. The only reason they're in Jerusalem at all, instead of out roaming like they like to or camped outside the walls is because Judah is occupied by Babylon right now. Babylon is literally sitting outside their gates right now.

So Jeremiah knows this is a weird thing to do, offering wine to them. He knows that God will communicate something through it.

Maybe he thinks they'll drink it. I mean: They're in the Temple, Jeremiah the Prophet is with them. Should they? You can wonder if they'd doubt, given the circumstances of the invitation. But they don't doubt. They don't waver. They know what they are about, who they are, who their leader is--even though he's long absent from them--and what it means to follow the source of their family and trade. They know what

they're supposed to do and be in the world, and their immediate circumstances don't change what has been tested as good for, like, 200 years at this point.

So they lay it out they way any marginalized, outside group lays things out: Reasserting their identity. This is not what we do. Whether they think Jeremiah is a dummy or trying to insult them or tempt them, we don't know. We only know what they know: This isn't for us.

And God responds:

12 Then the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah, saying: 13 "This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Go and tell the people of Judah and those living in Jerusalem, 'Will you not learn a lesson and obey my words?' declares the Lord. 14 'Jehonadab son of Rekab ordered his descendants not to drink wine and this command has been kept. To this day they do not drink wine, because they obey their forefather's command. But I have spoken to you again and again, yet you have not obeyed me. 15 Again and again I sent all my servants the prophets to you. They said, "Each of you must

turn from your wicked ways and reform your actions; do not follow other gods to serve them. Then you will live in the land I have given to you and your ancestors.” But you have not paid attention or listened to me. 16 The descendants of Jehonadab son of Rekab have carried out the command their forefather gave them, but these people have not obeyed me.’

Again: The descendants of Jehonadab son of Rekab have carried out the command their forefather gave them, but these people have not obeyed me.’

The Rekabites are a mirror for those living in Judah and Jerusalem. They have been faithful and obedient to their forefather, their founder, a person who spoke hundreds of years before, while Judah and Jerusalem have ignored God who has been continually speaking. What Judah should see in the Rekabites should shame them, embarrass them, inspire them to live differently. We all know it won't.

17 “Therefore this is what the Lord God Almighty, the God of Israel, says: ‘Listen! I am going to bring on Judah and on everyone living in Jerusalem every disaster I pronounced

against them. I spoke to them, but they did not listen; I called to them, but they did not answer.'"

We've heard this before. Babylon is coming.

And remember: Jeremiah's, like, declaring this in an atrium, an open room next to and above all sorts of Temple officials and Priests, who have been craning their necks to see just what's going on in there. You can imagine them rolling their eyes dismissively.

"Ohhhh...of course. It was one more ridiculous attempt by Jeremiah to make us think we're not obedient.

What an annoying jerk." But if you're a Rekabite, who just said, "We came here because there was nowhere safe outside the city," you're thinking, "Wait. What? I gotta get out of here." God knows that. God speaks up:

18 Then Jeremiah said to the family of the Rekabites, "This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: 'You have obeyed the command of your forefather Jehonadab and have followed all his instructions and have done everything he ordered.' 19 Therefore this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says:

‘Jehonadab son of Rekab will never fail to have a descendant to serve me.’”

Their loyalty is going to be rewarded. Not their loyalty to Yahweh, per se, but their loyalty, their faithfulness obedience, solidarity--however you frame it to yourself best--their loyalty to their forefather. That’s what God rewards. God acknowledges it as a model of the posture that Jerusalem should be taking toward God, and rewards them for the way they are being a role-model.

And, look: The Rekabites were Israelites. They were God’s People. But they were God’s People in a really weird way. Their choices to abstain from wine and go from place to place and, frankly, build chariots when Israel’s kings were told that trusting in chariots would be a downfall for them--these things set them up as weird, quasi-faithless Israelites. They were Yawhistic, but in a way that made no sense to anyone in Judah. For sure those Temple Officials and priests who watched as Jeremiah brought them in would have thought of them as lesser, as theologically wrong, as spectacle. Not as brother and sister, not as part of God’s People.

But this quality of steadfast obedience over generations, of loyalty and faithfulness in spite of hundreds of years of pressure to conform to a typical religious way of life is something that God admires. It's praised by God.

The religious elite would have considered these people beyond the pale, a necessary part of society, sure, but not anyone you want your kid to marry. They would never have been considered a role model in faithfulness. Never, ever, ever. They weren't "them," necessarily, but they were barely "us." Okay, okay, they were probably "them." You spend 200 years being different, you end up being different--religiously, socially.

And in the middle of an anxious moment, God promises that these Rekabites will not be wiped out. They survived Assyria and Israel's destruction decades and decades ago, they survived Babylon's occupation of Judah and Jerusalem's FIRST exile, and they'll survive Jerusalem's fall, too. 'Jehonadab son of Rekab will never fail to have a descendant to serve me.' God says.

Again: They are rewarded for their principles. They are

given this promise on account of their obedient faithfulness--not to what God has asked of them, but to what the founder of their way of life proscribed.

Transition:

Look, I love this. I just love it. I want God to be as expansive in the promises and blessings God gives as possible. I want everyone saved, right? I want every single person, when Jesus returns, to be a part of the New Creation world we're looking forward to. So I want God to reward people in this life, too, anytime they choose to live by principles that God affirms. I want covenantal blessings to come their way.

I wish it were mathematical: You live by principles God approves, you receive covenantal reward. Bam. But of course, we know that what's most true about a covenant is the relationship that forms it. We remember that the Rekabites, for all their outsidersness, were Israelites. Salvation, however we frame it, is tied deeply to relationship. God's shocking promise to them is as much a shaming warning to those who are listening in as it is anything else. Those who listened thought these Rekabites were too outside-the-pale, too insular, too whatever to be counted faithful; God promises them, specifically, that

they aren't.

Conclusion:

And I'm brought, simply, to this:

What Christians do we think God condemns and why? I mean what members of the Body of Christ, the Bride of Christ, the Church, are ones who we think are just...too out there, too weird, theologically suspect, too wrong about this or that. They're not totally "them," but they definitely aren't "us." Okay, okay, they're probably "them."

And are we humble enough, obedient enough ourselves, to look at them and try to see what God might praise? What is revealed in their principles that ought to embarrass us about ours?

These really are questions I ask myself a lot lately. I find I'm more ready to dismiss others than I have ever been, and more ready to dismiss those who claim to be part of the family of God than I have ever been. At the very same time, I'm more ready to embrace those who don't claim to be Christians, but reveal principles and ethics that I find very Christ-like. This is me, my, oh, "emotional place" right now. But we all have one,

we're all taking some sort of stance, and if, maybe, yours, like mine, needs to look closely at the way these outsiders are praised while those who think they know everything about God are condemned, well: Then take a look, right? Closely.

And hopefully, in looking at God's promises of continued relationship to these Rekabites, we'll see in the reflection our own shallow perspective, we'll be challenged to see what God finds praiseworthy in those we "other," especially those we make the "other" in the family of God.