

Historical context. After the Babylonians successfully invade Judah and destroy Jerusalem in 587 B.C., many Jews are deported to Babylonia, others flee to Egypt, still others remain in the devastated homeland. In 539 B.C. King Cyrus of Persia defeats the Babylonians and establishes Persian rule in that city. In one of the first decrees, Cyrus allows the conquered people to return to their homelands. As a result, Jewish exiles are free to return home.

While many return, many others remain in Babylon. They come to be called the Diaspora. While many of those who remain in Babylon defect from the faith of their ancestors, many others try to remain faithful. They meet in synagogues for worship and learning. In time they come to be known as ‘people of the book.’ They read and study the Mosaic Law and the prophets. In due course, they produce some of their own inspired writings. Among these are Lamentations, Tobit, Esther, Judith, Wisdom, and Baruch. The purpose of Diaspora writings is to help their people hold onto their faith in a pagan land.

Author. Most scholars believe that the book of Baruch, with its diverse types of writing, is a compilation of the works of several authors. It is customary in ancient times to attribute works by unknown writers to more famous authors of previous centuries. Thus many psalms written by nameless authors are attributed to David, and several Wisdom books to Solomon. It seems that the editors of this book felt that it was fitting to attribute their book to Baruch, Jeremiah’s famous secretary.

A deuterocanonical book. Baruch is one of the seven books of the Old Testament not found in the Protestant Canon of Scripture since it is not in the Hebrew version of the Old Testament (see article one for more on this issue). In the Sunday lectionary of readings, only one text from Baruch is found in all three cycles (5:1-9 on the Second Sunday of Advent, Cycle C). We can say that the Book of Baruch could be a guide for people who are separated or lost, physically and emotionally, from their normal environment. It shows that hope is in the Lord and in the scriptures. It contains a long prayer of lament and exalts wisdom, found in the Torah.

DIVISION OF CHAPTERS

- Part 1:** Prayer of the exiles (Chapters 1:13 to 3:8)
- Part 2:** A poem in praise of wisdom (Chapters 3:9 to 4:4)
- Part 3:** Jerusalem bewails and consoles her captive children (Chapters 4:5 to 5:9)
- Part 4:** Jeremiah’s letter condemning idolatry (Chapters 6:1 to 7:2)

COMMENTARY

CHAPTER 1: A confession of guilt by the exiles

“They wept and fasted and prayed...and collected funds...and sent them to Jerusalem....” (vv 5-7)

Verses 1-4 picture Baruch reading his scroll before the exile king and the exiles in Jerusalem.

Verses 5-12 show the people fasting, praying and trying to stay connected to their people who have returned to Jerusalem. They take up a collection for sacred vessels and request that offerings and prayers be made in their name.

CHAPTERS 1:13 to 3:8: Judah’s sins as the reason for the exile

“...We are flushed with shame, we men of Judah and citizens of Jerusalem, that we, with our kings and rulers and priests and prophets, and with our fathers, have sinned in the Lord’s sight and disobeyed him.” (1:15-18)

“We did not heed the voice of the Lord, our God, in all the words of the prophets whom he sent us, but each of us went off after the devices of our own wicked hearts, served other gods, and did evil in the sight of the Lord, our God.” (1:21-22)

“This was the warning through your servant Moses...: ‘If you do not heed my voice, surely this great and numerous throng will dwindle away among the nations to which I will scatter them.’” (2:28-29)

What the exiles refuse to learn from Jeremiah, they learn from the hardships of the exile. Prayers such as the Penitential Prayer in these verses are typical features of prayer services that originated in the exile

times. The purpose of this prayer is to state that God, the righteous One, is not to blame for the exile. The exile happened because the leaders and people refused to listen to the word of the Lord spoken through Judah's true prophets.

Chapters 2:11-15 and 3:1-8 are an appeal for God's mercy.

CHAPTERS 3:9 to 4:4: In praise of wisdom

"Hear, O Israel, the commandments of life: Listen, and know prudence!" (3:9)

"How is it Israel...you have forsaken the fountain of wisdom!" (3:10-12)

"O Israel, how vast is the house of God, how broad the scope of his dominion." (3:24)

"All who cling to her will live, but those will die who forsake her." (4:1)

For Jews, wisdom is the same as the fear of the Lord (that is, obedience to God's law and will) and the will of God is revealed in the scriptures—God's book. Only God is the ultimate source of wisdom and God has chosen to reveal his wisdom in the scriptures. As a consequence, praise of wisdom is indirect praise of God. This poem in praise of wisdom can be subdivided as follows:

3:10-14: Consequences for Israel for failing to listen to God's word.

3:15-23: True wisdom is only found in God.

3:37-4:4: Wisdom is the law. Only God knows the way to wisdom and God has given her to Israel in her holy books.

CHAPTERS 4:5 to 5:9: Jerusalem speaks to the exiles

"Fear not, my people...you were sold to the nations not for your destruction...." (4:5-6)

"...Hear, you neighbors of Zion! God has brought great mourning upon me." (4:9)

"...In the ways of God's commandments they did not walk...." (4:13)

"Fear not, my children, call upon God, who will deliver you from oppression at enemy's hands." (4:21)

"With mourning and lament I sent you forth, but God will give you back to me with enduring gladness and joy." (4:23)

"Jerusalem, take off your robes of mourning and misery...." (5:1)

In this beautiful poetic discourse, the writer personifies Jerusalem (4:5-29) as mother of the nation and the exiles. She explains to nearby nations and to her exiled children the reason for the exile (4:9-20) and encourages the exiles to look for an early return.

In 4:30-5:9, Jerusalem is addressed. Imaged as a grieving mother, she is told to remove her "mourning clothes" and replace them with "happy clothes—clothes that speak of splendor and rejoicing." Then Jerusalem is told "to stand up upon the heights" and prepare to watch the return of the exiles who will be led home by God.

Pause: What has helped you the most to deal with times of loss in your life?

CHAPTER 6: Jeremiah's letter condemning idolatry

"As useless as one's broken tools are their gods, set up in their houses...." (v.15)

"Kings they neither curse nor bless." (v.65)

"The better for the just man who has no idols: he shall be far from disgrace." (v.72)

This letter, not by Jeremiah, but attributed to him by its author, is a long sermon attacking the foolishness of idol worship and exhorting the exiles not to be drawn into it.

Pause: What are some of the prevalent idols in our society today? What can help us to reject being seduced by their attractiveness?

Resources

- The Collegeville Bible Commentary
- The Collegeville Bible Handbook
- The Men and Message of the Old Testament