

Jeremiah 22:13

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Woe unto him that buildeth his house by unrighteousness, and his chambers by wrong; that useth his neighbour's service without wages, and giveth him not for his work;

Analysis

Woe unto him that buildeth his house by unrighteousness—the Hebrew hoy boneh beito belo-tsedeq begins with the prophetic hoy (הֹי, 'woe'), a funeral lament pronouncing doom. This targets King Jehoiakim specifically (vv. 18-19 name him). **Unrighteousness** (belo-tsedeq, בֶּלֶא-צְדָק) means 'without righteousness/justice'—his palace was built through injustice. **And his chambers by wrong** (va'aliyotav belo mishpat, וְעַלְיוֹתָיו בֶּלֶא מִשְׁפָט) are upper rooms or chambers, and mishpat (מִשְׁפָט) is justice/judgment. The parallelism intensifies: no justice, no righteousness.

That useth his neighbour's service without wages, and giveth him not for his work—bere'ehu ya'avod chinam ufo'alo lo yitten-lo (בְּרַעַהוּ יַעֲבֹד חִנָּם וְפָעַלְוָה לֹא יִתְנַתֵּן לוֹ). Chinam (חִנָּם, 'without wages/for nothing') indicates forced labor without pay—exploitation condemned throughout Torah (Leviticus 19:13, Deuteronomy 24:14-15). Po'alo (פָּעָלָו, 'his work') is the laborer's wages justly owed. Jehoiakim conscripted workers to build his palace but refused payment—exactly what Pharaoh did to Israel in Egypt (Exodus 5:6-19). The irony: Judah's king imitates Israel's former oppressor. This violates covenant law requiring prompt payment to hired workers (Deuteronomy 24:15). James 5:4 echoes this: 'Behold, the hire of the labourers...which is of you kept back by fraud, crieth.'

Historical Context

This prophecy targets Jehoiakim (609-598 BC), installed as puppet king by Pharaoh Neco after deposing Jehoahaz. Jehoiakim was a brutal tyrant who 'did evil in the sight of the LORD' (2 Kings 23:37). Historical records indicate he built an elaborate palace during his reign, likely using forced labor to avoid paying the massive Egyptian tribute (2 Kings 23:35). His exploitation was particularly egregious given the nation's economic distress from Egyptian taxation. The woe oracle recalls similar denunciations: Habakkuk 2:9-12 condemns building with violence, Micah 3:10 denounces building Zion with blood. Jehoiakim also murdered prophets (Jeremiah 26:20-23) and burned Jeremiah's scroll (Jeremiah 36:23). His death was ignominious: verse 19 prophesies burial 'with the burial of an ass,' likely meaning he was left unburied. The contrast with Josiah (v. 15-16) is stark: Josiah 'judged the cause of the poor and needy,' while Jehoiakim exploited them. Proverbs 14:31 warns: 'He that oppresseth the poor reproacheth his Maker.'

Related Passages

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

Study Questions

1. What does building 'by unrighteousness' reveal about how the means of acquiring wealth and power matter as much to God as the ends?
2. How does Jehoiakim's exploitation of laborers violate the Torah's protections for workers and replicate the Egyptian oppression God had delivered Israel from?
3. What does this woe oracle teach about social justice as integral to covenant faithfulness, not peripheral to spiritual matters?

Interlinear Text

וְאֵלֶּה	בָּנְתָה	לֹא	בַּיּוֹתָה	אֶלְעָזֶר	אֶלְעָזֶר	תְּלִיזֶת
Woe	unto him that buildeth	his house	by	unrighteousness	and his chambers	
H1945	H1129	H1004	H3808	H6664		H5944
לֹא	מְשַׁפֵּט	בְּרִעַת	יַעֲבֵד	מְבָרֵךְ		
by	by wrong	that useth his neighbour's	service	without wages		
H3808	H4941	H7453	H5647	H2600		
וְאֵלֶּה	בְּנֵי	לֹא	יְתִן	לֹא		
him not for his work	by	and giveth				
H6467	H3808	H5414				

Additional Cross-References

James 5:4 (Parallel theme): Behold, the hire of the labourers who have reaped down your fields, which is of you kept back by fraud, crieth: and the cries of them which have reaped are entered into the ears of the Lord of sabaoth.

Leviticus 19:13 (Parallel theme): Thou shalt not defraud thy neighbour, neither rob him: the wages of him that is hired shall not abide with thee all night until the morning.

Micah 3:10 (Parallel theme): They build up Zion with blood, and Jerusalem with iniquity.

Malachi 3:5 (Parallel theme): And I will come near to you to judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, and against the adulterers, and against false swearers, and against those that oppress the hireling in his wages, the widow, and the fatherless, and that turn aside the stranger from his right, and fear not me, saith the LORD of hosts.