

Jeremiah 38:16

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

So Zedekiah the king sware secretly unto Jeremiah, saying, As the LORD liveth, that made us this soul, I will not put thee to death, neither will I give thee into the hand of these men that seek thy life.

Analysis

So Zedekiah the king sware secretly (וַיִּשְׁבַּע בְּסֵתֶר)—The king took an oath secretly, revealing his moral cowardice. He feared his own officials more than God, so he met Jeremiah in private rather than publicly honoring God's prophet. The verb shaba (שָׁבַע, "to swear") invokes the most solemn form of commitment in Hebrew culture.

As the LORD liveth, that made us this soul—Zedekiah swore by Yahweh as the Creator of nephesh (נֶפֶשׁ, "soul/life"). The irony is profound: he invoked the God whose word he continually rejected, and appealed to God's life-giving power while refusing the life-saving counsel God offered through Jeremiah. This oath acknowledges God's sovereignty while planning to disobey His explicit command—a contradiction epitomizing Zedekiah's spiritual schizophrenia.

Historical Context

Oath-taking by God's name was the most binding form of commitment in ancient Israel (Leviticus 19:12). That Zedekiah made this oath "secretly" shows he feared his anti-Jeremiah officials (particularly those who had just thrown the prophet into a cistern) more than he feared breaking covenant with Yahweh.

Related Passages

1 John 4:8 — God is love

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

Study Questions

1. What does it reveal about Zedekiah's character that he swears by God privately but won't obey Him publicly?
2. How do we similarly compartmentalize faith—acknowledging God in some areas while excluding Him from others?
3. Why might Zedekiah fear his officials more than the God by whose name he swears?

Interlinear Text

לֵאמֹר	בִּסְתֵּר	יְרֵמְיָהוּ	אֶל	צִדְקִיָּהוּ	הַמֶּלֶךְ	לֵךְ	וַיִּשָּׁבַע
	secretly	unto Jeremiah	H413	So Zedekiah	the king		sware
	H5643	H3414		H6667	H4428		H7650
הַזֹּאת	נַפְשְׁךָ:	אֶת	לְנוֹ	עָשָׂה	אֲשֶׁר	אֶת	יְהוָה
	thy life		H0	that made	H834	H853	As the LORD
	H5315			H6213			H3068
בְּיָד	אֶתְּנֶנּוּ	וְאִם	אֶמִיתְּךָ	אִם			
	neither will I give		I will not put thee to death				
	H5414		H4191				
נַפְשְׁךָ:	אֶת	מְבַקְשֵׁי	אֲשֶׁר	הָאֵל	לָהּ	הָאֲנָשִׁים	יִם
	thy life		that seek				
	H5315		H1245				

Additional Cross-References

Jeremiah 37:17 (Kingdom): Then Zedekiah the king sent, and took him out: and the king asked him secretly in his house, and said, Is there any word from the LORD? And Jeremiah said, There is: for, said he, thou shalt be delivered into the hand of the king of Babylon.

Isaiah 57:16 (Creation): For I will not contend for ever, neither will I be always wroth: for the spirit should fail before me, and the souls which I have made.

Zechariah 12:1 (References Lord): The burden of the word of the LORD for Israel, saith the LORD, which stretcheth forth the heavens, and layeth the foundation of the earth, and formeth the spirit of man within him.

John 3:2 (Parallel theme): The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.

Jeremiah 34:20 (Parallel theme): I will even give them into the hand of their enemies, and into the hand of them that seek their life: and their dead bodies shall be for meat unto the fowls of the heaven, and to the beasts of the earth.

Numbers 16:22 (Parallel theme): And they fell upon their faces, and said, O God, the God of the spirits of all flesh, shall one man sin, and wilt thou be wroth with all the congregation?

Numbers 27:16 (References Lord): Let the LORD, the God of the spirits of all flesh, set a man over the congregation,