

Jeremiah 40:15

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Then Johanan the son of Kareah spake to Gedaliah in Mizpah secretly, saying, Let me go, I pray thee, and I will slay Ishmael the son of Nethaniah, and no man shall know it: wherefore should he slay thee, that all the Jews which are gathered unto thee should be scattered, and the remnant in Judah perish?

Analysis

Johanan's secret offer to Gedaliah—"Let me go, I pray thee, and I will slay Ishmael the son of Nethaniah, and no man shall know it"—reveals both his genuine concern for the governor and the moral complexity of the situation. Johanan proposed pre-emptive assassination 'in secret' (literally 'and a man will not know'), suggesting he understood that public execution of Ishmael (a man of royal blood, verse 1) without clear proof of conspiracy might destabilize the fragile community. His reasoning—"wherefore should he slay thee, that all the Jews which are gathered unto thee should be scattered abroad, and the remnant in Judah perish?"—demonstrates strategic thinking: Gedaliah's death would shatter the community structure, causing refugees to flee again and the fragile recovery to collapse. Johanan correctly perceived that stability depended on Gedaliah's leadership and authority. However, his proposed solution—secret assassination—raises ethical questions about ends justifying means. Would murdering Ishmael based on credible but not yet acted-upon conspiracy be justice or merely pragmatic elimination of a threat? The passage doesn't explicitly condemn or endorse Johanan's offer, but Gedaliah's refusal (verse 16) suggests he found it morally unacceptable. This tension between preventing harm through morally questionable means versus maintaining ethical standards even at risk remains relevant for believers facing complex threats.

Historical Context

Johanan's offer of secret assassination reflects ancient Near Eastern political realities where eliminating threats to rulers and states through covert action was standard practice. David faced similar situations with Saul (1 Samuel 24, 26) and showed restraint despite opportunity, while other biblical figures (Ehud in Judges 3, Jehu in 2 Kings 9) executed violent actions against rulers at divine command. The proposal to act 'and no man shall know it' indicates Johanan planned to make Ishmael's death appear accidental or attributable to others, avoiding the political complications of Gedaliah being seen as eliminating a rival of royal blood. Johanan's argument about preventing community collapse proved prescient—when Gedaliah was indeed assassinated two months later (41:1-3), the remaining Jews fled to Egypt in fear of Babylonian reprisal (chapters 42-43), exactly as Johanan predicted. This creates historical irony: the harm Johanan sought to prevent through pre-emptive action occurred because Gedaliah refused to act. However, whether Johanan's proposed solution would have succeeded or merely created different problems remains unknowable. The passage invites reflection on whether Gedaliah's moral stance or Johanan's pragmatic calculation was wiser.

Related Passages

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

1 John 4:8 — God is love

Study Questions

1. How should believers weigh preventing genuine future harm against maintaining ethical standards in present action?
2. What does Johanan's accurate prediction of consequences teach about the relationship between political pragmatism and prophetic/moral wisdom?
3. When is pre-emptive action against credible threats justified, and when does it cross into evil that cannot be sanctified by good intentions?

Interlinear Text

וַיֹּאמֶר	בְּשָׂרֶב	גְּדֹלְיהָוּ	בַּתְּרֵבָה
Then Johanan	the son	of Kareah	saying
H3110	H1121	H7143	H559
			H413
			to Gedaliah
			H1436
			secretly
			H5643
אָתָּה	יְכֹהֶן	בְּמִצְפָּה	אָתָּה
אָתָּה	לְאָמֵר	לְאָמֵר	אָתָּה
in Mizpah	saying	H1980	I pray thee and I will slay
H4709	H559	H4994	H5221
			H853
לֹא	יְדַעַת	אָתָּה	לֹא
Ishmael	the son	of Nethaniah	and no man
H3458	H1121	H5418	H376
			H3808
			shall know
			H4100
			H3045
כָּל	יְנַפְּצָה	בְּפָשָׁע	כָּל
I pray thee and I will slay	H5221	H5315	unto thee should be scattered
			H6327
			H3605
שְׁאַר יִתְּהֻדָּה	וְאָבֶד הַיּוֹדֵה	בְּגַם־בָּאֵם	שְׁאַר יִתְּהֻדָּה
thee that all the Jews	which are gathered	H413	and the remnant
H3064	H6908	H6	H7611
וְהַיְתָה:			
in Judah			
H3063			

Additional Cross-References

1 Samuel 26:8 (Prayer): Then said Abishai to David, God hath delivered thine enemy into thine hand this day: now therefore let me smite him, I pray thee, with the spear even to the earth at once, and I will not smite him the second time.

2 Samuel 21:17 (Parallel theme): But Abishai the son of Zeruiah succoured him, and smote the Philistine, and killed him. Then the men of David sware unto him, saying, Thou shalt go no more out with us to battle, that thou quench not the light of Israel.

