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Reviewing the cities' role in Jeremiah 29 for missional theology and praxis in a glocal context

Author:
Takalani A. Muswubi[1]

Affiliation:
[1]School of Christian Ministry and Leadership, Department of Missiology, Faculty of Theology, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Takalani Muswubi,
aaron.muswubi@nwu.ac.za

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This article reviews the cities' role in Jeremiah 29 for missional theology and praxis within a glocal context. Glocalisation is a relatively recent term of the 21st century which prominence grew since the late 1980s through increased travel, trade, television, information, satellite technologies, and largely by the widespread use of the global lingua franca, including the English language. While local globalisation enables locally targeted brands, products, and services to enter the global arena, global localisation concurrently permits globally targeted brands, products, and services to penetrate local settings. These two principal processes render glocalisation a distinct phenomenon, whereby people, irrespective of geographical constraints, are gradually sharing a wide array of global products, services, values, practices, and tastes. Throughout this process, various academic disciplines and research fields have ascribed different meanings to the concept; nonetheless, it remains an elusive term to define. Within this context, this article examines the role of the city in Jeremiah 29 to address the main question: What insights can we glean from Jeremiah 29 that might provide impetus for a missional theology and praxis agenda regarding cities' role in a glocal context? In addressing this question, this discussion focuses on three aspects: the conception; misconception; and reception of Jeremiah 29 by God's people.

Contribution: This article contributes by uncovering biblical precepts and guidelines that are essential for offering missional incentives and impetus regarding cities' role. These insights enable us to both acknowledge (conceive and reflect on) and appreciate (receive and apply) the role that God has ascribed to cities. In doing so, this article not only cautions against diverse misconceptions regarding cities' role but also encourages a reshaping of the missional theology and praxis agenda of God's people, both within and outside the church.

Keywords: Jeremiah 29; urban mission; missional theology; missional praxis; glocalisation; glocal context.

Introduction

Glocalisation is a new term or 'slogan' of the 21st century that has intensified since the late 1980s (cf. Giulianotti 2012:433). It has been driven by developments in travel, trade, television, information, and satellite technologies, and largely by the global lingua franca, including the English language. While local globalisation enables locally targeted brands, products, and services to enter the global arena, global localisation concurrently permits globally targeted brands, products, and services to reach local settings. These two primary processes render glocalisation a distinct phenomenon whereby people everywhere, despite the constraints of place, distance, and borders, are gradually sharing a wide range of global products, services, values, practices, and tastes (Muswubi 2017; cf. Khondker 2004:3; Robertson 1992:28ff.). In this context, this article reviews the role of the city in Jeremiah 29 to address the main question: What insight do we uncover from Jeremiah 29 that can serve as an impetus for a missional theology and praxis agenda regarding cities' role in a glocal context? In answering this question, the article seeks to uncover the biblical precepts and guidelines necessary to provide missional incentives and impetus, assisting us in both acknowledging (conceiving and reflecting on) and appreciating (receiving and applying) the role that God has assigned to cities. This role not only cautions against diverse misconceptions but also encourages us to reshape the missional theology and praxis agenda for God's people, both within and outside the church. To this end, the article discusses three aspects: the conception (direction); misconception (misdirection); and reception (redirection) of Jeremiah 29 by God's people.

The conception of the role of the city in the light of the letter: Jeremiah 29

In Jeremiah 29:4–7, the essence of God's message is clearly captured. Through Jeremiah, God addressed his people, the Jews, both locally (in Jerusalem) and globally (among the Babylonian exiles

and beyond). The instruction was for them to settle in the city of Babylon until the final hour of deliverance after 70 years – the fullness of time. The conception and acceptance of God's message was that he expected his people to realise his plan, purpose, and promises of restoration. Acceptance and submission to the Babylonian deportation strategy were seen as signs of their obedience to God's message (cf. Jr 27:11, 17; 28:14, 15ff.; 29:15ff., 30ff.). This section discusses the biblical precepts and guidelines that enable God's people not only to conceive, acknowledge, and reflect on the role God assigned to cities, but also to receive, appreciate, and to apply these principles to reshape the missional theology and praxis of God's people concerning cities, wherever and whenever they may be found.

The city is a signpost of God's judgement

The city itself serves as a signpost of God's judgement. In Jeremiah 29:4, the Almighty God of Israel reveals to the Jewish exiles that he was responsible for bringing them into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. God chose Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon as his instruments to punish Judah and the surrounding nations for 70 years, as proclaimed by Jeremiah (cf. Jr 25:8–11, 27; 29:11). Before him, Isaiah had depicted Babylon as a centre for foreigners, a jewel among kingdoms, and a queen among nations (cf. Is 13:14, 19; 39:5–7; 47:5). Habakkuk, a contemporary of Jeremiah, initially questioned God's chosen instrument of punishment (cf. Hab 1:6, 12) but later acknowledged it, for God revealed himself to Habakkuk as a deity with unlimited control over the world and its events, free to employ even Babylon to punish sins. Nevertheless, in God's right time, even Babylon would be held accountable for its sins (cf. Hab 3). Against this background, Babylon came to symbolise God's warning and judgement against sin in biblical times. In several passages – including Zechariah 5:5–11 and Revelation 17:2, 5, and 18 – Babylon is portrayed as an embodiment of evil that brings suffering upon God's people. Jeremiah makes it clear in Jeremiah 5:1, and further, that the Holy and Almighty God could save and protect the sinful city of Jerusalem from punishment if its inhabitants repented and obeyed. The emphasis of Jeremiah's message is on the repentant and obedient hearts of God's people, whether they reside in Babylon or Jerusalem, rather than on the cities themselves. In other words, the Holy City and Holy Temple could not shield unholy and disobedient people. Daniel, along with other exiles, was also influenced by Jeremiah's prophecy concerning God's judgement on the nations – including Babylon – and by Jeremiah's letters before and during the exile (cf. Dn 1:1; 9:1; Jr 1:5; 46–51). Babylon's powerful kings, such as Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar, honoured God as sovereign over all gods and nations, thereby influencing those under their dominion to do the same (cf. Dn 2:47; 3:29; 4:34ff.; 5:18ff.; 6:26ff.).

The city is a centre of the realisation of God's gracious promises

In Jeremiah 29:10–11, God reveals his presence, purpose, and promises to the Jewish exiles, assuring them of his gracious companionship. On this basis, the Jewish exiles are urged to do two things during God's appointed, yet limited, period. Firstly, they should strive to secure peace and prosperity in the city, thereby creating a politically stable and economically flourishing environment in which God's gracious presence, purpose, and promise are and should be realised. Secondly, they are called to pray to God – interceding on the city's behalf and trusting that he will guide them in the city (Jr 29:7, 12–13).

Furthermore, in Jeremiah 29:10–11, God warns his people not to be misled by the deceptive words of false prophets and diviners, who instil in them the false hope of a speedy, 2-year return from exile, contrary to God's plan or purpose. These false prophets and diviners spoke merely to echo what people wished to hear, reflecting common customs, traditions, and fashions. In Jeremiah 29:13–14, God declares that he will personally gather and deliver them from wherever they may be among the nations, demonstrating his unwavering consistency with himself and his purpose (cf. Calvin 1851:428). Accordingly, he urges his people not only to surrender themselves to him and his will, but also to cultivate a firm, heartfelt conviction and to remain fully committed with full integrity to him and his word and mission in the city.

The city is an intercultural centre

Like Genesis 1:26–28, Jeremiah 29:5–6 embodies an aspect of the cultural mandate, entailing humanity's freedom to shape and mould the world in which they live. In this passage, God commanded the Jewish exiles to regard the city of Babylon as their home and that of their children, and to multiply there rather than decline. It is implied in Jeremiah 29:5–7 that raising families in exile was to be an act of faith. Their familial and ethnic bonds were to be founded on, shaped by, and influenced by God's will, serving as a witness to the power of the Almighty God of Israel, who reigns above all nations, including Babylon (cf. Dt 14:1, 2; Is 43:10).

Despite their circumstances, the Jewish exiles were called to obey God's will, which meant singing the Lord's songs in Babylon without objecting, as in asking, 'How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?' (cf. Ps 137:4; Greenway 1978:30). In this context, Greenway (1978:33) observes that 'God wants His witness in the key centres of culture, commerce, politics, and communication, and without exception these centres are the great cities'. Although most Jewish exiles, like Shemaiah, were troubled by the prospect of raising a family in the hostile environment of Babylon, the family structures of God's people stood as visible signs of their powerful witness within the city (cf. Bakke 1987:173). From the God-given cultural mandate given at creation to build the city, monogamous family values provided the Jewish exiles with an incentive to transform Babylon (Conn 1997).

The sharing and exchange of culture facilitated the transmission of values to other communities (cf. Bosch 1991:456), positioning Babylon as an intercultural centre.

According to Bakke (1987):

> There is one aspect of the form of cities which Mumford regards as unique. Cities contain and transmit cultures; by bringing together all the separate parts (as racial groups find themselves living side by side) they enable direct relationships that become engines and catalysts of cultural change. (p. 37)

Here, culture is defined as an 'organized system of knowledge and belief whereby a people structure their experience and perceptions, formulate acts, and choose between alternatives' (cf. Keesing 1981:68). Greenway and Monsma (1989:213ff.) and Bakke (1987:71) illustrate how culture was transmitted by the Jewish exiles in Babylon, in accordance with God's command as conveyed through Jeremiah's letters (cf. Jr 29:5–7).

Bakke (1987) further explains that:

> Daniel was a Jewish exile in Babylon and was selected by Nebuchadnezzars court to be trained as a court official. He was taught to read and write the Babylonian language (Dan 1:4) and to these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds (Dan 1:17). (p. 71)

Daniel moved into Babylon, learned its language and culture, and became a leading political influence in the king's court, but remained true to the God of Israel and 'resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine' (Dn 1:8). This was an issue of faith.

The city is a political and economic centre

In Jeremiah 29:7, Babylon is depicted as God's domain – a place where he not only punished the Jews but also enabled their prosperity, for the city's prosperity ultimately belonged to God rather than to the city itself (cf. Ps 24:1–2; 50:10–12; Job 41:11; Hg 2:8). For their own benefit, the Jewish exiles were instructed to 'exert themselves to the utmost' (cf. Calvin 1851:420) in pursuing and working for the city's political security and economic prosperity, particularly by praying on its behalf.

From Jeremiah 29:6, we can infer that the Jewish exiles, like other exiles, although not completely free to act as they pleased, enjoyed relative freedom of movement. They were permitted to build houses, marry (and allow their children and grandchildren to marry), cultivate the soil, trade, and increase in number. Deist and Le Roux (1987) state that,

> In each colony the elders came to the fore and provided the leadership according to ancient custom. It would also seem that some of the exiles grew very wealthy in the course of time. (p. 132)

It should be noted that the Jewish exiles received God's word in various ways through Jeremiah's letters. In Daniel 1:3–4, the academic training of young men of royal or noble blood was sponsored so that they could serve in Nebuchadnezzar's palace and kingdom. This arrangement was not only a political, economic, and socio-religious benefit for the individual learner, but also for his family, tribe, and nation in Babylon and beyond.

The entire book of Daniel attests to the gifted young men who demonstrated leadership potential in government. They operated within the framework of Babylonian policies on academic training and used their prominent positions in government for the benefit of God's people and his kingdom. Even Nebuchadnezzar praised the God of the Jews and decreed that no one was allowed to speak evil against him before the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates, and all provincial officials, as well as those assembled as families, political parties, or ethnic groups at several gatherings in the plain of Dura (cf. Dn 3:28–30; 2:46–48; 4:34–37).

The city is a socio-religious centre

Exile was not to be regarded as 'the graveyard of Israel's faith', but rather as a period 'of great spirituality' (cf. Bright 1953:133). Deist and Le Roux (1987) affirm this view, stating,

> The existence of colonies created favourable circumstances for the exiles to preserve their religious traditions, to reflect on the future and to work out their programmes of reconstruction in the finest detail. (p. 132)

Hinson (1990) further states that,

> Centres were needed among the exiles where the traditions of the nation could be discussed, the records preserved. The first synagogues were probably built at this time, and the first Sabbath gatherings of the Jews held in them. This was a new element in the religious life of Israel, and it was to play a very important part in the lives of the Jews in the time of Christ. (p. 156)

In Babylon, laws, psalms, the life, and prophetic teachings, as well as other historical records were remembered and transmitted both orally and eventually compiled into the more orderly, collected, and edited biblical books known today (Bright 1953:133; Hinson 1990:156). A socio-religious revival also took place among the Jews during their captivity in Babylon. Deist and Vorster (1986) argue that,

> Since the Zadokites belonged to the cream of the nation; they were taken away into exile in 597 and 586 B.C. In Babylonia they pooled their resources, gradually forming a power bloc and so regaining control over the people; they began to make plans for the restoration of the temple cult and the priesthood. In these difficult times the Zadokites' ideals found a remarkable expression in the writings of Ezekiel, a priest who was also a prophet. It is uncertain whether he was a Zadokite himself, but there is no doubt that the Zadokites' temple theology played a major role in his work. Ezekiel's accusations against the priests in Jerusalem were based mainly on the fact that they were tolerating all sorts of heathen practices there – which was the very reason why he saw the glory of Yahweh leave the Temple (10:18). All had not been lost, however. God's presence would return, but only if the people took utterly seriously the idea of the holiness of the cult and of the priesthood (cf, e.g. 11:17–21). Ezekiel's main concerns were the restoration of the true cult and the reorganisation of the legitimate (Zadokite) priesthood. His blueprint for reform is contained in Ezekiel 40–48. (p. 162)

Many scholars have noted that the exile provided a new context in which the history of Israel was reinterpreted. In particular, there was the growing awareness that God's judgement on Judah, especially the kings of Judah, was just (cf. Lm 4:6; Ezk 18). Even the actions of the pious Josiah were re-evaluated, as shown by comparisons between 2 Kings 23:26–27 and 2 Chronicles 20–25. This reappraisal confirmed Jeremiah's earlier proclamation that Josiah's reforms alone were insufficient to make the Jews the people of God. In Jeremiah 7:21–23, Jeremiah condemns mere external observance of cultic law and calls for repentance from the heart (cf. Jr 4:3–4, 14; Dt 10:16; Rm 2:25–29). The growing awareness of God's just judgement against Judah compelled the religious leaders to accept that the Jews as a nation had failed to adhere to God's covenant laws, leading them to conclude that, because they themselves were responsible for their own exile, each one of them should repent (cf. Ez 18:1ff.). Notably, Ezekiel insisted that the exiles should realise that Judah was being punished for its own sins, and not for the sins of its ancestors.

While some historians argue that the so-called 'Dark Age' – from AD 476 to 1453 – was a period during which biblical Christianity experienced a prolonged decline for almost 1000 years (Deist & Le Roux 1987:132), the period of the Jewish exile in Babylon should not be seen as 'the graveyard of Israel's faith'. As Greenway and Monsma (1989) observes:

> Both flexible and productive, these networks can be used as an avenue for the spread of the gospel. People tend to trust those who are members of their networks for information about where to find work, medical help, or good housing at a reasonable price. They also lean on network members for advice on deeper needs, such as whom to marry, how to deal with marital problems, and how to handle depression. Among these deeper needs is one's religious allegiance. When people recommend Jesus Christ to other members of their networks, it is a potent endorsement. (p. 123)

Cities such as Babylon were socio-religious centres of their times. Skilled and exiled nobles were placed and elevated to positions of authority in Babylon as a means of preventing potential leaders from leading future insurrections, winning their and their nation's loyalty, and harnessing international leadership potential for the benefit of the kingdom of Babylonia (2 Ki 24:15ff.; 25:18ff., 27ff.; Dn 1:3ff.; Bromiley 1986:975; Deist & Le Roux 1987:132).

The city is an integration and network centre of people groups

Isaiah predicted that Babylon would be a centre for foreigners, a jewel among kingdoms, and a queen of nations (cf. Is 13:14, 19; 47:5). Indeed, Babylon evolved into an integration hub where people were united by family ties, nations by political bonds, and languages by ethnic connections. This integration occurred under the organised leadership of satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates, and other provincial officials (cf. Dn 3:1–6). Moreover, the city of Babylon became home to the organised leadership of exiles from many countries, including Judah, Philistia, Phoenicia, Asia Minor, Elam, Media, and Persia (cf. Bromiley 1986:388, 975).

The city is a bridge for God's promised plan or purpose

From Jeremiah 29:11, God bestowed hope upon the Jewish exiles in Babylon – an expectation (cf. Matthew Henry 1961:989) or an 'expected end' (Taetsch 1965:235). This expected end referred to the 'end of days' or the 'Messianic era', around which the hopes of Israel were centred (cf. Gn 49:18; 1 Sm 2:10; Ps 14:7; Ml 3:1). By grace, God promised not only to dwell among them forever despite their sins (cf. Ezk 8–10; 43:1–12) but also to use them as witnesses to all the peoples of the earth for both the divided tribes of Israel and the Gentiles (cf. Ps 47:1; 67:2; 96:3; 105:1; 117:1) by drawing them to Jerusalem, where the temple, as the manifestation of Yahweh's throne and glory, served as a missionary incentive (cf. 1 Ki 8:41–43; Is 2:2–3; Jr 14:21; Ezk 48:35). Clearly, as foretold in the book of Samuel (2 Sm 7:11, 12, 16, 19) and even by Zechariah (8:20–23; 12:10; 13:1; 14:8ff.), Jerusalem was envisioned as a strategic centre for the reintegration of nations in the glorious expectation of Jesus Christ.

Addressing misconceptions regarding the role of city in Jeremiah 29

Factors accounting for the Jews' disobedience to God's message

Jeremiah 29:5–7 implies that God calls his people not only to reside and multiply in Babylon with their children as their home, and that they multiply there until the appointed period of 70 years has elapsed, but also to pray for and pursue peace and well-being for Babylon in order that God's purpose for them may be fulfilled. Both the Jews in Jerusalem and those in Babylon misunderstood and consequently disobeyed God's command in Jeremiah 29:5–7. Various factors contributed to their disobedience – one of which was the dominance of false theologies – some of which are discussed below.

The false prophecies and theologies uncovered in Jeremiah 29 and around that time

Jeremiah 29:1–14 calls upon the Jews to discern that Babylon and its deportation plan are not to be regarded as a tragedy in which they are merely refugees and victims, but rather as God's call for his people to engage in his mission. The essence of this message should be understood within the full, rich, and holistic concept of 'shalom' in both its vertical and horizontal dimensions (cf. Greenway 2007:45). 'Shalom' denotes a comprehensive state of well-being, encompassing four fundamental relationships: the most important being the right relationship with God, which in turn shapes one's relationship with oneself, with others, and with nature (Van der Walt 1997:14–17, 162).

The false prophets misunderstood God's plan and message for them: Jeremiah 29:1–14 forms part of the letter's structure.

Jeremiah 29 is a redacted composite of several letters (cf. Hill & Walton 1991:327), which include the following: (1) the initial letter written by Jeremiah from Jerusalem to the Jewish exiles in Babylon (cf. Jr 29:1–23); (2) letters in response to this initial letter, composed in Babylon by Shemaiah, who responds to Jeremiah's letter (cf. Jr 29:5, 6, 28) by addressing everyone in Jerusalem, including the priests – Zephaniah in particular and even asserts that Jeremiah should be imprisoned because, in his view, Jeremiah is mad for claiming to be God's prophet. He therefore rejects Jeremiah's or God's message (cf. Jr 29:24–29). At that time, Jeremiah himself appeared before conspirators in Jerusalem; he wore an ox yoke around his neck and instructed them to submit to the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar (cf. Jr 27:2–11); and (3) in response to Shemaiah's letter, Jeremiah composed a further letter from Jerusalem to all the Jewish exiles in Babylon, indicating the fate that awaited those who endorsed Shemaiah's false prophecy (Jr 29:30ff.). As part of the initial letter, Jeremiah 29:1–14 is followed by a prediction of the fate that would befall the Jews in Babylon if they disobeyed God's will. They are particularly warned to disregard the lying prophets, including figures such as Ahab and Zedekiah, who inflame the exiles with promises of immediate release and whose false predictions are based on the people's rebellion against God's will. Jeremiah's letter ultimately encourages the exiles to prepare for a long stay (cf. Jr 29:15–23). Jeremiah 29:1–14 plays a central role, because it encapsulates the essence of God's command.

The Jewish's wrong view of God's covenant

Many of Jeremiah's Jewish contemporaries mistakenly regarded God's covenant blessings and promises concerning the Davidic dynasty, the city of Jerusalem, and the temple as eternal, unconditional, and inviolable despite disobedience (sin) (cf. Deist & Le Roux 1987:129). They believed that Yahweh had established an everlasting covenant with David's dynasty, ensuring his perpetual presence in Jerusalem and its temple. Jeremiah countered this theology by proclaiming that only obedience to God's covenant laws would lead to the realisation of his blessings and promises, while disobedience would incur punishment. In this regard, Jeremiah cautioned against mere outward observance of the Mosaic laws, as exemplified in Josiah's reforms (cf. Jr 7:1–22; 26:1–6).

They were against the Babylonian deportation strategy

The Babylonian deportation strategy involved the deporting of the upper echelons of society, including the political, religious, and intellectual leaders, and their relocation to Babylon. This strategy served to eliminate potential leaders of future uprisings and to secure their loyalty (2 Ki 24:15–17; 25:18–19, 27–30; Deist & Le Roux 1987:133). For the kingdom of Babylonia, it was also an investment in its own leadership potential (Dn 1:3–4), as these leaders were elevated to positions of authority. The deportation of prominent people from Jerusalem to Babylon in 597 BC confirmed Jeremiah's prophecy, although his Jewish hearers perceived the event differently. This deportation created a new context in which Israel's history was reinterpreted to justify God's judgement on Judah (cf. Bosman & Loader 1988:69–70). According to Jeremiah's hearers, Jerusalem had withstood foreign powers for over 400 years, and because the city had not been razed, its people been slaughtered, or the temple destroyed, religious life continued as usual. Many still hoped for a perpetual Davidic dynasty, and a spirit of optimism prevailed, with the conviction growing that the Babylonian victory would be short-lived (cf. Jr 10:18; 13:19; Deist & Vorster 1986:161).

They misread and misunderstood God's long-suffering in their immediate history

They misread and misunderstood God's long-suffering in Josiah's reign (622–609 BC): When the Assyrians under Sennacherib advanced upon Jerusalem in 701 BC with the intent to destroy it, King Hezekiah humbled himself before Yahweh and consequently received and witnessed the fulfilment of a promise of deliverance. Following the murder of King Amon, the grandson of Hezekiah, the citizens ensured that his son, Josiah, acceded to the throne, thereby continuing David's lineage. Prophets such as Jeremiah and Zephaniah delivered their messages during the religious reformation of the pious King Josiah (622–609 BC) at a time when the Assyrian Empire was in decline (cf. 2 Ki 22–23; 2 Chr 34–35; Bosman & Loader 1988:68). Jeremiah received his prophetic calling about 5 years after Josiah's religious reforms, around 627–626 BC, and he hailed from a priestly family in Anathoth, a town situated about 5 km north of Jerusalem (cf. Bright 1953:106; Smit 1998:58; Von Rad 1968:161). One of Jeremiah's main messages during this period was that God required his people to possess obedient, circumcised, and renewed hearts – fully committed to the covenant relationship with him (cf. Jr 4:14; 7:1ff; 31:1ff.; also Helberg 1988:222; Bright 1953:107ff.; Smit 1998:66).

They misunderstood God's long-suffering in Jehoiakim's reign (609–598 BC): After King Josiah's death, the Jews opted for Jehoahaz because he was anti-Egyptian. However, Neco II quickly discerned this inclination and promptly removed him from the throne, installing Eliakim, also known as Jehoiakim (609–598 BC), as king. Jehoiakim was despised by the Jews for allocating funds to construct a new, grander palace, for employing forced labour, and for imposing heavy taxes (cf. 2 Ki 23:31, 36; Jr 22:13–14; cf. also Deist & Le Roux 1987:111). In 605 BC, Jehoiakim – then an Egyptian vassal – was confronted with the desperate choice of remaining loyal to Egypt or aligning with Babylon (Bright 1953:110). That same year, Nebuchadnezzar led the Babylonian army to battle against the Egyptians at Carchemish, inflicting a severe defeat on Jehoiakim and precipitating the deportation of key figures in 597 BC. Following his death, his son Jehoiachin reigned for only 3 months and 10 days (cf. 2 Chr 36:9). Distrusting him, the Babylonians dispatched an army against Jerusalem. Facing overwhelming force, Jehoiachin surrendered to Nebuchadnezzar, who then plundered the royal palace and the temple, deporting the king, his mother, the princes, and other officials, along with thousands of soldiers and artisans. These deportees represented the cream

of the population (Jr 24:5), while Nebuchadnezzar left only the lower classes behind. He acknowledged the Davidic dynasty by appointing Zedekiah as king (cf. Jr 46:2; Hinson 1990:142). The exilic interpretation of events insisted on the inviolability of the covenant – that the dynasty, city, and temple were to remain intact – despite Jeremiah's call to repentance (cf. Bosman & Loader 1988:71).

Their reading of history aggravated Zedekiah's inconsistent foreign relations: King Zedekiah, also known as Mattaniah (597–586 BC), inherited a divided nation from the reigns of Josiah (622–609 BC) and Jehoiakim (609–598). One faction believed that Judah should accept Babylonian rule, while another contended that Egypt could assist in breaking free (cf. Deist & Le Roux 1987:111). Judah's international policies were divided and continually changing (Hinson 1990:149). The independence and nationalist splendour of the Josianic era had been irretrievably lost, and Judah experienced humiliation and poverty through the imposition of tributes and heavy taxes by Egypt. The collapse of Josiah's reforms precipitated a resurgence of pagan cults and heathen practices, accompanied by a deterioration in public morals (e.g. Jr 7:16ff.; Ezk. 8; Bright 1953:110). The nation clung to a misguided nationalist theology that upheld the unconditional inviolability of the dynasty, city, and temple, while prophets and priests repeatedly assured the people of Yahweh's eternal protection (cf. Deist & Le Roux 1987:111).

Their misreading of history and the theology of the majority in Jerusalem: The anti-Babylonian prophets endeared themselves to the Jews by proclaiming the people's dreams and aspirations as though they were the Lord's own oracles (Taetsch 1965:234). The dream of a swift deliverance and return from exile circulated widely in both public and private spheres – permeating daily conversations in courts, marketplaces, and streets in Jerusalem – and inspired the Jewish exiles to mount revolts against Babylon (cf. Jr 28; 29:8–9; 21–22; Deist & Le Roux 1987:118). They refused to surrender to Nebuchadnezzar, remaining loyal to King Hophra of Egypt, and even allied themselves with the Ammonites in revolt against Babylon (cf. 2 Ki 25:1; Jr 37:1–8; 38:2, 17ff.; Ezk 21:18–24). They hoped that the Egyptians would assist them in resisting Babylonian rule (cf. Jr 34:8–11; 37:5). In their defiance, they allowed Jeremiah to be mistreated and imprisoned as he proclaimed God's word to the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem and foretold the downfall of the prophets exemplified by Ahab and Zedekiah in Babylon and by Hananiah in Jerusalem. Around 589 BC, out of fear, Zedekiah and his officials temporarily obeyed Jeremiah's message (cf. Jr 37:15ff.; 38:4ff., 19, 24ff.). However, their persistent disobedience to God culminated in the deportation of 586 BC, thereby bringing an end to the Davidic dynasty, the temple, and the city.

Their past misreading led them to believe that God is domesticated to the nation or land: The discussion above demonstrates that it was erroneous to believe that God could be confined exclusively to the Jewish nation and its land or domesticated to the city and temple in Jerusalem. God reminded his people that they were indeed his treasured possessions, and that their faith should reside not in the city and temple, but in him (Brown 1993:296). In fact, it was God's ultimate purpose to bless all peoples through Abraham (Gn 12:3c) so that all people, whether Israelites or non-Israelites, who: (1) had faith in and obeyed God and his word (cf. Lv 17:8; 19:34; Nm 15:14; 19:10; Dt 7:6; 26:12); and (2) were willing to be circumcised, would be regarded as Abraham's children (cf. Ex 12:48ff.; Is 56:3, 6; Dt 10:18ff.; 23:7ff.; Ml 3:5). God's grace and compassion extended beyond Israel to nations such as Nineveh, as Jonah came to realise (Jn 4:2). God's election of Israel had significant implications for its socio-economic and political relationships (Am 3:2; 5:11; 8:6).

Their misreading of history blinded them to ignore, if not reject to see their own sins: The unrest and theological crisis were stoked by false prophets, conspirators, and the Jewish masses in both Jerusalem and Babylon. They campaigned for the swift release of Jewish captives or slaves in Babylon. In that time of unrest and theological crisis, they regarded the Babylonian deportation and exile as unjust. Ironically, in Jerusalem, Jews enslaved their fellow Jews – even amidst widespread unrest throughout the Babylonian empire, particularly between 595 and 588 BC (Jr 27:2; 28:1). They failed to recognise that any form of social injustice, including slavery, was wrong, especially when they reversed their stance on the issue (Jr 34:8–11). Jeremiah urged King Zedekiah to release the Hebrew slaves, insisting that no Jew should hold another in bondage (Jr 34:8–10). Because God had promised his people future salvation and restoration (Jr 29:10–14, especially in chapter 30–31), Zedekiah, his officials, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem were compelled to repent and embrace God's word and promises by freeing the Hebrew slaves. Jeremiah's message in Jeremiah 29:10–14 must be understood within the broader context of his message concerning the future restoration and salvation of God's people (Jr 30–31). However, since the Jews neither heeded Jeremiah's message nor repented of their sins, God made it clear that he would use Babylon as an instrument to confront them (Jr 21:3–7).

The reception of the cities' role in Jeremiah 29

For God's people to acknowledge, conceive, and reflect on his message through Jeremiah's letter, they are also expected to appreciate, receive, and apply it in Babylon. There is a missional role that God has bestowed upon cities, including Babylon. In general, through the cities God not only reshapes the conception of missional theology and praxis within the faith and covenant community but also warns against the misconceptions that can arise. This article discusses two aspects: the conception (or direction), and the misconception (or misdirection) regarding the role that God has assigned to cities (including Babylon). In the following section, the article explores the receptive message that God expects his people to obey as their missional direction.

Missional reception and application of God's message through Jeremiah 29 in Babylon

The conception of God's mission is made clear in Jeremiah 29. God's people are taught to understand his mission in relation to their exile in Babylon – as discussed in the second sub-section – and to recognise the misconceptions fostered by false prophecies and the false hope propagated by false prophets, as outlined in the third sub-section. This understanding enables us not only to appreciate and receive his message but also to obey and apply it wherever we live, as demonstrated hereafter.

God's mission is constant despite location

> … of the city to which I have carried you into exile. (Jr 29:4, 7 – New International Version [NIV])

God's people are urged to manifest his mission in their present location. This mission becomes intelligible when the present (cf. Jr 29:5–7) is read considering the past (Dt 20:5–7; 28:30) and with a view of the future (Is 65:21–23). The mission manifested through God's presence, purpose, and promises made in the past (including in the Promised Land, Canaan), was carried out during the exile in Babylon (Jr 29:4, 7) and is promised to be restored in the future after their return from exile as he promised (Jr 29:11). Yahweh's mission remains constant, regardless of time (past, present, or future) or place (Canaan, Babylon or elsewhere); thus, God always works everywhere for his people's salvation and restoration. He revealed himself not only in the Promised Land, Canaan but also in the foreign land of Babylon during exile, and will ultimately manifest in the future Promised Land, the New Earth. In this regard, God's people are urged to bear witness to Yahweh and his mission in their present location in Babylon by seeking the peace and prosperity of the city and by praying for their enemies (cf. Mt 5:43–48; Rm 12:21; Tt 3:1–2; 1 Pt 2:18; Volz 1928:269; Bratcher 2009:362).

It starts with a missional heart, pray to the Lord for it (Jr 29:13 [NIV]):

> You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

God's people are called and expected to seek Yahweh and his blessings (Jr 29:7, 13). God is not only the reason behind their exile in Babylon because of his punishment for their sins, but also the One who remains in control of Babylon as part of his creation – with Nebuchadnezzar serving as his agent to fulfil his purposes (cf. Jr. 29:4, 7; Mackay 2004:162). In this way, Jeremiah 29 is intended to encourage God's people to live prayerfully and missionally in God's presence [*Omni Dei*], that is, living in the presence with the purpose and promises of God even in the city of Babylon. Recognising that it is his doing, his mission, his presence, purpose, and promises, they are called to engage in introspection and cultivate a personal relationship with him. This requires them not only to adjust their lives and adapt to their given context but also to embrace and enjoy God's mission in their specific situation and circumstance, learning to endure and endorse it in Babylon (Clements 1988:173; Mashau 2019:240ff.).

It continues with missional agenda to seek peace and prosperity of the city (Jr 29:7 [NIV]):

> …. because if it prospers, you too will.

Several reasons have been put forward to explain God's command for his people to 'seek the peace and prosperity'. These include seven motivations, introduced by the indicator 'because' [כִּי]. Firstly, transforming the evil, conflict-ridden city into one characterised by blessing, welfare, and peace will benefit God's people (Jr 29:7b). Secondly, God warns his people not to be swayed by the deceptive words of prophets and diviners during times of national crisis (Jr 29:8ff., 15; Overholt 1970; Taetsch 1965:1–12). Thirdly, the false prophets and diviners are not God-sent and must therefore be silenced and countered by his word (Jr 23:23ff.; 29:9; Brueggemann 1998:258). Fourthly, God's people are to understand that they will return from exile after 70 years and not two years (Jr. 29:10). Fifthly, God has good plans for his people (Jr 29:11ff). Sixthly, God's people are expected to seek him with all their heart (Jr. 29:13ff.); and lastly, Yahweh will raise up prophets in Babylon to rescue them (Jr 29:15ff.).

Conclusion

God's people had enjoyed a comfortable existence in Jerusalem; however, in the first year of their deportation, they experienced a terrible time in Babylon – a period marked by uncertainty, humiliation, torture, adjustment, fear, suffering, depression, and tension among other things (Perdue 2005:99). In this context, Jeremiah 29, on the one hand, calls upon God's people to change their mindset so that, above all, they may recognise Yahweh and his mission even in unfamiliar places. Through God and his word, they are meant to see themselves as sinners who deserve this deposition as punishment for disobeying him, and they were thus expected to repent. On the other hand, Jeremiah 29 exhorts God's people not only to acknowledge, conceive, and reflect on God's missional blessings, that is, his presence, purpose, and promises but also to appreciate, receive, and apply these blessings by adopting them as their divinely appointed mission as they adjust and adapt their lives in exile in Babylon. They are warned against the serious misconceptions and false hope propagated by false prophets, whose deceptive words in times of national crisis (Jr 29:8ff., 15; Overholt 1970; Taetsch 1965:1–12) must be silenced and countered by God's word (Jr 23:23ff.; 29:9; Brueggemann 1998:258).

It is in this context that this article reviews the role of the city in Jeremiah 29 to address the main question: What insight do we uncover from Jeremiah 29 that will serve as impetus for a missional theology and praxis agenda regarding cities' role in a glocal context? In answering this question, the article uncovers biblical precepts and guidelines that are necessary to provide missional incentives and impetus, encouraging us to reshape the missional theology and praxis agenda regarding cities' role of God's people both within and outside

the church. This approach further assists God's people, as individual Christians and as a corporate church, not only to acknowledge, conceive, and reflect on but also to appreciate, receive, and apply the role that God has always assigned to cities everywhere on this earth.

This article demonstrates that Yahweh's mission remains constant despite changes in time (past, present, and future) and location (Canaan, Babylon or elsewhere); indeed, God always works everywhere for his people's salvation and restoration. His people are urged to conduct their God-sent missional witness in their present location. This mission becomes clear when the immediate message (cf. Jr 29:5–7) is read considering the past (Dt 20:5–7; 28:30) and with a view to the future (Is 65:21–23). With God's missional blessings – his presence, purpose, and promises – his people are urged to witness Yahweh and his mission in their present context in Babylon by seeking the peace and prosperity of the city and by praying for their enemies (cf. Mt 5:43–48; Rm 12:21; Tt 3:1–2; 1 Pt 2:18; Bratcher 2009:362; Volz 1928:269).

It begins with a missional heart: pray to the Lord, for 'You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart' (Jr 29:13 – NIV). It continues with a clear missional agenda: to seek the peace and prosperity of the city, '… because if it prospers, you too will' (Jr 29:7 – NIV). In this regard, God has good plans for his people (Jr 29:11ff.). As Greenway (2007:42) states, 'God is the source and foundation of shalom, and in the final analysis there is no shalom apart from him'. Rather than harbouring deep resentment towards their imperial masters, God's people everywhere are called to work for the well-being of nations and their capitals (Brueggemann 1998:257). This was not merely a means of political survival, but rather their God-given mission – to pray for and seek God's intervention on behalf of the host city (Mackay 2004:165).

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