

# Ebed-melech the faithful disciple

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**I**N JEREMIAH 21 the prophet Jeremiah, having testified against the sins of Jerusalem, exhorted King Zedekiah and the people to be submissive to the judgement of Yahweh by surrendering to the Chaldeans, and thereby benefit from a measure of mercy. The fact that Jeremiah was speaking the word of Yahweh in these matters was not a matter of any importance to the carnally minded princes of Judah, as such revelation from Yahweh was destructive of their own agenda. As recorded in chapter 38, the princes therefore petitioned King Zedekiah to execute Jeremiah for treason on the basis that he was undermining the morale of the military and civilian population.

Zedekiah, although knowing that Jeremiah was Yahweh's prophet, acceded to the request of the princes, who consigned Jeremiah to a lingering death in the mire of a waterless pit in the prison (vv. 4-6). In this he behaved like that weak character Pilate later. Perhaps, in his dreadful extremity, Jeremiah remembered that Joseph was also consigned to a waterless pit (Gen. 37:24), and most likely he would also have remembered those Messianic psalms that speak of the Christ himself suffering the ordeal of the "horrible pit" and "miry clay" (Ps. 40:2; cf. 35:7). He would have been comforted thereby, even as he would also have recalled Yahweh's promise to him personally: "And they shall fight against thee; but they shall not prevail against thee; for I am with thee, saith the LORD [Yahweh], to deliver thee" (Jer. 1:19).

## Bondservants of Jesus Christ

In these matters, and many others, we perceive Jeremiah as a type of Christ, but in this article we want to look at a character we are introduced to in this thirty-eighth chapter, Ebed-melech, as a type of the faithful disciple of Christ. His name occurs five times in the chapter, a number associated with those under grace. His name means 'servant of the king', the king being Zedekiah, whose name in turn has a meaning of the 'righteousness of Yah', although tragically he did not practice God's righteousness. Nevertheless, Ebed-melech points forward to those who would be servants of the one called in 23:6 "The LORD [Yahweh] our righteousness".

It is easy for us to forget that we are not our own, but that, as bondservants of Jesus Christ, we must "yield . . . [our] members as instruments of righteousness" (Rom. 6:13). Such ideas easily trip off our lips, but we need constantly to examine ourselves to ensure that our priorities in life are appropriate to those who are 'Ebed-melechs'.

Ebed-melech is described as a eunuch, and, though this term sometimes just signifies a high-ranking official dedicated to the service of a monarch, it is most likely that he was actually a eunuch, and perhaps despised in the royal court. He was also an Ethiopian, but one who loved the God of Israel (Jer. 39:18). He lived up to the meaning of his name as a loyal and valued servant to King Zedekiah, since he was able to approach Zedekiah directly and plead for Jeremiah (38:8). In these matters there is an exhortation for those of us in employment, for, although we are also servants whose citizenship is not of the country in which we dwell (Phil. 3:20, RV), yet the apostle commands us:

"Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ; not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart; with good will doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men: knowing that whatsoever good thing any man doeth, the same shall he receive of the Lord, whether he be bond or free" (Eph. 6:5-8).

Our employers may think that we are a rather peculiar people, but they should be always aware of our hard-working, conscientious approach to our work, something of which they will sometimes take advantage for their own benefit, but also sometimes deliberately choosing to place a Christadelphian in a position of trust.<sup>1</sup>

## Not ashamed of me and my words

Zedekiah at least had a conscience, and Ebed-melech's courageous approach to the king met with some success. Ebed-melech thus showed

1. Obadiah (the name means 'servant of Yahweh'), governor of the house of Ahab (1 Kgs. 18:1-16), is another good example of these principles.

himself not to be ashamed of his association with Yahweh's prophet, as his forthright words reveal: "My lord the king, these men have done evil in all that they have done to Jeremiah the prophet, whom they have cast into the dungeon; and he is like to die for hunger in the place where he is: for there is no more bread in the city" (Jer. 38:9). These things are also written for our benefit, for Christ says: "Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation; of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels" (Mk. 8:38).

Ebed-melech's life was placed at risk by his intervention, as will be seen from Jeremiah 39, but Zedekiah commanded that he take thirty men with him to rescue Jeremiah from death in the dungeon (38:10). This act of belated mercy from this vacillating king may have been the reason that Yahweh permitted him to die in peace in Babylon rather than dying by the sword (34:4,5). Further, the thirty men may have been Zedekiah's personal bodyguard, similar to the elite thirty soldiers of King David's administration (2 Sam. 23:23). With such assistance, Ebed-melech could have proceeded with his mission without fear of immediate opposition from the hostile princes.

#### **I was in prison, and ye came to me**

It is interesting that Ebed-melech went straight to a room under the treasury where worn-out and worthless clothes had been deposited (Jer. 38:11), presumably because they were not worth keeping and had been rejected from the secure treasury. Taking some of these, he instructed the prophet to place the old cast clouts and rotten rags under his armpits to take the strain of the cords being used to pull him out (v. 12).

Similar worn-out garments had been used by the Gibeonites to save themselves from death under the Law (Josh. 9:13). Likewise the high priest Joshua, having been involved in the building of the temple, was in vision clothed in filthy garments, typical of his mortal condition, but was given a change of apparel (Zech. 3:3,4) appropriate for one styled "My servant the BRANCH" (v. 8). So Jeremiah's extraction with old cast clouts and old rotten rags from a place typical of the grave speaks of the mortal resurrection of Christ and his saints from death.

However, there is likely to be another reason for Ebed-melech's thoughtfulness in these mat-

ters. Jeremiah was most likely emaciated by starvation and beating, and attempting to extract him from the mire by ropes might have caused him further serious injury. Ebed-melech's act was an act of caring, loving compassion. This act of mercy in carefully extracting Jeremiah out of the mire by the cords contrasts with the way the princes would have let Yahweh's prophet down into the mire by cords (Jer. 38:6), no doubt with mocking and derision (*cf.* Ps. 22:6-10). The exhortational words of Matthew 25 come to mind: "Then shall the righteous answer him [Christ], saying . . . when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (vv. 37-40). This Ethiopian is an example to us.

#### **A passer-by who heard and took up the cross**

One of the hallmarks of inspiration is that the Bible is not a book of Jewish propaganda, extolling the virtues of the Israelite race, for indeed, being God's book, it often describes the Jews in unflattering and condemnatory terms. Deuteronomy 28, with its list of curses (a key to understanding all Bible prophecy), is just such an example of the Bible being written by holy men as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. Thus, in the historical incident being discussed in this article, a Gentile Ethiopian's love and works of faith towards Yahweh's prophet contrast with the stiff-necked Jews of Jerusalem.

Likewise, when the Lord Jesus was being ill-treated in the extreme, it was Simon (his name means 'hearing') of Cyrene (a place in North Africa) who bore the stake of Christ on the way to Golgotha. How the physically weakened Jesus would have appreciated this assistance as he pressed on to that momentous event, which is the fulcrum of all history! It would appear that this Simon was so impressed with his observation of these proceedings that he brought his wife and two sons, Alexander and Rufus, into the Truth (Mk. 15:21; Rom. 16:13).

#### **Another Ethiopian eunuch**

We meet another Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8. He had not been enlightened by the priests and Levites in Jerusalem, from which he was returning, but he was greatly impressed with Isaiah's prophecy (ch. 53) concerning the sufferings of Christ: "The place of the scripture which he read

was this, He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and like a lamb dumb before his shearer, so opened he not his mouth: in his humiliation his judgment was taken away: and who shall declare his generation? for his life is taken from the earth" (Acts 8:32,33). There are links between Jeremiah and Jesus being led as a lamb to the slaughter, for Jeremiah wrote of himself: "I was like a lamb or an ox that is brought to the slaughter; and I knew not that they had devised devices against me, saying, Let us destroy the tree with the fruit thereof, and let us cut him off from the land of the living, that his name may be no more remembered" (11:19).

The lesson for us in these things is that our association with Jesus Christ does, and must, involve a life of sacrifice, as Paul wrote to the Hebrews: "Wherefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered without the gate. Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach" (13:12,13).

It can be strongly suggested from a careful reading of the text that both these Ethiopian eunuchs chose to bear "his reproach", but the vision before them both would have been the words of Isaiah:

"Neither let the son of the stranger, that hath joined himself to the LORD [Yahweh], speak, saying, The LORD [Yahweh] hath utterly separated me from His people: neither let the eunuch say, Behold, I am a dry tree. For thus saith the LORD [Yahweh] unto the eunuchs that keep My sabbaths, and choose the things that please Me, and take hold of My covenant; even unto them will I give in Mine house and within My walls a place and a name better than of sons and of daughters: I will give them an everlasting name, that shall not be cut off" (56:3-5).

#### **Because thou hast put thy trust in Me**

Jeremiah 39 treats of the fall of Jerusalem and of Nebuchadrezzar issuing a directive (perhaps as petitioned by Daniel the prophet) that Jeremiah

be rescued from prison and well treated. Indeed, Jeremiah was in such a weakened state that he had to be carried back to Anathoth (v. 14).

But the chapter ends with an interesting appendix dealing with a situation that occurred before Jeremiah was rescued out of prison. It appears that the princes whose murderous intentions Ebed-melech had thwarted took their revenge by committing Ebed-melech to the same prison as Jeremiah: "Now the word of the LORD [Yahweh] came unto Jeremiah, while he was shut up in the court of the prison, saying, Go and speak to Ebed-melech the Ethiopian [who may therefore have been in prison also], saying, Thus saith the LORD [Yahweh] of hosts, the God of Israel; Behold, I will bring My words upon this city for evil, and not for good; and they shall be accomplished in that day before thee". The city was to fall in accordance with the word of God, but Yahweh continues by giving an important promise: "But I will deliver thee in that day, saith the LORD [Yahweh]; and thou shalt not be given into the hand of the men of whom thou art afraid" (vv. 15-17).

The hostile princes would have something more terrifying to worry themselves about in that day, but the final verse would have been a great source of comfort to Ebed-melech, as indeed it is to ourselves: "For I will surely deliver thee, and thou shalt not fall by the sword, but thy life shall be for a prey unto thee: because thou hast put thy trust in Me, saith the LORD [Yahweh]" (v. 18). Because of his works of faith towards Yahweh's prophet, a type of Christ, his life would be spared despite the most adverse circumstances.

Similarly, Jesus came that we might have life more abundantly at the resurrection; and, even as both Jeremiah and Ebed-melech were released from the prison-house of death to freedom, so the apostle's exhortation grants us that same message of comfort and assurance: ". . . and if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together" (Rom. 8:17).

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