

# The House of the Rechabites

## Jeremiah's Fourth Symbolic Action

### 35: 1-19

**DIG:** Chapter 35 flashes back to the reign of Jehoiakim ten years earlier. What is the relationship between Judah and Babylon at that time (Second Kings 24:1-2)? Why did ADONAI tell Jeremiah to offer the Rechabites wine? What two things made them different from other Israelites? Why do you think they had been told to live so radically different (Second Kings 10:15-23; compare to the Nazirite's vow in Numbers 6:2-4, 20)? Why had they moved into Jerusalem? Why might they feel uneasy about the situation there? What about the Rechabites pleased God? How were they rewarded? Was the Rechabite way of life commended to Jeremiah's readers? What is the object lesson in this for Judah? For you?

**REFLECT:** The Rechabites refused to go through the wide gate and take the broad way of the world that leads to destruction (see the commentary on The Life of Christ Dw - The Narrow and Wide Gates). Who in your world is like the "modern thinking" crowd in Judah? Who in your world is like these Rechabites? What can your messianic synagogue or church learn from such faithful believers? Is your lifestyle distinct from that of your peers at work, school or neighborhood? What one thing distinguishes you? How should believers separate from the rest of society, yet live close enough so that others can see our reflection of the Messiah?

599 BC during the eleven-year reign of Jehoiakim

The one main point to the fourth symbolic action (what might be called a parable in action) is that while the Rechabites were faithful to their vows, Isra'el was not.

Crowds lie. The more people, the less truth. Integrity is not strengthened by multiplication. We can test this easily. Which promise is more likely to be kept: the promise spoken by a politician to millions on social media or the promise exchanged by two friends?

Since we all have everyday experiences of the unreliability of crowds to discern and reflect the truth, it is puzzling that the appeal to numbers continues to carry so much weight with us. The selling of millions of copies of a book is accepted as evidence that the book is excellent and important. The fact that most people today believe in abortion or homosexuality is given as evidence of its legitimacy. But an elementary knowledge of history verified by a few moments of personal reflection will prove that the truth is not statistical and that crowds are more foolish than wise. We cannot avoid being in crowds. But can we keep from being crowd-controlled. Can we keep from trading our name for a number?

**Yirmeyahu** dealt with crowds most of **his** life. Unlike many of the prophets who lived in the desert, **the priest from Anathoth** was a man of the city. **He** walked in the streets daily. Frequently **he** visited the Temple courts. **But while Jeremiah was often in crowds, he was not crowd-controlled. The crowd did not dictate his message. The crowd did not shape his values. Jeremiah** did not commission a public opinion poll to find out what the crowd in **Jerusalem** wanted to hear about **God**. **He** did not ask for a show of hands to determine what level of moral behavior to emphasize. **YHVH** shaped **his** behavior. **YHVH** directed **his** life. **YHVH** trained **his** perceptions. This shaping and directing and training took place as he listened to **ADONAI** and spoke to **Him**. **He** meditated long and passionately on **the Word of God**. All **he** lived and spoke came from this inner action: **His word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot (20:9).**<sup>234</sup>

Some strange people appeared on the streets of **Tziyon**. They were called **Rechabites**. **The Rechabites** have usually been described as a nomadic clan that lived a disciplined, ascetic life pasturing flocks in the wilderness. **Their** way of life was a protest against the corruption of civilization and an idealization of the forty years of wilderness wanderings of the Israelites after receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai. Therefore, **they** led a wandering life and **lived in tents**. Recent studies have shown that **the Rechabites** were a guild of metalworkers involved in the making of chariots and other weaponry. **They** roamed the country, setting up camp outside villages and cities. If you had a javelin that needed straightening or a chariot wheel that needed repair, you put it aside for a time when **the Rechabites** would arrive. **They** were a small band that kept to **themselves**.<sup>235</sup>

Craftsmen in metal would have many trade secrets, tightly held. **They** didn't drink **wine** because they followed the well-known adage, "Loose lips sink ships." Metal workers in antiquity usually formed proud families with long genealogies. Marriages were carefully arranged within the guild, preventing outsiders from learning all their secrets. **They** had a formidable body of technical knowledge that was handed down and guarded jealously from generation to generation. The nature of **their** work prevented them from establishing a permanent home. **They** remained in one place until the supply of ore and fuel were exhausted. **Their** work required such skill and practice that **they** didn't have time for planting or harvesting crops.

**The Babylonian invasion of Judah** had made **their** living in the countryside dangerous and so **the Rechabites** had come inside the city walls of **Jerusalem** for safety (**35:11**). To say the least, **they** were an oddity in **the City**, conspicuous in their strangeness. **They** were, of course, noticed and commented on. Like an accident on the side of the road, everyone slowed down and gawked at **them**. Within two or three days everyone would either have seen **them** or heard about **them**.<sup>236</sup>

**God's Word Regarding the Rechabites:** This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD during the reign of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah. "Go to the house of the Rechabites and invite them to come to one of the side rooms of the Temple and give them wine to drink" (35:1-2). But the Rechabites didn't drink wine. Everybody knew that. Why invite them to a wine party that they couldn't enjoy? Then it dawned on the prophet. Of course. The Rechabites were living evidence; right there on the crowded streets of the city of David, of the two things the crowd-conditioned people assumed were impossible. First, they were evidence that everyday, ordinary people could live their entire lives directed by a personal command (opposed to the impersonal pressures of the crowd). And second, they were evidence that it was possible to maintain a lifestyle that was set-apart (and not assimilate to the fashions of the crowd). The people had already noticed the Rechabites - how could they miss them - now if the masses could just be made to notice exactly what it was that set them apart and gave them their identity, then they themselves might realize that a personal identity and a disciplined distinctiveness were possible for them also.<sup>237</sup>

So I went to get Jaazaniah son of Jeremiah the son of Habazziniah, and his brothers and all his sons - the whole family of the Rechabites. I brought them into the Temple, into the room of the sons of Hanan son of Igdaliah the man of God. It was next to the room of the officials, which was over that of Maaseiah son of Shallum the doorkeeper. This was a dramatic setting for Jeremiah's graphic declaration. The prophet didn't ask them anything. He simply set goblets full of wine and some cups before the Rechabites and said persuasively to them, "*L'Chaim!* Drink some wine (35:3-5 CJB)."

Did they join in? Did they relax their principles for the moment so as not to offend their new friend? Did they realize that they were living under emergency war conditions and that it was only courteous to adapt to the customs of their protectors? Did they do the politically correct thing? Did they take a realistic view of the situation and share the common cup, showing appreciation for being treated so generously?

No they did not, and Jeremiah knew they would not. The Rechabites promptly recited the commands of their ancestor and founder like a catechism: We do not drink wine, because our forefather Jonadab ben Rechab gave us this command, "Neither you nor your descendants must ever drink wine. Also you must never build houses, sow seed or plant vineyards; you must never have any of these things, but must always live in tents. Then you will live a long time in the Land where you are nomads" (35:6-7 CJB).

The Rechabites traced their ancestry back 250 years, to one Jonadab ben Rechab in the time of Jehu. He was not a Jew but did play a role in the northern Kingdom of Isra'el. He sided with Jehu in the bloody extermination of the house of Ahab in 842 BC, and his subsequent purge of the Baal-worshippers who had flourished under the patronage of Jezebel, Ahab's wife (Second Kings 10:15-17). This experience evidently turned Jonadab

against city living, thinking that living in cities lent itself to idol worship. Therefore, he instituted the vow mentioned above in 35:6-7.

They accounted for their disciplined life and distinctive identity in terms of their obedience to the command given by their ancestor: **We have obeyed** (Hebrew: *shema*) **everything our forefather Yonadab son of Rechab commanded us. Neither we nor our wives nor our sons and daughters have ever drunk wine or built houses to live in or had vineyards, fields or crops.** The climactic statement was: **We have lived in tents and have fully obeyed** (Hebrew: *shema*) **everything our forefather Jonadab commanded us. But when Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon invaded this land, we said, "Come, we must go to Jerusalem to escape the Babylonian and Aramean armies." So we have remained in Jerusalem (35:8-11). They were forced to flee for their lives and enter Zion, but they would not violate their promise not to drink wine.** This was an obedient community.

The Rechabites lived their lives on the basis of what had been commanded by their ancestor, not on the whims of the crowd. Their way of life was not formed out of current events but out of centuries of devotion. The ancient command, not the current headline, gave them their identity. That word shaped and preserved their proud traditions as skilled craftsmen. Neither the hospitality of a kind host nor the customs of the city where they had come for sanctuary could distract them from what was essential: that they were a commanded people, that they were a disciplined people. Jonadab's 250-year-old command carried far more weight with them than Jeremiah's immediate friendship. The discipline that made it possible for them to maintain their craft was far more important to them than making the "commonsense adaptations" that would make friends.<sup>238</sup>

**The Israelites and the Rechabites Compared:** Jeremiah could now explain his symbolic action, addressing the men of Judah, the Levites, the court officials and the citizens of Jerusalem who were at the Temple compound. The theme of Isra'el's disobedience is again stressed. The contrast between the loyalty and obedience of the Rechabites to their founder, and the disloyalty and disobedience of the Israelites to their God was once again pointed by Jeremiah through his **fourth symbolic action.**

Jeremiah was not commending them for their nomadic lifestyle. In fact, the Torah commanded the Jews to own vineyards, sow seed, and so on. But the Rechabites were not Jews so they were not obligated to follow the Torah. The prophet of God, however, was commending their obedience and faithfulness to their vow.

Then the word of ADONAI came to Yirmeyahu, "ADONAI-Tzva'ot the God of Isra'el says to go and tell the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Yerushalayim, 'Won't you ever learn to listen (Hebrew: *shema*) to My words and follow this example of obedience?' says ADONAI. 'Yonadab ben Rechab ordered his descendants not to drink wine and this command has been kept. To this day they do not drink wine, because they obey their

forefathers command. But I have spoken to you **persistently** (the pronoun is emphasized in the Hebrew to mark a contrast with Jonadab who was obeyed, whereas God's commands are ignored), yet you have not obeyed (Hebrew: *shema*) Me. **Persistently** I sent all My servants the prophets to you. They said: Each of you must turn from your wicked ways and reform your actions; do not follow other gods to serve them. Then you will live in the Land I have given to you and your ancestors. But you have not paid attention or listened (Hebrew: *shema*) to Me. The descendants of Yonadab ben Rechab have carried out the command their forefather gave them, but these people have not obeyed Me' (35:12-15 CJB)."

The essence of Jeremiah's message was this, "You also have a Father who has commanded you to live in complete submission to Him. You know that He has set you apart for His holy purposes. Why don't you live in response to that command? If you think it's too hard for you, think again. The Rechabites have been doing it for 250 years. Don't just look at them. Don't just talk about them. Pay attention to what is distinctive about them. They are not entertainment, but are a living example of faithfulness. Your problem isn't that you can't do it, but that you are lazy. You have let the crowd turn you into spectators and consumers. You listen to gossip and ignore God's Word. Why won't you let God's command grow within you a life of holy obedience instead of letting the crowd drag you down into the gutter.<sup>239</sup> The descendants of Yonadab ben Rechab have carried out the command their forefather gave them, but these people have not obeyed (Hebrew: *shama*) Me (35:16 CJB). Everything hinged on their willingness to be obedient (*shama*) and to listen (*shema*)!

**The Faithlessness of the Israelites Condemned:** Therefore, here is what ADONAI Elohei-Tzva'ot, the God of Isra'el says to go to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Tziyon say: Listen! I am going to bring on Judah and on everyone living in Jerusalem every disaster I pronounced against them. I spoke to them, but they did not listen (*shema*); I called to them, but they did not answer (35:17 CJB).

**The Faithfulness of the Rechabites Rewarded:** As the disobedience of the Judeans resulted in ruin, the faithfulness of the Rechabites would receive recognition from YHVH. Then Jeremiah said to the clan of the Rechabites, "This is what ADONAI-Tzva'ot, the God of Isra'el, says: You have obeyed (*shama*) the command of your forefather Jehonadab and have followed all his instructions and have done everything he ordered" (35:18 CJB).

Therefore, based on the obedience to their vow, this is what ADONAI Elohei-Tzva'ot, the God of Isra'el, says: Yonadab son of Rechab will never fail to have a descendant to stand before Me (35:19 CJB). Yonadab will always have descendants among the elect of God. The words stand before Me are usually used in terms of priestly service to ADONAI (Deuteronomy 10:8, 18:5-7; First Kings 8:11; Second Chronicles 29:11). Therefore, he will have descendants among the priests in the millennial Temple.

Isaiah 66:18-21 says that there will be both Jewish and Gentile priests in the millennial Kingdom. **The Mishna states that after returning from the Babylonian captivity there was a specific day of the year for the Rechabites to bring wood for the bronze altar.**

**Yirmeyahu** raises some weighty objections to our superficial lives that are shaped and sanctioned by the crowd. The moral level of our society is shameful. The spiritual integrity of our culture is an embarrassment. Any part of our lives that is turned over to the crowd makes it and us worse. The larger the crowd, the smaller our lives. Pliny the Elder once said that if the Romans couldn't make a building beautiful, they made it big. The practice continues to be popular: If we can't do it well, we make it larger. We add dollars to our income, rooms to our houses, activity to our schedules, appointments to our calendars. And the quality of life diminishes with each addition.

On the other hand, every time we retrieve a part of our life from the crowd and respond to **God's** call to us, we are that much more ourselves, more human. Every time we reject the habits of the crowd and practice the disciplines of faith, we become a little more alive.<sup>240</sup>