

The Book of Jeremiah

Background

In the seventh century BC, the prophet Jeremiah began his prophetic ministry, which lasted into the first part of the sixth century. According to the text of Jeremiah, his prophetic career covered forty years (627–587 BC), a number that would have had symbolic value for his audience (e.g., forty days and nights on the ark, forty years in the wilderness, etc.). However, many scholars believe that his prophetic activity covers a much shorter time period, perhaps only 609–587 BC. Jeremiah delivered words of judgment and hope, first to the people in Jerusalem and then to those who escaped to Egypt. He is often known as the prophet of woe, because of the hardships he faced in life and his tendency to complain. Jeremiah's message was not received well by those who were in power in Jerusalem. He was even imprisoned for sedition. In the end, Jeremiah was taken to Egypt and likely lived his last days there.

The Political Climate During Jeremiah's Time

During the seventh century BC, Assyria reached its zenith of power in the ancient Near East, but then its influence began to decline. For a brief period the Egyptians tried to regain some political control, but they were ultimately defeated by the Babylonians in 605 BC at the Battle of Carchemish. This was also a time of unrest in Judah, which now stood without the northern kingdom of Israel. A bright spot during this century were the reforms by King Josiah. Under this king, there was a move to reestablish proper worship in the Temple, which had become a place of religious syncretism. While workers were cleaning out the Temple, a scroll was found and declared to be the "book of the Law" by Huldah the prophetess (2 Kings, chapter 22; 2 Chronicles, chapter 34). When Josiah heard the words of the scroll, he realized how far from the Covenant with God the people had strayed. He gathered everyone together to have the scroll read aloud. When the people heard the words, they were also struck by their unfaithfulness, and they repented of their sins and vowed to live according to the teachings of the Lord.

Unfortunately, Josiah's reforms did not last very long. After his death in 609 BC, there were various kings on the throne in Jerusalem. None of them was concerned with proper worship. Under King Jehoiakim, the royal palace was made more luxurious using forced labor by the citizens of Judah (2 Kings 23:36—24:5). In 597 BC, Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, laid siege to Jerusalem and took some of its inhabitants into Exile in Babylon, including the current king, Jehoiachin, Jehoiakim's son (2 Kings 24:8–17). In Judah, Zedekiah sat on the throne as a puppet ruler for the Babylonians, until he decided to rebel against their authority. This action caused Nebuchadnezzar to march again on Judah. This time Jerusalem was conquered, the Temple was destroyed, and another group was taken into Exile. Judah, as well as all of the Promised Land, was now in the hands of a foreign power (2 Kings 25:1–11).

The Prophet Jeremiah

Jeremiah is identified in the beginning of the book as being from a priestly family in the town of Anathoth. It is quite possible that he was a priest himself. Like most prophets, Jeremiah was reluctant to accept the call of God upon his life. He tried to use every excuse to get out of the mission for which he had been chosen. Yet, God did not accept any of his excuses and promised to be with Jeremiah, putting God's own words in Jeremiah's mouth (Jeremiah 1:9). Jeremiah's mission was to be one of both judgment and hope: "To root



up and to tear down, / to destroy and to demolish, / to build and to plant” (1:10). Jeremiah lived through the reforms of Josiah and the downfall of Judah, even seeing the destruction of the Temple. He was very supportive of what Josiah had done but saw that it was ultimately too late for Judah to be spared.

In the early years of his prophetic ministry, Jeremiah spoke out against social injustice and the false assumption that proper worship was adequate for the people to maintain their covenantal relationship with God and with one another. However, it was during the reign of Jehoiakim that Jeremiah’s more caustic and direct messages were spoken. He denounced the king and the people for their idolatry and their injustice. In his famous Temple sermon (chapter 7), he left no one unscathed. This outspoken critique of the government continued when Zedekiah came to the throne in Jerusalem. In fact, Jeremiah’s words were so scandalous that he was arrested and imprisoned. Ultimately, Jeremiah was taken to Egypt by a group of refugees. It was from there that he wrote words of comfort and hope, after the destruction of Jerusalem and of the Temple.

The Messages of Jeremiah

As both a pre-exilic and a post-exilic prophet, Jeremiah delivers basically two types of messages. During his pre-exilic period, he speaks words of judgment and condemns both the rulers and the community for a lack of faithfulness. After Jerusalem falls, Jeremiah’s message becomes one of hope and encouragement. Like all true prophets, Jeremiah spoke what the people needed to hear, not what they wanted to hear. When, after Josiah’s reforms, the kings of Judah neglected the demands of the Covenant, and the people followed, Jeremiah was called to “tear down” the pride and idolatry he saw in Jerusalem (1:10). However, to those living in the ruins of Jerusalem and those outside of Judah, he began “to build and to plant” (1:10). Obviously, the prophecies he delivered during the last years of his ministry were received with a stronger welcome than were those of his early years.

Throughout the Book of Jeremiah, certain themes emerge and unite what would otherwise be a disjointed text. Jeremiah describes God as a God who knows, remembers, sees, and acts. These verbs are reminiscent of the description of God provided in Exodus 2:24–25, prior to God’s call of Moses to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land. Once again a parallel is made between Jeremiah and the great prophet Moses. This God—who knows, remembers, sees, and acts—is also described by Jeremiah as a spring of water and a righteous judge. However, once God has forgiven the sins of the people, God no longer remembers their sins. After the consequences for breaking the Covenant have been endured, God holds out to the people a future. There is assurance that just as God has judged and punished Judah, so will other nations be judged and held accountable for their wrongdoings.

Two texts within the Book of Jeremiah stand out as representative of his mixed prophetic career of judgment and hope: the Temple sermon (chapter 7) and the book of comfort (chapters 30–33). Jeremiah’s famous sermon, delivered in the court area of the Temple during a festival celebration, contains some of his most condemning words. The leaders and the people commit theft, murder, and adultery; they bear false witness against their neighbors and follow other gods. Yet, despite their sinful behavior, they are confident that no harm will befall them because they are in Jerusalem and have the Temple. God would never allow the Temple to be destroyed, they tell themselves. When Jeremiah critiques their false assurance, the people respond that another prophet (Micah) had prophesied the fall of Jerusalem, and he was wrong (26:18). Yes, the city was besieged by the Assyrians, but Jerusalem was not taken. Why should they fear Jeremiah’s predictions? This public sermon begins the stories of Jeremiah’s rejection and suffering.



The book of comfort is found in Jeremiah, chapters 30—33. Here Jeremiah's message is one of return and restoration. Although things seem hopeless, Jeremiah declares to the people that God is still in control and that there will be better days ahead. He affirms that God has not forgotten the people; once they return to God, all of Israel will be restored to a time of prosperity, happiness, and security. One of the most poignant descriptions of this future promise is found in Jeremiah, chapter 31, which begins with a series of short affirmations of Israel's restoration. Then the prophet provides the image of God's love as being like that of a mother weeping for her children (31:15). This eternal love of God will bring about a new thing, a renewed community and a renewal of the Covenant. In verses 31–34, God speaks of making a different kind of covenant with the people than the one God had made with the Israelites in the wilderness. The content of the covenant will remain the same, but how it will be known has changed. Instead of needing the covenant written in stone, this new one will be written upon the people's hearts. It will be internalized, and there will be no need to teach it to others; the covenant will be revealed in how they live their lives. Yet, the end result of the covenant is the same as the one made at Sinai: "I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (31:33).

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