

JEREMIAH

We have more detail about the life of the Jeremiah than of any other prophet in the Old Testament. Jeremiah, whose name means “the Lord will restore,” was born of the priestly line of Abiathar during the reign of King Josiah of Judah (640 – 609 B.C.). During Jeremiah’s lifetime the Chosen People of God came under the dominion of Assyria, then Egypt, then Babylon.

Jeremiah grew up in the small town of Anathoth, three miles northeast of Judah’s capital of Jerusalem. Jeremiah was in his early twenties when God called him. Sensitive by nature and preferring the quiet life (6:11; 9:20), Jeremiah sensed God’s call within his heart: **“there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary holding it in, and I cannot”** (20:9). In contrast to Isaiah’s response to God’s call (**“Here am I. Send me.”** Isaiah 6:8), Jeremiah protested that his youth and inexperience disqualified him (1:6-7). But God reassured Jeremiah: **“But you, gird up your loins; stand up and tell them everything that I command you. Do not break down before them, or I will break you before them. And I, for my part, have made you today a fortified city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall, against the whole land — against the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and the people of the land. They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the Lord, to deliver you”**(1:17-19).

Upon answering the call to be God’s prophet, Jeremiah found himself among priests who did not accept Jeremiah’s inherited priesthood because it was of the line of Abiathar (whom King Solomon 300 years earlier accused of disloyalty). Indeed, for this reason Jeremiah would always remain a suspicious and disliked outsider.



Historical background

God called Jeremiah during the terrible years leading up to the invasion of Judah by the Babylonians and the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. (2 Kings 25). Before this catastrophe, there was a strong national revival going on in Judah (627-626). The revival was sparked by the end of the Assyria’s century-long control of the region, when Judah’s economic resources had been drained and its political leaders compromised. For both kingdoms—Israel and Judah—it was a time of the reawakening of their identity as the Chosen People. Yet for all the optimism, Jeremiah’s early prophecies betray his own lingering doubts about Judah. The problem was Judah’s attitude which was that God would *always* protect Judah no matter how poorly the people behaved. It was this *complacent* optimism which caused Judah’s downfall; but before the full extent of this was felt, Jeremiah had to spend forty years as an isolated and derided prophet warning the people against such folly.

When Jeremiah begins his ministry in 609 B.C., Jehoiakim—proud, superstitious and cruel—is king of Judah. Jeremiah warns Jehoiakim against forming an alliance with Egypt; that it would prove Israel’s downfall while Babylon and Egypt both jockey for the spoils of a defeated Assyria. Moreover Judah is still a vassal of the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar. However Jehoiakim refuses to listen and, incredibly, further antagonizes Nebuchadnezzar by refusing to pay the usual tribute. Therefore in 598, Babylon attacks Judah and Jehoiakim is killed and his body thrown over the city’s walls. Jehoiakim is succeeded by his son, Jehoiachin. Only eight years-old when he becomes king, Jehoiachin is captured three months later and taken to Babylon. In 597 the nobles of Judah and people of every class (except the very poor) are also deported, along with Jeremiah.

Zedekiah, Jehoiachin’s uncle who succeeds the young king, follows the same policy as his nephew despite Jeremiah’s efforts to convince him otherwise. In 588, Zedekiah also rebels against Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar in turn invades and after a two-year siege, Jerusalem falls in 586. By then many Judaeans

have already fled to Egypt and taken Jeremiah and Baruch (Jeremiah's scribe) with them (43:6). In Egypt, Jeremiah continues his prophecies against idolatry.

The Book of Jeremiah does not follow an exact logical order because it is rather a series of warnings and threats of divine retribution for the unfaithfulness of the Chosen People, as well as frequent condemnations of the idolatry practiced by Israel's neighbors.

Book One: The actions of Jeremiah

A. The sign of the dirty loincloth (13:1-27): God commands Jeremiah to go to the Euphrates River and hide his loincloth in the cleft of a rock, return later, and then use it as a visible sign of how Israel and Judah, the northern and southern kingdoms, though unfaithful will eventually "cling" to the Lord.

B. The sign of the wine jars (13:12-27): God commands Jeremiah to proclaim that "**Every jar shall be filled with wine,**" which was an ancient slogan for prosperity (akin to "a chicken in every pot" used in Herbert Hoover's 1928 campaign). However, due to Israel's harlotry and promiscuity (engaging in pagan fertility rites), this "wine" will be the vintage of God's wrath against Israel.

C. The sign of Jeremiah's celibacy (16:1-13): God commands Jeremiah to remain celibate as a warning to his generation that anyone born in his day will suffer disease, disaster and death. Jeremiah is also not to attend weddings or funerals as a sign that soon such celebrations will cease, and that the dead will be too numerous to bury as a result of Israel's idolatry.

D. The sign of the broken potter's vessel (18:1-19:15): Jeremiah goes down to "the potter's house" and takes a potter's flask which he breaks at the Potsherd Gate near the Valley of Hinnom. Just as a potter's vessel is broken, so will "this people and the city" be broken when Jerusalem is overthrown.

Not happy with these signs of judgment from Jeremiah, the people begin to plot against him (18:18). Eventually Jeremiah is arrested and placed in stocks near the Benjamin Gate (20:1-2). Jeremiah curses the day he was born (20:7-18).

Book One: The words of Jeremiah

1. The sermon on the destruction of the Temple (7:1-9:26 ff).

Jeremiah criticizes the people's dependence upon the Temple as a kind of "good luck charm" or "guarantee" of God's protection. Jeremiah calls out the religious leaders for their preoccupation with Temple rituals at the expense of the poor. Standing at the Temple gate, Jeremiah declares that the city and its sanctuary will be destroyed as was the sanctuary at Shiloh (which had once housed the Ark of the Covenant). Love of God must coincide with love of neighbor; and worship without social responsibility is no religion at all (7:5-11).

2. The sermon against idolatry (10:1-25). Similar to the prophet Isaiah, Jeremiah preaches against the absolute foolishness and wickedness of idol worship.

3. The sermon on the covenant (11:1-12:17). The Lord commands Jeremiah to call the Judeans back to obedience to "this covenant" (with Moses on Mt. Sinai). Yet because they are stubborn and will not obey, the Lord will bring down upon them "all the words of this covenant," meaning the covenant curses of desolation and exile (Deuteronomy 27-32). Nevertheless, in the end the Lord will have compassion on Judah and even on the Gentiles who acknowledge the Lord (12:14-17).

4. The prophecy of the great drought (14:1-15:21). The Lord answers Jeremiah's charge—"Hast thou utterly rejected Judah? Does thy soul loath Zion?" (14:19)—by declaring that it is the people who have been unfaithful. Furthermore, because the abominations of King Manasseh of Judah (687-642) were so great, not even the intercessions of Moses and Samuel will save Judah (15:1-9).

5. The prophecy of the new Exodus (16:14-15). Jeremiah speaks of a new exodus that will eclipse the Moses-led Exodus from Egypt. However, before that happens the Lord will punish the sons of Israel for their idolatry. However, if they repent God will restore them in the Promised Land (17:24-27).

6. The prophecy of judgment on kings, prophets, people, and nations (21:1-25:38). Between kings Jehoiakim and Jeremiah there is a deep mutual hatred. While king Jehoiakim is not named, Jeremiah directs the scathing "woe" of 22:13-17 to Jehoiakim. Jeremiah charges the king with murder and oppression, as well as the extravagant remodeling of the palace with money extorted from the poor. Jeremiah further

contrasts Jehoiakim's lifestyle with the simple and just rule of his father, King Josiah. In the end, despite Jeremiah's denunciations, God does not reject His covenant with David. The divine punishment that was the Babylonian captivity will not last forever, but for **"70 years"** (25:11). In the meantime, all the nations of the earth—including Israel and Judah—will drink the **"cup of the wine of wrath"** (25:15). For if the Lord is punishing His own people, justice demands He also judge the Gentile idolaters (25:15-38).

Book Two: Judgment from the Temple to the Nations (26-51)

1. The Temple sermon in the first year of King Jehoiakim (26:1-24)

Standing at the New Gate that forms part of Jerusalem's city walls, Jeremiah invokes God's authority to speak and compares Jerusalem with Shiloh (20 miles north of Jerusalem), the previous site of the Ark of the Covenant before it was destroyed by the Philistines (1 Sam 5). The reaction to Jeremiah's Temple sermon is fierce: **"And when Jeremiah had finished speaking all that the Lord had commanded him to speak to all the people, then the priests and the prophets and all the people laid hold of him, saying, 'You shall die'"** (26:8)! A dispute breaks out whether to put Jeremiah to death, or spare him and heed his words as they had once heeded the words of the prophet Micah. For the time being, Jeremiah's life is spared.

2. The sign of the yoke (27:1-28:17)

To press his point, Jeremiah makes a wooden yoke, puts it over his shoulders and publicly prophesies to Judah and the surrounding nations that the Lord is placing all nations under the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. Those exiled earlier to Babylon with King Jehoiachin (597) will not be returning soon. Furious, the false prophet Hananiah seizes Jeremiah's yoke and breaks it as a sign of a counter-prophecy: that Nebuchadnezzar's power will be broken (28:1-11). But Hananiah's words are a lie, and within a year he dies for his opposition to the Lord.

3. Letters to those exiled with Jehoiachin: Restoration after 70 years (29:1-32)

After the exile of 597, Jeremiah sends a letter to the Jews in Babylon urging them to settle down and make permanent homes, since their time in exile will last a generation (70 years); that the prophets of Babylon who promise a brief exile and speedy return are liars (29:21-32). After the exile God will visit His people and restore their land and right relationship with Him. As for those who were not exiled, they will experience the wrath of the Lord because they did not heed His word.

4. The new Exodus and the new covenant (30:1-31:40)

At the center of the Book of Jeremiah is "the book of comfort" (30-33), because in the midst of judgment prophecies these chapters contain words of the restoration of Israel and the inauguration of a "new covenant," a "new Exodus" and the return of the Davidic king who in later years would be referred to as the Messiah (30-33).

5. The Sign-Act of the redemption of the field (32:1-44)

During the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem, when it seemed that the inhabitants of Judah were about to be deported, Jeremiah purchases his ancestral land from his cousin Hananel as a public act of faith in the future of the nation. Indeed, God reassures Jeremiah that He will eventually restore His people in a New Covenant (32:36-44).

6. Restoration and covenant fidelity to Levi and David (33:1-26)

While Jeremiah is in prison during the final siege of Jerusalem (588 – 587), he receives another inspiration of hope: that after the Lord has cleansed Judah and Jerusalem by means of the Babylonian invasion and exile, He will restore the nation's fortunes. This restoration will include forgiveness of sins (38:8). One day both kingship and priesthood will be restored when a "righteous Branch" arises to rule from David's throne (38:15).

7. The doom of Zedekiah and the judgment for breaking the covenant of liberation (34:1-22)

The painful reality of the infidelity of Judah means that King Zedekiah will be defeated and exiled by Nebuchadnezzar. And due to the king reneging on his promise to restore social justice to his people, doom will fall upon the leading citizens of Jerusalem.

8. The fidelity of the Rechabites (35:1-19)

Jeremiah contrasts the infidelity of the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem with the fidelity of the tribe of the Rechabites, who were then living in Jerusalem, as a visible sign against the wickedness of the Jewish people during the Babylonian siege.

The **Rechabites** were the conservative defenders of Israelite traditions. They did not drink wine or dwell in houses; they neither planted crops nor owned vineyards. As nomads they lived in tents, clinging to the nomadic way of life of ancient Israel, rejecting the urban-agricultural society of the Canaanites which by then Israel herself had adopted. Jeremiah praises the Rechabites for their fidelity to their traditions in contrast with the infidelity of Judah and Jerusalem.

9. Jehoiakim burns Jeremiah's scroll (36:1-32)

To inspire repentance, the Lord commands Jeremiah to write **“all the words that I have spoken to you”** on a scroll (36:2) which was to be read publicly to the people. This causes a sensation and Baruch and Jeremiah are warned to hide. When word of this gets to King Jehoiakim, he commands a scribe to retrieve the scroll and read it to him. As each column is read aloud in the king's winter palace, he cuts off whole columns from the scroll throws them into the fire (brazier), dramatizing his contempt for the word of God (36:23-26). In response, the Jeremiah rewrites the scroll in its entirety and with still greater intensity (36:32).

10. The “Passion” of Jeremiah (37:1-45:5)

Jeremiah tells the royal court that the Babylonian armies will prevail and that destruction and exile are inevitable (37:1-10). During a break in the siege, Jeremiah attempts to visit his hometown, but is accused of desertion to the enemy and is imprisoned (37:11-21). But the princes of Judah are not satisfied with mere imprisonment, and so Jeremiah is thrown into a cistern to die. An Ethiopian royal servant rescues Jeremiah and has him placed back in custody. Still, the king does not heed the warnings of Jeremiah (38:14-28). As a result, the Babylonian army seizes Jerusalem. Upon capturing King Jehoiakim, Nebuchadnezzar slays the king's sons before his eyes, then blinds the king and deports him to Babylon with the remaining inhabitants of the city (39:6-10). A brief period of peace follows, but it is short-lived. People are afraid of reprisals by the Babylonian authorities for Gedaliah's assassination (Gedaliah was appointed governor of Judah by Nebuchadnezzar). Jeremiah warns them not to flee to Egypt but to seek the favor of the Babylonian authorities since they were not complicit in the assassination. However the people again reject Jeremiah's counsel and lay hold of Jeremiah and Baruch and flee to Egypt.

11. The prophecies against the nations (46-51)

The messages to the other nations is the same: the Lord is coming to judge them for their iniquities, their worship of false gods, and for their abuse of the Lord's Chosen People. However the judgment on Israel's enemies also implies vindication and restoration for the People of God.

Epilogue (52)

The fall of Jerusalem, the fate of Zedekiah and of Jehoiachin, represent the fulfillment of Jeremiah's predictions: the capture and destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 587; the deportation of the people, and the miserable fate of Zedekiah. But the final message is one of hope: Jehoiachin is released from prison and granted a living allowance for the remainder of his life (52:31-34). It is believed that Jeremiah dies in Egypt, stoned to death by those who tired of his critical prophesies and predictions of doom.

Conclusion

Jeremiah's major contribution is his prophecy and theology of the “new covenant” (31:31-34) and his description of the sacrificial worship of that covenant (30-33). Much later, these passages shaped the theological perspective of the New Testament authors and their understanding of Jesus, Who Himself claimed to fulfill Jeremiah's prophecies through the blood of the “new covenant” (Luke 22:19-22; 1 Corinthians 11:23-25).