



JEREMIAH

Survey of the Old Testament: The Prophets

Fall 2005

Introduction

Background

Name & Author: The book begins by giving us the lineage of the prophet Jeremiah. He came from the priestly class, and was the son of Hilkiah. We do not know if this is the same Hilkiah, who during Josiah's reign, found the book of the Law (2 Kings 22), and oversaw the reinstatement of the Passover (2 Chronicles 35). The commentators are emphatic in their opinions. But the evidence is clear: we just don't know.

While not necessarily a priest himself, Jeremiah grew up in the priestly tradition. His hometown, Anathoth, is a Levitical town (Joshua 21:18), given to the sons of Aaron. He knew the religious practices of the people and was probably trained as a priest.

In 16:1-4, we know that God did not allow Jeremiah to take a wife or have children. If Jeremiah had a family to worry about, his prophecies would likely have not been as bold and his ability to face the coming opposition would have been compromised.

Date: Jeremiah prophesied for 42 years, ministering from the reign of the last good king of Judah, Josiah, to the final destruction of the city of Jerusalem. Politically, the region was going through tremendous changes as the Assyrian Empire waned and Egypt, Babylon, the Medes, and Persia, all tried to grab the remains of the Assyrian Empire. Jeremiah saw these events as directed by God, intended on bringing destruction to the wicked.

Audience: The nation of Judah in the last days before Jerusalem falls to Babylon. Jeremiah speaks primarily to the leadership of Judah, including its kings.

Historical Background

Since the time of Hezekiah and all through the reign of King Manasseh, Judah had been paying tribute to the king of Assyria. But upon the death of Ashurbanipal of Assyria in 633 BC, the empire was thrown into internal turmoil as the sons of Ashurbanipal battled for the throne. The empire was split in two as a result, with one son ruling in Nineveh and another in Harran. This split allowed King Josiah to stop paying tribute to Assyria.

Babylon used this Assyrian civil war as a chance to conquer the Assyrian empire. Nebopollaser of Chaldea seized power in Babylon and after allying himself with Persia, he conquered Nineveh in 612 BC and Harran in 610 BC.

Egypt saw the balance of power shifting from Assyria to Babylon and launched a campaign to stop the Babylonians. King Josiah foolishly tried to engage the Egyptians as they passed through Judah, but was killed in battle while his son Jehoahaz was taken captive in Egypt. Then, in a dramatic battle that set the course of history for centuries to come, Nebopollaser's son, Nebuchadnezzar defeated the Egyptians in the battle of Carchemish in 605 BC.

Purpose

Jeremiah is calling on a people facing imminent destruction to repent of their idolatry and injustice and accept the punishment God is about to bring.

Theme

Jeremiah's message in this context is clear. Babylon is coming. Repent and the coming invasion from the north won't be as brutal. Keep with your wicked ways, and the destruction will be thorough.

Jeremiah's Call (Chapter 1)

Part of the prophetic model includes the calling of the prophet. Most of the major and Minor Prophets record the circumstances under which the LORD called them to proclaim his message. Jeremiah is no exception to this model. His calling in chapter 1 has two parts to it: the formal calling and the vision related to his calling.

The Calling of Jeremiah

The LORD calls Jeremiah to proclaim his message to Judah. But, just as the prophetic model usually records God's calling, it also usually records the reluctance of the prophet to take on this role. Jeremiah is no exception. After hearing God's call, Jeremiah tells Him, "I am too young, and I do not know how to speak."

Like Moses, Jonah, and Amos, God's ambassadors often are hesitant at first to take on the task of proclaiming God's word. However, just as in these cases, God takes away the excuses one by one. First, the LORD tells Jeremiah that his youth won't be a problem because He is sending Him. Secondly, his lack of speaking ability is not an issue, because the LORD will tell him what to say.

(Jeremiah 1:7 NASB) But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am a youth,' Because everywhere I send you, you shall go, And all that I command you, you shall speak.

The Vision

Part of Jeremiah's prophetic style includes visual or living illustrations of his message. This begins right with his calling. The visual illustration given by God of his calling begins in verse 11 with an almond tree and a boiling pot. This confirms to Jeremiah that he is seeing and hearing the things God wants him to see and hear. These visions are the first test of Jeremiah. They seem almost to be a trial run to make sure Jeremiah's prophetic antennae are working- to see if he really is plugged into God's word. At the end of the test, the Lord tells him:

(Jeremiah 1:12 NASB) Then the LORD said to me, "You have seen well, for I am watching over My word to perform it."

Judgment on Judah (Chapters 2-19)

Jeremiah's message to Judah is recorded in chapters 2-29.

The Message Summarized

However, we have a concise summary of his message in 3:6-18. Here we have the three elements of the prophetic model all in one concise: chapter: 3:6-18

The Sin Described (3:6-11)

Jeremiah begins his discussion of Judah's sin by reminding the people of the Northern Kingdom's sin. As discussed in Hosea, we see Israel played the harlot to God, committing adultery.

This horrible description of Israel's sin, however, is nothing compared to Judah, according to Jeremiah.

(Jeremiah 3:11 NASB) And the LORD said to me, "Faithless Israel has proved herself more righteous than treacherous Judah.

Why is Judah worse than Israel? Judah has seen Israel's punishment for their sin. Yet Judah persists in the same sin as Israel. They know the consequences of their behavior, yet still keep doing it. To God, this is worse than the sin of Israel. They should know better. Yet knowing the right thing to do, they ignore this and continue on. This pattern of disobedience, not out of ignorance, but out of out-right defiance, is continued throughout the book of Jeremiah.

The Call to Repent (3:12-14)

The second message in the prophetic model is the call for the people to repent. All that the Lord requires of them is that they acknowledge their sin and are willing to return to Him.

The Restoration (3:15-18)

If they do so, the Lord will restore the nation of Israel. In this restoration period, Jeremiah states that they will not think of the Ark of the Covenant anymore. The ark always symbolized the presence of God's glory dwelling with Israel in the temple. Jeremiah is telling them, that when Israel is restored, people will not consider the Ark of the Covenant, because God himself will dwell with them and Jerusalem will be His throne (3:17).

The Foolishness of Judah's Wisdom

The Jews could not recognize the coming of the Lord's judgment. The wise men, scribes, prophets, and even priests were softening the blow of God's condemnation by saying that peace was imminent. They were unwilling to admit that God was punishing the nation. Jeremiah 8:15 declares the result of this false teaching: "We looked for peace, but no good came; And for a time of health, and there was trouble!"

The teachers and scribes of the day had rejected God's Law (8:9). They had taken the Law of the Lord had warped it (8:8) such that they people could no longer recognize it (8:7). And they considered themselves wise for having done so. Jeremiah asks them how they can consider themselves wise when they have corrupted the law. If they were really a wise people, they would understand that Jeremiah spoke for the Lord (9:12). They would understand why Judah was about to be ruined and laid waste.

Judah had no reason at all to boast in their wisdom. Nor did Judah have any reason to boast in their strength or their wealth. The only thing which Judah should boast in is in their knowledge and understanding of the Lord (9:23). The only wisdom is the wisdom that knows the Yahweh delights in lovingkindness, justice and righteousness (9:24).

The Broken Covenant

Following the Exodus of Israel from their slavery in Egypt, God made a covenant with the nation of Israel. As part of that covenant, if Israel obeyed the Law of the Lord, the nation would be blessed. If they disobeyed the Law, the nation would be cursed (Deuteronomy 27-28). Among those curses was the invasion of foreign nations would lay siege to the nation (Deuteronomy 28:49ff).

Jeremiah reminds Judah of this covenant (11:1-2), and specifically he reminds them of the curses (11:3). The nation had decided to serve other gods, and the whole city of Jerusalem was filled with altars to the god, Baal (11:13). Therefore, Jeremiah reminds them, God will bring disaster upon them (11:11).

The Inevitability of Judgment

Jeremiah repeatedly talks about the inevitability of judgment. The sin of Judah had become so corrupt that there was action of repentance which could forestall judgment. While the message of the prior prophets had always offered a hope that if the people repented that God would relent and they could avoid judgment, Jeremiah's message is that judgment is certain, and the best they could hope for was that the judgment wouldn't be as bad if they repented and just accepted the punishment coming from God.

Jeremiah says, even if Moses and Samuel were to come and lead the people into repentance, it would not be enough to forestall judgment (15:1). For this reason, God tells Jeremiah to stop bothering to pray for Judah (14:11). God will no longer listen to their prayers.

Because judgment is certain, Jeremiah is also prohibited from taking a wife and starting a family (16:1ff). If Jeremiah were to have children, it would be just to introduce them to disease, famine and violence.

When Babylon is laying siege to Jerusalem, King Zedekiah comes and asks Jeremiah if there is anything they can do so that the Lord will cause the enemy to withdraw (21:1). Jeremiah tells Zedekiah that God would not revoke his punishment, and that the only way they can survive this siege is to surrender to the Babylonians (21:8-9). God has already decided to give Jerusalem to be destroyed by Babylon (21:10).

Jeremiah's Object Lessons

Desperate times call for desperate measures. When calamity is coming, one must do all you can to get the people's attention. So God has Jeremiah use a number of object lessons, each more dramatic than the next to get the attention of the people.

- € *The Linen Belt* (Jeremiah 13) – God tells Jeremiah to buy a linen belt and then bury it in the rocks at the Euphrates River. The belt lay there for many days until God tells him to go dig it up. Now the belt had rotted and was no longer any good. Just as the belt had rotted and now was worthless, so Judah's pride had rotted it away, and they were now worthless.
- € *The Potter and the Clay* (Jeremiah 18) – God tells Jeremiah to go visit a potter. The potter was working the clay and as he was making a vessel on the pottery wheel, the vessel became ruined. So the potter remade the clay into another vessel. So was Israel in the hands of the Lord. Israel had become ruined, so he would destroy it so he could remake it again.
- € *The Broken Pot* (Jeremiah 19) – God tells Jeremiah to go buy an earthenware jar. After announcing judgment on the people Jeremiah was to break the jar before his audience, announcing that in the same way God would break his people.

The Yoke (Jeremiah 27)

God tells Jeremiah to make a yoke and to put it around his neck. So Jeremiah does so, and he wanders around Jerusalem wearing the yoke. Jeremiah's object lesson was to call the people to voluntarily put themselves under the yoke of the king of Babylon, for if they voluntarily submitted they would live. If they resisted they would die.

This was not a popular message, and it contradicted other prophets at the time. But Jeremiah, wearing the yoke warned about the falsehood of these other prophets.

(Jeremiah 27:9-10 NASB) "But as for you, do not listen to your prophets, your diviners, your dreamers, your soothsayers, or your sorcerers, who speak to you, saying, 'You shall not serve the king of Babylon.' [10] 'For they prophesy a lie to you, in order to remove you far from your land; and I will drive you out, and you will perish.'"

This was a warning unheeded, and it contradicted at least one of the prophets own predictions. In chapter 28, the false prophet Hananiah declares that the captivity would end in 2 years and that the yoke oppressing Judah would be lifted. The yoke of Jeremiah was physically removed and broken by the false prophet (28:10). Jeremiah's response in 28:16-17 by predicting the death of Hananiah,.

Jeremiah Persecuted (Chapters 20-29)

Religious Opposition- The False Prophets

Throughout the history of Israel & Judah, there were prophets to whom the LORD did not speak. These *false* prophets would not declare the Word of the LORD, but would declare the popular opinion of the day. The message of the false prophets and priests in Jeremiah's day was simple: "Peace, peace"

Jeremiah 14:10-16. God warns Jeremiah not to ask for deliverance from the coming difficulty, because the punishment is for their own good (i.e. to punish for their evil and to bring them back to repentance.) Yet the prophets of Jeremiah's day were preaching that deliverance was imminent, and that there would not be any "sword and famine." God tells Jeremiah that He did not reveal this to them, and that their false prophecy will cost them their life.

Jeremiah 23:9-17. The prophets were wicked, deceitful, and adulterous. Their visions were not from God, but man. These worthless visions said that Judah was on the verge of peace. But God was these liars along with the nation would soon be destroyed.

Jeremiah's Persecution

Deuteronomy 13:1-5 and **Deuteronomy 18:15-22** warns that false prophecy should result in death, and that God would send these prophets to test the people. Jeremiah expresses his frustration that the false prophets are not receiving their due. Furthermore, because the religious leaders of the day considered Jeremiah to be a false prophet, his life was in constant jeopardy. How did they know and how do we know if the message is from God or not?

Jeremiah 11:18-23, 12:1-13. Jeremiah pleads with God about a threat to his own life. It appears that even priests from his hometown that were seeking to kill him as a false prophet. But Jeremiah knows that his message is from God, and pleads with God to spare his life. After God declares his punishment for his enemies (11:22-23), Jeremiah praises God for his faithfulness and deliverance.

Jeremiah 17:14-18. Again the people doubt Jeremiah's authenticity (vs. 15). After all, the other prophets were proclaiming peace, and Jeremiah was proclaiming disaster. Jeremiah's response in vs. 18 then is not just vengeance on his enemies, but a plead with God to fulfill what he had revealed.

Jeremiah 20:1-18. This chapter begins with a historical discussion of when Pashur, the priest struck Jeremiah and placed him in a stockade after hearing his prophecy of doom. Jeremiah's response is to continue in his prophecy of destruction. Then Jeremiah shares his desire to give up the ministry in vs. 7-10. But his conclusion is that God is true and he will be vindicated. Nonetheless, he expresses his struggle with the job God has given, ending the chapter with a curse on the day he was born.

Jeremiah 26. The priests and prophets seized Jeremiah again after proclaiming God's punishment. They declare that he is worthy of death (v. 11), based likely on the Deuteronomy law regarding false prophets. Jeremiah's response in vs. 13 & 14 is remarkable:

(Jeremiah 26:13-15 NASB) ""Now therefore amend your ways and your deeds, and obey the voice of the LORD your God; and the LORD will change His mind about the misfortune which He has pronounced against you. [14] "But as for me, behold, I am in your hands; do with me as is good and right in your sight. [15] "Only know for certain that if you put me to death, you will bring innocent

blood on yourselves, and on this city, and on its inhabitants; for truly the LORD has sent me to you to speak all these words in your hearing."

The political leaders in Jerusalem did not believe that he was a false prophet. Rather, they defended his prophecy by quoting Micah. Another prophet with the same message, however, was not as fortunate. Urijah fled to Egypt when his life was threatened, but was pursued, brought back to Jerusalem and killed.

Jeremiah later would be imprisoned (Jeremiah 32, 37:11ff), thrown into a cistern (Jeremiah 38) and taken against his will to Egypt (Jeremiah 43).

Judah's Hope (Chapters 30-33)

Like all the prophets, Jeremiah's call for repentance doesn't just show God's judgment. He also shows the hope of a restored Israel. Chapters 30-33 contain the bulk of Jeremiah's prediction of the hope for Israel. God will bring Israel back to the Promised Land, and they will return to the Lord.

Jeremiah's Letter to the Exiles (Chapter 29)

False Message from False Prophets

Even after the captivity began, the false prophets would not accept Jeremiah's warnings. The false prophets believed the captivity would be short lived. But Jeremiah, in a letter to the captives, tells them to settle in, for the captivity will last for 70 years (29:10). A false prophet in Babylon named Shemaiah the Nehelamite wrote back to the priests asking them why they did not deal with this pretender. Jeremiah's response is to proclaim that Shemaiah is not a prophet of God and will be killed.

The people struggled with the idea of a condemning God. They desired to hear the message of peace and prosperity. They were a religious people, and the religious leaders were teaching them that things were okay. Jeremiah threatened this arrangement.

We must be careful that as a church we are not teaching the comfortable things. We can be teaching religious things, and good things, and be compromising the truth. We can be teaching things that do not make people uncomfortable and in the process be compromising the truth.

As much as it troubled him, Jeremiah continued in his preaching of the truth. He never let popular opinion change his message, although he kept his approach fresh and accessible to anyone. The result of compromised truth was devastating to Judah.

God's plan for prosperity

One of the most quoted verses in Jeremiah is a promise that God has a purpose for us. Jeremiah 29:11 is used to comfort us that God really wants what is best for us and will bring us to a time of prosperity and hope.

*For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD ,
"plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope
and a future. (Jeremiah 29:11 NIV)*

But the context of this verse is rarely discussed. This verse comes in the midst of the letter which Jeremiah sent to the exiles. Yes, God has plans to prosper His people. Yes, there is a hope and future. But it's a distant future, and in the meantime, settle into your captivity.

We should be careful not to pull this verse out of its context, for while God indeed wants what is best for us, and there will be a time where we will prosper, that may not be in the short run. It may be that God wants us to dwell in exile for awhile before that happens.

The New Covenant

But God will indeed restore Israel. But such restoration means that the old covenant that the Lord had made with Israel is going to have to be reworked. The old covenant had been broken and it depended too much on Israel to keep its part. This new covenant would not rely on Israel's faithfulness to the Law. This new covenant would not require obedience to the Law at all. For, in the new covenant, the Law would be written on the very heart of His people.

"But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the LORD, "I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. (Jeremiah 31:33 NASB)

God would change the heart of His people and they will know their God. Furthermore, this new covenant includes provision for the forgiveness of sins (31:34).

With Jeremiah's prediction of restoration, the question must be asked, "what will keep Israel from falling into sin again?" What is to prevent Israel from breaking the covenant again? It's the new covenant that will prevent this. The new covenant where God indwells the people, where they know Him, and where God forgives them.

This passage is quoted again in Hebrews 8, where the writer says that Jesus is the fulfillment of this prophecy. Indeed, the proclamation by Jesus in the Last Supper declares that he is bringing a "new covenant." Certainly, then, the hope stated here is partially fulfilled in the covenant given to the church. Our covenant is not one of laws, but of the Spirit. The Law of God isn't written, but dwells within us in the form of the Holy Spirit. We don't need prophets and teachers to tell us the Law. The Spirit himself teaches us. As a result, the Lord is our God and we are His people.

Jeremiah's Real Estate Deal (Chapter 32)

To confirm that this restoration will take place, Jeremiah gives a object lesson. His relative offers to sell him land. This real estate transaction is taking place in the 10th year of King Zedekiah. The army of Babylon has been laying siege to Jerusalem for over a year at this point. Jeremiah himself is in prison for his treacherous prophecies. The nation has been overtaken and Jerusalem is about to be destroyed. Buying real estate at this point would not be the smartest investment.

But God tells Jeremiah to go ahead and buy the land. For some day, God will restore Judah and people will again buy and sell land and conduct commerce and dwell back in the Promised Land (32:15). Yes, God will hand Judah into the hands of the Babylonians (32:26-29). But nothing is too difficult for God, and some day bring them back to this land (32:37). God will make a new covenant which will not be broken (32:40) and once again fields will be bought and sold (32:43-44).

Restoration of the Davidic Kings (Chapter 33)

An integral part to the restoration of Israel is a restoration of the throne of David. With the deposition of Zedekiah by Babylon, the reign of the Davidic kings comes to an end. But in the future a king in the lineage of David would rise up (33:15). This king will be just and righteous (23:5, 33:15) and under His reign Jerusalem will live in peace and safety (23:6, 33:16). In the meantime, lest Zedekiah take this as a promise that he is this righteous branch, Jeremiah reminds him that if he fails to obey the covenant, that the Davidic covenant will be broken as far as Zedekiah is concerned (33:19-27).

The Final Days of Jerusalem (Chapters 34-44)

Zedekiah Ignores Jeremiah's Advice

In case Zedekiah didn't understand this, Jeremiah makes his condemnation of Zedekiah more explicit in chapters 34-38. Jeremiah tells Zedekiah that Babylon will destroy the city and he will be captured and delivered into the King of Babylon's hand.

Zedekiah had rebelled against Babylon and was counting on Egypt to rise up and defend him in his rebellion. In this context, Jeremiah's prophecies seemed to be treasonous (Jeremiah 37:13-14). Now the politicians were not as accepting of Jeremiah's views. He was imprisoned on the charge of treason. Nonetheless, King Zedekiah secretly went to Jeremiah for advice. His advice shows us why they considered him treasonous:

(Jeremiah 38:17-18 NASB) "Then Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, 'Thus says the LORD God of hosts, the God of Israel, 'If you will indeed go out to the officers of the king of Babylon, then you will live, this city will not be burned with fire, and you and your household will survive. [18] 'But if you will not go out to the officers of the king of Babylon, then this city will be given over to the hand of the Chaldeans; and they will burn it with fire, and you yourself will not escape from their hand.'"

Jeremiah was asking the people to accept God's punishment. Babylon was God's agent. Yet the King, as well as other political leaders in Jerusalem still held on to the idea that they could escape Babylonian invasion and that Jeremiah's prophecy was disloyal to the King.

Jeremiah was concerned with why Zedekiah was coming to him for advice. In 38:15, the prophet asks the King, "If I declare it to you, will you not surely put me to death? And if I give you counsel, you will not listen to me." In verse 20, Jeremiah begs the King to heed the advice. But Zedekiah rejects the truth for the advice of the princes in Jerusalem.

The real tragedy is that Zedekiah sought advice from God, and then rejected it. We must be careful that we do not act as Zedekiah. As we seek God's truth through the Word, obedience is critical. Otherwise we are as foolish as King Zedekiah himself. James 1:23-25 addresses this same concept in a New Testament setting.

The Remnant Ask Jeremiah's Advice

Jeremiah faces this again after the fall of Jerusalem. The remnant asks Jeremiah what to do. They promise, "whatever it is... we will obey the voice of the LORD our God." (42:6). Jeremiah warns them not to go to Egypt. But when confronted with the truth, the people decide to disregard his advice and head to Egypt (43:1-3). Furthermore, Jeremiah himself is kidnapped and hauled off to Egypt with them.

The Word Against the Nations (Chapters 45-51)

The final seven chapters of the book are judgments to the various nations around Judah. These pronouncements do not fit chronologically at the end of his ministry as one would think by its placement in the book. It is likely that these chapters are a collection of Jeremiah's prophecies to other nations that were given throughout his ministry. These messages were probably given to Judah in order to demonstrate that God's judgment will be against all who sin against him, Judah included.

But these messages also served as source of hope for Judah. For even their enemy, Babylon, would some day have to face judgment. The final judgment against Babylon would in fact be written down and delivered to Babylon (51:59). Jeremiah sent Seraiah to Babylon with this scroll and he was

to read the scroll to those in Babylon (51:63) and then take the scroll and throw it into the Euphrates river as an object lesson of the judgment coming to Babylon.

Historical Epilogue (Chapter 52)

Jeremiah 51:64 ends by saying, “thus far the words of Jeremiah.” This gives evidence that the book was compiled and edited within the lifetime of Jeremiah, and that the editor expected that there might be more words from Jeremiah. The bible doesn’t tell us anything of Jeremiah’s death.

Chapter 52, then seems to have been added on later as a historical epilogue. The book ends with this epilogue describing Jerusalem’s fall and the release of King Jehoiachin. Most likely this chapter was written by someone after Jeremiah to tie the book into the history of Israel.

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