

Apostolic Handbook Series

Handbook on the Prophets



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Jeremiah

INTRODUCTION

He is forever known as the “Weeping Prophet.” Jeremiah, the son of Hilkiah the priest was the prophet selected by God to give us the “God’s eye view” of the downfall of Jerusalem and destruction of the Temple by the Babylonians in 586 BC. In some sense, this event is one of two historical poles that shape both the structure and the theology of the Old Testament. Clearly, the first polar event is the Exodus from Egypt. Structurally, that narrative is the pivotal turning point of the Pentateuch. The Exodus becomes, for the Old Testament, the paradigmatic example of God’s role as “Savior.” To say that God is our Savior means that He is the one who liberates us from bondage and brings us into proper relationship with Himself. In one sense, all the glorious events that follow the Exodus—the conquest of the land, the appointment of a king, the unification of the nation—are all outcomes of God’s promise-keeping that began with the Exodus.¹

With that in mind, then, when we come to the event of the Exile, we face something of a theological conundrum. We are presented in these narratives not with God the Savior but with God the Judge. And what the Old Testament asks

us to believe and affirm is that the same God who delivered Israel from bondage to Pharaoh in Egypt and gave them their own land and national identity is the same God who, just scant centuries later, took away the Promised Land from Israel and Judah, effectively destroyed the nation, and sent them into slavery in Babylon. This apparent tension between the Old Testament's presentations of the "God of the Exodus" and the "God of the Exile" is the crux of understanding its overall message.

MAIN MESSAGE

Describing Jeremiah as the "Weeping Prophet," while it is a convenient catch-phrase that can easily gloss over important elements of the book, does reveal two significant features:

(1) Jeremiah is a deeply emotional book. Long gone are the high-flown, majestic phrases of Isaiah; instead, the language and imagery of Jeremiah is raw and powerful. It is a book of grief and all its attendant emotions . . . sadness, anger, despair, rage.²

(2) Jeremiah is a deeply personal book. Here, more than in any other prophetic book, we hear the prophet's own voice, differentiated from the voice of God and the voice of the people. In fact, the Book of Jeremiah puts just as much emphasis on the person of Jeremiah as it does on the message of Jeremiah. It would not be too much of a stretch to say that, in Jeremiah, the person of the prophet is the message of the book.

This is evident from the opening narrative of Jeremiah's call (Jeremiah 1:4–10), which parallels in many ways the call narrative of Moses in the Book of Exodus. In fact, William Holladay makes a compelling case that the call narrative and the portrayal of Jeremiah throughout the book that bears his name is designed to prove that Jeremiah is the prophet like unto Moses predicted in Deuteronomy 18:18.³ Marvin Sweeney picks up on this point, noting that the superscription

indicates that Jeremiah's ministry lasted from the reign of Josiah until the fall of the city under Zedekiah, a period of forty years. This is not simply a "time stamp" on the book; it also aids the paralleling of the lives of Moses and Jeremiah: "Whereas Moses spent forty years leading Israel from Egypt to the promised land, Jeremiah's forty years saw . . . Judah exiled from the land and Jeremiah ultimately in Egypt."⁴

JEREMIAH AS THE PROPHET LIKE UNTO MOSES

In Deuteronomy 18:15, on the eve of his death, Moses' prophesied to the people of Israel: "The LORD thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken." Moses had established himself as the prototype of the prophet in Israel's encounter with God at Mount Sinai, where the people, frightened and overwhelmed by the fiery theophany, asked Moses to be their sole intermediary (Exodus 19:18–19). From that encounter, we can understand the prophetic role has two important functions: 1) to serve as God's spokesperson to the people and the people's spokesperson to God, and 2) to bring the people into covenant relationship with God. It is not too great a stretch to see the Old Testament prophets fulfilling the role of "covenant mediator."

The call narrative of the prophet Jeremiah makes several important allusions to the call narrative of Moses (Jeremiah 1:4–10; cf. Exodus 3–4):

Both men initially refused their call (Jeremiah 1:6; Exodus 4:10).⁵

*The pairing of the words "command" (Hebrew *tsavakh*) and "speak" (Hebrew *dabar*) occurs in only three passages: Exodus 7:2 (addressed to Moses), Deuteronomy 18:18 (prophesied by Moses), and Jeremiah 1:7 (addressed to Jeremiah).*

*The phrase "I have put my words in your mouth" in Jeremiah 1:9 uses the Hebrew verb *natan* (literally "given"), which is only used elsewhere in this phrase in Jeremiah 5:14 and Deuteronomy 18:18.*

These parallels between Moses and Jeremiah provide the necessary backdrop for Jeremiah's prophecy of a "new covenant" (see Jeremiah 31:31–34), which is the theological crux of Jeremiah's promise of hope for the future.

Perhaps the most important question to ask as we begin to explore the Book of Jeremiah is why is there so much more focus on the person of the prophet here than in the Book of Isaiah. Why did the audience need to hear the prophet's personal outcries to God? What does it matter to us that Jeremiah weeps? (See Jeremiah 4:19; 9:1.)

In *Jeremiah: Pain & Promise*, Kathleen O'Connor uses the emerging discipline of trauma studies to offer insight into Jeremiah.⁶ Scholars have long described the Book of Jeremiah as disorganized and jumbled, sometimes even going so far as to claim that the book's lack of orderly presentation makes it inferior to the tightly structured work of Isaiah.

Such a reading, O'Connor suggests, is both highly unfortunate and deeply prejudicial. Furthermore, such a reading ultimately misses the point that the book's "chaotic" nature may be a key part of the message it is meant to deliver. Ultimately, the Book of Jeremiah is a book of disaster—the disaster of Jerusalem's destruction and Judah's exile. One key human impact of disaster is the fragmentation of event-memory. For example, people who have experienced a violent personal attack often have difficulty reconstructing the sequence of events and recalling specific details afterward. As O'Connor points out, "Trauma survivors can experience the violence as a kind of stunning non-event, or more aptly, as such an overwhelming experience that they cannot receive or assimilate it into consciousness."⁷ Disastrous events, in a sense, simply disintegrate into "glimpses of horror."⁸ Thus, the chaotic, fragmented nature of the book—the leaps from passages of deep personal grief to enraged tirades of righteous indignation—actually reflect the nature of the trauma on which the book itself meditates.

By focusing so much on the figure of the prophet Jeremiah, the book also serves to bring a national disaster into personal focus. Jeremiah's experience of the disaster of exile becomes paradigmatic⁹ for the audience's experience of exile—his pain expresses their pain, his bewildered cries give

voice to their own despairing meditations. Thus, the Book of Jeremiah, in its most immediate context, had an almost therapeutic impact, its chaotic nature working as a “mode of recovery” for the victims of the fall of Jerusalem.¹⁰ Wrestling to make sense of the disorganized book forced hearers to begin the painful process of making sense of the disaster they had faced. Furthermore, the prophecies that foretold God’s just dealings with the nations and His renewal of the covenant with restored Israel also served to produce the first glimmers of hope.

STRUCTURE

Having established the interconnection of message and messenger, the following analysis will work to present the Book of Jeremiah as a portrait of the prophet.¹¹ Though not nearly as neatly organized as the Book of Isaiah, it is possible to look at the major sections of the book as a record of the words and the works of the prophet Jeremiah.

- Introduction: The Call of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1)
- I. Jeremiah’s Words to Judah (Jeremiah 2–20)
 - A. Words to the People (Jeremiah 2–11:17)
 - B. Words to God (Jeremiah 11:18–20:18)
 - C. Words to the Leaders (Jeremiah 21–25)
- II. Jeremiah’s Works in Judah (Jeremiah 26–45)
 - A. Jeremiah’s Validation as a Prophet (Jeremiah 26–29)
 - B. Jeremiah’s Words of Comfort (Jeremiah 30–33)
 - C. Jeremiah’s Persecution as a Prophet (Jeremiah 34–45)
- III. Jeremiah’s Words to the Nations (Jeremiah 46–51)
- Conclusion: The Fall of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 52)

JEREMIAH 1

Unlike the Book of Isaiah, which delays the record of the prophet's call, the Book of Jeremiah opens with the narrative of that crucial event. Within the structure of the book, then, this call narrative serves both to authenticate the prophet's words as coming from God and also to provide an introduction to the key themes of the prophetic message and serve as something of a reading guide for the book.¹²

Jeremiah's prophetic call is unique in that he was called as a prophet before he was even born. Not only does this qualify as a unique theological statement on the status of the unborn as persons in the eyes of God, it also demonstrates the power of Jeremiah's calling. However, it would not be right to say that Jeremiah was "destined" to be a prophet in the sense that the calling was inescapable or irresistible. In fact, the texts commonly known as "Jeremiah's Confessions"¹³ are really the prophet's personal reflections on his calling and show him as resistant to it—even at one point attempting to completely resign from his prophetic office (Jeremiah 20:9).

Jeremiah's call is unique in another way as well. Unlike Isaiah, who was called to prophesy to Judah, and Ezekiel who was called to prophesy to the exiles in Babylon, Jeremiah was called specifically as a prophet to "the nations" (Jeremiah 1:10), that is, the Gentiles. What makes this title even more intriguing is that Jeremiah only delivered one prophetic message outside of Judah (Jeremiah 44); the preponderance of Jeremiah's prophetic words were addressed to the people and leaders of Judah. Primarily, describing Jeremiah as a prophet to the nations serves as an indictment of the nation of Judah. In other words, Judah's idolatrous and oppressive behavior has made it, in God's eyes, simply another heathen nation deserving of judgment.¹⁴

However, as the prophet who stands closest to the brink of the Exile, this designation perhaps has a tinge of hope. In the Exodus event, when God formed and called Israel as His people, God specifically described the nation of Israel as a

priestly nation (Exodus 19:6); Israel's existence as one of the nations of the earth was meant to serve a mediatorial role of bringing the revelation of the one true God to all people and bringing all people into covenant with the living God.¹⁵ However, how would it be possible for Israel to proclaim this one, true God to all the nations unless it first went out among all the nations? Thus, the Book of Jeremiah seems to indicate that the Exile is both a divine judgment on Judah's sin and the next step in salvation-history. As Wilhelm Vischer states: "The prophet Jeremiah does not exert two ministries, one to the elect people and one to the nations. The word that the Lord speaks to Jerusalem and Judah determines by itself the destiny of the nations. . . . The history of Israel is at all times closely related to the history of other peoples and all great empires." Thus, "the nations are to be instructed because the Israelites dispersed among them are the witnesses of the Good Shepherd who one day will gather them all into one flock."¹⁶

This dual understanding of Jeremiah's mission is reinforced by God's description of His appointed task, given in a series of three verbal pairs: *root out* and *pull down*, *destroy* and *throw down*, and *build* and *plant* (Jeremiah 1:10). This verbal sequence is crucial to understanding both the prophet and the book. First, the main focus (of Jeremiah's ministry and the book which bears witness to it) will be on destruction, particularly the imminent destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple because of the people's continued refusal to serve God with their whole hearts.¹⁷ The message of hope and restoration, though undeniably present, will be necessarily muted. Second, the possibility of hope and restoration will only be made available after the destruction has come to pass. In effect, the punishment of exile is a necessary prerequisite to—even the very means of—God's salvation. This also helps the attentive audience empathize with Jeremiah's many protests of his mission and the many points along the journey to Jerusalem's fall where the threat of destruction seems to eclipse any and