

An Overview of

Jeremiah

and Lamentations

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Jeremiah and His Book

Jeremiah is often called “the weeping prophet,” but not because he was weak or effeminate. Instead, he was one of the most bull-headed prophets of the Old Testament period, unwilling to compromise his faith or the difficult message God gave him to speak to the people of Judah. His “weeping” indicates, however, that he was a man whose heart grieved over the coming ruin of his people. He personally agonized over the perpetual “pain” he suffered at having to prophesy against—and serve as a personal witness to—the moral decline of his own countrymen. The character of this prophetic book is like none other in the Old Testament. Likewise, few have had to endure the struggle imposed upon this man for the length of time that he was forced to bear it.

Jeremiah was born ca. 647 BC, before Babylon began plundering the nation of Judah and taking Jews into foreign captivity. His actual ministry began when he was about 20 years old (ca. 627 BC) and spanned the reigns of the last several Judean kings. Jeremiah was the son of a priest (Hilkiah) who ministered in Anathoth, a few miles north of Jerusalem. (Hilkiah does not appear to be the one who found the book of the Law in Josiah’s reign; see 2 Chronicles 34:14.) This gave the prophet access to kings and nobles, and he began his ministry as a spiritual counselor to the Judean kings. His prophetic career lasted over forty years (from 627 to 586+). It began in the thirteenth year of Josiah’s reign, yet the prophet’s writings actually focus upon (and are often critical of) Josiah’s successors: Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah. He was contemporary with the prophets Zephaniah, Habakkuk, Daniel, and Ezekiel.

Jeremiah was about the same age as King Josiah, and both seemed to have shared the same passion for serving Jehovah. It is quite possible that some of the infamous reforms carried out during the reign of Josiah were actually inspired by the prophet himself, or that he collaborated with the king in order to accomplish them. The prophet suffered much during the reign of Josiah’s successors, however. He was beaten, imprisoned (several times), left to die in a pit, and was ultimately kidnapped. Nonetheless, Jeremiah remained strong, resilient, and unyielding. He said what needed to be said, even to his own hurt. One scholar writes: “He is never weary of holding up their [i.e., the Jews] sins to the view of the people and its leaders, the corrupt priests, the false prophets, the godless kings and princes; this, too, he does amidst much trial both from within and from without, and without seeing any fruit of his labors.”¹ In the end, King Nebuchadnezzar (of Babylon) treated Jeremiah with personal respect (39:11 – 40:6) and allowed him to remain in Judah as a free man. However, certain Jews murdered Gedaliah, the Babylon-

¹ Keil, C. F., “Jeremiah, Lamentations,” *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes*, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishers, 1991), 13.

appointed governor of Judah, and kidnapped Jeremiah as they fled to Egypt. Jeremiah's story (and his life) ended in obscurity.

The theme of Jeremiah revolves around God's denouncement of Judah and His promise to send them into Babylonian captivity. This covers the prophetic portion of the book; also included are the records of Jeremiah's personal experiences as a result of giving these prophecies. From the time of Josiah, Jeremiah preached a dark and woeful message concerning Judah's future, and insisted that the kings of Judah submit to Babylon, since this would allow them to remain in their land. The kings (after Josiah) resisted him, however—as did the aristocracy of Jerusalem, and the several false prophets among the people. Nonetheless, in the fourth year of Jehoiakim, God instructed Jeremiah to dictate the divine oracles to his scribe Baruch, which he did (Jeremiah 36:1ff). Jehoiakim, however, cut up this book (scroll) and burned it in the fire. Jeremiah and Baruch re-wrote this book, and included additional prophecies as well. This written record was likely taken down into Egypt and possibly into Babylon itself (since Daniel refers to it; Daniel 9:2). Thus, at least part of the text of what we read today was exactly what Jehoiakim was given to read some 2,600 years ago. There are few serious objections to Jeremiah being the author of the entire Book of Jeremiah, except that chapter 52 is nearly verbatim of 2 Kings 24 – 25. It is quite possible that the text in 2 Kings came from Jeremiah, however, and not the other way around.

The Book of Jeremiah is nearly as much about its author as it is about the oracles of God to the Jews. We know more about Jeremiah than any other single Old Testament prophet. He is emotional, exasperated, angry, despairing, and ever-agitated over the moral state of his people. His prophecies reflect his own temperament: they are often moody, emotional, and intense. They do not have the stately structure that one finds in Isaiah, or the fierce tone that one sees in Amos. Instead, we are given an emotionally-charged glimpse into the heart of a man whose loyalty to God and love for his people resonates throughout his prophetic mission. Indeed, Jeremiah lived through one of the most troubling times in all of Old Testament history—the culmination of centuries of prophecies spoken against Judah.

The Book of Jeremiah is not organized in chronological order. This makes it difficult to study (or to keep track of context), since the chapters jump from one king (or time period) to another, often without clear indication. In the present study, an attempt has been made to follow the book in historical and chronological order as best as possible. This makes for an awkward outline, but it is hoped that the final outcome—a consistent, forward-moving narrative of Jeremiah's prophetic career—will be worth this awkwardness. Thus, Jeremiah will be studied in four major parts (arranged chronologically):

- ❑ **Part One:** prophecies made during Josiah's reign (640 – 609 BC); chapters 2 – 20.
- ❑ **Part Two:** prophecies made during Jehoiakim's reign (609 – 598); chapters 26, 25, 46:1 – 49:33, 35, 36, 45, 22, and 23.
- ❑ **Part Three:** prophecies made during Zedekiah's reign (598 – 586); chapters 24, 49:34 – 51:64, 27 – 31, 37, 32, 33, 21, 34, 38, 39, and 52.
- ❑ **Part Four:** prophecies made after the fall of Jerusalem (586 - ?); chapters 40 – 44.

Historical Background of Jeremiah

- ❑ **Assyria is a declining world power.**
 - During Hezekiah's reign (ca. 714 BC), 185,000 men of Sennacherib's army are destroyed overnight as he plans to lay siege against Jerusalem (2 Kings 19:35, Isaiah 37:36). Sennacherib abandons his plans to invade Jerusalem and returns home to Nineveh. Twenty years later, he is assassinated by his own sons, and the rule over the Assyrian Empire—with a few notable exceptions—begins to wane.
 - Manasseh, king of Judah and successor to Hezekiah (after Amon's assassination; see 2 Kings 21:19-26), is imprisoned by Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, for rebellion (2 Kings 21, 2 Chronicles 33:1-20). He is returned to Judah to reign as king, but remains a humble vassal to Assyria.
 - After this, however, Assyria has little to do with Judah. Esarhaddon is succeeded by Ashurbanipal, a very powerful ruler, but none of his successors can hold the kingdom together.
 - In 612 BC, a coalition army (Chaldeans and other nations), led by Nabopolassar and his son Nebuchadnezzar, besieges Nineveh and destroys it.
- ❑ **Egypt becomes a rising world power during the struggle between Assyria and Babylon.**
 - Psammetichus, a powerful Egyptian prince, becomes ruler over all of Egypt (649), uniting Egypt's 12 provinces into one effective unit.
 - Psammetichus' son, Neco, assumes control of Egypt after his father's death; he begins a military campaign aimed at destroying Assyria.
 - Neco marches through Palestine on his way to Carchemish, and is confronted by Josiah and his army in the valley of Megiddo. In the ensuing battle, Josiah is killed and Neco appoints Jehoiakim [Eliakim] as king in place of Josiah's older son, Jehoahaz [Shallum] (2 Kings 23:28-35, 2 Chronicles 34:1 – 36:4). After this, Neco conquers Syria, then waits at Carchemish (in northern Syria, on the Euphrates River) for Assyria's army. Meanwhile, Assyria is defeated by Nabopolassar's coalition army.

□ **Babylon quickly rushes to fill the power void left by Assyria's fall.**

- Nebuchadnezzar meets Neco's army at Carchemish (605) and destroys them; this occurs in the fourth year of King Jehoiakim's reign in Judah.
- Nebuchadnezzar pursues Neco's fleeing army through Syria and Judah, putting both nations under his control in the process. Many Jews (including Daniel and later Ezekiel) are taken captive into Babylon, and Jehoiakim becomes a vassal to Babylon. This becomes the beginning of the 70-year exile that is prophesied by Jeremiah (25:8-11; see 2 Chronicles 36:21). Nebuchadnezzar becomes king of Babylon upon the death of his father that same year.
- Egypt remains a power to be reckoned with, and it takes several years before Babylon finally subdues that nation entirely. Jeremiah predicts Egypt's fall, but the actual subjugation of Babylon occurs beyond the timeframe of the Book of Jeremiah.
- Judah rebels twice (under Jehoiakim and Zedekiah) against Babylon based upon the alleged support promised them by Egypt; both times result in disaster for Judah. When Jehoiakim rebels, he is taken away in chains to Babylon, where he dies an inglorious death (Jeremiah 22:19; see 2 Kings 23:34 – 24:5, 2 Chronicles 36:5-8). Jehoiachin [Coniah or Jeconiah] succeeds him, but is also deported by Nebuchadnezzar after only three months, along with his family (2 Kings 24:6-16, 25:27-30). Nebuchadnezzar appoints Zedekiah [Mattaniah], an uncle of Jehoiachin, in his place, but he also rebels against Babylon, inciting Nebuchadnezzar to subjugate Judah once and for all.
- Nebuchadnezzar lays siege against Jerusalem (587), and the following year the walls of the city are breached, the temple is obliterated, and the city is destroyed and burned with fire. Many thousands of Jews are taken captive to Babylon, and only the poorer classes are left (2 Kings 25:8ff).
- King Zedekiah tries to escape from Jerusalem, but is captured by Nebuchadnezzar's army; his sons are killed in his presence, then his eyes are put out, and he is carried off into captivity in chains. Judah is put under control of Gedaliah, a governor appointed by Nebuchadnezzar.
- The exiled Jews do not return to Judah until Babylon itself is conquered by Cyrus the Persian, as prophesied in Isaiah 45:1-13. By decree, the people are invited to return to the land of Judah, and Cyrus also provides resources for them to rebuild their temple (2 Chronicles 36:17-23, Ezra 1:1-11, 6:3-5).



Lesson One: Introduction to the Book (1:1-19)

Chapter 1 provides the historical timeframe in which Jeremiah prophesied—from Josiah to the exile of Judah (1:2-3)—and names the several kings whose reigns his ministry spanned. (Jehoahaz and Jehoiachin are not included because their reigns only lasted a few months each. Among the Israelites, a king was not established if his reign lasted less than a full year.) Jeremiah’s father was a priest, but not necessarily of the line of Zadok, which was considered the “pure” lineage from Aaron. Instead, Hilkiyah may have been a descendent of Abiathar the priest who sided with the usurper Adonijah rather than David (1 Kings 2:26-27). As a result, Abiathar’s priesthood was moved from Jerusalem to Anathoth. Even if Jeremiah was not a descendent of Abiathar, likely the fact that he is from Anathoth associated him with that negative stigma.² Regardless, Jeremiah’s ministry began “in the thirteenth year of his [Josiah’s] reign,” or ca. 627 BC.

God makes it clear to Jeremiah that he had been selected from “before you were born” to carry out this ministry (1:4-5). God knew what was about to happen to Judah, and He needs a man like Jeremiah to confront the Jews with this calamity. Jeremiah’s protest is likened to Moses’ own protest (Exodus 4:1-17): he cites his lack of experience, lack of age, and lack of courage (1:6-8). Jeremiah is only about 20 years old at the time, is untested, and faces a daunting challenge in speaking to a stubborn and rebellious people. Yet God provides him with whatever he needs to carry out this task. By touching his mouth (1:9; see Isaiah 6:1-7), God consecrates and empowers Jeremiah for the ministry set before him.

God then provides Jeremiah with two visionary signs: an almond rod and a boiling pot (1:11-14). The almond tree is the first to bloom in its season (i.e., in January), and is thus active and vigilant when all other trees are still dormant.³ Just as men looked to the almond tree for fruit, so God looked to see if Judah was going to repent of her crimes. The boiling pot in this vision is tipped to the south, and thus away from the north (see Ezekiel 11:3, 7). The idea is that the confusion and destruction of war—which is what this indicates—is about to pour out upon Judah from the north. (Even though Babylon is to the east, its armies would come from the north, especially since Nebuchadnezzar would be camped at Carchemish and then in Riblah, both in Syria.) The *reason* for this threat is described in 1:16: it is a divine judgment against Jerusalem (Judah) because of her

² Jamieson, Robert, Andrew Fausset and David Brown, *New Commentary on the Whole Bible: Old Testament Volume*, D. Douglas, gen. ed.; revised by Dr. Philip W. Comfort (© 2009 QuickVerse, electronic edition), on 1:1-3.

³ There is also an intentional play on words here. The Hebrew word for “almond” is *shaqed*; the word for “watching” is *shoqed*. In other words, God’s watchfulness is very much alert and alive, like the almond tree (*Strong’s Hebrew and Greek Dictionaries* [© 2003 QuickVerse, electronic edition]).

apostasy and idolatry. In order to provide a sufficient testimony against these people, God sends Jeremiah to “speak to them all which I command you” (1:17). He promises to make Jeremiah “as a fortified city and as a pillar of iron and as walls of bronze” in order to endure the difficulty and hostility he will face in doing this. Clearly, the people are not going to like what he has to say, and he will meet much resistance.

Questions:

- 1.) Compare 1:5 with Galatians 1:15. Did God force men like Jeremiah and Paul into their ministries by appointing them before they were even born? If so, does this override their free will to resist Him? Please explain.

- 2.) Consider the reasons Jeremiah offered as to why he was unfit for the task God gave to him (1:6-8). How did God respond to this? Are we adequately equipped by God to handle whatever ministry He has given to each of us?

- 3.) What does the vision of the almond rod signify (1:11-12)?

4.) What does the vision of the boiling pot signify (1:13-15)?

5.) God knew that the Jews would sorely resist Jeremiah, and yet His message had to be proclaimed (1:16-19). Is people's *resistance*—or our aversion to this resistance—a good reason to avoid speaking God's truth to others today? Please explain.

Part One: Prophecies Made During Josiah's Reign

Lesson Two: Denouncement of Judah's Idolatry (2:1 – 3:5)

The first twenty chapters of Jeremiah are typically attributed to the reign of Josiah (640 – 609 BC). These chapters are comprised of moral discussions concerning the faithlessness of Jerusalem (Judah) toward God due to her fondness for idolatry. God's depiction of this ruined relationship is often characterized as a failed marriage due to adultery and (spiritual) fornication (with foreign gods or nations). These moral sermons center upon idolatry, sin, irreverence, moral deterioration, and self-reliance. C. F. Keil divides these twenty chapters into six sections, and we will follow this arrangement for this study, with one added section to review chapter 7 by itself (because of the amount of material):

- ❑ Denouncement of Judah's idolatry and adultery (2:1 – 3:5).
- ❑ Judah's destruction announced, and likened to Israel (3:6 – 6:30).
- ❑ False confidence of the people in their "worship" of Jehovah (chapters 7 – 10).
- ❑ False confidence of the people in their "worship" of Jehovah (*continued*)
- ❑ Judah's breach of covenant will be punished accordingly (chapters 11 – 13).
- ❑ Judah's captivity is absolute and irrevocable (chapters 14 – 17).
- ❑ Symbolic acts of Judah's sin and destruction (chapters 18 – 20).

This section begins with God laying out His argument to Jerusalem (Judah). He recounts the "youth" of Israel, when the people were still walking through the wilderness and God was providing for them (2:1-2). Yet Israel—like Judah—walked away from Him and

pursued other gods. Those nations that “ate of it”—i.e., took wrongful advantage of Israel, a consecrated people—were guilty for corrupting her (2:3). Meanwhile, Israel herself “walked after emptiness and became empty” (2:5)—i.e., the people left the providential protection of God and gained nothing in their desertion of Him. Thus, they have no reason to hold God accountable for their troubles since they brought them upon themselves. All of Judah is guilty, from the priests to the Levites to the rulers (or kings) to the prophets (of Baal) (2:8). God accuses them of committing two (simultaneous) evils: having left Him, the God of “living waters,” and having dug for themselves “broken cisterns that can hold no water” (2:13). The reason for Judah’s devastation (from foreign invaders) is directly attributed to their own sin (2:14-19). God once delivered His people from bondage (i.e., from Egypt), yet they refused to serve God with any gratitude. Instead, Judah has made herself a harlot (see Isaiah 1:21); the choice vine which God had planted has become corrupted with foreign branches (2:20-21; see Isaiah 5:1-7). “Although you wash yourself with lye and use much soap, the stain of your iniquity is before Me” (2:22).

God’s characterization of Judah’s penchant for idolatry is pointed and purposely graphic. He likens her to a wild donkey in heat, luring the foreign nations to her with her scent (i.e., her lust for idolatry) (2:24; see 5:8). Judah has exchanged the parentage of God for literal strangers; she has rejected the Living God for gods made of her own hands (2:26-28). While Judah claims to be “innocent” and self-righteously defends her honor before the Lord, her crimes and bloodshed give her away (2:29-37). Thus, He promises that the Jews will leave their own land “with your hands on your head”—i.e., as prisoners of war—and their gods will not be able to save them (2:37).

According to the Law of Moses, it is an abomination for a divorced wife to return to the husband who divorced her (Deuteronomy 24:1-4). God *did* divorce Israel for her unfaithfulness to Him (Isaiah 50:1, Hosea 1:6), yet Judah seems undeterred by this and commits all kinds of (spiritual) harlotries and adulteries against her covenant with Him. Thus, God has every reason and every right to divorce Judah as well, since she has become completely polluted and defiled with her wicked union with false gods and the uninhibited life that accompanies this (3:1-5).

Questions:

- 1.) What four classes of people does God hold responsible for Judah's moral decline (2:8)? Why does He focus upon these people in particular?

- 2.) Judah refused to drink of the "living waters" of God, but dug her own cisterns instead (2:13). What does this mean, exactly? How might this same action manifest itself among Christians today?

- 3.) God told Judah, "Although you wash yourself with lye and use much soap, the stain of your iniquity is before Me" (2:22). How does this illustrate the human inability to deal with one's own sin? How does this compare with the act of Christian baptism (see 1 Peter 3:21)—can baptism *by itself* take away sin?

- 4.) In 2:35, Judah claimed innocence against the charges God brought against her. Why did God refuse to listen to her claim? In a practical application, if one *feels* justified by (or innocent toward) God, does that *make* him justified (or innocent)? Please explain.

- 5.) Why does God (repeatedly) liken Judah's idolatrous practices to sexual crimes like harlotry and adultery (as in 3:1-2; see also 3:9)? What is sexual about idolatry?