

Jeremiah: Historical Background

From Jeremiah: Hebrew Prophet, by J. Philip Hyatt: Jeremiah was born, circa 650 B.C., and grew up in the village of Anathoth, a few miles northeast of Jerusalem, in a priestly family. In his childhood he must have learned some of the traditions of his people, particularly the prophecies of Hosea, whose influence can be seen in his early messages. The era in which Jeremiah lived was one of transition for the ancient Near East. The Assyrian empire, which had been dominant for two centuries, declined and fell. Its capital, Nineveh, was captured in 612 B.C. by Babylonians and Medes. Egypt had a brief period of resurgence under the 26th dynasty but did not prove strong enough to establish an empire. The new world power was the Neo-Babylonian empire, ruled by a Chaldean dynasty whose best-known king was Nebuchadnezzar. The small and comparatively insignificant state of Judah had been a vassal of Assyria and, when Assyria declined, asserted its independence for a short time. Subsequently Judah vacillated in its allegiance between Babylonia and Egypt and ultimately became a province of the Neo-Babylonian empire. In 621 B.C., the Judean King Josiah instituted far-reaching reforms based upon a book discovered in the Temple of Jerusalem in the course of building repairs, which was probably Deuteronomy or some part of it. Josiah's reforms included the purification of worship from pagan practices, the centralization of all sacrificial rites in the Temple of Jerusalem, and an effort to establish social justice following principles articulated by earlier prophets (a program that has come to be called the Deuteronomic Reforms). Jeremiah traveled around Jerusalem and the villages of Judah exhorting the people to follow the reforms. Later, he became disillusioned with the reforms because they dealt too largely with the externals of religion and not with the inner spirit and ethical conduct of the people. Early in the reign of Jehoiakim, Josiah's son, Jeremiah delivered his famous "Temple sermon," of which there are two versions, one in Jeremiah 7:1–15 and the other in Jeremiah 26:1–24. He denounced the people for their dependence on the Temple for security and called on them to effect genuine ethical reform. He predicted that God would destroy the Temple of Jerusalem, as he had earlier destroyed that of Shiloh, if they continued in their present path. Jeremiah was immediately arrested and tried on a capital charge. He was acquitted but may have been forbidden to preach again in the Temple. The reign of Jehoiakim was an active and difficult period in Jeremiah's life. That king was very different from his father, the reforming Josiah, whom Jeremiah commended for doing justice and righteousness. Jeremiah denounced Jehoiakim harshly for his selfishness, materialism, and practice of social injustice. Near the time of the Battle of Carchemish, in 605 B.C., when the Babylonians decisively defeated the Egyptians and the remnant of the Assyrians, Jeremiah delivered an oracle against Egypt and a call for Judea to align with the Babylonians. Realizing that this battle made a great difference in the world situation, Jeremiah soon dictated to his scribe, Baruch, a scroll containing all of the messages he had delivered to this time. The scroll

was read by Baruch in the Temple. Subsequently it was read before King Jehoiakim, who cut it into pieces and burned it. Jeremiah went into hiding and dictated another scroll, with additions. When Jehoiakim withheld tribute from the Babylonians (about 601 B.C.), Jeremiah began to warn the Judaeans that they would be destroyed at the hands of those who had previously been their friends. When the king persisted in resisting the Babylonians, King Nebuchadnezzar sent an army to besiege Jerusalem. King Jehoiakim died before the siege began and was succeeded by his son, Jeconiah, who surrendered the capital to the Babylonians on March 16, 597 B.C., and was taken to Babylonia with many of his subjects. The Babylonians placed on the throne of Judah a king favorable to them, Zedekiah (597–586 B.C.), who was more inclined to follow Jeremiah's counsel than Jehoiakim had been but was weak and vacillating and whose court was torn by conflict between pro-Babylonian and pro-Egyptian parties. After paying Babylonia tribute for nearly 10 years, the king made an alliance with Egypt. A second time King Nebuchadnezzar sent an army to Jerusalem, which he captured in August 586 B.C. When emissaries from surrounding states came to Judea to enlist Judea's support in rebellion against Babylonia, Jeremiah put a yoke upon his neck and went around proclaiming that Judea and the surrounding states should submit to the yoke of Babylonia, for it was God who had given them into the hand of the king of Babylonia. Even to the time of the fall of Jerusalem, Jeremiah's message remained the same: submit to the yoke of Babylonia. When the siege of Jerusalem was temporarily lifted at the approach of an Egyptian force, Jeremiah started to leave Jerusalem to go to the land of the tribe of Benjamin. He was arrested on a charge of desertion and placed in prison. Subsequently he was placed in an abandoned cistern, where he would have died had it not been for the prompt action of an Ethiopian eunuch, Ebed-melech, who rescued the prophet with the king's permission and put him in a less confining place. King Zedekiah summoned him from prison twice for secret interviews, and both times Jeremiah advised him to surrender to Babylonia. When Jerusalem finally fell, Jeremiah was released from prison by the Babylonians and offered safe conduct to Babylonia, but he preferred to remain with his own people. So he was entrusted to Gedaliah, a Judaeen from a prominent family whom the Babylonians appointed as governor of the province of Judea. The prophet continued to oppose those who wanted to rebel against Babylonia. After Gedaliah was assassinated, Jeremiah was taken against his will to Egypt by some of the Jews who feared reprisal from the Babylonians. Even in Egypt he continued to rebuke his fellow exiles. Jeremiah probably died about 570 B.C. According to a tradition that is preserved in extrabiblical sources, he was stoned to death there by his own exasperated countrymen. This sketch of Jeremiah's life portrays him as a courageous and persistent prophet who often had to endure physical suffering for his fidelity to the prophetic call. He also suffered inner doubts and conflicts, as his own words reveal, especially those passages that are usually called his "confessions." They reveal a strong conflict between Jeremiah's natural inclinations and his deep sense of vocation to deliver God's message to the people. Jeremiah was by nature sensitive, introspective, and shy. He was denied participation in the ordinary joys and sorrows of his fellowmen and did not marry. He thus could say, "I sat alone," with God's hand upon him. Jeremiah had periods of despondency when he expressed the wish that he had never been born or that he might run away and live alone in the desert. He

reached the point of calling God “a deceitful brook...waters that fail” and even accused God of deceiving and overpowering him. Yet there were times of exaltation when he could say to God, “Thy words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart,” and he could speak of God as “a dread warrior” fighting by his side.

Jeremiah: Key Themes in Prophecy

Authorship and Historical Context

Jeremiah, often called “the weeping prophet,” prophesied during the final decades of the kingdom of Judah, spanning the reigns of multiple kings (Josiah, Jehoiakim, and Zedekiah) until the Babylonian conquest (circa 627-586 BC). Internal evidence (Jeremiah 1:1) and external sources such as the Babylonian Chronicles corroborate that Jeremiah was a historical figure who delivered warnings of impending judgment and eventual restoration. The text itself indicates that Jeremiah’s scribe was Baruch son of Neriah (Jeremiah 36:4), who recorded the prophet’s messages and events.

Archaeological findings, such as the Lachish Letters, illuminate the tumultuous era just prior to the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem (ca. 586 BC). These letters mention the deteriorating situation in Judah, matching key elements in Jeremiah’s account of siege, judgment, and social chaos. Portions of Jeremiah among the Dead Sea Scrolls also demonstrate the reliability of the text, showing only minor scribal variations that do not alter the core message.

Divine Calling and Prophetic Commission

Jeremiah’s calling came at a young age. In Jeremiah 1:5, the Lord says, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you... I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.” Despite Jeremiah’s initial hesitations, he accepted the divine mandate to speak God’s words of warning and hope to a people who largely resisted his message. This personal aspect of the call reveals God’s sovereign choice and underscores themes of divine authority and foreknowledge.

Covenant Faithfulness and National Apostasy

Central to Jeremiah’s message is the concept of covenant faithfulness. Throughout the book, Jeremiah rebukes Judah for violating the Mosaic Covenant through idolatry, social injustice, and spiritual neglect (Jeremiah 2:13; 7:9-10). The prophet highlights how the people relied on the presence of the temple as a guarantee of security (Jeremiah 7:4) rather than living in submission to God’s commands. This warning reveals a key thematic element: external religious forms cannot replace wholehearted devotion and obedience.

Jeremiah's depiction of idolatry (Jeremiah 2:27-28) reveals the gravity of turning from the living God to lifeless idols. He repeatedly emphasizes that such rebellion would inevitably yield divine judgment, reinforcing the broader biblical theme of the seriousness of sin and the necessity of genuine repentance.

Impending Judgment and Exile

A repeated motif in Jeremiah is the impending judgment through the Babylonian empire. Jeremiah 25:11-12 specifically references the seventy years of captivity, confirming a clear prophetic timeline that labeled Babylon as the vehicle of God's discipline. The city of Jerusalem and its surrounding towns would be besieged and ultimately fall because the people refused to heed the prophet's warnings (Jeremiah 19:7-9).

Jeremiah often faced hostility for proclaiming this unwelcome message. Political and religious leaders tried to suppress him, but large-scale destruction came as the Lord declared (Jeremiah 52:4-14). These events highlight the inextricable link between consistent rebellion against God and devastating consequences-both national and personal.

False Prophets vs. True Prophet

The Book of Jeremiah also addresses the prevalence of false prophets claiming peace and prosperity when destruction was imminent (Jeremiah 6:13-14). Jeremiah stands alone in declaring the truth from God while false prophets assure the people that all would be well, despite widespread sin. This conflict underscores a vital biblical principle: discernment is essential because many may speak in God's name, but not all speak truthfully.

Jeremiah 28 portrays the clash between the prophet Jeremiah and Hananiah, a false prophet who contradicts God's solemn warnings. The events that follow-Hananiah's death and the unfolding of Babylon's power-validate Jeremiah's status as a genuine messenger of the Lord. This section warns readers to evaluate purported divine messages carefully, matching them with the revealed Word of God.

Hope and Promised Restoration

Though known for dire predictions, Jeremiah's writings also offer profound hope. Even in the darkest prophecies, God promises He will one day bring His people back from exile (Jeremiah 29:10-14). This promise was not merely national; it included a deep spiritual renewal. Throughout the text, references to a restored future illustrate God's unyielding commitment to His covenant people, even when they had been unfaithful.

Jeremiah 31:10 declares, “He who scattered Israel will gather them and keep them as a shepherd keeps his flock.” This shepherd imagery presents a God who is both just (in allowing punishment for sin) and merciful (in extending restoration).

The New Covenant

One of the most notable themes in Jeremiah is the prophecy of a New Covenant, famously articulated in Jeremiah 31:31-34. This pivotal promise underscores the transformation of the heart as the key to true relationship with the Lord. Jeremiah 31:33 says, “I will put My law in their minds and inscribe it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they will be My people.”

This New Covenant is central not only to Jeremiah’s writing but to the entire biblical redemption narrative. It points forward to the ultimate fulfillment in Christ’s work, as cited later in the New Testament (cf. Hebrews 8:8-12). The heart change envisioned here suggests an intimate, internalized faith far surpassing mere external conformity.

Personal Struggles of the Prophet

Jeremiah’s life and emotional struggles run throughout the book, reflecting a deeply personal aspect of prophecy. He demonstrates authenticity in his laments and confessions-sometimes called Jeremiah’s “Confessions” (Jeremiah 11:18-23; 15:15-18; 17:14-18, among others). These passages reveal the emotional toll that standing for truth can have in a hostile environment.

The prophet’s tears are symbolic of his compassion for his wayward nation. Jeremiah 9:1 states, “Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears, I would weep day and night.” His burden underscores the seriousness of the people’s plight and reflects God’s heart for those who stray.

Emphasis on Repentance

Repentance is a recurring call in Jeremiah. The prophet calls people to “amend your ways and your deeds” (Jeremiah 7:3), insisting that genuine return to the Lord would pivot the nation away from looming disaster. This imperative of repentance is braided together with the broader biblical understanding that God is always ready to forgive those who turn from sin and seek Him wholeheartedly.

In Jeremiah 18:7-8, the example of the potter and clay underscores that if a nation repents, God can relent from the judgment He has declared. This theme highlights both divine sovereignty and human responsibility, showing that individuals and nations do not have to remain in rebellion but may humbly return to the Lord’s ways.

God's Sovereignty Over Nations

Another dominant note is the universal reign of God over all nations. Though Jeremiah's primary focus is on Judah, he prophesies judgment and hope for various Gentile peoples (Jeremiah 46-51). This worldwide scope reveals the Lord as not merely the local God of Judah but the sovereign Ruler over all kingdoms.

The theological significance of God's sovereignty undergirds the entire book, affirming that historical events-yet future when Jeremiah spoke-unfolded precisely as foretold. The Babylonian rise and the later Persian ascendancy align with Jeremiah's prophecies, illustrating that no empire can thwart God's sovereign decree.

Applications and Lessons

Jeremiah's teachings resonate beyond ancient Judah. The warnings against empty religion, outward ritual without inward devotion, false security, and reliance on false prophets remain relevant. The promise of restoration, especially through the New Covenant, shapes broader Christian and biblical truth that emphasizes grace, transformed hearts, and unbreakable fellowship with God.

Jeremiah's personal struggles encourage believers in every age to remain faithful despite trials. His example of unwavering proclamation-amid opposition, rejection, and personal cost-calls readers to pursue truth, trust God's word, and remember that even in the midst of judgment, divine mercy and redemption shine.

Midrashim about Jeremiah

The sages drew direct comparisons between their lives and ministries, noting striking similarities:

Ministry Duration: Both Moses and Jeremiah prophesied for a period of forty years.

Tribe Rebellions: Moses' own tribe (the Levites led by Korach) rebelled against him. Similarly, Jeremiah's tribe and hometown (Anathoth) revolted against his message.

Reluctant Beginnings: Both men initially resisted their divine call by claiming they were unable to speak properly (Exodus 4:10, Jeremiah 1:6)

In Lamentations Rabbah (Eikhah Rabbah), the rabbis link the two figures through the Hebrew word Eikhah ("How?"), a word used to introduce lamentation. Three biblical figures—Moses, Isaiah, and Jeremiah—prophesied using this term, but each did so in a different era:

Moses uttered it in times of relative stability: "How can I myself alone bear your troublesomeness!" (Deut. 1:12).

Isaiah uttered it during Israel's moral decline: "How is the faithful city become a harlot!" (Isaiah 1:21).

Jeremiah uttered it during absolute destruction: "How does the city sit solitary!" (Lamentations 1:1).

Rabbi Levi compares this to a princess who has three suitors. The first suitor sees her in her happiness, the second sees her acting immorally, and the third sees her in complete disgrace. Moses saw Israel in their glory, Isaiah saw their infidelity, and Jeremiah was forced to witness their ultimate ruin and exile.