

HOURGLASS BIBLE STUDY

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Introduction to Jeremiah*

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Biographical Background

Jeremiah came from a village in the land of the Benjamites, Anathoth, which is in the hill country north of Judah, in Israel. His father, Hilkiyah, was a priest in Anathoth, and Jeremiah was a Levite descended from Abiathar. His homeland was culturally and religiously more like the tribes of Israel than Judah, although its territory was often under the control of Judah, which was governed by Jerusalem.

Jeremiah was a critic of the house of David, probably in part because of his family's previous history. During David's reign, there were two factions of priests; Abiathar was a leader of the Levite priests, who were designated as priests during Moses' time and who were the dominant priests during the time of Judges. Zadok was the leader of the other faction of priests, and they were in competition for control of the temple and influence with King David. When there was a struggle to see who would succeed David, (Solomon or Adonijah), Abiathar backed Adonijah. When Solomon became king, he banished Abiathar from Jerusalem and Zadok's faction gained control of the Temple.

Jeremiah was called by God to be a prophet probably as a teenager, but he was not widely regarded for his prophecy for the first 15 years or so because he prophesized that Jerusalem would fall and most thought it would be able to become independent again. He prophesized throughout a turbulent time in Jerusalem and Judah, through the reign of multiple kings and while Judah was under the power of different Empires. He died in Egypt sometime after 587 BCE.

General Historical Background

Jeremiah is considered to be an actual historic figure. His prophetic mission began in 627 BCE and occurred during the reigns of three different kings in Jerusalem: Josiah (640-609 BCE), Jehoiakim (609-598 BCE), and Zedekiah (597-587 BCE). There were two other kings named between these reigns, but those reigns lasted only a few months before the powers that be set up others as king. This time span included many of the most significant events in Judah's history.

During Josiah's thirteenth year on the throne, which is when Jeremiah began his ministry, the last powerful king of Assyria, Ashurbanipal, died. When this happened, Assyria became less powerful and Judah and other countries rebelled and were free of Assyrian control. Josiah hoped to reestablish the kingdom as it had existed under David and Solomon. Jeremiah's more pessimistic prophecy of the fall of Jerusalem was not popular with him.

Probably as part of this effort to reinvigorate the Kingdom, Josiah initiated religious reforms in 622 BCE. The tradition was that a scroll was found in the Temple that triggered this reform, but not all scholars seem to think this was true. Josiah reaffirmed the covenant of Moses and focused worship in the Temple in Jerusalem. Jeremiah favored return to Mosaic law but seemed to not particularly favor sacrifice and making the Temple so important. In 609 BCE, Josiah died in a battle with Egypt at Megiddo (the battle of Carchemish). His son Jehoahaz was crowned, but a few months later the Egyptian King came back through the area and took Jehoahaz captive, putting Jehoiakim on the throne and requiring tribute to be paid to Egypt. Two years later, the power in the region shifted away from Egypt and Judah was part of the Babylonian empire.

The Temple's life fell into two categories. There was the life of the Temple priests, of which Jeremiah was not a part. Then there was the life of men who came to the outer court daily and discussed issues of religion, politics, and general news. Jeremiah would have been part of this group. These people tended to group around different leaders—Jeremiah was probably one of these people who had a following.

Jehoiakim did not like Jeremiah's prophecies and the temple authorities banned Jeremiah from the Temple. In response, Jeremiah dictated his prophecies to his friend Baruch, who wrote them down and took them to the Temple, where he read them aloud. This was the first time a prophet had his words written down, a significant development. At some point, Jeremiah's scroll was destroyed and he asked Baruch to recreate it.

This king, Jehoiakim (second son of Josiah), was set up by the Egyptian rulers, but later shifted his allegiance to Babylon. At one point, Jehoiakim advocated a rebellion, but the nobles decided against it, perhaps influenced by Jeremiah's prophecy. Eventually, however, he led a revolt against Babylon that failed. Jehoiakim died in unknown circumstances and the first exiles were taken to Babylon at this time (597 BCE). Jeremiah, however, was given a choice and stayed in Judah. After Jehoiakim died, another king was chosen but was soon replaced by someone chosen by the Babylonians, Zedekiah.

The third king, Zedekiah, another son of Josiah, was set up as the king by Babylon. Zedekiah eventually led another rebellion against Babylon, which failed and resulted in the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem. Zedekiah was forced to see his sons die, then blinded, then taken to Babylon in chains. At this time Jeremiah reluctantly was taken with other refugees to Egypt.

Authorship of Jeremiah

Jeremiah dictated two scrolls of the book to Baruch, and Baruch wrote other parts of the book based on his memories of Jeremiah. Other Deuteronomic writers likely added explanatory or other notes. Several versions of the book exist. As a result, the organization of the book is debatable and some authorship is unknown, but much of it was written during Jeremiah's lifetime.

Literary Overview of the Book of Jeremiah

There are three genres of literature in Jeremiah, and all three are more or less scattered throughout the book. First, there are poetic oracles, which are printed as poetry and are probably the most direct version of Jeremiah's words. Second, there are literary speeches, more like sermons, that are probably composed of things Baruch or others remembered Jeremiah saying. Finally there are biographical narratives, mostly in the later two thirds of the book. The literary speeches and biographical narratives were edited by later scribes, as shown by the variation in the content in different ancient scrolls. These scribes were influenced by the Deuteronomic traditions, which Warren will explain to us in more detail.

There were two major versions of Jeremiah, the Septuagint (Greek) and the Masoretic (Hebrew). The Greek version is shorter and the two versions have different organizations. Evidence found in the Dead Sea scrolls suggests that the Greek version is based on an older version than the Hebrew. While there have been various scholars who have analyzed the organization of the book, it is difficult to say that the organization is itself too meaningful because of the various versions and the history of editing.

Jeremiah's poetic style includes sudden changes in scene and point of view, moving from commentary on one king's reign to another and from one situation to another. Jeremiah has a broad view of the role of God, even though he also talks about specific parts of the natural landscape and images from human occupations. He uses staccato exclamations, assonance, and word play, which is typical of Hebrew poetry.

He also uses rhetorical questions and commands and invocation. The rapid change between these techniques and topics may prove challenging to us as we read.

The literary speeches show that Jeremiah's view is often similar to the Deuteronomic view. He simultaneously affirms Israel's uniqueness and denies that it is different from other nations, showing how Israel is a reflection of all people.

All the biographical narratives are scattered throughout the book, but they only include references to specific people and dates from Chapter 20 onward. This material occurs when amplifying sermon situations and when explaining a historical event or project.

One way to look at the structure is to see that it begins with a historical note and Jeremiah's commission, then moves to a prophesy of doom for Israel. It then goes to history of the prophet's tribulations. This is followed by optimistic prophecy of Israel's renewal and the prophets return to Anathoth, with more about his tribulations. It then moves back to predicting doom for the nations, has a concluding message, and a historical appendix.

Chapters 20-40 illustrate how the book moves in a non-chronological sequence. It first moves between the reign of Jehoiakim to the reign of Zedekiah, then back to Jehoiakim's 4th year, then to the beginning of Jehoiakim's reign, then to Zedekiah, back to Jehoiakim and then Zedekiah and after the capture of Jerusalem.

Another way to look at the organization is to see chapters 1-25 as Jeremiah's book and chapters 26-45 as Baruch's book about Jeremiah. Chapters 46-51 includes the Oracles against the Nations. The final part, chapter 52 is a historical summary.

Other Interesting Bits

Islamic thought is that Jeremiah is mentioned in the Quran in 2:258, although there is some debate about this identification.

"Jeremiah" means "God shall raise."

"The prophetess Huldah was a relative and contemporary of Jeremiah while the prophet Zephaniah was his mentor." (Wikipedia entry on Jeremiah)

"Many of his first reported oracles are about, and addressed to, the Israelites at Samaria. He resembles the northern prophet Hosea in his use of language and examples of God's relationship to Israel." (Wikipedia entry on Jeremiah).

*Much of this information has been drawn from the *Harper Collins Study Bible*, 1993. Literary information came from *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, Alter and Kermode, editors, 1987. Other sources include *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: An Ecumenical Study Bible* (1991), *The Interpreters One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, and Wikipedia entries.