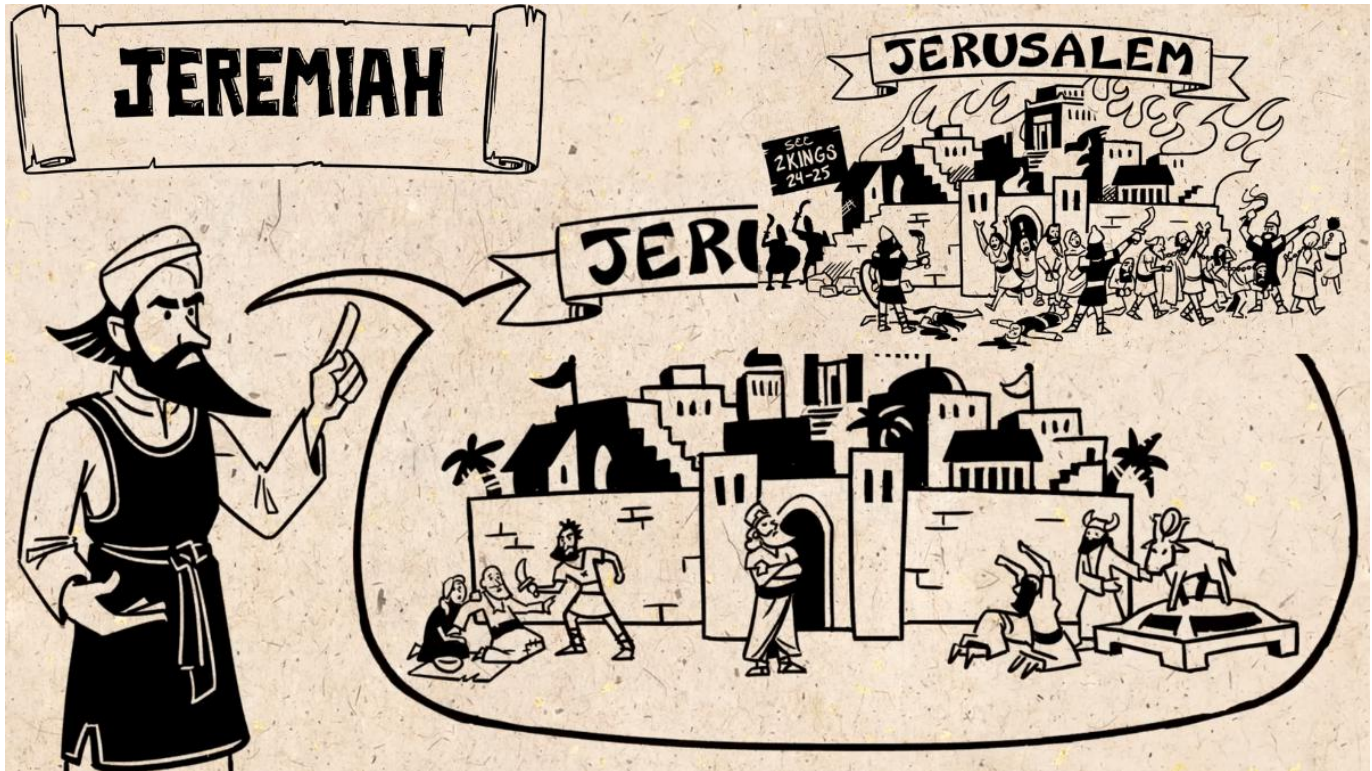


## Introduction to Jeremiah



### The Legacy for Jeremiah

In the middle of the 8th century BC, approximately a century before Jeremiah began his ministry, a new age of prophets appeared in Israel: Amos and Hosea, whose ministry was largely to Northern Israel. These were followed after a short time by Isaiah and Micah, who preached mainly to Judah. They rebuked kings, as did Nathan and Elijah before them. They attacked the worship of other gods than Yahweh as Elijah had done, and like him deplored empty rituals. What is new is that this new age of prophets emphasized the tradition that Israel had become the people of Yahweh through divine election at the Exodus and hence these new prophets their own mission in the light of the particular privileges and responsibilities of Israel. There was evidently no need to teach the people these facts as though they had never heard them. And when the prophets castigated the people because of their disloyalty and neglect of the obligations which lay upon them because of their privileged position, they were not preaching in a vacuum. Rather, the people were reminded of what they knew, or should have known.

Isaiah and Micah added and stressed another aspect of the people's election: the divine choice of David and his dynasty to rule Yahweh's people and the city of Jerusalem/Temple as the place where Yahweh's dwelling place was to be found. Isaiah made a good deal of reference to them. Yahweh's presence in Jerusalem was

- the hope for the future of Israel and the nations (Isa. 2:2–4).
- He would fight for Israel from Mount Zion (Isa. 14:32; 17:12–14; 28:14–18; 29:5–8).
- At the same time Isaiah could preach judgment against Judah (Isa. 1:21–26) and against Jerusalem (Isa. 29:1–4), a theme taken up by Micah (Mic. 3:9–12).

There was a double tradition of a covenant: the covenant of Sinai which brought Israel into its privileged position and laid a heavy obligation upon her, and the covenant which Yahweh made with the house of David (2 Sam. 7). Even though the term “covenant” is seldom used there is no escaping its reality, with its

emphasis on the divine grace which originated it and the privilege and obligations resting on those who regarded themselves as members of the covenant family.

The two covenants were not unrelated. In the age of David the older Sinai Covenant tradition was extended to provide a divine authorization for the new state with its territorial and political claims. The dual election of the Davidic house to rule over Israel and of Mount Zion to be Yahweh's dwelling place was not intended to overshadow the Sinai Covenant. But given the location within the Southern Kingdom, it was the source of considerable tension, and part of the prophetic task was to remind the people of the primacy of the Sinai Covenant.

The Covenant imposed obligations upon the nation and upon individuals, expressed in the basic covenant law. There were ethical claims upon Israel of the strongest kind. When that law was held lightly and openly disregarded, Israel placed herself under the judgment of that law. Failure to fulfill the demands of the covenant law would result in the divine judgment falling on the offenders. Instead of the law being a guide to national welfare and happiness it became a curse and a threat to national existence. The greatest offense of all was the rejection of Yahweh himself as Israel's sovereign Lord. There could be no shared allegiance between Yahweh and any other god. The cry of Elijah was "If Yahweh be God, follow him" (1 K. 18:21). The spirit of that cry, if not the exact words, is found again and again in the prophets of Israel. To worship any other god was to violate Yahweh's covenant and to lay oneself open to Yahweh's wrath. All the eighth-century prophets gave warning of judgment to come, not in some distant future but in the context of historical events. At the same time they looked beyond judgment to a better future.

It was against the background of a long prophetic tradition that Jeremiah was called to preach.

### **The Historical Times**

The book of Jeremiah makes contact with historical events at many points. In many cases precise dates and otherwise known events are referred to. It was Jeremiah's responsibility to proclaim a message about nations and kingdoms, "to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant" (1:10). It was an age of crises. As Jeremiah began to preach, the Assyrian empire was in decay. At the collapse of Assyria, Egypt, and then Babylon, the kingdom of the Medes stood waiting to pick the spoils of war. Judah herself was caught up in the drama. To begin she was nominally a vassal of Assyria, then for a brief period independent, then a vassal of Egypt, and finally a vassal of Babylon, under whom Judah lost even her identity as a nation when Nebuchadrezzar took her king into exile and destroyed her city and temple. Jeremiah lived through all this that can be seen in six "periods:"

- Judah up to the accession of Josiah in 640 BC,
- the nations at the time of Assyrian power,
- Josiah's reign 640–609 and the final collapse of Assyria,
- from Josiah's death to the fall of Jerusalem in 597,
- the period 597–587 - vassal of the Babylonians, and
- post 587 - the Exile

Jeremiah began his ministry in the "13th year of Josiah" (Jer 1:6; 627 BC). Josiah was the grandson of King Manasseh, perhaps the most evil and idolatrous king of Judah. Manasseh was the catalyst to many of the evils in Judah to which Jeremiah drew attention in his preaching. In his day Judah was a vassal state of Assyria, and had been since 732. (*Note: if you are interested in a recounting of the history of Kings from David to Manasseh, the "Introduction to Isaiah" provides a good summary*)

Manasseh allowed the restoration of local pagan shrines, gave full rein to pagan practices of all kinds, tolerated the fertility cult with its sacred prostitution in the very temple precincts (2 K. 21:4–7; Zeph.

1:4–5). Even the cult of Molech which practiced human sacrifice was allowed (2 K. 21:6), Old Canaanite practices, the worship of Baal, the erection of an Asherah, the worship of astral deities, and a host of other practices which were an offense to the Lord were unleashed in Judah once again. All this led to a blurring of the distinction between Judaism and paganism, and to a wholesale disregard of covenant law. Indeed, the tolerance of all these pagan practices was tantamount to a rejection of the sole sovereignty of Yahweh, Israel's covenant God.

As Assyria's power began to wane, Josiah came to the throne - first under a regency because of his young age, but eventually as true king. But Judah was surrounded by other nations/tribes which were nettlesome to dangerous. These nations are mentioned in Jeremiah's "oracles against the nations" (chs. 46–51). The nations include: Egypt, Philistia, Moab, Ammon, Edom, Damascus, Arab tribes, Elam, and Babylon .

Still, the weakening of Assyria provided the opportunity for Judah to no longer be a vassal state, but regain its independence. When Josiah had the full power of his kingship he began a series of reforms that are described in 2 Kings 22–23 and 2 Chronicles 34–35. The accounts differ somewhat and the exact chronology of events is less than clear, but undoubtedly the reform took some time. The reform was already well in progress before the law book was found in the temple in 622 BC. This discovery did not spark off the reform but certainly gave impetus to the program.

In its initial stages the reform was concerned with the purging of foreign cults of all kinds both in the Jerusalem temple and further afield. The repairs to the temple (2 Kings 22:3–7) involved the removal of evidence of Assyrian religion, notably the bronze altar (2 Kings 17:12–16). But all the paraphernalia of the foreign cults and practices, the solar and astral cults largely of Mesopotamian origin (2 Kings 23:4–5, 11–12), the native pagan cults, some introduced by Manasseh (2 Kings 23:6, 10) and some more ancient (vv. 13–14), were removed. The personnel associated with these cults were put to death. Divination and magic were banned. The cult places in Northern Israel were likewise destroyed (vv. 15–20) as far north as Galilee (2 Chronicles 34:6). In Judah itself Yahweh shrines throughout the land were closed and all public worship was centralized in Jerusalem. Country priests were invited to come to Jerusalem and take their place among the priests there (2 Kings 23:8). The religious reform was comprehensive and far-reaching and was also the principal expression of a resurgent nationalism. Josiah's annexation of Northern Israel gave political expression to a renewed nationalism. Political unification and religious unification went hand in hand.

There was a long period in Josiah's reign when the regional powers sorted themselves out. While the "sorting" is historically interesting, for our purposes, it can be described as the Babylonian Empire to the East and Egypt to the south and west - with Judah in between. Religiously, what steps Josiah took to maintain the momentum of the reform we do not know. Presumably he preserved all his gains while he lived. But it was, of course, an imposed reform, and we may well wonder whether the great bulk of the people underwent any change of heart at all. Judging from Jeremiah's later preaching many of them did not, and once Josiah passed from the scene they reverted to their old ways.

No doubt there were many good results in areas of national morality and justice. The abolition of pagan cults would have been a moral and spiritual benefit. But there were, no doubt, problems too. The closing of the shrines in the countryside created problems for the local priests, and many village people were deprived of at least some form of public worship. The temple in Jerusalem gained in prestige, but participation in the official services in the temple led to complacency and under the cover of religious observances many people indulged in blatant violations of covenant law (Jer 7:1–15, cf. vv. 21–31). A man like Jeremiah saw through the whole sham of external conformity without inward change, and as the years went by he became disillusioned. Alongside increased cultic activity (6:16–21) was ingrained

rebellion (7:1–5; 8:4–9). There was also a smug complacency among the people arising out of Yahweh's having given the people a new independence and having preserved the temple, the king, and the state. Somehow they believed that the whole scandalous eclipse of religion and state hardly mattered since Yahweh guaranteed the inviolability of both temple and state. The death of Josiah came as a rude shock, but not of such a kind as to lead the nation to repentance.

After the death of Josiah, Judah became a vassal state of Egypt. King Jehoiakim was a poor replacement for Josiah. He was personally extravagant and built a fine palace with forced labor (22:13–19). He allowed Josiah's reform to lapse and played into the hands of those who had always opposed it. There may not have been the excesses of Manasseh's reign but popular pagan practices were introduced again (7:16–18; 11:9–13). Public morality deteriorated (5:26–29; 7:1–15). Prophets who resisted these tendencies were harassed and even put to death (26:20–23). Despite this, priests and prophets continued to assure the people that all was well (5:12; 7:4; 14:13; etc.). Jeremiah's exposure of the evil of all this led him into deep personal persecution, even in his own village Anathoth (11:18–23).

While the history of the Kings and Jerusalem from this point are historically interesting, simply put, the combination of weak kings, external powers, faithlessness to the covenant, and more led to Jerusalem being captured by the Babylonians in 597 BC (with key members of the royal family, artisans and religious leaders taken in to exile), and after a senseless rebellion, Jerusalem was destroyed in 587 and the Jerusalem population was exiled to the east.

The Babylonians attempted to establish their regional form of government in Judah, but the appointed governor was assassinated, and the group behind the revolt forcibly took Jeremiah to Egypt.

Judah is removed from history until the people are restored to the land and Jerusalem by King Cyrus some 40 years later.

Such were the times of Jeremiah's ministry.

### **The Book of Jeremiah**

The book of Jeremiah, like other prophetic books, is not a book in the modern sense but rather a collection of prophetic oracles and other materials which have passed through a long and complex history of transmission. While there are many theories about the book's path to reaching the final written form, a simple theory is that the book consists of three collections:

Chapters 1–25: Divine Judgment upon Judah and Jerusalem

Chapters 30–33: The Book of Consolation

Chapters 46–51: Oracles against the Nations

The scholarly opinions are many and nuanced, but for our purpose, the basic historical material came from a "Biographer" of some kind who was contemporary with the events and perhaps an eyewitness. The best candidate for such a biographer is Baruch. It is possible that Baruch simply provided basic material which was then available to men who had been deeply influenced by the reforms of Josiah and by the book of Deuteronomy and who, like Jeremiah himself, were inheritors of a literary prose style which came to expression in various ways during the seventh and early sixth centuries BC. In these Jeremianic narratives, in the Deuteronomistic history (Joshua to II Kings), and in the Sermons of the book of Jeremiah. Baruch preserved the teaching of Jeremiah so that his ministry of judgment and hope need not die with him but could continue to be relevant to the people of Israel after the fall of Jerusalem.

The Book of Jeremiah (apart from the Psalms) is the longest book in Scripture. It is complex, not systematically constructed, and very much a response to the history unfolding during his ministry. Nonetheless, there are perhaps four major themes that emerge:

God

Israel, the Nation, and the Individual

Sin and Repentance

The Future Hope

### God

For Jeremiah, Yahweh was the “Fountain of living waters” (יְהוָה), the sure source of the life and sustenance of his people Israel. He was a Potter who stood as a free Person over men who were also free persons. He was the Creator of the world who had set up the natural order of things. He was the Lord of history who directed Israel’s history from the time of her election but who also controlled the nations. He knew the hearts of men and tried them and rewarded men according to their deeds. Toward his people Yahweh was “merciful” (חַסִּיד), that is, he displayed “loyalty/steadfast love” (חֶסֶד). This love of Yahweh for Israel is implied in passages which express his pain and consternation that Israel should turn away from him in her sinfulness. He had loved Israel with an “everlasting love” and despite her rebellion he had prolonged his unfailing faithfulness (חֶסֶד) to her.

Yahweh did not require from men sacrifices and ritual observances which the priests and temple prophets would require, but repentance and obedience. God dealt with men in the immediacy of personal relationship, which excluded any necessity for the intervention of the priests and the cult or their mistaken trust in cultic activities. In the context of a personal relationship, obedience to Yahweh’s laws which would issue in social and personal ethics was demanded.

### Israel

Jeremiah had a noble view of Israel and explored a number of striking metaphors to describe her: vineyard, first fruits, beloved, flock whom he loved with an everlasting love. However, those metaphors were limited to the period of Exodus. Entrance into the settled land of Canaan marked the beginning of apostasy from Yahweh, which Jeremiah depicts in figures drawn from nature. Israel was like a “restive young she-camel” or “a wild ass used to the wilderness.” Because Israel had left her first love and had turned aside to worship false gods, and had even attempted to worship Yahweh with pagan rites, Israel was depicted under the figures of “adultery” or “harlotry.”

The nation, however, was composed of individuals, and Jeremiah understood better than most that God works with the individual. Jeremiah’s teaching on the individual comes more by implication than by direct statement. He had much to say about the “heart,” which in the psychology of the time represented the inclinations and attitudes of men. Yahweh tries the heart and the mind. The heart of man is the source of evil, “*deceitful above all things and desperately wicked*” (17:9). In the days of restoration Yahweh would give men a new “heart” (24:7).

Jeremiah’s view is that a man’s acceptance with God is not dependent on the temple and its rituals or circumcision. Nor does a man need to live in the land of Judah, for Yahweh may be worshiped and served in exile. Wherever men are, they may seek Yahweh with all their heart. When Yahweh restored his people and established a New Covenant with the nation, the law would be in the hearts of men, that is, the emphasis is on personal acceptance of the law and personal obedience to it (31:31–33). Jeremiah’s own deep personal experience with Yahweh was testimony enough to the importance of the individual.

### Sin and Repentance

The source of this wickedness in Israel is the hearts of the people (4:14; 5:23; 17:1, 9). The people are described as having a stubborn and rebellious heart. The phrase “the stubbornness of their hearts” occurs many times. The evil deeds in which Israel was involved were of two broad classes—the worship of false gods, and the perpetration of personal and social sins of an ethical and moral kind. To worship false gods was to commit an abomination. The ethical sins touched on matters of justice, honesty, purity, etc. (7:5, 8). All such evil deeds were offenses against Yahweh’s law and represented a breach of the covenant. Obedience to the covenant demands was incumbent on Israel. Yet sin was not simply a matter of casual, or even habitual breach of the covenant laws. It was a basic attitude in Israel in regard to Yahweh (2:22; 5:3, 5; 36:7). It became clear to Jeremiah that Israel’s only hope lay in repentance and the turning of the whole person to Yahweh. When Israel turned from their evil ways and turned to Yahweh with all their hearts they would find that Yahweh yearned for them and would have mercy on them. As the years went by, it would seem that Jeremiah was less and less persuaded that the people would or could repent. It was not that Yahweh was unable to forgive or unwilling to restore the repentant man of Israel to fellowship with himself, but rather that Israel by habit and custom would not repent: “*Fools my people are, they know me not; Senseless children they are, having no understanding; They are wise in evil, but know not how to do good.*” (Jer 4:22)

### Future Hope

Jeremiah’s message pointed men beyond judgment to a future hope when Israel’s fortunes would be restored. In the famous passage in 31:31–34 describing the New Covenant, Jeremiah reached the apex of his thinking on the new hope. One day God would give his people a covenant, not like the one they had broken during the centuries but one in which his law would be written on people’s hearts. The New Covenant would be with the nation, but since it was to be written on the hearts of the people it would also be with individuals.

*The days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers the day I took them by the hand to lead them forth from the land of Egypt; for they broke my covenant and I had to show myself their master, says the LORD. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD. I will place my law within them, and write it upon their hearts; I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer will they have need to teach their friends and kinsmen how to know the LORD. All, from least to greatest, shall know me, says the LORD, for I will forgive their evildoing and remember their sin no more. (Jer 31:31-34)*

Jeremiah also gave expression to messianic hopes. God would raise up a “righteous Branch for David,” who would deal wisely and perform justice and righteousness in the land (23:5–6; 33:15–16). Jeremiah, like some of his predecessors, gave him the symbolic name “Yahweh our Righteousness.”

### **Metaphors in Jeremiah**

Most metaphors in Jeremiah are taken from the sphere of human activities: roles and activities within the family and the home, personal life, agriculture activities, work, and social realities. The language of the law and court offers many metaphors to Jeremiah. To Jeremiah God is the judge who will judge his people for their violation of the covenant (Jer. 11:20). In some passages God appears as the counsel presenting his case against Israel (Jer. 2:9) or against the nations (Jer. 25:9). In other passages God appears as the defending counsel who pleads the case of Israel (Jer. 50:34, 51:36). The reason Jeremiah used legal

language was because the people of Israel believed the legal system in Israel was a place where they could find justice.[4]

The primary metaphor Jeremiah used to describe the relationship between God and Israel was that of marriage. In the marriage metaphor God is portrayed as the husband who has been betrayed by his wife and expresses all the anger and disappointment that follows betrayal. The marriage metaphor reflects the depth of Israel's infidelity.

The marital relationship between God and Israel began well (Jer. 2:2-3) but then it degenerated because the people found other lovers by worshiping other gods (Jer. 2:5-13). Jeremiah used graphic sexual metaphors to depict Israel's infidelity (Jer. 2:20, 23-24, 33; 3:1-9, 12, 20; 4:30; 13:27). These metaphors were designed to shock Jeremiah's hearer and to bring home to his audience the depth of Israel's unfaithfulness.

To describe Israel's relationship with Yahweh, Jeremiah used the water metaphor. God was "the fountain of living water" (Jer. 2:13), an ongoing source of life like an ever-flowing natural spring. The other gods were "cracked cisterns that cannot hold water." The water metaphor is also used to describe the politics of Judah. Asking military assistance from Egypt was like drinking the waters of the Nile and asking for help from Assyria was like drinking the waters of the Euphrates (Jer. 2:18).

Jeremiah used several metaphors to describe the coming judgment. The judgment against Judah was hot wind (Jer. 4:11), it was a burning fire (Jer. 4:4), and a devouring lion (Jer. 4:7). To portray Judah's enemies, Jeremiah used the shepherd metaphor. The generals of their armies are shepherds and their armies are flocks (Jer. 6:3). The devastation caused by the invading armies is like the devastation caused by fire (Jer. 11:16). The people described God's judgment as drinking poisoned water (Jer. 8:14).

The poetic and symbolic language in the message of Jeremiah is evidence of a prophet skilled in the art of communication. Jeremiah knew that failure to convince the people about the urgency of his message would result in the destruction of the nation. Although Jeremiah was an accomplished orator and his preaching was filled with passion and urgency, the rebellious people refused to accept his impassioned call to repent and turn to God.