

Book of Jeremiah

Title:

This book gains its title from the human author, who begins with “the words of Jeremiah” (1:1).

Jeremiah recounts more of his own life than any other prophet, telling of his ministry, the reactions of his audiences, testings, and his personal feelings.

His name means “Jehovah throws”, in the sense of laying down a foundation, or “Jehovah establishes, appoints, or sends”.

Seven other Jeremiahs appear in Scripture (2 Kings 23:31, 1 Chron. 5:24; 12:4; 12:10; 12:13; Neh. 10:2, 12:1), and Jeremiah the prophet is named at least 9 times outside of his book (compare 2 Chron. 35:25; 36:12; 36:21-22; Ezra 1:1; Dan. 9:2; Matt. 2:17; 16:14; 27:9).

The Old and New Testaments quote Jeremiah at least 7 times.

Jeremiah is rightly considered among the major prophets.

His book is longer than Isaiah and is also longer than either Ezekiel or the 12 Minor Prophets combined.

Its important subject matter includes timely messages to God’s people in the closing days of Judah, and prophecies concerning the Messiah and the new covenant.

The book customarily appears between Isaiah and Ezekiel in the Old Testament Canon.

Jeremiah’s text has come down in differing forms.

In the Greek Old Testament (the Septuagint), it is shorter and shows a different arrangement of the material (in chapters 46 to 51).

Both the Hebrew and Greek texts of the book have been found among the Dead sea Scrolls.

No compelling reason exists, however, for abandoning the traditional form of the original Hebrew text reflected in our English translations.

Authorship:

Jeremiah doubtless was the chief author of the book that bears his name (see title above).

The Book's final edition was probably brought together shortly after his death by his scribe, Baruch.

Because he was raised in a Levitical tribe, Jeremiah learned a high regard for the law of the Lord and the importance of the temple and priesthood.

Jeremiah, who served as both a priest and a prophet, was the son of a priest named Hilkiah (not the high-priest of 2 Kings 22:8 who discovered the book of the law).

He was from the small village of Anathoth (1:1), today called Anata, about 3 miles northeast of Jerusalem in Benjamin's tribal inheritance.

As an object lesson to Judah, Jeremiah remained unmarried (16:1-4).

He was assisted in ministry by a scribe named Baruch, to whom Jeremiah dictated and who copied and had custody over the writings compiled from the prophet's messages (36:4, 32; 45:1).

Jeremiah has been known as "the weeping prophet" (compare 9:1, 13:17; 14:17), living a life of conflict because of his predictions of judgment by the invading Babylonians.

He was threatened, tried for his life, put in stocks, forced to flee from Jehoiakim, publicly humiliated by a false prophet and thrown into a pit.

Jeremiah carried out a ministry directed mostly to his own people in Judah, but which expanded to other nations at times.

He appealed to his countrymen to repent and avoid God's judgment via an invader (chapters 7 and 26).

Once invasion was certain after Judah refused to repent, he pled with them not to resist the Babylonian conqueror in order to prevent total destruction (chapter 27).

He also called on delegates of other nations to heed his counsel and submit to Babylon (chapter 27), and he predicted judgments from God on various nations (25:12-38; Chapters 46 to 51).

The dates of his ministry, which spanned 5 decades (a little more than 4 decades), are from the Judean king Josiah's 13th year, noted in 1:2 (627 B.C.), to beyond the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon in 586 B.C. (Jer. chapters 39, 40 and 52).

After 586 B.C., Jeremiah was forced to go with a fleeing remnant of Judah to Egypt (Jer. chapters 43 and 44).

He was possibly still ministering (in 570 B.C.).

A rabbinic note claims that when Babylon invaded Egypt in 568/567 B.C., Jeremiah was taken captive to Babylon.

He could have lived even to pen the book's closing scene ca. 561 B.C. in Babylon, when Judah's king Jehoiachin, captive in Babylon since 597 B.C., was allowed liberties in his last days (See 52:31-34).

Jeremiah, if still alive at that time, was between 85 and 90 years old.

Jeremiah prophesied during the reigns of Judah's last kings.

His prophetic ministry stretched from the days of Josiah (640 – 609 B.C.), until Jerusalem's fall in the reign of Zedekiah (598 – 586 B.C.).

Following his divine call (in 627 B.C.), Jeremiah served the Lord and the people of Judah throughout the rapidly changing scenes of the final decades of the southern kingdom and even beyond.

This prophet was a deeply spiritual man.

He was wholly dedicated to God so that despite a shy and retiring nature, his fervent love for God and His people never waned.

Jeremiah became an object lesson of a man whose commitment to God enabled him, by God's grace, to overcome his natural timidity and live courageously in the face of severe opposition and tragic circumstances.

His personal sorrow over the messages that he had to deliver often caused him to weep for his people in a manner unparalleled until the Man of Sorrows would come.

Historical Setting:

The time frame of the Book of Jeremiah stretches from the prophet's call in 627 B.C. until his later life among the Judean refugees in Egypt some years after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.

These were trying times for Judah.

The nation was caught up in the rapidly changing political events in the Near East during the late seventh and early sixth centuries B.C.

Although revival and religious reform followed the finding of the Book of the Law during the repair of the temple in 622 B.C. (compare 2 Kings 22:8 – 23:24; 2 Chronicles 34:8 – 35:19), the effects of Josiah's religious edicts were short lived.

With the death of the godly Josiah, Judah's apostasy quickly resurfaced.

Jeremiah repeatedly warned of the resulting judgment, which finally occurred through the events of the shifting Near Eastern political scene.

Nabopolassar of Babylon defeated the Assyrians at Nineveh (in 612 B.C.).

When Pharaoh-nechoh (609 – 594 B.C.) of Egypt moved to their aid, Josiah withstood Egypt at Megiddo at the cost of his life.

Later, the retreating Egyptians took his son Jehoahaz captive (2 Kings 23:31-33), and crowned Josiah's second son, Jehoiakim (609 – 598 B.C.), on the throne.

He was an apostate who persecuted Jeremiah and other true believers.

He was later succeeded by his brother Jehoiachin, who was captured by Nebuchadnezzar at the same time Ezekiel was taken captive.

Zedekiah, Josiah's third son, was then crowned as king (2 Kings 24:17).

He too was an ungodly king who persecuted Jeremiah and rejected his prophecies.

Finally in 586 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar totally destroyed Jerusalem, and Zedekiah was blinded and led away in chains to Babylon.

Although Jeremiah's message was one of inevitable judgment on Judah, he also delivered news of great consolation.

God would yet deal anew with a repentant people (23:1-8 – 29:10-19), in a great new covenant (30:1 – 33:26), through which the promised blessings of old would be realized.

Jeremiah's prophecies thus span the era that was passing away and that which was to come.

The returning exiles would constitute a pledge of that great final gathering of God's people to Himself for the Messiah's everlasting reign.

Background and Setting:

While some people are called into God's service as children (1 Sam. chapter 3), Jeremiah was commissioned as a "prophet to the nations" even before he was conceived (1:5).

Jeremiah's 40 year ministry was centered in Judah, the region of the tribes of Benjamin and Judah, surrounding Jerusalem.

He prophesied during the reigns of the final five kings of Judah, up until the time the Babylonians destroyed the city (chapter 52).

He began prophesying during the "thirteenth year of King Josiah's reign" (1:2), Josiah being the last righteous monarch of Judah.

The four kings following Josiah were Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah.

They ignored the brief revival of Josiah's days (2 Kings Chapter 23), and continued leading Judah toward judgment.

We know more about Jeremiah's personal life than we do about any other prophet.

As with Moses before him (Exodus 3:11; 4:10), Jeremiah was timid as a young man and reluctant to accept the call to be God's spokesman.

God, however, reached out and touched the young man's mouth, symbolically imparting to him the words he would need to speak (1:9).

And God had much to say through His prophet.

Jeremiah's book contains more words than any other book of the Bible.

From the beginning, God left no doubt; Jeremiah would face stiff opposition: "They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you" (1:19).

King Jehoiakim cut up and burned the first scroll containing Jeremiah's words (chapter 36).

Jeremiah was beaten and imprisoned (37:15), and at one point thrown into a muddy cistern, sinking into the filthy mire (38:6).

The last we hear of him, he was forcibly taken to Egypt, where he apparently died (43:6-7).

In his perseverance and faithfulness, Jeremiah was an example for all who would follow God's call in the face of opposition.

The Book of Jeremiah combines prose, poetry, historical narrative, sermons, oracles of judgment, and other literary forms, apparently in a non-chronological collection rather than a running narrative.

While primarily addressing Judah, Jeremiah's prophecies also contain messages of judgment to nine neighbor-nations.

More than 100 times, he calls for repentance.

Besides being persistent, Jeremiah was consistent.

In spite of his own occasional laments and complaints, he never varied from his calling.

Background details of Jeremiah's times are portrayed (in 2 Kings chapters 22 to 25 and 2 Chronicles Chapters 34 to 36). Jeremiah's messages paint pictures of;

- (1) His people's sins;
- (2) The invader God would send;
- (3) The rigors of siege; and
- (4) Calamities of destruction.

Jeremiah's message of impending judgment for idolatry and other sins was preached over a period of 40 years (ca. 627 – 586 B.C. and beyond).

His prophecy took place during the reigns of Judah's final 5 kings (Josiah 640 – 609 B.C., Jehoahaz 609 B.C., Jehoiakim 609 – 598 B.C., Jehoiachin 598 – 597 B.C., and Zedekiah 597 – 586 B.C.).

The spiritual condition of Judah was one of flagrant idol worship (compare chapter 2).

King Ahaz, preceding his son Hezekiah long before Jeremiah in Isaiah's day, had set up a system of sacrificing children to the god Molech in the Valley of Hinnom just outside Jerusalem (735 – 715 B.C.).

Hezekiah led in reforms and clean-up (Isa. 36:7), but his son Manasseh continued to foster child sacrifice along with gross idolatry, which continued into Jeremiah's time (7:31; 19:5; 32:35).

Many also worshiped the "queen of heaven" (7:18; 44:19).

Josiah's reforms, reaching their apex (in 622 B.C.), forced a repressing of the worst practices outwardly, but the deadly cancer of sin was deep and flourished quickly again after a shallow revival.

Religious insincerity, dishonesty, adultery, injustice, tyranny against the helpless, and slander prevailed as the norm not the exception.

Politically momentous events occurred in Jeremiah's day.

Assyria saw its power wane gradually; then Ashurbanipal died in 626 B.C.

Assyria grew so feeble that in 612 B.C. her seemingly invincible capital, Nineveh, was destroyed (compare the book of Nahum).

The Neo-Babylonian empire under Nabopolassar (625 – 605 B.C.), became dominant militarily with victories against Assyria (612 B.C.), Egypt (609 – 605 B.C.), and Israel in three phases (605 B.C.), as in Dan. Chapter 1; (597 B.C.), as in 2 Kings 24:10-16; and (586 B.C.), as in Jer. chapters 39, 40 and 52.

While Joel and Micah had earlier prophesied of Judah's judgment, during Josiah's reign, God's leading prophets were Jeremiah, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah.

Later, Jeremiah's contemporaries, Ezekiel and Daniel, played prominent prophetic roles.

Historical and Theological Themes:

The main theme of Jeremiah is judgment upon Judah (chapters 1 to 29), with restoration in the future messianic kingdom (23:3-8; and chapters 30 to 33).

Whereas Isaiah devoted many chapters to a future glory for Israel (Isa. Chapters 40 to 66), Jeremiah gave far less space to this subject.

Since God's judgment was imminent he concentrated on current problems as he sought to turn the nation back from the point of no return.

A secondary theme is God's willingness to spare and bless the nation only if the people repent.

Though this is a frequent emphasis, it is most graphically portrayed at the potter's shop (See 18:1-11).

A further focus is God's plan for Jeremiah's life, both in his proclamation of God's message and in his commitment to fulfill all of His will (1:5-19; 15:19-21).

Other themes include:

- (1) God's longing for Israel to be tender toward Him, as in the days of first love (2:1-3);
- (2) Jeremiah's servant tears, as "the weeping prophet" (9:1; 14:17);
- (3) The close, intimate relationship God had with Israel and that He yearned to keep (13:11);
- (4) Suffering, as in Jeremiah's trials (11:18-23; 20:1-18) and God's sufficiency in all trouble (20:11-13);
- (5) The vital role that God's Word can play in life (15:16);

(6) The place of faith in expecting restoration from the God for whom nothing is too difficult (chapter 32, especially verses 17 and 27);

(7) Prayer for the coordination of God's will with God's action in restoring Israel to its land (33:3, 6-18).

What it means for you: "Call to me".

The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah while he was in prison, at a time when the Babylonian army surrounded Jerusalem.

"Call to Me," the Lord said to him, "and I will answer you, and show you great and mighty things, which you do not know" (33:3).

How strange those words must have seemed to Jeremiah.

Almighty God was inviting him into a conversation and offering to reveal marvelous secrets, in a time and place like that?

Yes, and Jeremiah had only to call out to the Lord.

On days when we feel under pressure or locked up by anxiety and worry, the Lord invites us to simply call to Him.

He comes to us where we are, offering to enter into conversation with us and reveal truths about our lives, our circumstances and Himself.

No matter how confined or restricted our situation might make us feel, we are united to a God who knows no boundaries, no restrictions, and no limitations.

He loves us dearly and desires our best.