



JEREMIAH



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THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH is not the work of one author. It is more in the nature of a notebook or an annotated anthology, based on and inspired by a prophet's words and life, but not written as a book by Jeremiah. This very brief introduction is but a concise statement of what a reader who takes up the book of Jeremiah is dealing with. The reader might begin by scanning the book of Jeremiah itself (which is less than 100 pages in most Bibles) to get an overall picture, and then read this pamphlet.

The Book of Jeremiah and its Place in the Bible

The book of Jeremiah is one of 16 books in the Hebrew Bible, the Christian Old Testament, bearing the names of individual prophets. These books conclude the Christian Old Testament, and are preceded by two narrative versions of the ancient Hebrews' life with God (Genesis—2 Kings

and 1 Chronicles—Esther) and a collection of wisdom and poetry that originated in that life (Job—Song of Solomon). In the Jewish community's Hebrew Bible, the books of the prophets immediately follow the narrative, with the wisdom/poetry collection as the conclusion. In either case, though most obviously in the Hebrew Bible, the order of the biblical books bespeaks the belief that there came a tragic point where God's involvement in history could no longer be recounted through the story of a people as a whole, but through the words and lives of individual prophets. There was a time when the life of a people with God in history was the context for the lives and words of prophets. But there came a time when prophetic lives and words were the locus of God's involvement in history. Thus, the structure of the canon of scripture (its books and their order) interprets the prophets as the link between past and future, whether the future is understood in Jewish or Christian terms.

The Prophet and the "School" Behind the Book

Like the 15 other classical prophets, Jeremiah was not an author. The Hebrew words for "prophet," "prophecy," and "prophecy" are from a root denoting ecstatic, frenzied activity resulting from possession by a divine being. Jeremiah, like other prophets, was, in that tradition, one who, possessed by God, delivered orally terse, allusive, poetic oracles or engaged in symbolic behavior. Jeremiah himself, as well as others, believed his oracles, "words," and symbolic actions to be God's own comments on the meaning of the events through which they were living. In Jeremiah's case, those events were the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC and the beginning of the Babylonian exile and what immediately preceded and followed. Those for whom Jeremiah's prophetic oracles redeemed a traumatically tragic time from sheer meaninglessness came to be his followers, his disciples.

As in the case of other prophets, a "school" gathered around him, his oracles, and the memory of his life of

faithfulness to God. This school seems to have begun with Baruch ben Neriah, the scribe who recorded Jeremiah's oracles (see 36:4, 45:1ff). The book of Jeremiah is the product of this school. The book probably came into being gradually over several centuries, various originally independent sections of it being brought together finally as a whole. Differences between the final Hebrew text and the text of the 2nd century BC Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (the Septuagint) are evidence that the book as a whole was not a set piece even four centuries after the time of Jeremiah himself. The book should be read with all this in mind.

The Tradition Behind the Prophet and the "School"

As in the case of the Christian church today, different theological traditions, different schools of practice and thought, different emphases were to be found in the Hebrew community in which the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, originated and was handed down. Each of the strands embodied in the completed

narrative portion of scripture (Yahwist, Elohist, Deuteronomists, Priestly writers) is distinguishable not only by style and vocabulary, but by theological perspective and emphasis, by being pro-monarchy or anti-monarchy and so on. Careful reading of the different prophetic books indicates that the prophets, and the prophetic schools, also originated in different traditions within the Hebrew community. Isaiah and the book of Isaiah seem to come from a pro-monarchy tradition, emphasizing royal motifs, the covenant between God and the Davidic monarchy, and God as transcendent cosmic sovereign (cf. Isaiah 6).

Jeremiah and the book of Jeremiah, on the other hand, come from an anti-monarchy tradition emphasizing the covenant relationship between God and the people as community which antedated the monarchy, for which Moses and the prophetic successors of Moses are central to the people's ongoing life, and which gives priority to prophets rather than kings. Jeremiah is indeed pictured as prophesying to kings, but the emphasis in the book is on the Mosaic covenant and

its demands, on a new covenant written on the hearts of all, rather than the reign of a Davidic Messiah as ideal future. And, in contrast to the self-assured, "here-am-I-send-me" posture of an Isaiah, Jeremiah is pictured in the tradition of Moses and Elijah as a self-deprecatory, lamenting, arguing, suffering servant of God. Jeremiah, like all the prophets, is not a theological or spiritual "lone ranger," but the bearer and articulator of a tradition imbedded in his people's culture. He is a significant link between that tradition and subsequent generations. The book should be read with this also in mind.

Jeremiah as Interpreter of a Traumatic Time

According to the book, Jeremiah's career began somewhere around 625 BC in Jerusalem as the reformer King Josiah cleansed the temple and the land of sacrileges perpetrated during the Assyrian empire's domination of Judah. Josiah's reform, however, marked only a very short-lived respite before Babylon resumed domination as conqueror and

successor of Assyria. From the call experience with which his career began (chapter 1) during Josiah's doomed reassertion of Hebrew independence, through the ups and downs of forty tumultuous years of a small kingdom's being caught between the imperial pushes of Egypt and Babylon, to Jerusalem's fall to Babylon and the beginning of the Babylonian exile of the Hebrew royal and religious leaders, Jeremiah's words from God were consistent. His people's history in the form in which it had existed was at an end. God was banning his people to wilderness wandering again, this time the wilderness of exile. It had to be so, for God's people had abandoned and forgotten the covenant definition of what it was to be God's people, had pursued world power after the example of Assyria, Babylon, and Egypt. Only by accepting both historical reality and covenant indictment could there be any hope for a future as God's people. Jeremiah seems to have kept at it, right into being, forcibly and against his will, taken to Egypt with a group of Hebrew refugees still seeking an "out" after Jerusalem had fallen to

Babylon. He must have died in Egypt some years after the fall of Jerusalem in 587.

The book organizes Jeremiah's oracles into four groups, and this may reflect earlier collections antedating the book. The earliest oracles concerning the fate of his people, from the period between his call about 625 BC and the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon in 587 BC, are preserved in chapters 2-20 of the book. The oracles during the siege that led to Jerusalem's fall in 587 and in the period after the fall are found in chapters 21-25. Oracles of promise, envisioning the future to which acceptance of the end of the old era will lead, are found in chapters 26-35. Oracles concerning the other peoples involved in the traumatic events of Jeremiah's time are collected in chapters 46-51. The concern of Jeremiah's disciples in the process leading to the finished book was not stenographic reporting of the prophet's pronouncements, but the preservation and interpretation of what they believed to be God's word to God's people delivered through the oracles. While terse, allusive, poetic oracles are most likely to

come from Jeremiah himself, and more "preachy" interpretation and narrative framework from disciples, strict delineation of "primary" from "secondary" material is difficult, if not impossible. In biblical perspective, both Jeremiah's life and words and the life and continued witness of the community find their meaning in the corporate history underlying both the book of Jeremiah and the Bible as a whole.

Jeremiah as Lamenting Struggler with God

The poetic pronouncements of Jeremiah include not only oracles concerning the events of his time and God's role in them. The book of Jeremiah is unique among the books of the prophets in containing a series of poems in the lament genre, cataloging the suffering involved in faithfulness to God, cursing cruel and unfaithful enemies, angrily shouting "Why?" and "How long?" to God. Not only are such laments interspersed among the oracles of judgment and doom in the collection based on Jeremiah's earliest

oracles at the beginning of the book, but they seem to provide the framework for that collection, beginning with the account of the prophet's call in chapter 1 and concluding with the prophet's cursing of the day of his birth at the conclusion of chapter 20. In a tradition going back to Moses, the prototypical founder of the prophetic tradition of which he is part, Jeremiah protests his reluctance to take up the prophetic office, as well as pain and anger at having to pronounce doom on his country and people.

These so-called "confessions" of Jeremiah begin with the account of his call to be a prophet, where Jeremiah's resistance is overwhelmed by God's insistent reassurance (1:4-19). Then, however, as God's word turns out to spell unrelenting doom for Jeremiah's people, the burden of the prophetic calling begins to be more than Jeremiah can bear (see, for example, 8:18—9:1). Jeremiah's mounting frustration and rage at God's unrelenting judgment on Jeremiah's people, and God's intractable responses, find expression in a series of increasingly vehement, even sacrilegious, lamenting dialogues

(11:18—12:6; 15:10-23; 17:14-18; 18:18-23; 20:7-18). In the final passage, 20:7-18, all that is left is Jeremiah's desperate lament. The prophet fails to discern a response, feels abandoned.

These moving passages witness not only to what it cost Jeremiah in particular to be a prophet. They are evidence of the understanding, by his disciples, of Jeremiah as part of a succession, going clear back to the patriarch Abraham (see Genesis 18:22-33) and continuing through Job, in which the Hebrew people continue to be in contact with God even in the most terrible times through the persistent lament of questioning, suffering heroes.

The "Passion Narrative of Jeremiah"

As in other books bearing the names of prophets, the collections of Jeremiah's oracles contain bits of narrative illuminating the situations in which the prophetic oracles were delivered (see, for example, 19:1—20:6, and chapters 24-25). The book of Jeremiah, however, is unique in containing a relatively long narrative section

recounting what the prophet went through during and after Babylon's siege and conquest of Jerusalem (chapters 36-44). As he consistently refused to provide the reassurance of continued national existence the king and people wanted, and consistently interpreted the Babylonian conquest as the inescapable means of God's judgment and the only possible prelude to a future for his people, Jeremiah suffered rejection, humiliation, and physical abuse. Against his will, in violation of his human dignity, a group seeking to escape the inevitable by fleeing there removed him to Egypt. There he died, forcibly removed from the land of promise to the land of his people's bondage. His was a tragic life.

Nevertheless, what has been called the passion narrative of Jeremiah is not sheer tragedy. It is the story of the prophetic teller of only the truth, the lamenting sufferer who would not let go of God, in and through whose suffering and lamenting—as well as his prophetic pronouncements of God's truth—a traumatic time was redeemed from meaninglessness and the possibility of a future with God held open.

The Origin and Growth of the Book of Jeremiah

Jeremiah was not the author of a book. His oracles and laments were delivered orally, and undoubtedly at first passed along orally. Written biblical Hebrew, consisting originally only of consonants, is really shorthand used to preserve oral pronunciation for oral transmission. The book undoubtedly began with the writing down, in this sense, of Jeremiah's oracles concerning the times he lived through. It began as the means of Jeremiah's continuing delivery of God's words among successive generations of disciples. And Jeremiah's disciples continued to prophesy themselves, repeating Jeremiah's oracles as redemptive clues to their times and updating and interpreting the oracles as God's continuing communication with God's people. The book began, in the same way, as the means of the ongoing recital of the narrative of Jeremiah's redemptive life of suffering faithfulness to God. So the book grew, and continued to grow in a living process in a historical community. As the passage of time left Jeremiah himself further and

further back in the past, the text became increasingly "set" as the book came gradually into existence in the "school" of Jeremiah.

The book understands that process to be integrally a part of Jeremiah and his prophetic ministry. That is the meaning of the conclusion of the "passion narrative" in chapter 45. The final word is to Baruch—yes, the scribe who writes down Jeremiah's oracles, but also the personification of the disciples. Baruch, and the disciples of Jeremiah, are not merely to preserve words and a story from the past. They are to share in Jeremiah's ministry and suffering. And like Jeremiah, they are, from generation to generation, out of the traumas of history and the suffering of those who tell the truth, to be "prizes of war," who ponder the words and tell the story that redeem history and suffering.

The book of Jeremiah is not merely a record of a past life and ministry, not merely a document in sacred scripture. It is an invitation into a process, into life with Jeremiah in an ongoing community of disciples.



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Cover Image: Detail (depicting Jeremiah)
of the Sistine Chapel ceiling painted by
Michelangelo Buonarroti, 1508-1512.

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