

INTRODUCTION TO JEREMIAH

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Introduction

In his book, Roots: Let the Old Testament Speak, Alec Motyer says, "More than any other prophet, Jeremiah experienced the good mingled with the bad."¹ Unlike many of the other prophets, Jeremiah did not hesitate to express his emotions in his prophetic work. Hence, Jeremiah's experience of the good and the bad are made accessible to the reader right alongside of his prophetic pronouncements of judgment upon the idolatrous practices of the people of Judah. The experiences of the "weeping prophet" make him an invaluable resource of inspiration and perseverance for contemporary readers that find themselves in similar ministry situations. Therefore, for the sake of fostering a better understanding of the book of Jeremiah, this brief introduction will seek to provide the necessary background materials for understanding and properly interpreting its content in its grammatical-historical context.

Authorship

The authorship of the book of Jeremiah is a rather controverted subject. According to Huey, "For centuries no serious questions were raised about Jeremianic authorship."² However, as source criticism grew in Old Testament studies, particularly from the influence of Wellhausen's Documentary Hypothesis,³ the traditionally accepted authorship of many Old Testament books were questioned.⁴ This was the case with the book of Jeremiah. As such, there have been "three principal sources" of the material suggested in the book of Jeremiah: 1) the prophet oracles in poetic form, 2) biographical information from Baruch, Jeremiah's scribe, and

¹ J. A Motyer, *Roots: Let The Old Testament Speak* (ed. John R. W Stott; Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2010), 241.

² F. B Huey, *Jeremiah, Lamentations* (The New American Commentary; Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 1993), 16:26.

³ See Gleason L Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 2007), 71–138 for an introduction to and scholarly repudiation of the Documentary Hypothesis.

⁴ Huey, *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, 16:26.

3) Deuteronomic editors from a later time.⁵ For the purposes of this introduction, it is probably helpful to note with Old Testament scholars, Andrew Hill and John Walton, that "Jeremiah is one of the few books of the Old Testament to provide information about its writing."⁶ Based on its own testimony, it is clear that Baruch was commissioned by Jeremiah to write down the material that he dictated to him (Jeremiah 36:4).

For the most part, the issue that many scholars have had with Jeremianic authorship is the "problem" of determining the source of what they consider to be "Deuteronomic" material that reads more like a later theological expositions of prophetic speech, rather than strict poetry or strict prose. Old Testament scholar, Mark Rooker, however, offers the following solution to "sourcing" the "deuteronomic material," when he writes, "The so-called Deuteronomic style was actually nothing more than Hebrew rhetorical prose in existence in the seventh and sixth century BC. If Jeremiah did reflect a Deuteronomic style, this actually meant that he was familiar with the contents of the book of Deuteronomy."⁷ Given that Jeremiah most likely descended from a priestly family⁸ that resided in Anathoth, a small town in Benjamin, and ministered after the discovery of the book of the law during the time of Josiah, it does not seem too far-fetched to attribute the "deuteronomic" material to Jeremiah. Therefore, since most historical-critical scholarship has not produced any compelling reasons to abandon the more traditional view of Jeremianic authorship, this introduction concludes that the material found in the book of

⁵ Most commentators commonly assert these three "sources" with only minor variance. The bibliography at the end of this paper serves as a good starting place for those who desire to study the nuances of these positions in greater detail.

⁶ Andrew E Hill and John H Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 534.

⁷ Eugene H Merrill, Mark F Rooker, and Michael A Grisanti, *The World and The Word: An Introduction to The Old Testament* (Nashville, Tenn.: B&H Academic, 2011), 383.

⁸ Paul R House and Eric Alan Mitchell, *Old Testament Survey* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2007), 201.

Jeremiah should be considered the content of Jeremiah the prophet written by the hand of Baruch, his scribe.

Date of Composition

Having embraced Jeremianic authorship, it follows that the material (at least up to chapter 52) was composed between 627 BC and 580 BC, with final form of the book "in circulation no later than 520 BC."⁹ As for the specifics of when certain materials were actually composed in the proposed span of time, the following chart¹⁰ by R.K. Harrison is especially helpful:

Under Josiah	1:1-19; 2:1-3:5; 3:6-6:30; 7:1-10:25; 18:1-20:18
Under Jehoiakim	11:1-13:14; 14:1-15:21; 16:1-17:27; 22:1-30:23:1-8, 9-40; 25:1-14, 15-38; 26:1-24; 35:1-19; 36:1-32; 45:1-5; 46:1-12, 13-28; 47:1-7; 48:1-47
Under Jehoiachin	31:15-27
Under Zedekiah	21:1-22:30; 24:1-10; 27:1-22; 28:1-17; 29:1-32; 30:1-31:40; 32:1-44; 33:1-26; 34:1-7, 8-11, 12-22; 37:1-21; 38:1-28; 39:1-18; 49:1-22, 23-33, 34-39; 50:1-51:64
Under Gedaliah	40:1-42:22; 43:1-44:30
Historical Appendix	52:1-34

Historical Context

As was seen in the last section, the book of Jeremiah was written over the span of three kings, one regent,¹¹ and one governor.¹² The historical context of Jeremiah begins during the reform efforts of Josiah after the discovery of the book of the law (2 Kings 22:8ff). Josiah's

⁹ R. K Harrison, *Jeremiah and Lamentations: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973), 32.

¹⁰ Ibid., 33.

¹¹ According to House and Mitchell, *Old Testament Survey*, 199, Zedekiah was appointed as regent and never really considered the true king by the people. House states, "The exiles in Babylon, including Ezekiel, considered Jehoiachin the true king even after his exile."

¹² According to Ibid., 211, Gedaliah served as governor over Judah as a Babylonian territory.

reform efforts were far-reaching, extending even into the northern regions of the land formerly known as Israel. At the heart of Josiah's reform were his efforts to remove the practice of idolatry among the people and centralized worship at the temple in Jerusalem after it was "cleansed, renovated, and repaired."¹³ Josiah was a good king, but the external reforms did little to change the hearts of the people.

After his unfortunate early death in battle with Egyptian forces at Megiddo, his son, Jehoahaz became king, but his reign only lasted three months until Necho, Pharaoh of Egypt, removed him from the throne and appointed his brother, Jehoiakim. This appointment was probably due to anti-Egyptian sentiments held by Jehoahaz that upset Necho.¹⁴ Unlike his brother, Jehoiakim reigned for approximately twelve years and his reign was fraught with departures from the reforms of his father Josiah. Whereas Jeremiah and Josiah had a seemingly good relationship, Jehoiakim is known for his abhorrence of the prophet. The most notable example of the king's dislike for Jeremiah came in the infamous burning of the "first scroll" of judgment prepared by Baruch at the request of Jeremiah. Upon hearing the oracles, Jehoiakim severed the document and then burned it to show his absolute disregard for the words of the prophet.

Jehoiakim remained loyal to Egypt until their defeat at Carchemish in 605, where after he reluctantly pledged allegiance to Babylon until 601 when he was renounce his allegiance in hopes of receiving aid from a surging Egyptian army.¹⁵ This change in allegiance was short-lived because Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylon army would conquer the Egyptians and their allies and establish their supremacy in the Ancient Near East. Many speculate as to what exactly happened

¹³ Walter C Kaiser, *A History of Israel: From the Bronze Age through the Jewish Wars* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 1998), 392.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 400.

¹⁵ Huey, *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, 16:20.

to Jehoiakim in his death, whether he died naturally or whether his own people assassinated him, but whatever did exactly happen, Jehoiakim's son, Jehoiachin would be appointed king in 598 BC. Similar to his uncle's reign, Jehoiachin would only reign for three months before being taken into captivity.

In 597, Zedekiah, the third son of Josiah, was appointed as "king" of Judah, even though Judah was ultimately under the rule of Babylon. At the very least, Zedekiah could be considered an unstable ruler. He waffled in his allegiance and never seemed to know whom he wanted to trust. There were times when he would call upon Jeremiah for counsel, but when Jeremiah counseled him to "accept Babylonian domination," he did not commit to the prophet's words. He wanted to listen but he was a weak man and when the Egyptians tried to persuade him to join a revolt against Babylon" there were plenty of other "prophetic voices" at his disposal.¹⁶ The result of Zedekiah refusal to listen to Jeremiah was the eventual and total destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. Jerusalem had finally fallen, and once again the words of Jeremiah's warnings were vindicated.

Following the fall of Jerusalem, Zedekiah was captured, his family was murdered before him, and he was blinded and taken to Babylon. A man by the name of Gedaliah was placed over Judah as governor of those who chose to remain. Two months into his work as governor, a man named Ishmael by order of the king of Ammon assassinated Gedaliah. During this time, Jeremiah resolved to stay with those who remained in Jerusalem and help rebuild the nation, but against his will, he was forced to go to Egypt.¹⁷ "Information about life in Judah following Gedaliah's assassination is almost nonexistent, except for a brief report in Jeremiah 52:30 that

¹⁶ John William Drane, *Introducing the Old Testament* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 164.

¹⁷ Huey, *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, 16:22.

another Babylonian deportation involved 745 Judeans who were exiled in the twenty-third year of Nebuchadnezzar (581 BC)."¹⁸

Literary Prophetic Forms

The book of Jeremiah exhibits all three major forms of prophetic speech. According to Westermann,¹⁹ those forms are accounts, prophetic speeches, and utterances directed from man to God. In the case of the book of Jeremiah, the accounts would be instances where a story is being told about a particular incident in the life of Jeremiah. Prophetic speeches would for the most part be seen in poetic form throughout the book of Jeremiah and have contain the "messenger formula – thus says the LORD" with statements of both judgment and salvation. Lastly, the utterances of Jeremiah are some of the most clear in all of Old Testament prophetic literature because of the expressiveness of the prophet. More than any other prophet, Jeremiah exhibits utterances from man to God whether in protest, prayer, or praise.

Theological Themes

Some of the key theological themes in the book of Jeremiah include: covenant, obedience, and repentance. The theological significance of the theme of covenant is seen two-fold in the book of Jeremiah. First, it is seen in relationship to the covenantal unfaithfulness of the people of Israel. Their disobedience is what underlies Jeremiah's work as prophet. Second, the covenant is seen again in relationship to the promises of a new covenant being made with Israel (31:31-34). This shows that God refuses to break His promises on account of Israel's unfaithfulness, though they will have to experience exile before they experience restoration. Another theological point of significance that is related to the concept of covenant is that of

¹⁸ Kaiser, *A history of Israel*, 411.

¹⁹ Claus Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech* (Cambridge, England; Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 90.

obedience. A great portion of Jeremiah's work as a prophet was to call the people back to obedience to the Lord (7:21-23) instead of regarding the provision of sacrifice as a way to indulge in their sin. Also related to the theological themes of covenant and obedience is the third theological theme of repentance. Some form of the work "repent" occurs approximately 111 times in the book of Jeremiah, illustrating the prominence of this concept.²⁰ Not only were the people to regard the covenant of the LORD and obey it, but also they were to repent of their idolatrous ways and turn back to the LORD who had redeemed them.

Outline of Text²¹

I. Prophecies Relating to Current History and Domestic Matters (1:1-45:5)

- a. Prophecies occurring between 625 BC and the Fourth Year of Jehoiakim (1:1-20:18)
- b. Utterances Relating to the Kings of Judah and False Prophets (21:1-25:14)
- c. A Summary of Prophecies Against Foreign Nations (25:15-38)
- d. Predictions of the Fall of Jerusalem (26:1-28:17)
- e. Letter to the Deportees of Babylonia (29:1-32)
- f. Messages of Consolation (30:1-31:40)
- g. Prophecies from the Time of Zedekiah (32:1-44:30)
- h. A Message to Baruch (45:1-5)

II. Oracles Against Foreign Nations (46:1-51:64)

- a. Against Egypt (46:1-28)
- b. Against Philistia (47:1-7)
- c. Against Moab (48:1-47)
- d. Against Edom (49:7-22)
- e. Against Damascus (49:23-27)
- f. Against Kedar and Hazor (49:28-33)
- g. Against Elam (49:34-39)
- h. Against Babylon (50:1-51:64)

III. Historical Appendix (52:1-34)

²⁰ House and Mitchell, *Old Testament Survey*, 197.

²¹ Outline taken from Harrison, *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, 45.

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