

OLD TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 42

JEREMIAH

I. BACKGROUND

Who was Jeremiah?

With all due respect to 3 Dog Night, Jeremiah was NOT a bull-frog! Jeremiah was a prophet in the southern kingdom of Judah. Yahweh called him to be a prophet when just a young man (1:6). The Hebrew word used for young man is “*na’ar*,” which can mean anything from an infant (Ex. 2:6) to an advanced adolescent (1 Sam. 30:17). Jeremiah grew up in a pious priestly home (1:1). He prophesied for at least 40 years stretching over the reigns of five kings of Judah.

Who wrote Jeremiah?

It depends on what we mean by “wrote.” Jeremiah dictated the book to his secretary Baruch, who then wrote the book. The book was not delivered in a long flowing session. In fact, it was partially written, burned up by a king, and then rewritten more fully.

What is peculiar about the book of Jeremiah?

Several peculiarities stand out. First, Jeremiah is the longest book of the Bible by word count. Other books have more chapters, but Jeremiah has the most words of any biblical book. A second peculiarity lies on the ordering of the material in the book. The prophecies, oracles, judgments, and narrative are not put in a chronological order.

How reliable is the text of Jeremiah?

Of course, faith teaches us that the text preserved for us was not a coincidence but one of divine control. Even so, biblical linguistics and evidence shed good light on this issue. The Hebrew text of Jeremiah is fairly different from the Greek text (Septuagint). The main differences lie not in word choice or overall substance. The Greek text is significantly shorter than the Hebrew one. There is almost 20% of the material missing from the Greek. The Dead Sea scrolls contained 6 scrolls of Jeremiah, but they were all so tattered that it is hard to reconstruct the book from those

scrolls. There is enough text preserved to indicate that the Dead Sea community had a Hebrew text that was closer to the Greek.

II. TEXT

Even though Jeremiah is not in chronological order, we might find it easier to digest it if we put it into some time sequence. We will work through the text in the order of the reigning kings.

A. *Pre-calling (Kings Manassah and Amon)*

Jeremiah probably grew up during the reigns of Manassah and his son Amon. Manassah was the son of the godly king Hezekiah. Unlike his father, however, Manassah's¹ heart was far from the Lord. Manassah reigned for 55 years from the age of 12 in 696 B.C. until 642 B.C. Manassah's reign saw the introduction of many pagan and idolatrous altars in the Temple courts and throughout Judah. Along with this fascination for the cults of Assyria (the international powerhouse of the day) came sinful and rebellious hearts among the people.

When Manassah died, his son Amon reigned for 2 years before he was assassinated. Like his father, Amon was evil before the Lord and continued in the pagan idolatry and sin.

There can be little doubt that in the house of a pious priest, many discussions would have been held longing for the return of Judah to Yahweh. Young Jeremiah doubtlessly grew up around such concerns. Jeremiah would likely have been taught the prophecies of Isaiah and others that preceded him. However, Jeremiah's call would not come until later.

B. *The Call (King Josiah)*

Josiah was the eight year old son of Amon who assumed the throne after his father was assassinated. Josiah reigned for 31 years from 640–609 B.C. It was during the reign of Josiah that Assyria began weakening as a power, enough so that Judah could assert some independence. In fact, Josiah turned the country from the Assyrian

¹ According to 2 Chronicles 33:10-13, Manassah repented later in his life following deportation to Babylon. Any such repentance did not take hold of the land or court in any way, as evidenced by Manassah's son Amon.

influence and cultish practices and restored the worship of Yahweh. In the process of instituting reforms, Josiah was handed a discovered copy of the book of the law which was then read to the people.

Jeremiah was called as a prophet in the twelfth year of Josiah's reign (around 626 B.C.). The first six chapters of Jeremiah seem to lament the early part of the prophet's ministry before the finding of the law in 621 B.C. We read that even though the king was trying to turn hearts back to Yahweh, the nation itself was corrupt and blind to the coming events of judgment.

Josiah gets killed in 608 B.C. while trying to resist Egypt's Pharaoh Neco in battle. Josiah was succeeded by his son, Jehoahaz. Jeremiah mourned the death of King Josiah and noted him as a king who "did right and just." Specifically, Josiah "defended the cause of the poor and needy" (22:15-16).

C. King Jehoahaz

Jehoahaz lasted on the throne for a full three months before Pharaoh Neco deposed him in favor of Jehoahaz's brother, Jehoiakim (also called Eliakim). Of this short time as king, Jeremiah says little. Jeremiah does lament the deposition of Jehoahaz and his exile in Egypt (22:10-12).

D. Jehoiakim

Jehoiakim reigned over a very active ten year stretch in the Middle East (609–598 B.C.) During this time, the regional power structure again changed hands. King Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians whipped Pharaoh Neco at Charchemish on the Euphrates River. Jehoiakim was bad news for Jeremiah.

Jehoiakim was an oppressive leader who imposed heavy taxes and used significant forced labor. The first century Jewish historian Josephus writes that Jehoiakim was "unjust and wicked by nature, and was neither reverent toward God nor kind to man" (Antiquities of the Jews, 10:83). The religious decay of his years magnified that of his predecessors.

Jeremiah 36 records an interesting story in this regard. During the fourth year of Jehoiakim's reign, Yahweh tells Jeremiah to write in a scroll all the words Yahweh had previously spoken through

Jeremiah. Yahweh's desire was that when the people heard the words and the pending judgment, the people would repent. Jeremiah followed Yahweh's instructions dictating the scroll to Baruch. This was not an overnight process!

A year or so later, Jeremiah sent Baruch to the Temple to read the finished scroll to the people. When word of the reading reached the government officials, one of the officials was sent to get the scroll. Baruch came and read the scroll to the officials who were then themselves petrified. After confirming from Baruch that the words were those of Jeremiah, the officials urged Baruch to find Jeremiah and go into hiding. We should remember that during the previous administrations, Jeremiah was seen as a counselor for the king who had the ear and mouth of Yahweh for the good of Judah.

The government officials then sent Baruch away but kept the scroll in the court secretary's room. The king was told of all that happened and he sent for the scroll. While sitting in front of a fire on a cold winter day (the "ninth month"), the king listened as the scroll was read to him. The king was neither pleased nor frightened. The king was, instead, particularly angry and displeased (especially over the section about Judah falling into captivity to Babylon.)

In spite of the pleadings of some of the court officials to the contrary, the king took a knife and after every three to four columns of the scroll were read, the king would cut those columns off and feed them to his fire. After a full reading/burning, the king put out an arrest warrant on Jeremiah and Baruch. They were not found, however, because Yahweh hid them (Yahweh instructed Jeremiah and Baruch to rewrite the scroll and add some more to it. Among the things added were curses pronounced upon the king and his descendants).

History provides us with some more understanding of the significance of this story and the king's reactions. There were two world powers at the time, Egypt and Babylon. After Josiah was defeated in the battle by Pharaoh Neco (subsequently dying from wounds received in that battle), Judah became a vassal to Egypt. In fact, it was Pharaoh Neco II (son of Neco) who put Jehoiakim on the throne of Judah.

Egypt fought Babylon for ultimate supremacy and lost in the battle of Carchemish referenced earlier. The year of this battle was 605

B.C., the same year of the scroll reading. Jehoiakim no doubt did not enjoy hearing the part about how Babylon would cart Judah off into captivity. I doubt he was pleased that this prophecy from a well known prophet had been read publicly in a well attended session with people from all over Judah listening. Basically, everyone was told “the king, whom the Pharaoh put in place, has aligned us with the country that is a LOSER and a net result will be our conquering and carting off by the Babylonians.” Hence, the burning of the scroll and attempted arrest of the writers!

As an aside, Babylon does conquer Judah. In one of the Babylonian raids, Jehoiakim is captured and dies. (2 Chron. 36:6).

Jeremiah’s interaction with the king was not limited to this one story. Over the ten year reign, the king repeatedly persecuted, plotted against, and imprisoned Jeremiah. For his part, Jeremiah continued to reprimand the king, the false prophets and the priests who would not follow the ways of the Lord.

E. Jehoiachin

Though similar in name, Jehoiachin should not be confused with Jehoiakim. Jehoiachin assumed the throne after the death of Jehoiakim, his father. As an immature youth, Jehoiachin ruled only three months before he was captured and carted off to Babylon. As discussed in an earlier lesson on 2 Kings, Babylon’s capture of Jehoiachin is confirmed in Babylonian tablets setting out the provisions given him for sustenance while a prisoner of war.

F. Zedekiah

Zedekiah was the final king that Judah had which also makes him the last king Jeremiah prophesied under! He reigned from 597-587 B.C. Zedekiah was Uncle to Jehoiachin and was placed on the throne by Nebuchadnezzar (who had captured Jehoiachin). Zedekiah eventually rebelled against Babylon (contrary to Jeremiah’s advice – Jer. 27 and 28) and saw the final destruction of Judah and Jerusalem by the Babylonian nation. Zedekiah watched as his three sons were killed. Zedekiah was then blinded and taken off into captivity (2 Kings 25 and Jer. 52:7-11).

During this reign, Jeremiah forecast the Babylonian captivity to last 70 years (he was right). Jeremiah violently opposed Zedekiah’s

planned rebellion against Babylon, but to no avail. (Jer. 27 *ff*). Jeremiah urged Zedekiah to surrender and recognize that the Babylonian reign was ordained by God, but Zedekiah was weak and refused to follow the word of the Lord.

It was during this time that Jeremiah made prophecies about not only the restoration of the people after the captivity but also about the promise of a coming new covenant (31:31*ff*), which found ultimate fulfillment in Christ as the mediator between God and man.

Although Nebuchadnezzar treated Jeremiah well, leaving him in a leadership role in Jerusalem, events dictated Jeremiah's accompanying Jews into Egypt. Here, we lose track of Jeremiah and he dies.

III. MESSAGE THEMES/POINTS FOR HOME.

- A. God is sovereign.
- B. Sin is destructive.
- C. Valid religion is from the heart, not cold ritual.
- D. Real worship is heart, not form.

These are themes within the messages proclaimed by Jeremiah. Jeremiah proclaims God as sovereign Lord over all the earth including Babylon (27:5, 28:23*f*; 5:22, 24; 10:12*f*). God controls all nations, even the superpowers (10:14*f*; 14:22; 18:5-10; 25:15-38; 27:6-8). Idolatry, immorality, and moral corruption follow hearts that wonder from God, destroying his people (5:1-9; 7:3-11; 23:10-14). Moral obedience flowing from a heart right before God was more important than mere following religious ritual (3:16; 4:4; 6:10; 7:4; 7:21*ff*). In fact, this was why the exiled Jews received a letter from Jeremiah explaining that in Babylon, removed from the Temple and the trappings of the Jewish religion, the people could still worship Yahweh (Jer. 29).