

THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH

A. OVERVIEW

- Content: oracles of judgment against Judah and the nations, along with oracles of future hope, interwoven with narratives of Jeremiah's role in the concluding days of Judah
- Prophet: Jeremiah, of priestly lineage from the village of Anathoth, about three miles south of Jerusalem
- Date of prophetic activity: from 627 to 585 B.C. (see 1:2–3)
- Emphases: Judah's unfaithfulness to Yahweh will end in its destruction; in keeping with the promises of Deuteronomy, God has a bright future for his people—a time of restoration and a new covenant; Yahweh's own heart for his people revealed through the heart of Jeremiah

The book of Jeremiah is a collection of his many oracles—mostly in poetry and mostly against Judah and Jerusalem—plus a large number of narratives in which he is the leading player. The collection itself, perhaps “published” by Baruch (Jer 36:32; 45:1–5), comes in four major parts. Chapters 1–25 contain oracles and interpreted symbolic actions that announce the coming doom of Judah and Jerusalem. A large part of this material appears in the form of conversation/dialogue between the prophet and Yahweh. In chapters 26–36 two collections of (nonchronological) narratives enclose the highly important message of hope in chapters 30–33. Chapters 37–45 contain a series of narratives in chronological order, having to do with events that fulfill prophecies in part 1. Chapters 46–51 contain oracles against the nations, while chapter 52 is a historical epilogue, vindicating Jeremiah as a prophet. Thus:

- A Prophecies of Judgment against Jerusalem (chs. 1–25)
- B Narratives Holding Out Hope for the Future (chs. 26–36)
- B* Narratives regarding the Fall of Jerusalem (chs. 37–45)
- A* Prophecies of Judgment against the Nations (chs. 46–51)
- Epilogue (ch. 52)

It is important to note that the narratives in chapters 26–36 have many correspondences with the preceding oracles. For example, the content of the famous temple sermon appears in 7:1–29, while the reaction to it appears as the first narrative (ch. 26); the policy to yield to Babylon and go into exile in 21:8–10 becomes the major focus of the narratives in chapters 27–29; and the reasons for judgments against Judah's kings and prophets given in chapters 22–23 find narrative expression in chapters 26–29 and 34–36. This suggests that the reason for the (nonchronological) first collection of narratives is topical—and intentional.

Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 186–187.

B. SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING JEREMIAH

To read Jeremiah well, you need to have some inkling about the man and his times, as well as the nature of the materials that make up the book.

First, a few comments about the times in which Jeremiah lived. Although Jeremiah received his call during the thirteenth year (of thirty-one years) of the reign of Josiah, only one of his oracles is dated to that period (3:6–10). Most of them come from the tumultuous years in Jerusalem after Josiah's death, during the reigns of two sons (Jehoiakim, 609–598 B.C., and Zedekiah, 597–586). Josiah himself had reigned during a lull on the international scene, as Assyria was in serious decline and both Egypt and Babylon were vying for supremacy in the coastal area that included Judah. Josiah had died in battle against the Egyptian pharaoh Neco (609), but Neco in turn was defeated by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon in 605. The rest of Judah's final years are related to the political events that followed.

Josiah's sons (and one grandson, Jehoiachin) spent their few ruling years as political footballs between Egypt and Babylon, always under Babylonian control but repeatedly turning to Egypt for help to throw off the Babylonian yoke and gain a measure of independence. These policies eventually resulted in a siege by Nebuchadnezzar in 598 that brought Jehoiachin's brief reign of three months to an end, as he and most of the leading people of Jerusalem were sent into exile to Babylon (2 Kgs 24:8–17; Jer 29:2; see Ezekiel). Nonetheless, the final king of Judah, Zedekiah, returned to these hopeless policies, which eventually led to a second siege and the total destruction of Jerusalem (586). A still further rebellion by a remnant of those who remained in Judah finally resulted in a flight to Egypt in which both Jeremiah and Baruch were taken along. It is not possible to make sense of Jeremiah apart from this history, since he played a major role in speaking into these political affairs over the twenty-two years of Jehoiakim's and Zedekiah's reigns. The narratives reveal a great deal about political intrigue, as both hawks and doves are represented, along with pro-Egyptian and pro-Babylonian voices. And because Jeremiah's oracles and narratives (until the events of the end, chs. 37–45) are not in their chronological order, you will do well to keep these names, dates, and political policies near at hand as you read.

Second, Jeremiah was given a most unenviable task, namely, to stand in opposition to the royal house of David and to the prophets, priests, and people by announcing the coming destruction of Jerusalem and urging them to accept exile in Babylon if they wished to live and have any future at all. At issue is Jeremiah's pro-Babylonian policy (following the first exile under Jehoiachin in 598), a view that had two things militating against it in the royal court: Many believed (1) that Jerusalem was secure because of the Davidic covenant and the presence of Yahweh's temple (see 7:4–11) and (2) that the present exile of Jehoiachin would be short-lived (see 28:1–4). Jeremiah's message is clear: Yield to Babylon and you will live—even if the return is a lifetime away (!); resist and you will die. Lying behind this resistance is a conviction, stemming from Yahweh's rescue of Jerusalem from the Assyrians (see Isa 36–37), that Zion was inviolable—because of its temple, Yahweh's resting/dwelling place.

Third, a few comments about Jeremiah's book. You need to note that chapters 1–25 form the heart of Jeremiah's prophetic word and probably represent much of the scroll that was burned by Jehoiakim and rewritten with the help of Baruch (ch. 36). The beginning oracles announce the coming judgment and the reasons for it (primarily unfaithfulness to Yahweh in the form of idolatry), while at the same time they are full of appeals to Judah, urging that if her people repent, Yahweh will relent. But the appeals go unheeded and eventually give way to the certainty of coming judgment. Included in this collection are the many intriguing moments of Jeremiah's own interactions with Yahweh (by argument, dialogue, lament, and complaint) over the coming disaster or over his own ill-treatment. You may find the going a bit easier when reading this collection if you mark carefully the changes of speakers. Also included are several interpreted symbolic actions, which serve to illustrate what Yahweh has to say to Judah. Of the several influences on Jeremiah himself, the most obvious are Hosea and Deuteronomy. Jeremiah makes considerable use of the former's vivid imagery of Israel as a faithless bride-turned-prostitute, dearly loved by Yahweh, but whose unfaithfulness will cause him to give her over to her "lovers." This in turn reflects several Deuteronomistic influences, especially the appeal to the stipulations of the covenant, including the curses for unfaithfulness at the key point of whether they will serve Yahweh alone (Jer 11:1–13; cf. 17:5–8). Related is the imagery of the un/circumcised heart (4:4; 9:25; cf. Deut 10:16; 30:6) and the promised restoration after exile with a new covenant (Jer 30–33). As in Deuteronomy, the issue is not merely idolatry, but syncretism—worshiping and serving Baal alongside Yahweh. But Yahweh is God alone and therefore a jealous God who cannot abide their idolatry, yet he is also compassionate and loving toward his people. It is this mixture of realities that finds poignant expression in Jeremiah.