



The Book of Jeremiah Jeremiah, Part 1

Jeremiah Introduction

As a prophet, Jeremiah is a very particular figure writing in and for a very particular time and place in history. The Book of Jeremiah is one of the so-called "Major Prophets": Isaiah, Jeremiah (along with Lamentations), Ezekiel, and Daniel. However, even the simple act of locating this book within the Bible leads to certain peculiarities: the designation and grouping of the "Major Prophets" is a construct unique to the Christian Old Testament. In the Hebrew Bible, only Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel are found together, and form part of the *Nevi'im*, or the "Prophets," while Lamentations and the Book of Daniel are included with the later grouping of texts called the *Ketuvim*, or the "Writings."

The fact that both traditions group the Books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel together reflects their similarities. These three books are, at least to some degree, prophetic products of the historical timeframes in which they claim to be written, and deal directly with prophecies concerning Israel during the 8th through 6th centuries BCE. Many scholars often characterize the tone of three books in relation to each other: Jeremiah is "all doom," Ezekiel is "half doom, half consolation," and Isaiah is "all consolation." Obviously, these three lengthy books are far more nuanced than that, but it is a helpful framework with which to approach these texts.

Jeremiah the Prophet, Jeremiah the Book

The Book of Jeremiah itself is a multi-faceted, multi-authored, multi-layered work. What we might think of as one single "book" is in fact a complex, composite set of smaller works, which span many different genres, and speak to a very specific historical setting. Jeremiah himself was a figure whose prophetic career spanned the better part of four decades, from the 13th year of King Josiah's reign until the beginning of King Zedekiah's reign. His activity covers the dissolution of the Assyrian empire, a brief time of independence for Judah, and the growing Babylonian threat. In many ways, it is deeply appropriate to call Jeremiah a prophet of doom, because, at least in some sense, everything he predicts comes to pass.

Does this mean Jeremiah was a good prophet? Could he tell the future successfully, or was he perhaps just a realist, who could see the writing on the wall (to borrow a phrase from Daniel)? Like Isaiah, Jeremiah seems to have been a professional court prophet, but unlike the earlier prophet Jeremiah seems to have been particularly unpopular due to his message; he was even banned from

entering the temple! Jeremiah preached an idiosyncratic message, one which was clearly not liked or appreciated by everyone.

Who was Jeremiah?

When we think about prophetic texts, it is easy to think that what we're reading are the direct words of the prophet, written or recorded. For some prophetic books, that prospect is easier to imagine due to the length, format, and content of those works. In the case of Jeremiah, however, the work itself is different: it contains prophetic oracles and first-person narration, as we might expect, but there are also third-person narratives about Jeremiah, and sections with heavy Deuteronomistic overtones. It is somewhat ironic that despite being the most biographical prophetic book in the biblical corpus it is very difficult to pin down exactly who Jeremiah was.

This fact helps demonstrate that the way these words attach themselves to a prophetic figure, whether as their own words or words assigned to them, is not done in service of actually telling the reader who they were. Rather, the point is often to show the prophet's experience of the divine word, in the service of speaking an often-inconvenient truth about how God's laws play out in history. Jeremiah believes, as does Ezekiel, that Israel has irrevocably destroyed the terms of their covenant with YHWH. On account of this, he has clear problems with the implications of Josiah's reforms, even if the prophet doesn't address those reforms directly.

Jeremiah and the Josianic Reforms

Among the myriad genres found in the Book of Jeremiah – poetic and prose prophecies, biography, lamentations for Israel and self – we find a number of important sermons. In Chapter 7, Jeremiah delivers his so-called "Temple Sermon," in which he describes God coming to dwell "in this place," that is to say, the temple itself. This might seem obvious to modern readers – of course God would dwell in God's temple in Jerusalem! However, this was a critical theological issue in Jeremiah's day. The focus on the temple as God's dwelling place calls to mind the Deuteronomic program of centralizing the cult at Jerusalem, but Jeremiah's words in verses 5-7 (and elsewhere) also allude to the reforms under Josiah. How? In Josiah's day, we observed that a scroll was discovered in the temple, containing laws and statutes that the people had not been following, and that Israel is now in deep trouble. Part of those laws and statutes was the elimination of cult practices which involved the worship of other deities, and the centralizing of the cult of YHWH in Jerusalem. Jeremiah's implicit critique of those reforms is that it is not enough to simply eliminate the other cultic programs and centralize worship of YHWH in Jerusalem if the people are still committing other moral ills, such as oppressing the alien, the orphan, and the widow, and shedding innocent blood.

This section is picking up on a common theme found throughout much of the early prophetic works, which might best be described as "anti-hypocrisy." Many people erroneously think of this theme as "anti-cult," but that could not be further from the truth. Rather, the message of Jeremiah and other prophets like him is that correct observation of the proscribed and sanction cultic program does not automatically absolve someone of the wrongs they are still doing. Jeremiah specifically calls out the cult centralization in this manner: just because the people now come to Jerusalem to worship YHWH, it does not mean it is the be-all-end-all of their responsibilities.

Jeremiah specifically uses the language of Deuteronomistic theology in order to critique a reform motivated by the same theology. The great message about the reforms is: "necessary, but not sufficient." Jeremiah is not anti-centralization; he is deploying the same language used to justify the reform in order to strengthen his critique in a nuanced and highly sophisticated manner. In verse 12, God tells the people through Jeremiah to "go now to my place that was in Shiloh," an important shrine that is now defunct, as a warning against what happens when centralization takes place without also taking care of those in the land.

This message against the Josianic reforms is likely from an early part of Jeremiah's prophetic career, but even here there is the rising threat of Babylon. The world beyond Israel is a scary place, and the encroaching geopolitical landscape forms a key backdrop to much of what happens throughout the Book of Jeremiah.

The World of Jeremiah

At the time of Jeremiah's prophetic activity, there were three major world powers in close proximity to Judah: the setting sun of Assyria, the rising star of Babylonia, and the ever-present specter of Egypt. As a nation, Judah is constantly trying to figure out where it fits on the scene, and whom to ally themselves with – if such a thing is even acceptable.

Jeremiah functions as a sort-of political go-between; his actions firmly represent the position of trying to figure out where Judah should sit at the table of these greater powers. After the Assyrian destruction of the Northern Kingdom in the 8th century, those in Jeremiah's time were all too aware of what it looks like to stand against imperial power and attempt to push back, and indeed, Judah almost went through the same destruction at the hands of the Assyrian empire. For Jeremiah, the question was whether to ally with those who are fighting back against the Babylonians, especially when to do so will likely result in total annihilation. They cannot rely on Egypt, given the decades of prophets like Isaiah maligning any such alliance with larger powers. As a result, Jeremiah will even go so far as to say that YHWH is in fact on the side of the Babylonians. Clearly, there is a lot at play in the theological and geopolitical undercurrents of the Book of Jeremiah.

Was Jeremiah a Priest?

To add to the confusing biographical nature of this work, the initial superscript in Chapter 1 seems to indicate that Jeremiah comes from a line of priests – but was he himself a priest? He belonged to a line of priests from Anathoth, in Benjamin, located on the periphery between desert and fertile land. Was this an exiled priestly line? What were priests doing anywhere other than Jerusalem after Josiah has conducted his reforms to centralize the cult there? In many ways, this perfectly sums up the kind of character Jeremiah is he's a liminal figure. He is a priest, but perhaps not the right kind of priest. He's a court prophet; but not a well-liked or appreciated court prophet. He lives in a time and space caught between Egypt and Babylon. Much of the subsequent sessions will focus on how Jeremiah navigates living in all these liminal states.

Yale Divinity School, 409 Prospect Street, New Haven, CT 06511
www.yalebiblestudy.org