

Some Thoughts on the Book of Jeremiah

“Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come.”¹

Jeremiah is the longest of the Old Testament prophetic books. It is also one of the most difficult to deal with. The book is a redaction of Jeremiah’s prophesies as well as a retelling of the events that occurred during his life and ministry.² The actual book is comprised of poetry, prose, and prosy.³ As such it was not written by Jeremiah, himself. It may have been assembled by his scribe Baruch,⁴ or by others after the prophet’s death (probably in Egypt). Unlike Psalms, the poetry of Jeremiah are oracles. They would have been chanted by the prophet, not sung by the congregation. Jeremiah is not a hopeful book. The LORD was warning Judah that, unless they changed their ways, judgment would come. Jeremiah was not popular either. The people who heard him wanted to believe other prophets who were speaking at the same time – false prophets. They were saying what the people wanted to hear, so Jeremiah’s stark warnings were unwelcome and even seen as threatening the security of the state.

Jeremiah prophesied over forty years during the reigns of Josiah, Jehoiakim, Zedekiah, and Gedaliah. Besides the false prophets, Jeremiah is contemporary with other Old Testament prophets. These include: Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Obadiah, Daniel, and Ezekiel. Unlike the Psalms, whose historical and liturgical settings are not well documented, Jeremiah’s prophetic ministry has a remarkable amount of historical context both in 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles as well as the historical tales of Jeremiah’s life and times internal to the book of Jeremiah. A brief chronology is presented below.

640 Judah: King: Josiah (640 – 609), son of Amon is 8 years old when he begins his reign 2 Kings 22:1

639 The prophet Zephaniah sternly condemns corruption and paganism rampant in Jerusalem. Zephaniah1-2

634 Josiah, age 14, begets Eliakim by his wife Zebidah. 2 Kings 22:1, 23:34 - 36

632 Josiah begins to study the traditions of his people. 2 Chron 14:3

632 Josiah, age 16, begets Jehoahaz by his wife Hamutal. 2 Kings 23:31

628 Josiah breaks Judah's ties to Assyrian religion. He restores Judah's religious traditions by destroying pagan altars and shrines. 2 Chron 34:3-5

627 Josiah takes advantage of Assyrian weakness to assert independence and control over parts of northern Israel. 2 Chron 34:6-7

626 Jeremiah begins his long career as a prophet, condemning Jerusalem's continuing apostasy from God. Jeremiah 1:1-4:4

625 The prophet Nahum in Jerusalem anticipates the fall of Nineveh and Assyria: "Woe to the bloody city, all full of lies and booty - no end to the plunder!" Nahum3:1

622 The prophet Habakkuk mourns the fact that the oppression of the Assyrians is being replaced by the Chaldeans

(Babylonians). He calls them all "guilty men, whose own might is their god!" Habakkuk 1:11

621 King Josiah commissions Hilkiah, the chief priest, to renovate the Temple in Jerusalem.

621 Hilkiah finds the book of the Law of Moses (probably the book of Deuteronomy, newly put into writing) in the Temple. 2 Kings 22:8-13

621 The book is authenticated by a prophetess named Huldah. 2 Kings 22:14-20

620 Josiah institutes a restoration of the Law of Moses and asserts Judah's independence based on the new-found book. 2 Kings 23:1-25

620/615 Unknown authors compile the bulk of the material that makes up the history of Israel and Judah in 1 and 2 Kings.

612 Josiah supports the Babylonian overthrow of Assyria.

609 Josiah is mortally wounded in battle trying to prevent Egypt from belatedly helping Assyria. 2 Kings 23:29

609 Egypt takes control of Palestine. Jewish independence is lost for more than four centuries.

609 The people of Judah choose Josiah's youngest son as his successor. 2 Chron 36:1

609 Judah: King: Jehoahaz (also called Shallum) 2 Kings 23:31; Jeremiah 22:11-12

¹ 1Corinthians 10:11

² Not unlike the Gospels that present Jesus’ sayings and provide some context for them in the form of stories about Jesus’ life.

³ Writing that uses some poetic imagery and metaphor but without observing the more formal structure of poetry.

⁴ Jeremiah 36:4 “Then Jeremiah called Baruch the son of Neriah: and Baruch wrote from the mouth of Jeremiah all the words of the LORD, which he had spoken unto him, upon a roll of a book.”

- 609 Pharaoh Necho deposes Jehoahaz, places his brother Eliakim on the throne, and renames him Jehoiakim. 2 Kings 23:33-34
- 609 Judah: King: Jehoiakim (609-598), 25 years old. 2 Kings 23:36
- 609 Necho imposes harsh tribute on Judah, which Jehoiakim passes on to the people in heavy taxes. 2 Kings 23:35
- 608 Royal prophets and priests assure Jehoiakim that Babylon cannot destroy Jerusalem because God will protect his Temple. Jeremiah 5:12; 14:13
- 608 Jeremiah stands in the Temple and predicts its destruction. He is arrested by Temple priests and prophets and threatened with execution for treason. Jeremiah 7:1-15; 26:1-24
- 605 Jeremiah dictates to Baruch, his assistant, all his prophecies since 626. He sends Baruch to read them in the Temple, since Jeremiah is barred from the Temple. Sympathetic princes warn Baruch and Jeremiah to go into hiding. Jeremiah 36:1-19
- 605 The scroll of Jeremiah's prophecies is confiscated and read to King Jehoiakim. He burns the scroll and orders the arrest of Jeremiah and Baruch. Jeremiah dictates a new scroll - probably the basic contents of Jeremiah 1-25. Jeremiah 36:20-32
- 605 Jeremiah recognizes that Pharaoh Necho's defeat at the hands of the Babylonians at Carchemish means that Egypt's power is waning. Jeremiah 46:22; 46:1-28
- 604 Babylon destroys Ashkelon in Philistia and deports the upper classes to Babylon. Jeremiah 47:5-7
- 603 Jehoiakim becomes an unwilling vassal of Babylon. 2 Kings 24:1
- 601 Nebuchadnezzar attempts to conquer Egypt but is stopped at the border of Egypt in a great battle.
- 600 Jehoiakim rebels against Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar does not attack immediately, but Babylon's allies harass Judah. 2 Kings 24:2
- 598 Jehoiakim dies, perhaps by assassination, and his body lies unburied. 2 Kings 24:6-7; Jeremiah 22:18-19; 36:30
- 598 Judah: King: Jehoiachin (598 - 597), aged 18, son of Jehoiakim. 2 Kings 24:6
- 597 Nebuchadnezzar besieges Jerusalem and Jehoiachin surrenders. Nebuchadnezzar deports Jehoiachin and thousands of the Jewish nobility and skilled craftsmen to Babylon. 2 Kings 24:10-16; Jeremiah 52:28
- 597 Nebuchadnezzar chooses Jehoiachin's uncle Mattaniah as a puppet king and renames him Zedekiah. Many Jews continue to consider Jehoiachin king. 2 Kings 24:17; Ezekiel 1:2
- 597 Judah: King: Zedekiah (597-586), aged 21, son of Josiah. 2 Kings 24:18
- 596 Jeremiah wears an ox yoke and predicts a long exile under Babylon's yoke. The Temple prophet Hananiah predicts that God will break Babylon's yoke in two years and restore Jehoiachin. Jeremiah 27-28
- 594 The accounts of Daniel interpreting Nebuchadnezzar's dream are set in this period. Daniel 1-2
- 593 Ezekiel, a prophet and priest in Babylon, sees his first vision during a great storm. His prophecies continue till 571. Ezekiel 1
- 589 Zedekiah rebels against Nebuchadnezzar. 2 Kings 24:20
- 588 In January, Nebuchadnezzar begins a two-year siege of Jerusalem. 2 Kings 25:1; Jeremiah 21:3-7:37:5
- 588 In Babylon, Ezekiel predicts the destruction of Jerusalem. Ezekiel 24:1-14
- 588 Jeremiah is arrested and imprisoned. Jeremiah 37:11-21
- 587 Jeremiah is thrown into a muddy cistern to die, but is rescued by Ebed-melech, an Ethiopian eunuch. Jeremiah 38
- 586 Nebuchadnezzar enters Jerusalem. Zedekiah tries to escape, is captured, tortured, and deported to Babylon. 2 Kings 25:2-7
- 586 In August, Nebuchadnezzar burns Solomon's Temple and every substantial building in Jerusalem. He deports more than 800 Jews. 2 Kings 25:8-12; Jeremiah 52:29
- 586 Later legend tells that Jeremiah hid the Ark of the Covenant in an unknown location on Mt. Nebo in Moab. 2 Maccabees 2:4-8
- 586 The kingdom of Judah ceases to exist and becomes a province of the Babylonian empire. Nebuchadnezzar appoints Gedaliah, a supporter of Jeremiah, as governor. 2 Kings 25:22; Jeremiah 39:14
- 586 Judah: Governor: Gedaliah (586-585) son of Ahikam, lives at Mizpah. Jerusalem is uninhabitable. 2 Kings 25:22-23
- 586 The prophet Obadiah condemns the people of Edom for aiding Babylon against Judah and predicts a restoration of the exiles. Obadiah 1-21
- 585 Gedaliah and his advisers are assassinated by Ishmael, the son of Nethaniah, a member of the deposed royal family. 2 Kings 25:25; Jeremiah 41:1-3
- 585 An anthology of poetic Lamentations over Jerusalem is collected. Lamentations 1-5
- 584 A company of Jews flees to Egypt and forces Jeremiah and Baruch to accompany them. They settle in the border fortress of Tahpanhes. Jeremiah 42-43
- 582 Nebuchadnezzar's commander deports nearly 750 more Jews to Babylon. Jeremiah 52:30
- 580 The Jews who have fled to Egypt blame their disaster on their failure to worship Canaanite and Babylonian gods. Jeremiah 44:15-19
- 575 Jeremiah dies. The exact date and circumstances are unknown. A legend says that he was stoned to death in Egypt; another says he was taken to Babylon and died.
- 573 Ezekiel, after 25 years in exile, sees an elaborate vision of the Jerusalem Temple restored and the nation of Israel reunited. Ezekiel 40 .48
- 560 Jehoiachin in exile in Babylon is released from prison by Awil-Marduk (Evil Merodach) and treated as a king in exile. 2 Kings 25:27-30