

Jeremiah¹ and His Times

¹The words of Jeremiah, son of Hilkiah, one of the priests at Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin. ²The word of the LORD came to him in the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah, son of Amon king of Judah, ³and through the reign of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, down to the fifth month of the eleventh year of Zedekiah son of Josiah king of Judah, when the people of Jerusalem went into exile.



The first chapter of the Book (or Scroll) of Jeremiah is a long prologue to what follows as the record of Jeremiah's prophetic ministry and life.

"The chapter comprises a four-part introduction to the scroll:

Verses 1-3 A preface introducing Jeremiah and his times

Verses 4-10 Jeremiah's self-introduction describing his commission, with its challenge to speak boldly and its promise of protection

Verses 11-12 Jeremiah's report of a message from Yahweh about the coming implementation of his message

Verses 13-19 Jeremiah's report of a second (double) message from Yahweh:

Verses 13-16 Yahweh's intention to bring disaster on Judah by means of enemy invasion

Verses 17-19 Yahweh's renewed commission to Jeremiah with its challenge to speak boldly and its promise of protection"²

In the opening three verses of the first chapter of Jeremiah, several important facts about the prophet are presented.

1) He is the "son of Hilkiah,³ one of the priests at Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin." This family background may have influenced his life as a prophet of the LORD. Since his family resided in the village of Anathoth (about 4 km northeast of Jerusalem), Jeremiah most likely attended temple worship during Josiah's reforms with his father in the as he grew older. In this aspect, he is somewhat similar to John the Baptist almost six centuries later. Both came from priestly families.⁴ Neither followed in their parental footsteps. Both were appointed prophets and both preached a message repentance, each message had a different motivational focus. Jeremiah's message was essentially 'Repent or Jerusalem will destroyed.' John's message was "Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."⁵ While John had a following of disciples, it is not clear how large Jeremiah's was. Repentance preached required that both messages have a moral content. That content was very threatening, however, to the established power structure and them both unpopular with the ruling class. In both cases, Jerusalem and the Temple were under threat of destruction. In Jeremiah's case by Nebuchadnezzar and in John's case by Titus.

¹ Jeremiah means "YHVH will lift up"

² For clarity and for coherence, I have chosen to use this outline of the first chapter of Jeremiah developed by John Goldingay as listed on page 68 of The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: the Book of Jeremiah, Published by William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Copyright John Goldingay 2021. ISBN 978-0-8028-7584-6

³ It is tempting to equate Jeremiah's father with the high priest who found book of the law in the temple. "2Kings 22:8 And Hilkiah the high priest said unto Shaphan the scribe, 'I have found the book of the law in the house of the LORD.' And Hilkiah gave the book to Shaphan, and he read it." This is not certain, however.

⁴ Luke 1:5 "There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judaea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia: and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth." Zacharias and Elizabeth were the parents of John who was born late in their lives.

⁵ Matthew 3:2

2) “The word of the LORD came to him.” It is not clear how this occurred, whether by direct audition or by visions or by sober reflection and illumination. What is clear is that the conservators of Jeremiah’s spoken and written ministry were convinced that the LORD had communicated to him what was to be spoken to the LORD’s people. The verses that follow in this chapter give further details of the word of the LORD that came to him and, as that oracle is presented in this chapter, it is his commission to speak as the LORD’s prophet.

3) It tells the duration of his ministry: from Josiah’s 13th year (627 BC.) “to the fifth month of the eleventh year of Zedekiah son of Josiah king of Judah, when the people of Jerusalem went into exile” (586 BC). These dates cover a period of 41 years.⁶ This statement is important for two reasons.

The first reason is that this list of kings gives us points of contact to the wider history of Israel as reported in 2Kings 21:24 to 25:10 and in 2Chronicles 33:25 to 36:10. This allows us to understand something of the spiritual milieu in which Jeremiah exercised his prophetic office. For example, the book of 2 Kings tells us Josiah was a good king who initiated reform in Israel.⁷ This may explain why there are no explicit prophecies associated with Josiah in the book. But Jeremiah’s subsequent ministry after Josiah’s death at Megiddo raises the question of how profound and therefore long-lasting Josiah’s reforms really were. The harmonization of these and other prophetic voices occurring in this period ⁸ will be helpful as a spiritual context to Jeremiah’s prophecies.

The second reason is important for Israel as it is for us. Jeremiah’s redactors doubtless included this latter date (the people of Jerusalem going into exile) as important evidence that the word of the LORD really had come to Jeremiah, whose public ministry was exceedingly unpopular because it was one long denunciation of the spiritual life of Israel and continual warning of the LORD’s judgment that would come unless the people repented. The fact that Jeremiah’s redactors include this phrase means they are looking back in time on the events mentioned and found in them positive proof of Jeremiah was a true prophet of the LORD. Jeremiah must have been included in the Old Testament cannon ⁹ at least in part for this very reason. But why would these prophecies, which had been fulfilled with such terrible certainty, be important *ex post facto* for later generations of Jews. Clearly, when the captives returned from Babylon and Jerusalem was rebuilt, they did not want to repeat their parents (or grandparents) errors. For us the lesson is simple. “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. Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.”¹⁰

⁶ If 627 marks the year of his birth, (as William Holladay asserts) and his prophesying began about his twelfth year, then the period of his prophesying would be shorter (~ 30 years).

⁷ The dates of King Josiah are 640 – 609 BC. His thirteenth year would be 627 BC. Most commentators believe that date marks the start of Jeremiah’s prophesying. One of the leading experts on Jeremiah, William Halliday, believes that it really marks his birthdate. The difference is critical to the chronology of Jeremiah and to the problem of assigning a wider historical setting to individual prophecies where feasible. Verses 3 and 4 that follow clearly associate Jeremiah’s divine appointment to the prophetic office to the time before he was born. “The word of the LORD came to me, saying, ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born, I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.’” Jeremiah’s redactors, who assembled this scroll, might well have understood the thirteenth year of King Josiah as being the date when Jeremiah was *appointed* prophet (i.e., the year of his birth) and not when he started his prophetic utterances. There are several arguments that support such a minority view and we may encounter them as we go through the book, but our approach in these notes does not support a detailed assessment of either position.

⁸ Jeremiah is contemporary with six other prophets: Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Obadiah, Daniel, and Ezekiel.

⁹ While the Old Testament cannon (the list of those books deemed essential for faith and practice by the Jews) was probably made later than the compilation of the scroll of Jeremiah, it must have been accepted by the Old Testament translation (the Septuagint) made between the 3rd and 1st centuries B.C.

¹⁰ 1Corinthians 10:11 - 12