

[Introduction to Jeremiah](#)

Author and Date

The book preserves an account of the prophetic ministry of Jeremiah, whose personal life and struggles are known to us in greater depth and detail than those of any other OT prophet. The meaning of his name is uncertain. Suggestions include "The LORD exalts" and "The LORD establishes," but a more likely proposal is "The LORD throws," either in the sense of "hurling" the prophet into a hostile world or of "throwing down" the nations in divine judgment for their sins. Jeremiah's prophetic ministry began in 626 B.C. and ended sometime after 586 (see notes on [1:2-3](#)). His ministry was immediately preceded by that of Zephaniah. Habakkuk was a contemporary, and Obadiah may have been also. Since Ezekiel began his ministry in Babylon in 593 he too was a late contemporary of the great prophet in Jerusalem. How and when Jeremiah died is not known; Jewish tradition, however, asserts that while living in Egypt he was put to death by being stoned (cf. [Heb 11:37](#)).

Jeremiah was a priest, a member of the household of Hilkiah. His hometown was Anathoth ([1:1](#)), so he may have been a descendant of Abiathar ([1Ki 2:26](#)), a priest during the days of King Solomon. The Lord commanded Jeremiah not to marry and raise children because the impending divine judgment on Judah would sweep away the next generation ([16:1-4](#)). Primarily a prophet of doom, he attracted only a few friends, among whom were Ahikam ([26:24](#)), Gedaliah (Ahikam's son, [39:14](#)) and Ebed-Melech ([38:7-13](#); cf. [39:1 5-18](#)). Jeremiah's closest companion was his faithful secretary, Baruch, who wrote down Jeremiah's words as the prophet dictated them ([36:4-32](#)). He was advised by Jeremiah not to succumb to the temptations of ambition but to be content with his lot (ch. [45](#)). He also received from Jeremiah and deposited for safekeeping a deed of purchase ([32:11-16](#)), and accompanied the prophet on the long road to exile in Egypt ([43:6-7](#)). It is possible that Baruch was also responsible for the final compilation of the book of Jeremiah itself, since no event recorded in chs. [1-51](#) occurred after 580 B.C. (ch. [52](#) is an appendix added by a later hand).

Given to self-analysis and self-criticism ([10:24](#)), Jeremiah has revealed a great deal about his character and personality. Although timid by nature ([1:6](#)), he received the Lord's assurance that he would become strong and courageous ([1:18](#); [6:27](#); [15:20](#)). In his "confessions" ([11:18-23](#); [12:1-4](#); [15:10-21](#); [17:12-18](#); [18:18-23](#); [20:7-18](#)) he laid bare the deep struggles of his inmost being, sometimes making startlingly honest statements about his feelings toward God ([12:1](#); [15:18](#)). On occasion, he engaged in calling for redress against his personal enemies ([12:1-3](#); [15:15](#); [17:18](#); [18:19-23](#))--a practice that explains the origin of the English word "jeremiad," referring to a denunciatory tirade or complaint. Jeremiah, so often characterized by anguish of spirit ([4:19](#); [9:1](#); [10:19-20](#); [23:9](#)), has justly been called the "weeping prophet." But it is also true that the memory of his divine call ([1:17](#)) and the Lord's frequent reaffirmations of his commissioning as a prophet (see, e.g., [3:12](#); [7:2](#), [27-28](#); [11:2](#), [6](#); [13:12-13](#); [17:1 9-20](#)) made Jeremiah fearless in the service of his God (cf. [15:20](#)).

Background

Jeremiah began prophesying in Judah halfway through the reign of Josiah (640-609 B.C.) and continued throughout the reigns of Jehoahaz (609), Jehoiakim (609-598), Jehoiachin (598-597) and Zedekiah (597-586). It was a period of storm and stress when the doom of entire nations—including Judah itself—was being sealed. The smaller states of western Asia were often pawns in the power plays of such imperial giants as Egypt, Assyria and Babylon, and the time of Jeremiah's ministry was no exception. Ashurbanipal, last of the great Assyrian rulers, died in 627. His successors were no match for Nabopolassar, the founder of the Neo-Babylonian empire, who began his rule in 626 (the year of Jeremiah's call to prophesy). Soon after Assyria's capital city Nineveh fell under the onslaught of a coalition of Babylonians and Medes in 612, Egypt (no friend of Babylon) marched northward in an attempt to rescue Assyria, which was near destruction. King Josiah of Judah made the mistake of trying to stop the Egyptian advance, and his untimely death near Megiddo in 609 at the hands of Pharaoh Neco II was the sad result (2Ch 35:20-24). Jeremiah, who had found a kindred spirit in the godly Josiah and had perhaps proclaimed the messages recorded in 11:1-8; 17:19-27 during the king's reformation movement, lamented Josiah's death (2Ch 35:25).

Josiah's son Jehoahaz (see NIV text note on 22:11), also known as Shallum, is mentioned only briefly in the book of Jeremiah (22:10 b-12), and then in an unfavorable way. Neco put Jehoahaz in chains and made Eliakim, another of Josiah's sons, king in his place, renaming him Jehoiakim. Jehoahaz had ruled for a scant three months (2Ch 36:2), and his reign marks the turning point in the court's attitude toward Jeremiah. Once the king's friend and confidant, the prophet now entered a dreary round of persecution and imprisonment, alternating with only brief periods of freedom (20:1-2; 26:8-9; 32:2-3; 33:1; 36:26; 37:12-21; 38:6-13, 28).

Jehoiakim was relentlessly hostile toward Jeremiah. On one occasion, when an early draft of the prophet's writings was being read to Jehoiakim (36:21), the king used a scribe's knife to cut the scroll apart, three or four columns at a time, and threw it piece by piece into the firepot in his winter apartment (vv. 22-23). At the Lord's command, however, Jeremiah simply dictated his prophecies to Baruch a second time, adding "many similar words" to them (v. 32).

Just prior to this episode in Jeremiah's life, an event of extraordinary importance took place that changed the course of history: In 605 B.C., the Egyptians were crushed at Carchemish on the Euphrates by Nebuchadnezzar (46:2), the gifted general who succeeded his father Nabopolassar as ruler of Babylon that same year. Neco returned to Egypt with heavy losses, and Babylon was given a virtually free hand in western Asia for the next 70 years. Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem in 605, humiliating Jehoiakim (Da 1:1-2) and carrying off Daniel and his three companions to Babylon (Da 1:3-6). Later, in 598-597, Nebuchadnezzar attacked Jerusalem again, and the rebellious Jehoiakim was heard of no more. His son Jehoiachin ruled Judah for only three months (2Ch 36:9). Jeremiah foretold the captivity of Jehoiachin and his followers (22:24-30), a prediction that was later fulfilled (24:1; 29:1-2).

Mattaniah, Jehoiachin's uncle and a son of Josiah, was renamed Zedekiah and placed on Judah's throne by Nebuchadnezzar in 597 B.C. (37:1; 2Ch 35:11-14). Zedekiah, a weak and vacillating ruler, sometimes befriended Jeremiah and sought his advice but at other times allowed the prophet's enemies to mistreat and imprison him. Near the end of Zedekiah's reign, Jeremiah entered into an

agreement with him to reveal God's will to him in exchange for his own personal safety (38:15-27). Even then the prophet was under virtual house arrest until Jerusalem was captured in 586 (38:28).

While trying to flee the city, Zedekiah was overtaken by the pursuing Babylonians. In his presence his sons were executed, after which he himself was blinded by Nebuchadnezzar (39:1-7). Nebuzaradan, commander of the imperial guard, advised Jeremiah to live with Gedaliah, whom Nebuchadnezzar had made governor over Judah (40:1-6). After a brief reign, Gedaliah was murdered by his opponents (ch. 41). Others in Judah feared Babylonian reprisal and fled to Egypt, taking Jeremiah and Baruch with them (43:4-7). By that time the prophet was probably over 70 years old. His last recorded words are found in 44:24-30, the last verse of which is the only explicit reference in the Bible to Pharaoh Hophra, who ruled Egypt from 589 to 570 B.C.

Themes and Message

Referred to frequently as "Jeremiah the prophet" in the book that bears his name (20:2; 25:2; 28:5, 10-12, 15; 29:1, 29; 32:2; 34:6; 36:8, 26; 37:2, 3, 6; 38:9-10, 14; 42:2, 4; 43:6; 45:1; 46:1, 13; 47:1; 49:34; 50:1) and elsewhere (2Ch 36:12; Da 9:2; Mt 2:17; 27:9; see Mt 16:14), Jeremiah was ever conscious of his call from the Lord (1:5; 15:19) to be a prophet. As such, he proclaimed words that were spoken first by God himself (19:2) and were therefore certain of fulfillment (28:9; 32:24). Jeremiah had only contempt for false prophets (14:13-18; 23:13-40; 27:14-18) like Hananiah (ch. 28) and Shemaiah (29:24-32). Many of his own predictions were fulfilled in the short term (e.g., 16:15; 20:4; 25:11-14; 27:19-22; 29:10; 34:4-5; 43:10-11; 44:30; 46:13), and others were--or will yet be--fulfilled in the long term (e.g., 23:5-6; 30:8-9; 31:31-34; 33:15-16).

As hinted earlier, an aura of conflict surrounded Jeremiah almost from the beginning. He lashed out against the sins of his countrymen (44:23), scoring them severely for their idolatry (16:10-13, 20; 22:9; 32:29; 44:2-3, 8, 17-19, 25)--which sometimes even involved sacrificing their children to foreign gods (7:30-34). But Jeremiah loved the people of Judah in spite of their sins, and he prayed for them (14:7, 20) even when the Lord told him not to (7:16; 11:14; 14:11).

Judgment is one of the all-pervasive themes in Jeremiah's writings, though he was careful to point out that repentance, if sincere, would postpone the inevitable. His counsel of submission to Babylon and his message of "life as usual" for the exiles of the early deportations branded him as a traitor in the eyes of many. Actually, of course, his advice against rebellion marked him as a true patriot, a man who loved his countrymen too much to stand by silently and watch them destroy themselves. By warning them to submit and not rebel, Jeremiah was revealing God's will to them--always the most sensible prospect under any circumstances.

For Jeremiah, God was ultimate. The prophet's theology conceived of the Lord as the Creator of all that exists (10:12-16; 51:15-19), as all-powerful (32:27; 48:15; 51:57), as everywhere present (23:24). Jeremiah ascribed the most elevated attributes to the God whom he served (32:17-25), viewing him as the Lord not only of Judah but also of the nations (5:15; 18:7-10; 25:17-28; chs. 46-51).

At the same time, God is very much concerned about individual people and their accountability to him. Jeremiah's emphasis in this regard (see, e.g., 31:29-30) is similar to that of Ezekiel (see [Eze](#)

18:2-4), and the two men have become known as the "prophets of individual responsibility." The undeniable relationship between sin and its consequences, so visible to Jeremiah as he watched his beloved Judah in her death throes, made him--in the pursuit of his divine vocation--a fiery preacher (5:14; 20:9; 23:29) of righteousness, and his oracles have lost none of their power with the passing of the centuries.

Called to the unhappy task of announcing the destruction of the kingdom of Judah (thoroughly corrupted by the long and evil reign of Manasseh and only superficially affected by Josiah's efforts at reform), it was Jeremiah's commission to lodge God's indictment against his people and proclaim the end of an era. At long last, the Lord was about to inflict on the remnant of his people the ultimate covenant curse (see Lev 26:31-33; Dt 28:49-68). He would undo all that he had done for them since the day he brought them out of Egypt. It would then seem that the end had come, that Israel's stubborn and uncircumcised (unconsecrated) heart had sealed her final destiny, that God's chosen people had been cast off, that all the ancient promises and covenants had come to nothing.

But God's judgment of his people (and the nations), though terrible, was not to be the last word, the final work of God in history. Mercy and covenant faithfulness would triumph over wrath. Beyond the judgment would come restoration and renewal. Israel would be restored, the nations that crushed her would be crushed, and the old covenants (with Israel, David and the Levites) would be honored. God would make a new covenant with his people in which he would write his law on their hearts (31:31-34) and thus consecrate them to his service. The house of David would rule them in righteousness, and faithful priests would serve. God's commitment to Israel's redemption was as unfailing as the secure order of creation (ch. 33).

Jeremiah's message illumined the distant as well as the near horizon. It was false prophets who proclaimed peace to a rebellious nation, as though the God of Israel's peace was indifferent to her unfaithfulness. But the very God who compelled Jeremiah to denounce sin and pronounce judgment was the God who authorized him to announce that the divine wrath had its bounds, its 70 years. Afterward forgiveness and cleansing would come--and a new day, in which all the old expectations, aroused by God's past acts and his promises and covenants, would yet be fulfilled in a manner transcending all God's mercies of old.

Literary Features

Jeremiah is the longest book in the Bible, containing more words than any other book. Although a number of chapters were written mainly in prose (chs. 7; 11; 16; 19; 21; 24-29; 32-45), including the appendix (ch. 52), most sections are predominantly poetic in form. Jeremiah's poetry is as lofty and lyrical as any found elsewhere in Scripture. A creator of beautiful phrases, he has given us an abundance of memorable passages (e.g., 2:13, 26-28; 7:4, 11, 34; 8:20, 22; 9:23-24; 10:6-7, 10, 12-13; 13:23; 15:20; 17:5-9; 20:13; 29:13; 30:7, 22; 31:3, 15, 29-30, 31-34; 33:3; 51:10).

Poetic repetition was used by Jeremiah with particular skill (see, e.g., 4:23-26; 51:20-23). He understood the effectiveness of repeating a striking phrase over and over. An example is "sword, famine and plague," found in 15 separate verses (14:12; 21:7, 9; 24:10; 27:8, 13; 29:17-18; 32:24, 36; 34:17; 38:2; 42:17, 22; 44:13). He made use of cryptograms (see NIV text notes on 25:26; 51:1, 41) on appropriate occasions. Alliteration and assonance were also a part of his literary style,

examples being *zarim wezeruha* ("foreigners . . . to winnow her," 51:2) and *pahad wapahat wapah* ("Terror and pit and snare," 48:43; see note on Isa 24:17).

Like Ezekiel, Jeremiah was often instructed to use symbolism to highlight his message: a ruined and useless belt (13:1-11), a smashed clay jar (19:1-12), a yoke of straps and crossbars (ch. 27), large stones in a brick pavement (43:8-13). Symbolic value is also seen in the Lord's commands to Jeremiah not to marry and raise children (16:1-4), not to enter a house where there is a funeral meal or where there is feasting (16:5-9), and to buy a field in his hometown, Anathoth (32:6-15). Similarly, the Lord used visual aids in conveying his message to Jeremiah: potter's clay (18:1-10), two baskets of figs (ch. 24).

Outline

Unlike Ezekiel, the oracles in Jeremiah are not arranged in chronological order. Had they been so arranged, the sequence of sections within the book would have been approximately as follows: 1:1-7:15; ch. 26; 7:16-20:18; ch. 25; chs. 46-51; 36:1-8; ch. 45; 36:9-32; ch. 35; chs. 21-24; chs. 27-31; 34:1-7; 37:1-10; 34:8-22; 37:11-38:13; 39:15-18; chs. 32-33; 38:14-39:14; 52:1-30; chs. 40-44; 52:31-34. The outline below represents an analysis of the book of Jeremiah in its present canonical order.

- I. Call of the Prophet (ch. 1)
- II. Warnings and Exhortations to Judah (chs. 2-35)
 - A. Earliest Discourses (chs. 2-6)
 - B. Temple Message (chs. 7-10)
 - C. Covenant and Conspiracy (chs. 11-13)
 - D. Messages concerning the Drought (chs. 14-15)
 - E. Disaster and Comfort (16:1-17:18)
 - F. Command to Keep the Sabbath Holy (17:19-27)
 - G. Lessons from the Potter (chs. 18-20)
 - H. Condemnation of Kings, Prophets and People (chs. 21-24)
 - I. Foretelling the Babylonian Exile (chs. 25-29)
 - J. Promises of Restoration (chs. 30-33)
 - K. Historical Appendix (chs. 34-35)
- III. Sufferings and Persecutions of the Prophet (chs. 36-38)
 - A. Burning Jeremiah's Scroll (ch. 36)
 - B. Imprisoning Jeremiah (chs. 37-38)
- IV. The Fall of Jerusalem and Its Aftermath (chs. 39-45)
 - A. The Fall Itself (ch. 39)
 - B. Accession and Assassination of Gedaliah (40:1-41:15)
 - C. Migration to Egypt (41:16-43:13)
 - D. Prophecy against Those in Egypt (ch. 44)
 - E. Historical Appendix: Promise to Baruch (ch. 45)

- V. Judgment against the Nations (chs. 46-51)
 - A. Against Egypt (ch. 46)
 - B. Against Philistia (ch. 47)
 - C. Against Moab (ch. 48)
 - D. Against Ammon (49:1-6)
 - E. Against Edom (49:7-22)
 - F. Against Damascus (49:23-27)
 - G. Against Kedar and Hazor (Arabia) (49:28-33)
 - H. Against Elam (49:34-39)
 - I. Against Babylon (chs. 50-51)

- VI. Historical Appendix (ch. 52)