

SESSION THIRTEEN

JEREMIAH

Historical Background and Synthesis of Ch. 1–20

I. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

A. *The Prophet Jeremiah (יֵרֵמְיָהוּ) — "the weeping prophet"*

Jeremiah was born in the village of Anathoth about 646 BC and died probably in Egypt, sometime after 587 BC (possibly not until 570 in light of 44:29-30). He was called to prophetic office about 627 BC (1:2; 25:3).¹ His ministry spanned the era of Babylon's repeated attacks upon Judah, including the fall of Judah in 587 BC. He was specifically instructed by God to record the divine revelation from God (36:1-3), although he utilized a scribe by the name of Baruch to do this (36:4).

His early ministry began in the days of Josiah, in which he complemented the king's efforts for reform (prior to finding the "book of the Law"). The Jews who fled to Egypt after 587 took Jeremiah with them (42:1–43:7), though against his will. The distinguishing characteristic of Jeremiah's prophetic ministry is that he urged unconditional surrender to Babylon, whereas Elisha and Isaiah had earlier urged the nation to withstand the assault of Assyria and promised God's help in doing so. Jeremiah faithfully preached what God wanted him to, though it proved to be quite unpopular among the people. As a result, he faced stern opposition and hostility from kings, priests, and prophets. At times, this proved to be emotionally overwhelming for him (20:7-18).

B. *The International Scene*

As Jeremiah began his ministry, Assyria was tumbling from its position of supremacy, and the Neo-Babylonian empire was gaining strength. By 612 BC, Nineveh was destroyed, thus marking the effectual end of Assyria. Babylon and Egypt then vied for supremacy. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon (r. 605-562 BC) dealt Pharaoh Neco of Egypt a major defeat at the battle of Carchemish in 605 BC, thus making Babylon *the force* to be reckoned with. Jeremiah's message, which included a call for submission to the heathen power of Babylon, was understandably unpopular.

¹627 BC was also the year of the death of the Assyrian king, Ashurbanipal (ca. 669-627 BC). This marked a major international shakeup, and led to an independent Babylonian state in 626 BC. Jeremiah's call to ministry was very timely in regard to current events of that day. With Ashurbanipal's death, the mighty kingdom of Assyria that had ruled the Ancient Near East for several centuries was crumbling, and Babylon was on the rise to become the next superpower. Assyria would virtually be eliminated in 612 BC with the destruction of Nineveh.

C. Important Dates and Rulers of Judah

1. 641/640-609 - **Josiah's** reign
 - 627- Jeremiah's call to ministry
 - 612- Fall of Nineveh
 - 609- Death of Josiah at Megiddo (by Egypt)
2. 609 - **Jehoahaz** (Shallum) [3 months: Jul-Oct 609]
3. 609-598 - **Johoiakim's** reign
 - 605 - Battle of Carchemish: Defeat of Pharaoh Neco by Nebuchadnezzar
 - 605 - First siege of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar (small deportation to Babylon which included Daniel)
4. 597 - **Jehoiachin's** reign (also called Jeconiah or Coniah) [3 months]
 - 597- 2nd siege of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar (another deportation which included Jehoiachin & Ezekiel)
5. 597-587 - **Zedekiah's** reign
 - 588 - Zedekiah conspired with Pharaoh Hophra of Egypt against Nebuchadnezzar
 - 588- Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem (lasting 30 months)
 - 587 - Jerusalem and the temple destroyed
6. 587 - **Gedaliah** appointed as *governor* over Judah
 - Fixed his residence at Mizpah, 11 km. NW of Jerusalem, and was joined by Jeremiah (40:6).

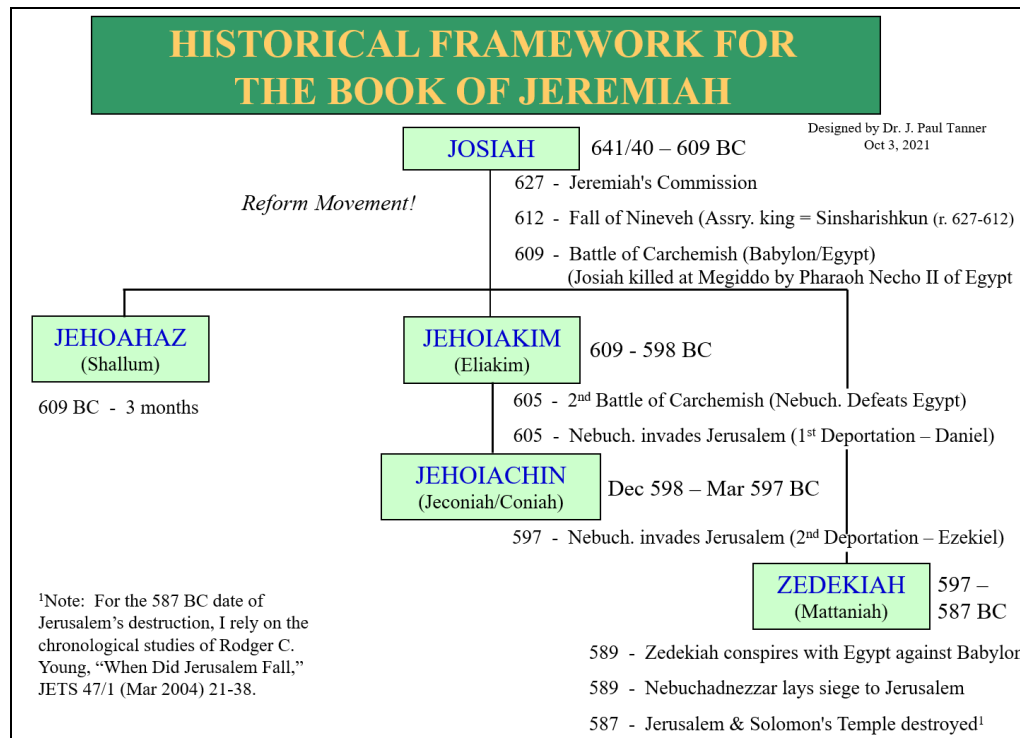
For a chart summarizing these rulers and their relationship to one another, see Section III below.

II. STRUCTURE AND PURPOSE OF THE BOOK

- Structure - See book chart of Jeremiah (*Suppl. 13.1*)
- Purpose - *To record the tragic destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC as a result of covenant unfaithfulness and in light of the rejection of YHWH's warnings, thus announcing a new covenant to be made with Israel in the future.*

In the future, God will restore and reunite both the Northern and Southern kingdoms as the New Covenant is enacted. Then, the corrupt leadership of the nation (unjust kings, unrighteous priests and lying prophets) will be replaced by the righteous Davidic king, the Messiah.

III. THE RULERS OF ISRAEL AT JUDAH'S INVASION



IV. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE BOOK: SECTION I

The first major section of the book consists of chapters 1–20 in which Yahweh makes clear His contention with the Southern Kingdom of Judah. It had been roughly a hundred years since the Northern Kingdom was disciplined by exile. Jeremiah is called upon to be the primary prophet for the time of the Southern Kingdom's discipline by exile.

A. *Jeremiah's Commission (Ch 1)*

"the boiling pot facing away from the north" (1:13-15) - anticipates the Babylonian invasion from the north.

B. *Warnings in Light of Josiah's Reform Efforts (Ch 2–6)*

1. 2:3 – Israel was the first nation to worship the true God. Echoes the promise to Abraham (Gen 12:1-3).
2. 2:18-19 – Commentary on the vain attempts at military alliances. Ironically, Judah will be disciplined by Egypt (2:36), an event which happened in 609 BC.

3. 2:22-23 – Reform attempts are only superficial (cf. 3:1; 5:1-3; 6:16-21). Yet, they claim innocence (2:35). In reality, *spiritual adultery* was still active, as the people continued to turn to idolatry. Chisholm notes,

Jeremiah specified certain pagan deities and practices as being especially attractive to the people. They worshiped the Canaanite storm and fertility god Baal (2:8, 23; 7:9; 9:14; 11:13, 17; 12:16; 19:5; 23:13, 27; 32:29, 35) and even burned their children in the fire as whole offerings to this god (19:5) and to Molech (32:35; cf. Lev. 18:21; 20:2-5; 2 Kings 23:10). They also expressed their devotion to the Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar, called in Jeremiah "the Queen of Heaven" (7:18; 44:17-19, 25). The worship of this goddess involved the ritual of baking cakes in her image, burning incense, and pouring out drink offerings. Following the destruction of Jerusalem, the exiles in Egypt even resumed this practice, claiming that the city's downfall was the result of abandoning the ritual (44:15-19).²
4. Social injustice, evidenced by oppression of the poor and failure to defend the course of widows and orphans, characterized society (2:34; 5:26-28; 7:5-6).
5. 2:30 – The nation has not been responsive to God's chastening (cf. 5:2-3; 6:10,16).
6. 3:6-10 – Judah has failed to learn from Samaria's downfall. In contrast, she has mocked the danger of judgment (5:11-13), often putting vain hopes in the messages of the false prophets (5:12; 8:11; 14:13,15; 27:9; 28:2-4).
7. Israel's millennial blessings (3:14b-18) are conditioned on true repentance (3:11-14a). This is in keeping with the principle of restoration laid down in Deuteronomy 30.
8. Judgment is imminent (foreign invasion—4:5-9; 5:15; 6:22), yet repentance is still urged to avert judgment (4:1-4,14).

C. *Jeremiah's Temple Address (Ch 7–10)*

1. 7:2 – The setting for this section is at the temple of the LORD.
2. 7:3-11 – The people are rebuked for hollow worship at the temple.
3. This material does not necessarily represent a single occasion. This should be coordinated with 26:1-2 which places the scene in the early part of Jehoiakim's reign (ca. 609-605 BC). Whereas chapter 7 emphasizes the event itself and Jeremiah's boldness, chapter 26 records the consequences of the address.
4. 8:8 – superficial righteousness! The LORD desired true righteousness of heart (9:23-24).
5. The heart of this address: unless Judah repented, Jerusalem would be as Shiloh (7:12; cf. 26:4-6).

D. *Call for Covenant Faithfulness (Ch 11–12)*

1. No date is given for this unit, and the historical setting is debated.
2. Feinberg comments, "Some, recognizing that Jeremiah is condemning Judah for disobeying the law of Moses, hold that the time must be in Jehoiakim's reign, when there was a retrogression from the reformation in Josiah's reign. Others hold, and their view represents a consensus of

²Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., "A Theology of Jeremiah and Lamentations," *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, 343.

expositors, that the historical setting was the reign of Josiah with his reformation, which proved to be only superficial. This position is preferable. The date might even have been soon after the discovery of the book of the Law before the reform became widespread (v. 6; cf. 2 Kings 23)."³

3. Several verses *hint* that this probably followed the discovery of the book of the Law (11:2,6). 11:6 could be looking at Josiah's proclamation of the Law and his call for reforms.

E. Signs to Awaken Repentance (Ch 13–19)

These chapters utilize several vivid object lessons designed to awaken Judah to repentance. This includes the linen waistband (13:1), a drought (14:1), Jeremiah's celibacy (16:2), the potter's wheel and clay (18:1), and the broken jar (19:1). Chisholm explains the significance of these in light of the historical context:

To illustrate the coming judgment, the Lord gave the people vivid object lessons. He instructed Jeremiah to refrain from taking a wife, mourning over the dead, or participating in feasts (16:1-9). Jeremiah's celibate lifestyle foreshadowed the decimation of the nation's families. The sword and famine would rob families of husbands/fathers, wives/mothers, and children. The prophet's refusal to participate in funerals anticipated the day when people would not have time or opportunity to bury their dead, let alone formally lament over them. Feasting was inappropriate, for God's judgment would soon bring an end to all the land's joyous celebrations.⁴

1. Judah's need was to *cling* to the LORD (13:11). This is the same Hebrew word used in Genesis 2 for the man and woman clinging to each other.
2. Notice the prevalence of those in the nation who are deceived into thinking that they are prophesying for the LORD (14:13-14).
3. 15:4 – The evil of Manasseh is a primary factor that sealed the fate of the Southern Kingdom of Judah.
4. 17:5-10 – Observe God's evaluation of humanism.

F. Jeremiah Confronted Followed by Emotional Turmoil (Ch 20)

20:7-11 – Observe Jeremiah's personal struggle in the ministry.

A LESSON FOR OUR LIFE

As with ancient Judah, the LORD detests superficial obedience—outward religious expressions when the heart is elsewhere. He is far more concerned about what goes on at the level of the heart (17:9-10). One of the struggles that all God's people face in the ministry is the tension between *learning* and *yearning*. There are many things that we all need to learn in preparation for our ministry, but this must never come at the expense of yearning for fellowship with our wonderful Lord, Himself. Our heart can easily be deceived into thinking that we are "spiritual" when in actuality we are drifting from the heart of our Lord. What a pitiful state the servant of God has fallen into who does not wake up in the morning and *yearn* to get alone with His God and fellowship with Him in prayer and the study of His precious Holy Word. Cultivate this now, or face a bleak future of unfruitful ministry from a dry heart! Let us then be careful, lest we assume our heart cannot be deceitful. God must be allowed to sensitize our heart with His own.

³Charles L. Feinberg, *Jeremiah*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Vol. 6 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1986), 95-96.

⁴Chisholm, 351.