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The Prophet Jeremiah - Before and During the Exile

Introduction

The prophet of the Books of Jeremiah and Lamentations was called by God to announce the coming desolation of Judah because the people had been unfaithful to their God (Jer 1:7-19). Jeremiah felt inadequate to carry out this monumental task, but God used him in a powerful way to proclaim His word. Jeremiah preached a message of judgment condemning the people for their disobedience to God and for not holding to their part of the covenant; yet, he ended the book with a message of hope that God would restore Judah to its previous glory after 70 years of captivity (Giszczak).

The reigning theme in the Book of Jeremiah is that sin has devastating consequences (Theology). God forgives sin, but sin must be punished in hopes that the punishment will lead the sinner to repentance. True repentance will manifest itself by a change of heart. Upon Judah's repentance, God promised to implement a New Covenant which would be written on their hearts rather than on stone tablets.

The prophet Jeremiah has long been regarded as 'The Weeping Prophet' because of the deep love he felt for his people; he desperately wanted them to repent and not suffer. The Book of Lamentations, filled with its funeral poems, displays Jeremiah's heartfelt sorrow at Judah's desolation and the exilic state of the Israelites, but also offers the promise of restoration.

The Books of Jeremiah and Lamentations

The Book of Jeremiah tells us a great deal about the man and the prophet; however, the picture is not complete without reading and understanding the Book of Lamentations (Boadt 360). The Book of Jeremiah is not written chronologically, and it is believed by theologians to be a collection of writings by several contributors about Jeremiah and his message to the southern Kingdom of Judah during its last days (Boadt 317). Some theologians believe Jeremiah dictated the bulk of the manuscript to his scribe Baruch (36, 25:1-24) (Stuhlmüller 454). As a result, comprehending the meaning of his prophecies can prove to be difficult. Though the Book of Jeremiah is not ordered chronologically, it was written during three distinct time periods: 1/ during the reign of King Josiah during which he was called to be a prophet in 627 BCE through 622 BCE, and possibly 609 BCE when Josiah dies; 2/ during the reign of Josiah's son King Jehoiakim (609-598); and 3/ from the initial destruction of Jerusalem by Babylonia (598 BCE), through its final collapse (586 BCE), and for a short period after that until about 582 (Boadt 316).

The Book of Lamentations provides an emotionally evoking picture of the desolation of Jerusalem after the Babylonian invasion. It reveals the deep, painful reactions Jeremiah experienced during those days in response to the destruction of Judah, Jerusalem, and the Temple. Despite the pain and agony of this time, Jeremiah offered hope that God's anger would not last forever and He would restore His people (Boadt 358). The writings in Lamentations also yields for us a clearer view and better understanding of Jeremiah's visions (Boadt 360).

Three identifiable genres of writings are mixed throughout the Book of Jeremiah (Boadt 317). The oracles of Jeremiah are written in poetic language and appear to be in their original

form (Type A material). They are most commonly found in chapters 1-25 and 46-51. The biographical reports of Jeremiah's work and his personal adversity are most notably identified in chapters 26-45 (Type B material). These reports are not in chronological order, and it is unclear whether or not his scribe Baruch and/or several different sources contributed to the information. Finally, several chapters (7, 16, 21, and 32) contain prose oracles which have been edited and contain many of the common Deuteronomic words and phrases, some of which are written in the third person (Type C material).

Notable also is the fact that the Greek (Septuagint) version of the Book of Jeremiah is considerably shorter than the Hebrew (Masoretic) version (Boadt 316-7). Theologians now agree that the Septuagint version is actually the early Hebrew text, and the Hebrew version constitutes a text that was later expanded. It is also important to note that the last chapter of Jeremiah (52) was extracted from the last chapter of II Kings (25).

The Book of Jeremiah can be broadly outlined as follows:

- Introduction: The Call of Jeremiah (1:1-1:19)
- Part 1: Inescapable Destruction Announced (2:1-20:18)
 - A/ The Oracles in the Days of Josiah (2:1-6:30).
 - B/ Temple Sermon/Oracles Primarily from the Days of Jehoiakim (7:1-20:18).
- Part 2: Sinful Kings and False prophets (21:1-29:32)
 - A/ Oracles in the Last Years of Jerusalem (21:1-25:38).
 - B/ The Temple Sermon (26:1-24).
 - C/ Controversies with the False Prophets 27:1-29:32).

- Part 3: Hope for the Future (30:1-45:5)
 - A/ Oracles of the Restoration of Israel and Judah (30:1-35:19).
 - B/ Jeremiah and the Fall of Jerusalem (36:1-45:5)
- Part 4: Oracles Against the Nation (46:1-51:64).
- Conclusion: 9/ Historical Index (52:1-34). (Simian-Yofre 998; USCCB)

Historical Background and Time Frame

The Ten Tribes of Israel had seceded from Israel after the death of Solomon when his son Rehoboam became king. Due to Rehoboam's ungodliness, God chose Jeroboam I to lead the Ten Tribes, which made up the northern Kingdom of Israel. Most of the subsequent kings of Israel and Judah were ungodly, and they led their people in idolatrous adultery against God. God allowed the northern kingdom of Israel to be conquered by Assyria. God would allow the same fate to befall Judah; it would be conquered by Babylon.

The southern Kingdom of Judah was comprised of the tribes Judah and Benjamin. Judah had seen a long line of kings, and most had not been faithful to God. The Book of Jeremiah is set during the last 40 - 50 years of Judah's monarchy — during the reigns of Josiah (640-609), his sons, Jehoahaz (609), Jehoiakim (609-598), Jehoiakim's son (Jehoiachin) (598), and Josiah's third son, Zedekiah (597-586) (Boadt 318-319).

Josiah had become king of Judah at age 8. He strove to follow the ways of God. At age 26, he ordered repairs be made to the Temple. While repairs were being made, the Book of the Law was found. When Josiah heard the words contained in the Book of the Law, he immediately sought to correct the evils committed against the Lord. He called together the priests and

prophets and renewed the covenant with the Lord (2 Kings 23), he ordered all the altars dedicated to false gods be torn down, and he called the people back to obedience to God.

Initially during this time period, Assyria was the greatest power. However, in 612 BCE, the Babylonians and Medes conquered Assyria. Egypt unsuccessfully attempted to help Assyria combat the Babylonians. During the battles, Egypt acquired most of Syria and Palestine, and King Josiah died in battle. Jehoahaz succeeded his father Josiah, not because he was the oldest, but because he vowed to continue his father's upright ways. The Egyptians removed Jehoahaz from the throne, and appointed Josiah's oldest son Jehoiakim to be king. Jehoiakim was initially loyal to Egypt; however, when Babylon overthrew Egypt, Jehoiakim immediately, but unwillingly, showed loyalty to Babylon. When Babylon's King Nebuchadnezzar captured Jerusalem in 598, Jehoiakim was killed in battle, leaving his young son, Jehoiachin as king. King Nebuchadnezzar took Jehoiachin into exile, and appointed Zedekiah, Josiah's third son, king. All of Judah was subsequently conquered. The Babylonians completely destroyed Jerusalem; they burned its walls and gates and destroyed the Temple. The majority of the Hebrew people were taken to Babylon into exile in three waves of deportation. The monarchy of Judah officially came to an end in 586 BCE.

The Man Jeremiah

We know more about Jeremiah than any other prophet (Stuhlmüller 453). He was from a priestly family of the tribe of Benjamin. He lived in the town of Anathoth which was located a few miles northeast of Jerusalem. Jeremiah identified himself as one predestined from the womb for his ministry and called to preach at a young age. He was ordered by God not to marry nor have children because of the coming disaster (16:2). Jeremiah saw himself first and foremost as

God's messenger to God's people (Stuhlmüller 456). As a result, many times he spoke to the people in the first person as if he were actually God speaking to them.

Jeremiah prophesied to the Jews in Judah for over 40 years before it came to its final end in 586 BCE. He continued to prophesy after they went into exile and even when he was forcibly taken to Egypt. Jeremiah witnessed not only the destruction of Jerusalem, but also the destruction of Temple (Theology). He was an eyewitness to the herding of God's chosen people out of Judah as they were taken into Babylonian exile. He did not go into exile, however, but remained in Jerusalem.

Jeremiah passionately and vehemently preached against the sins of the kings, the priests, the false prophets, and the people. He was rebuffed, called a false prophet, charged with treason, beaten, and imprisoned. Threats were made against his life. Despite these persecutions, he never wavered in his faith or devotion to the ministry God gave him. He loved the people of Judah, and wanted them to repent. For this reason he is called 'The Weeping Prophet'; he stated he wished his head was a spring that he could shed tears for the people (Jer 8:23, 13:17)

Jeremiah had a passionate religious life. His book includes extensive prayers that reveal how deeply intimate and trusting his relationship was with God. Many times Jeremiah is seen in active discussions with God, speaking plainly to him, and expressing his thoughts and feelings. Jeremiah even dared to question God at times about how he dealt with humankind (Theology). He made five self-exposing "confessions" to God (12:1-6, 15:10-21, 17:14-18, 18:18-23, 20:7-18) (Stuhlmüller 462-464). At times, Jeremiah begged God to punish the wicked, destroy his enemies, and thoroughly avenge the hurt they had caused him. Jeremiah also accused God of deceiving and abandoning him. After unloading his mind and heart to God, he always listened

for God's response. Despite his courage and honesty before God, he never vacillated in his faith. He was always humble and repentant upon God's chastisement and accepted God's encouragement.

At the time Judah was conquered by Babylon, Jeremiah was imprisoned in chains. The Babylonians gave him the choice of going to Babylon or remaining in Judah; he chose to remain in Jerusalem. After the exile, he continued to prophesy. No longer needing to prophesy about the coming doom, however, his prophecy became one of hope. He called the people to repent, for if they did, God would make a new covenant with them. The covenant would not be dependent on or associated with the land or the Temple. The people of Judah would be bound to God through a covenant which would be written on their hearts.

Jeremiah was later forced to move to Egypt by a group of Israelites despite his prophecy against going there (Jer 43:4-7). Although most theologians accept that Jeremiah died in Egypt and Jewish legend accepts that he was stoned to death, there is no written or archeological evidence to support either of those claims (Boadt 318, Stuhlmüller 475).

The Case Against Judah

Similar to the message Hosea and Amos preached to the northern Kingdom of Israel before him, Jeremiah vehemently preached against the idolatry and social injustices which were rampant in Judah (Boadt 320). He utilized Hosea's marriage analogy to condemn them for being an unfaithful, adulterous bride. Throughout the Book, Jeremiah strongly accused Judah of becoming a faithless, unjust nation. The Israelites had abandoned their true God to worship false gods made of wood and stone. Jeremiah told them that they had carved false gods from dead wood, dressed them up, and then attributed greatness to them — the greatness which belonged to

YHWH. King Josiah had made a valiant effort to rid the land of false gods after he read the Book of the Law; but after his death, Judah returned to her old ways under the rule of Josiah's heirs.

The Temple Sermon (chapters 7 and 26) revealed God's case against Judah. He was particularly partial to the poor and marginalized (Theology). Point by point, the charge against Judah was presented: they dealt unjustly with their neighbors, oppressed the foreigners, orphans and widows; they were murderers, thieves, adulterers, and perjurers, and they worshipped and sacrificed to Baal and other false gods. After they committed those abominations against God, they would go into the Temple for purification — only to go out and commit more sins. What's more, the entire family was involved with the preparations of making offerings to the false gods (Jer 7:18). Jeremiah strongly preached against false prophets, and defined the criteria for distinguishing between a true and false prophet (Jer 28:7-9) (Theology).

Jeremiah also preached against the sins of Judah's leadership. The kings and the false prophets rejected his message. When Jeremiah sent his scribe Baruch to Jehoiakim to read the oracle on a scroll containing God's message, Jehoiakim did not repent; instead Jehoiakim tore up the scroll and burned it (Jer 36:1-25). Jeremiah re-dictated an extended version and sent another scroll containing God's message to Jehoiakim (Jer 36:32).

Fed up with the sins of Judah, God told Jeremiah: "Do not intercede on behalf of this people, nor utter a plea for them. I will not listen when they call to me at the time of their misfortune" (Jer 11:14). They were accused of being disobedient to God and committing the same crimes for which their forefathers were chastised (Jer 11:10). They had not kept their covenant promises with God, but instead they broke the covenant Laws and worshipped the false gods of the surrounding nation.

Jeremiah's Message

Jeremiah's message was twofold: Throughout the Book, he pled with the people of Judah to listen with their hearts. Most of his message was consumed with warning them against the coming doom. When they did not heed his instructions, he preached about God's judgment and the impending doom. The last part of his message, however, offered the hope of God's promise to eventually restore Israel (Boadt 327).

He preached that God would use Babylon as his instrument to humble the Israelites. As a result of living in exile, they would learn that their relationship with God did not depend on their ability to worship in the Temple or to occupy the Promised Land. They would learn that their relationship with God was a matter of the heart.

Jeremiah also tried to comfort the people and offer them hope. Jeremiah chapters 30-31 are called his Books of Consolation (Boadt 327). Some passages are directed to the remnants of Israel while others are directed to the exiles of Judah. They offered "words of healing, visions of fruitful fields, the joy of singing, hopes for free travel to Jerusalem for feasts, and a return to the great days of David and Solomon when the nation was one."

Chapter 6 in the Book of Baruch is a duplicate of the letter said to be from Jeremiah to the exiles in Babylon (Baruch 6:1-70). (It is patterned after the letter in Jeremiah 29.) Jeremiah explained in that letter in Baruch that Judah's sins against God resulted in their Babylonian captivity which would last 7 generations.¹ He told them that while they were in Babylon, they would be exposed to pagan idolatry. They were warned, however, not to succumb to idol worship. They were to remember that they worshipped the Lord their God only. Jeremiah also

¹ Jeremiah 29:10 states the length of the Babylonian exile would be 70 years.

told them that although their exile would be long, God would not forget them, but would lead them out of Babylon in peace.

The most significant part of Jeremiah's message was the doctrine of the New Covenant (Jer 31:31-34) (Boadt 327-328). Due to the sinful nature of humankind, the Israelites could not — by themselves — adhere to the terms of the Mosaic Covenant: "Can Ethiopians change their skin, leopards their spots? As easily would you be able to do good, accustomed to evil as you are" (Jer 13:23). The only way they could have a right relationship with God would be to have a change of heart. Only God could do that for them; they could not do it for themselves. Therefore, Jeremiah recounted God's words to them:

See, days are coming...when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors the day I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt. They broke my covenant, though I was their master... But this is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days... I will place my law within them, and write it upon their hearts; I will be their God, and they shall be my people. They will no longer teach their friends and relatives, "Know the LORD!" Everyone, from least to greatest, shall know me...for I will forgive their iniquity and no longer remember their sin. (Jer 31:31-34)

Jeremiah also spoke out regarding personal responsibility to follow God's laws (31:29-30). Each individual would be held accountable for his or her own behavior.

Jeremiah believed, however, that the experience of the exile in Babylon would yield a new vision

for the people; those who had not gone into exile would not be able to provide the necessary leadership for the future of Judah (Boadt 328).

Jeremiah held out hope for the people of Israel, convinced they would return to God. He told them that God would not forget them, and would bless them. He tried to show them this by buying a field even after Babylon had conquered Judah (31:1-15). Though he had preached destruction and doom, his actions spoke loudly that times of blessing would again belong to the Israelites. A note should be made that the author of Second Maccabees tells us that it was Jeremiah who hid the Ark of the Covenant and other prized things prior to the Babylonian siege (2 Mac 2:1-5). Jeremiah told them the hiding place would “remain unknown until God gather(ed) his people together again and show(ed) them mercy.”

Finally, Jeremiah was forced to relocate to Egypt after the siege. The commanders who remained in Jerusalem after the exile sought council from Jeremiah about relocating to Egypt. God told Jeremiah to tell the Israelite commanders not to move the people to Egypt, but they did not believe him; instead they forced Jeremiah to accompany them. While in Egypt, Jeremiah continued to prophesy to the Israelites, warning them that God would punish them for disobeying Him and going to Egypt against His command (Jer 44:12-30). As aforementioned, Jeremiah is believed to have died in Egypt, although no definitive evidence has been identified.

Jeremiah's Later Influence

The Jews read several editions of scrolls containing Jeremiah's words while they were in exile (USCCB). The impact of Jeremiah's ministry can be seen in later works, such as Ezekiel, Psalms 40-66, and Isaiah (Simian-Yofre 1005 -1006). References to Jeremiah's words are seen in

Ezekiel. In addition, the description of the Suffering Servant in Deutero-Isaiah 53:7-8 parallels Jeremiah 11:19.

In the New Testament, references to Jeremiah are usually in association with the New Covenant. (Indeed the Greek word *diathēkē* is translated both ‘covenant’ and ‘testament.’)

Matthew is reminded of Jeremiah when Herod slaughtered young boys:

A voice was heard in Ramah,
sobbing and loud lamentation;
Rachel weeping for her children,
and she would not be consoled,
since they were no more. (Matt 2:18; cf Jer 31:15)

The synoptic Gospel writers also quoted Jeremiah when Jesus turned over the the tables of the money changers (Matt 21:13, Mark 11:17, Luke 19:46; cf Jer 7:11). Apostle Paul used Jeremiah’s words to describe his own call from the womb (Gal 1:15, cf Jer 1:5). He and the Hebrews’ writer make many references to the New Covenant (I Cor 1:31, 2 Cor 10:17, Heb 8:8-12).

Conclusion

Jeremiah is considered one of the greatest prophets. His book is difficult to follow because it is not written in chronological order, several writers are believed to have contributed to its final product, and several writing styles are employed. Despite this, Jeremiah’s message is clear. This weeping prophet diligently carried the message from God to the people he loved. He preached for over 4 decades, imploring them to return to God. He condemned their unfaithfulness to God and their idolatry. In accordance with Hosea’s message, God loved his

people and would take them back despite their infidelity. However, God required obedience from His people (Boadt 321).

Jeremiah watch in horror, however, as his people were led into Babylonian exile. His Book of Lamentations reveals the deep emotions he felt during this time. He continued to minister to them and encouraged them, reminding them that God would not forget His covenant promises. Babylon would teach them, however, that they did not need to be in a particular land nor have the Temple in which to worship in order to have a close relationship with God. He would one day lead them out of Babylon. When doing so, He would act and make a new covenant with them, one that would be written on their hearts: “I will place my law within them, and write it upon their hearts; I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Jer 31:33).

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