

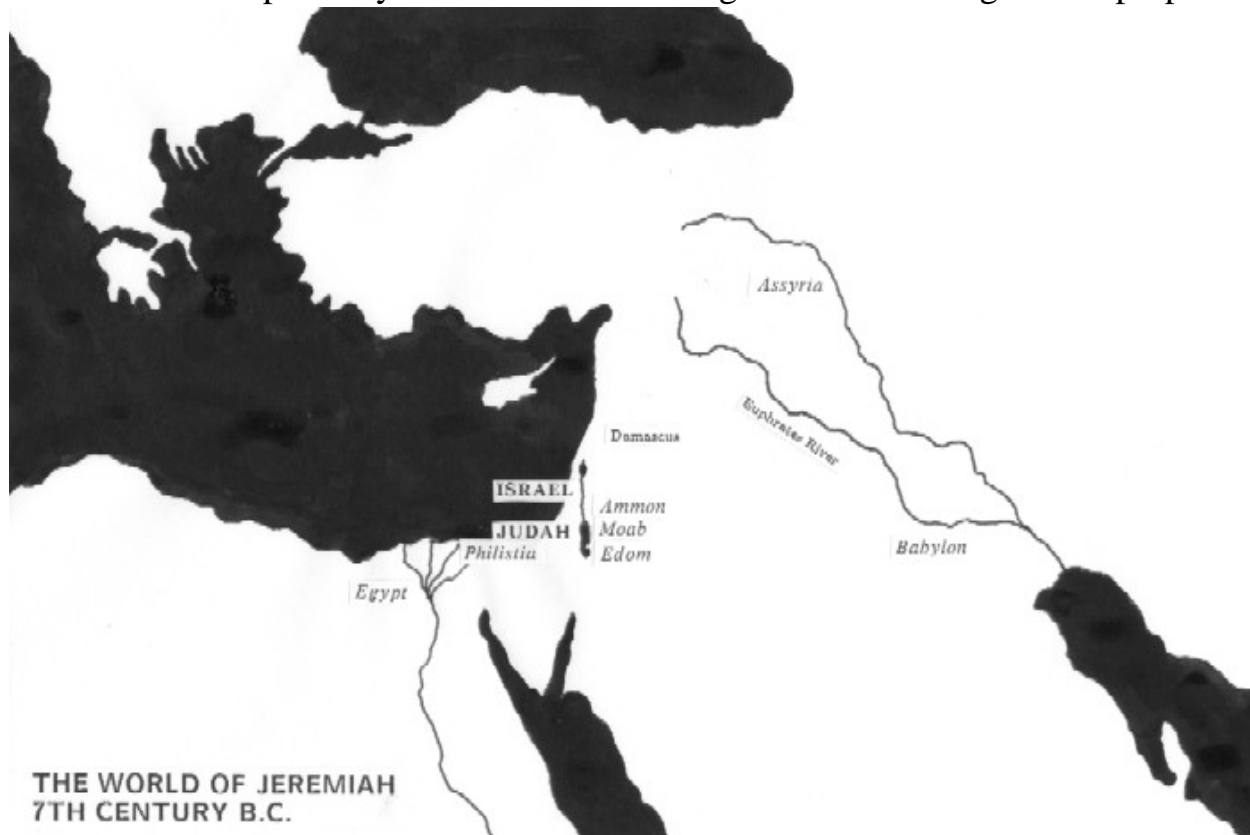
Jeremiah, the Deuteronomic Prophet
Studies in the Theology and the Life of Jeremiah

by
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PREFACE

Outside of academic circles, the prophets of the Old Testament take a decided back seat in biblical studies. For laypersons, the prophets are difficult to follow, and their messages seem to lack relevancy for the 21st century. Narrative literature, such as is found in the books of Joshua through Kings, is much simpler, at least on the surface. What little time is spent on the prophets is usually given to the attempt to either buttress an eschatological scheme of one sort or another or else uncover messianic predictions which have a direct connection with the New Testament. Christian ministers fare somewhat better, but still, the prophets do not make for easy preaching material, outside of a few well-worn passages. In the end, the average church attendant probably knows little or nothing about the writings of the prophets.



This lack is especially problematic when one considers that there are two historical foci in the Old Testament, the exodus and the exile. The prophets are the

ones who give theological meaning to this latter event, and I am well within the mark when I say that it is every bit as significant as the first one. In one sense, the exile was the exodus in reverse. The nation which was liberated and planted in the land of promise, a land from which she was never to be uprooted, was driven out and scattered among the other nations. How could the God who said his people would inherit the land forever give them over into the hands of foreigners who would rape their villages, sack their capital, burn their temple, and deport their citizens? That is the theological crisis which the Israelites faced and which the prophets helped them to understand. Jeremiah figures prominently in this explanation. It is Jeremiah, more than any other prophet, who ties together the experience of Sinai and the tragedy of exile. His theology is firmly grounded in the Deuteronomic Code, and hence, he is the Deuteronomic Prophet *par excellence*. His work is not for the faint hearted, but it is well worth the effort to explore!

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Jeremiah, The Deuteronomic Prophet

In the Old Testament, there are two extended reflections upon Torah as expressed in the Book of Deuteronomy. The first is the section of the Hebrew Canon called the "Former Prophets" (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings). This historical narrative interprets the history of Israel from the invasion of Canaan until the fall of Jerusalem through the lens of the Deuteronomic code. As such, many scholars refer to this corpus of writings as Deuteronomic History. The second of these extended reflections is the Book of Jeremiah. Biblical scholars have long observed that there is a fundamental similarity of perspective in the Books of Deuteronomy and Jeremiah. Though there are different ideas about a precise relationship,¹ theologically there is an unmistakable connection.

Deuteronomic Theology

Deuteronomic theology is an emphasis upon the theological norms which are found in the Book of Deuteronomy, especially concerning the nature and role of the monarchy, the centralization of worship in Jerusalem, the laws of holy war, the call for periodic covenant renewal, and the promise of blessings or cursings for obedience or disobedience. The Deuteronomic code is patterned after the suzerainty treaties of the ancient Near East,² and the controlling factor in such treaties was absolute loyalty or disloyalty to the suzerain. From the time of Yahweh's revelation at Sinai, Israel had been bound to her divine Suzerain by solemn oath. Yahweh was a covenant God, and Israel was a covenant people.

The Book of Jeremiah exhibits all of these same theological emphases. The political fluctuations of Judah among the nations was a direct outworking of the conditions of the covenant. The role of the king, the nature of worship, the threat of religious syncretism, and the character of holy war all loom large in Jeremiah's interpretation of his nation's fortunes.

¹That there are affinities between language, thought and style in the two books, no one denies. Some explain the relationship in terms of a Deuteronomic school of thought, a sort of circle of theological tradition which was rooted in the Deuteronomic code and was reflected both in Deuteronomic History as well as in Jeremiah. Whether this is true or not, the fact remains that the same concerns of Jeremiah are precisely those of the Book of Deuteronomy, cf. E. Achtemeier, *Deuteronomy, Jeremiah [PC]* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 6-7, 48. It is not without interest to note that Jewish tradition even assigned the authorship of the anonymous books of Samuel and Kings to Jeremiah (*Baba Bathra* 14b-15a), and though we might be reluctant in placing too much weight upon such tradition, the tradition reinforces the very early recognition of the theological affinities between Deuteronomy, Deuteronomic History, and Jeremiah.

²In fact, the Book of Deuteronomy may be intentionally structured to reflect the elements of the ancient covenant formulary, that is, Preamble, Historical Prologue, Stipulations, Deposition, Witnesses, and Blessings and Curses, cf. P. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy [NICOT]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 36-45. See Page 12 for an outline of the basic content.

The Politics of the Seventh Century

For about a century, there were no strong prophetic voices to rival the quartet of 8th century prophets (Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah).³ However, in the later half of the 7th century two prophetic voices spoke clearly to the Israel and her place among the nations. These two prophets were Zephaniah and Jeremiah. Since both of their books interact freely with the political situation of Judah, it is necessary to observe the political context in which they spoke.

The northern nation of Israel had been destroyed in 722-721 B.C. by the Assyrians (2 Ki. 17:1-23). Many of the citizens in the north were carried away as captives to become colonists in outlying parts of the Assyrian empire (2 Ki. 17:6). In their place, foreigners from Mesopotamia were settled in Israel (2 Ki. 17:24). Judah to the south, however, retained her political identity, though with much difficulty. From the beginning of the reign of Tiglath-Pileser III (745 B.C.) until the death of Ashurbanipal (627 B.C.), Assyria dominated the politics of the ancient Near East. For a century, Judah was forced to pay enormous tribute in order to retain her national life. Ahaz began this relationship with Assyria when he invited Tiglath-Pileser to defend him against the Syro-Ephraimite Alliance (2 Ki. 16:7-9). Hezekiah, Ahaz' son, attempted to break the bond (2 Ki. 18:7), but paid for his insurrection with the loss of all his fortified outposts and a horrific payment in precious metals, much of which was stripped from the temple (2 Ki. 18:13-16). Manasseh, Hezekiah's son, also served as a tributary to Assyria (2 Chr. 33:11).

The most serious threat to Assyrian dominance was Egypt, and unfortunately, the small province of Judah lay on the land bridge between Asia and Africa, directly on line between the two superpowers. During the reign of Ashurbanipal, the giant Assyrian empire began to fragment. Egypt, on the outside, was able to break free of Assyrian domination (about 655 B.C.). Internal rebellion broke out in Babylon and had to be quelled (about 652 B.C.). The Indo-Aryan peoples to the northern frontier began pressing southward, and when Ashurbanipal died in 627 B.C., the empire collapsed within 20 years.⁴ This left Judah, now under the kingship of the young Josiah, a free country by default.

³Nahum may be cited, of course, since his oracle was certainly after the sack of Thebes in 663 B.C. (Na. 3:8) and presumably before the fall of Nineveh in 612 B.C., cf. R. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) 927. However, the brevity of his oracle and its focus upon Assyria rather than Israel keeps it in a minor role.

⁴J. Bright, *A History of Israel*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972) 312-315.

The Hittite Suzerainty Treaty

Preamble

"These are the words..."

Historical Prologue

Events leading up to the treaty

Stipulations

Obligations of the vassal and the overlord

Deposit of Document

To be read periodically

Witnesses

Deities of the suzerain and the vassal

Blessings and Curses

Obedience or disobedience

The Theological Climate of the Seventh Century

The mercurial political fortunes of Judah were matched by a constant upheaval in her religious life. The religious syncretism which the 8th century prophets had condemned so severely continued. Ahaz, like his fathers, practiced the religions of the Canaanites (2 Ki. 16:3-4). Hezekiah attempted a sweeping reform, repairing the temple and purifying its worship, reviving the sacred calendar festivals, and razing the cultic sites of Canaanite worship (2 Ki. 18:3-4; 2 Chr. 29-31). He called upon all Israelites to make the pilgrimage to the central shrine in Jerusalem for temple worship (2 Chr. 30:6-12). Unfortunatley, Hezekiah's reform was short-lived, and when his son Manasseh took the throne, the policy of reform was quickly reversed.

Manasseh earned the reputation for leading the Israelites so far astray that

"they did more evil than the nations the LORD had destroyed before the Israelites" (2 Ki. 21:9b). In religious terms, Manasseh's fifty-five year reign was the darkest hour of the nation. He rebuilt the Canaanite cult centers of Baal and Asherah with their fertility rites and sacred prostitution, he revived the astral cults (in which the sun, moon and stars were regarded as deities), he sacrificed his own son in the fire, he encouraged the occult practices of sorcery, divination and necromancy (contact with spirits, ghosts and the dead), he filled Jerusalem "from end to end" with innocent blood, and he put a carved Asherah pole in the very temple of Yahweh (2 Ki. 21:3-9, 16; 2 Chr. 33:1-9). So great was his apostasy that God declared judgment in the same terms that were originally used for Shiloh, Samaria, and the dynasty of Ahab (2 Ki. 21:12-13; cf. 1 Sa. 3:11; 1 Ki. 21:17-26; 2 Ki. 10:6-11; 17:7-20). According to Jeremiah, if even Moses and Samuel had stood to intercede for the nation, the outrage of Yahweh would not have been thwarted (Je. 15:1-4). Even worse, the cynical apathy of the people was so overwhelming that they were sure Yahweh would do nothing about it anyway (Zep. 1:12). Even a late turn of heart by Manasseh could not undo the pending judgment.⁵

The Josianic Reform

At Manasseh's death, he was succeeded briefly by his son Amon, who also continued the pattern of Canaanite worship (2 Ki. 22:19-22), but when Amon was assassinated by members of his own court after a two-year reign, his eight-year old son, Josiah, was placed on the throne by the popular consent of the free landholders (2 Ki. 21:23-24). Josiah, at the young age of sixteen, began a deeply spiritual search after God (2 Chr. 34:1-3a).

Just what influences may have spurred the youthful Josiah toward sweeping reform, the text does not explain. It is not unlikely that Zephaniah preached during the early years of Josiah's reign, and if so, this would undoubtedly have been a powerful motivating force.⁶ Zephaniah thundered out a message of rebuke against the religious and social abuses that filled the land. He announced that Yahweh was sending a blistering judgment because of Baal worship (1:4),⁷ the worship of the

⁵Manasseh was chastened in the end when he incurred the disfavor of his Assyrian suzerain and was taken as a prisoner to Mesopotamia with a hook through his nose (2 Chr. 33:10-13). The OT mentions that while in exile he composed a prayer of repentance which is contained in two documents no longer extant (2 Chr. 33:18-19). When he returned to Jerusalem, he began a partial reform movement, apparently near the end of his career (2 Chr. 33:15-19). Sometime in the two centuries before Christ, an anonymous Jewish poet wrote a prayer in honor of Manasseh's repentance which survives in the Apocrypha under the title "The Prayer of Manasseh."

⁶By the superscription at the beginning of his book (1:1), Zephaniah's career is placed during the reign of Josiah (640-609 B.C.). Many scholars, based on internal evidences, are inclined to be even more precise in putting Zephaniah before the Josianic reforms, cf. O. Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction*, trans. P. Ackroyd (New York: Harper & Row, 1965) 424.

⁷The central concern of Baal worship was the fertility of crops, animals and humans. In the Canaanite myths, Baal

astral cult (1:5a), the worship of Molech (1:5b),⁸ the adoption of pagan clothes and customs (1:8), and the adoption of pagan superstitions (1:9).⁹ Political and religious leaders alike were deeply corrupt (3:1-4). Just as bad, the citizenry was complacent (1:12). The only hope which Zephaniah held out to the nation was a thoroughgoing repentance (2:1-3), though he seemed to have held little optimism that they would heed his word (3:6-7). The Day of Yahweh, the time of God's judgmental wrath, was near (1:7-18). If these oracles were delivered in the early years of Josiah's reign, their impact upon the teenage king must have been profound.

Whatever its origin, Josiah's zeal for reformation was unparalleled. By the age of twenty, he had begun a thoroughgoing purge of all vestiges of Canaanite religion (2 Kg. 23:4-14//2 Chr. 34:3b-5). He even pursued his religious reform in areas that had formerly been inhabited by the northern nation of Israel (2 Chr. 34:6-7), and he destroyed the Bethel shrine which had been erected by Jeroboam I (2 Kg. 23:15-20). In 627 B. C., when Josiah was about twenty-one, Assurbanipal died and Assyria was plunged into civil strife. This weakening of Assyria meant that Judah could once again assert her freedom, even if only by default. As his crowning achievement, Josiah once again centralized the worship of Yahweh in Jerusalem, as stipulated in Torah (Dt. 12) and implemented by David and Solomon (2 Chr. 35).

Extremely important to the Josianic reform was the discovery of the lost Book of Torah during the remodeling of the temple.¹⁰ While repairs were being made, a

the storm god and fertility deity, was temporarily overpowered by death, which resulted in the human world being subjected to infertility. Baal could be revived, however, by his female counterpart who would search for him in the realm of death, defeat the death god Mot, and engage in sexual intercourse with Baal, which in turn would revive the fertility of the human world.

The worship of Baal involved imitative magic, in which the king engaged in sexual intercourse with the high priestess of the fertility goddess, particularly at the New Year festival, in imitation of the sexual intercourse of Baal and Asherah. The people also participated by engaging in sexual intercourse with the *qedeshim* (male cult prostitutes) and *qedeshot* (female cult prostitutes) in the temples and shrines of the fertility deities (which were built with chambers for such cultic rituals), cf. G. Wilson, "Religions: Canaanite," *ISBE* (1988) IV.99-100.

⁸Just how the worship of the Ammonite god Molech was conducted is uncertain. It does seem clear, both from biblical texts as well as from other ancient Near Eastern sources, that it involved child sacrifice, cf. H. Ringgren, *Religions of the Ancient Near East*, trans. J. Sturdy (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973) 162. Rabbinic writers described a bronze statue with a human body and an ox head, hollow inside and heated from below. According to these sources, children were placed inside this image and destroyed while drums drowned out their cries, R. Harrison, "Molech," *ISBE* (1986) III.401.

⁹The intriguing phrase, "avoid stepping on the threshold," is probably the practice of jumping over the threshold of a shrine because of a fear of demons, since the threshold might have been contaminated by the amputated members of the god (1 Sa. 5:5), cf. R. Smith, *Micah-Malachi [WBC]* (Waco, TX: Word, 1984) 130; H. Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel [OTL]*, trans. J. Bowden (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964) 54.

¹⁰There is a question of chronology here between the Kings account and the Chronicles account. In 2 Kings, the discovery of the Book of Torah seems to have been the impetus for the major reforms, while in 2 Chronicles the reform was well under way when the Book of Torah was discovered. Both accounts agree that the scroll was discovered in Josiah's 18th regnal year (2 Kg. 22:3ff.; 2 Chr. 34:8ff.). It is not unlikely that although 2 Kings does not describe it, the reform had indeed begun earlier in Josiah's reign as the Chronicler states. However, the finding of the scroll became such a significant factor in the continuance and shaping of the reform movement that in 2 Kings

scroll of Torah was discovered and read before the young King (2 Kg. 22:3-10).¹¹ It is generally agreed upon that the discovered law code was some form of the Book of Deuteronomy,¹² and several portions of this code must have hit the king with terrific force. Deuteronomy commands the utter destruction of all pagan cults (12:1-4), it makes idolatry a capital crime (13), it explicitly forbids worship, even Yahweh worship, at any place except the central shrine (12:13-14; 16:5-6), and it contains a law for the king which made his authority secondary to that of the Deuteronomic legislation (17:14-20). The code closes with the searing prediction of the curses which would result from disobedience (28:15-68). Small wonder that when Josiah heard the scroll read, he was filled with consternation (2 Kg. 22:11). The prophetess Huldah confirmed that the curses would indeed be carried out by Yahweh (2 Kg. 22:14-20; 2 Chr. 34:22-28). Not only did the newly rediscovered Book of Torah shape the reform and drive it to completion, it inspired Josiah and the nation toward covenant renewal (2 Kg. 23:1-3). Not since the time of Samuel had Passover been celebrated in Jerusalem with the fervency of Josiah's generation (2 Kg. 23:21-23; 2 Chr. 35)!

Covenantal Tension

There were two covenants which by this time in Israel's history shaped her national and religious ideals. Both of them were initiated by Yahweh, but in two different periods. One was the Mosaic Covenant of Torah, given at Sinai through Moses. The other was the Davidic Covenant of the perpetual royal king, given to David after the completion of his wars. Though not mutually exclusive, these two covenants gave rise to two ways of viewing God's dealings with his covenant people.

The older covenant, the Mosaic code, was strictly conditional. Regulated by the Deuteronomic blessings and cursings, it was a suzerainty treaty which demanded that the vassal accept the terms of the overlord. Failure to maintain covenant would result in sanctions from the suzerain and disaster for the people. The favor of Yahweh, the ownership of the land, the desire for economic prosperity, and safety from political enemies was not guaranteed. It could only be achieved if the nation was faithful in keeping the terms of the covenant.

The other covenant, the Davidic promise, was taken to be unconditional. God

it is viewed as the dominant factor, cf. J. Howard, "1 and 2 Chronicles," *The International Bible Commentary*, ed. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Zondervan/Marshall Pickering, 1986) 485; Achtemeier, 17.

¹¹The name of the discoverer of the Torah scroll has been found by archaeologists on a seal ring bearing the inscription, "[Belonging] to Hanan, son [of] Hilqiyahu the priest" (cf. 2 Kg. 22:8), cf. J. Elayi, "Name of Deuteronomy's Author Found on Seal Ring," *BAR* (Sep/Oct 1987) 54ff.

¹²This was first suggested by some of the church fathers, such as Jerome, and is generally accepted by modern scholars, cf. J. Bright, *Covenant and Promises* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976) 129.

guaranteed David that he would never fail to have a descendent reigning in Jerusalem (2 Sa. 7:8-16; 22:51; 23:5a). Even in times of dire threat to the security of the nation, the covenant with David would remain intact (Is. 37:35). While the northern nation of Israel rejected the Davidic covenant with its dynasty and temple (1 Kg. 12:16, 19), the southern nation of Judah clung to it tenaciously, never abandoning the dynasty of David or the central importance of Jerusalem. It was believed that Mt. Zion, Yahweh's holy hill, would never be captured, even though it might be chastised (Is. 29:1-8; 31:4-5; Mic. 4:11-13; Ps. 46; 48). The popular view was that Jerusalem and the dynasty of David were guaranteed, and Yahweh's divine pleasure and blessing would continue, no matter what.

Josiah, of course, was a Davidic king. He had doubtless been reared with the Davidic understanding of his covenant relationship to Yahweh. Especially if the Deuteronomic code had been lost, the conditional nature of his kingship, dynasty and national security may not have fully dawned upon him until the lost scroll of Torah was read. The realization that there was no absolute guarantee for either himself or the people drove him toward reform, spurred on by the blunt but reinforcing oracle of Huldah, "This is what Yahweh says: I am going to bring disaster on this place and its people--all the curses written in the book that has been read in the presence of the king of Judah" (2 Chr. 34:24).

The Prophet Jeremiah

About 5 years after Josiah had begun initiating his reforms in Jerusalem, Jeremiah received the divine call to prophesy to the people of Judah (Je. 1:2). Jeremiah, as did Huldah the Prophetess, reinforced the Deuteronomic character of the covenant (Je. 11:1-8). His ministry continued until the exile of Judah in 587 B.C. (Je. 1:3).

Little is known of Jeremiah's early life, except that he was born into a priestly family in Anathoth, a village some 3 miles north of Jerusalem (Je. 1:1). If Jeremiah belonged to the same family of priests at Anathoth which were banished there by Solomon because they had supported the Adonijah revolt in the throne succession narratives at the end of David's life (1 Kg. 2:26-27), then Jeremiah may have been a descendant of Eli (1 Sa. 22:20; 14:3). If so, then he was descended from the family of Moses himself. How actively Jeremiah may have been involved in Josiah's reform movement is unstated, but it is hardly conceivable that he would have done anything except heartily approve. Certainly his respect for Josiah was strong (cf. Je. 22:11, 15b-16)!

Structure, Authorship, and Date of the Book

The Book of Jeremiah is not an autobiography. Rather, it is more on the order of an anthology, that is, a collection of Jeremiah's prophetic oracles written in a wide

variety of literary forms in both poetry and prose. In general, there are three major types of material: there are poetic sayings, biographical sections of prose, and prose discourses.¹³ It should be carefully noted, however, that the oracles of Jeremiah have not been arranged in any particular order, chronological or otherwise. As the book now stands, it may be divided into four major sections.

Chapters 1-25: Jeremiah's prophecies against his own people

Chapters 26-45: A biography about Jeremiah written in the third person (probably by Baruch)

Chapters 46-51: Jeremiah's prophecies against the foreign nations¹⁴

Chapter 52: An historical appendix, parallel to 2 Kings 24:18--25:30

An important story is related in Jeremiah 36 which bears significantly upon the final form of the book. During the reign of Jehoiakim, Jeremiah was commanded by God to inscribe all his oracles from the beginning of his ministry during the reign of Josiah to the present time (36:1-3). As was not unusual, prophetic oracles were first uttered vocally and only later written down. This task Jeremiah completed by dictating his works to Baruch, his secretary (36:4; cf. 45:1).¹⁵ Since Jeremiah was at that time barred from the temple precincts, he sent Baruch with the scroll so that it might be publicly read (36:5-10). News of this public reading quickly spread, even to the royal officials of the king (36:11-19). When the matter had been reported to King Jehoiakim, the scroll was brought before his royal presence to be read there as well (36:20-21). The arrogant king's reaction was typical of the flippant attitudes of the day. He sat in the luxury of his winter palace and carved off the columns as they were read, throwing them into the brazier before him (36:22-24). When some of his attendants urged that he not burn the scroll, he petulantly demanded the arrest of Jeremiah and Baruch (36:25-26). Consequently, Jeremiah was forced to dictate his oracles once again to Baruch, who preserved them on a scroll including some expansions (36:27-28, 32).

It is not unlikely that Jeremiah periodically added to this original collection of

¹³R. Harrison, *Jeremiah and Lamentations: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1973) 28.

¹⁴In the LXX, chapters 46-51 are placed after 25:13, and the oracles contained in those chapters are in a different order. Furthermore, the LXX text is about 1/8 shorter, apparently based on a different recension of the text than that of the Masoretes, cf. Achtemeier, 57.

¹⁵Seldom does archaeology come face to face with someone actually mentioned in the Bible, but Baruch is one of those select few. A hoard of inscribed bullae (lumps of clay impressed with a seal) came to light in 1975, and among them were the seals of two biblical figures from the Book of Jeremiah, Baruch and Yerahme'el, King Jehoiakim's son. Baruch's seal reads, "[Belonging] to Berekhyahu son of Neriyaahu the scribe," cf. H. Shanks, "Jeremiah's Scribe and Confidant Speaks from a Hoard of Clay Bullae," *BAR* (Sep/Oct 1987) 58ff.

oracles so that the present form of the book gradually took shape. Baruch may have been responsible for some of the biographical material written in the third person.

As to the actual date of the Book of Jeremiah, his call was in 627 B.C., the 13th regnal year of Josiah (1:2). The first scroll was dictated in the 4th regnal year of Jehoiakim, 605/4 B.C. (36:1-4), and after it had been destroyed, was later inscribed again with additions (36:32). Other additions are difficult to date with any precision.

B.C.	EPHRAIM	PROPHETS	JUDAH	ASSYRIA	BABYLON
		Hosea	Ahaz	Tiglath-pileser	
	Pekoh				
725	Hoshea	Isaiah		Shalmaneser	
	EXILE 722	Micah	H Ezekiah	Sargon	
700				Sennacherib	
				Esarhaddon	
675			Manasseh		
				Ashurbanipal	
650			Josiah		
		Zephaniah	Jesiah		
625		Jeremiah			Nebopolassar
			Jehoaahaz		
600			Jehoiakim		
			Jehoiachin		
			Zedekiah		Nebuchanezzar
			EXILE		
575			587		

Reading Jeremiah

(a topical approach to the book)

His Call and Early Ministry 1-6

The Temple Sermon and it's Aftermath 7, 26, 8-10

His Conflicts with Kings and Prophets 14, 21-23, 27-29, 36, 45

His Parables 13, 16, 18-19, 24-25, 27, 32, 35, 43

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The Call and Early Ministry of Jeremiah

Jeremiah can legitimately be called a paragon of heroic prophethood. He battled, often alone, against the forces of corrupt religiosity, fat priests and manipulative cult prophets. He denounced a nation far gone from God. He derided the king and his council, and in the lonely retreats of his soul, he communicated his troubles to God. He often stood against everyone, and just as often, everyone stood against him.¹⁶ It is surely more than accidental that of those in the history of Israel who seemed to resemble Jesus of Nazareth, Jeremiah is one of those actually called by name (Mt. 16:14).

The Call of Jeremiah (1)

The call of Jeremiah is dated in the 13th regnal year of Josiah, 627 B.C., and his ministry extended through the collapse of the nation in 587 B.C. (1:2-3). At the time of his call, Jeremiah, by his own admission, was only a youth (1:6).¹⁷ Many of

¹⁶This description of Jeremiah is not supported by those scholars who deny to Jeremiah the bulk of his book, but for those who accept the book's integrity, it is an apt description, cf. R. Carroll, *From Chaos to Covenant* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 6-7.

¹⁷Some scholars view 627 B.C. as the date of Jeremiah's birth and consider him to have been called from his prenatal state (1:5), cf. J. P. Hyatt, "Introduction and Exegesis, Jeremiah," *IB* (1956) V.778-782. Here, we follow the more

his oracles are undated, and their contexts can only be guessed, but there are exceptions (i.e., 3:6; 21:1; 24:1; 26:1; 27:1; 32:1, etc.).

As a prophet, Jeremiah was chosen and shaped for prophethood by Yahweh from the time of his conception (1:4-5). In his call, there is a remarkable similarity between the dialogue of Jeremiah and Yahweh and the dialogue of Moses and Yahweh. Both objected to their call on the basis of personal inadequacies, but they were equally assured that God would make up the difference (1:6-8; Ex. 4:1-17). Yahweh had put his words in their mouths (1:7, 9; cf. Dt. 18:18). For both, Yahweh was the Divine Warrior who called upon them not to be afraid (1:17-19; cf. 20:11; Ex. 15:3; Dt. 1:21, 29; 3:2, 22; 7:18, 21, etc.). Jeremiah's call also resembles that of Isaiah. Like Isaiah before him (6:6-7), Jeremiah's mouth was touched to empower him with the prophetic word, and also like Isaiah, his commission is described as though he were standing in the heavenly council of Yahweh (cf. 23:18; Is. 6:1).

Jeremiah's call sets the agenda for his entire ministry. He is told from the beginning that his mission is "to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant" (1:10). His initial word from Yahweh is a word of terrible judgment, but while this word of judgment forms the bulk of his preaching, it is not the final word. In fact, there is a second word born out in his oracles, and it is a word of hope. This dual theme of judgment and promise drives Jeremiah onward, and once again in these two polar themes, the figure of the Carpenter from Nazareth impinges itself upon the prophetic horizon.

Two visions reinforce and explain his calling. The first was of the branch of an almond tree, the first tree to bud in the spring (1:11-12).¹⁸ The meaning of the vision depends upon a word-play in Hebrew, since the word *shaqed* (= almond tree) is phonetically similar to the word *shoqed* (= watching). To a nation that ignored the Deuteronomic warnings and to a people who fostered a false sense of security grounded in the Davidic king, Yahweh was watching that his deuteronomic word would be carried out.

The second vision was of a boiling pot tilting toward the south (1:13-14). This picture anticipates the repeated prediction of an enemy from the north which would lay waste the land of Judah (4:6; 6:1, 22; 10:22; 13:20; 25:9, etc.). This northern menace was an ancient nation speaking a foreign tongue (5:15), just as the Deuteronomic curse had said (Dt. 28:49) and Isaiah had also predicted (Is. 28:11). Its soldiers were mighty warriors (5:16), and they destroyed without mercy (6:23). Their attacks were sudden, their horses fleet, and they were armed with war chariots,

traditional interpretation that Jeremiah was born sometime about the middle of the 7th century and began his prophetic ministry in 627 B.C.

¹⁸Anathoth, the home village of Jeremiah, remains a center for growing almond trees to this day. In early spring, the blossoming of the almond trees is unforgettable, cf. J. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah [NICOT]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) vii, 153, as this author can personally attest.

bows and spears (4:13, 20, 29; 6:23, 26). While the identity of this northern terror is not always mentioned,¹⁹ it is virtually certain that Jeremiah was speaking of the Mesopotamian super-powers, particularly Babylon.²⁰ Their appearance in Judah would be the means of Yahweh's divine judgment according to the Deuteronomic curse (1:15b-16; 16:10-18; Dt. 28:25, 36-37, 41, 45-57, 68). The imminence of this disaster was so threatening that Jeremiah was required to be celibate, a lifestyle that was virtually unknown in Israel (16:1-4).²¹ He was forbidden to attend weddings and funerals (16:5-9), an unusual breaking with social custom. The disaster would be so terrible that all human emotion, whether joy or grief, would be stripped away, and the nation would be left in numbed shock.

The Early Oracles (2-6)

It is generally agreed that Jeremiah's earliest work is to be found in chapters 2-6, oracles that are largely poetic.

The Lawsuit (2)

Suzerainty treaties broken by rebellion were normally handled in a legal form called a *riv* (= lawsuit). Several *riv* documents have been uncovered by archaeologists, and the general shape of such an indictment followed a common pattern.²² This included:

- a) An appeal to the vassal to pay heed, and a summon to the sky and earth to be witnesses (2:12)
- b) A series of questions implying an accusation of rebellion (2:5-6)
- c) A review of past benefits in the suzerain-vassal relationship, and a declaration of the broken treaty (2:7-11, 13-30)
- d) A warning as to the futility of help in foreign cults (2:26-28)
- e) A declaration of guilt and a threat of impending action by the suzerain (2:31-37)

As can be seen, the oracle in Jeremiah 2 follows this basic pattern (cf. 2:9), except that for Jeremiah, Yahweh was the Divine Suzerain and Israel was his vassal.

¹⁹For discussions as to other possible historical identities as well as apocalyptic imagery, see the essays by H. Cazelles, B. S. Childs and C. F. Whitley in L. Perdue and B. Kovacs, eds., *A Prophet to the Nations* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1984) 129-173.

²⁰The frequency with which Babylon is mentioned in Jeremiah can be traced in any standard biblical concordance, and of course, Babylon was the nation which eventually sacked Jerusalem and turned the nation to exile in 587 B.C.

²¹So unusual is the idea of celibacy that the OT has no word for bachelor. The Arabs still call the bachelor '*azab*' (= forsaken). This sacrifice of marriage was a symbolic act of Yahweh's rejection of the entire nation, cf. W. Holladay, *Jeremiah 1 [Hermeneia]* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 469.

²²Thompson, 159-160.

It began with the memories of the exodus from Egypt (2:2, 5-6) and closed with Israel's terrible fascination with the Canaanite fertility cults (2:20, 23-25, 33). In between are indictments for the nation's vacillating flirtation with the culture and cults of Assyria and Egypt, the super-powers to the north and south (2:16, 18, 36).

Israel, the Brazen Lover (3:1--4:4)

The background for this oracle is the Deuteronomic code regarding marriage and divorce (Dt. 24:1-4). According to Torah, if a woman was divorced due to "something indecent,"²³ and she married another man who also divorced her, she was forbidden to return to her first husband for remarriage. The covenant relationship between Yahweh and Israel was like a marriage covenant, and the nation had behaved like a faithless wife in following the gods of the pagans (3:20). Judah had no right to expect her first husband, Yahweh, to take her back (3:1). She had lived as an eager prostitute (3:2), brazen and unashamed (3:3b), and so desperate for sex that she ambushed lovers in the desert like an erotic bandit (3:2b). She had attempted to pass herself off before God as merely a wayward child, but her feeble efforts at reconciliation were drowned by her unbridled adult passions (3:4-5). God would have been overjoyed to treat her as his child if she had been sincere (3:19), but the truth of her relationship was not that of a child to its father, but of an adulterous wife who has been unfaithful to her husband (3:20).

The prose section of the oracle (3:6-18) continues to develop this same theme, describing the nations of Israel and Judah as two adulterous sisters (3:6-7). The exile of Israel in 722 B.C. was, in effect, the breaking of the marriage covenant by divorce (3:8a), but Judah, the sister who remained, was unmoved by the divorce (3:8b). She recklessly continued to ply her trade of religious prostitution (3:9-11).

In spite of Torah which forbade allowing the twice-married wife to return to her first husband, Yahweh invites his people back. Yahweh is quite capable of countermanding even his own laws, and if Israel will return, he will receive her--but only on his own terms (3:12, 14).²⁴ The people will have to make a full repentance for the enormity of their sins (3:13), and of course they would need righteous pastors (3:15). In fact, restoration was promised, and in it the immediacy of Yahweh's presence would be such that cultic objects of mediation, such as the precious ark of the covenant, would no longer be necessary (3:16-18; cf. Re. 21:22). So again and again comes the poignant cry from the depths of Yahweh's pathos, "*Shuv* [= turn, return, repent], faithless people" (3:12, 14, 22; 4:1)! The oracle

²³The expression "something indecent" suggests something impure (cf. Dt. 23:14), though exactly what is in mind is not clear, P. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy [NICOT]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 305.

²⁴The bold use of *Ba'al* (= master, husband) for Yahweh himself is emphatic in 3:14, "For I, Yahweh, am your Ba'al."

closes with a final appeal for inward change (4:3-4).

The Coming Disaster (4:5--6:30)

The final oracles of Jeremiah's early preaching all revolve around the predicted Deuteronomic judgment in history. The war trumpet would shatter the fragile peace (4:5-6), for the enemy had already mobilized itself (4:7) and would descend like a desert sirocco (4:11-12). Though the popular idea was that Yahweh had unconditionally guaranteed peace and well-being for the nation on the basis of the Davidic covenant, and this misconception was reinforced by the words of other preachers (6:13-14),²⁵ such a message of peace was a false message (4:10; 5:12-13).²⁶

Jeremiah was deeply troubled. He was not emotionally aloof to either the internal rottenness of his country nor the threatening disaster. It squeezed at his heart and pounded in his veins to speak of the ruthless destruction coming upon his own people (4:19-21). Like a woman dying in childbirth, the nation would be gasping out its own death rattles (4:31).

Still, the nation deserved what she was to receive! She was bringing the bitter consequences on herself (4:18; 6:19) with rampant dishonesty (5:1-2), sacred prostitution (5:7-9), cultic syncretism (5:19), stubborn rebellion (5:21, 23; 6:16-17, 28-30), social injustice (5:28-29), religious corruption (5:31; 6:13), worthless worship (6:20), brazenness (6:15), and above all, spiritual apathy (5:12). However, though the enemy from the north was surely coming as the instrument of God's terrible judgment (6:1, 4-6, 22-23), the destruction would not be total. Even in such justifiable devastation, Yahweh would restrain the forces of chaos from obliterating the nation (5:10, 18).

The Temple Sermon and Its Aftermath

One of the puzzling questions in any study of the ministry of Jeremiah is why he did not comment upon the Josianic reforms, particularly since the word of Yahweh came to him during Josiah's reign (1:1). We know that he held Josiah in high esteem (22:11, 15b-16). Furthermore, the kinds of reforms Josiah instituted were precisely along the lines called for by Jeremiah's preaching. For whatever reason, Jeremiah made no remarks about the reform movement. Perhaps he felt that while the reforms were in order, they were more external than internal. They had

²⁵It should be understood that the word *shalom* (= peace) refers not merely to the absence of war, but to well-being in general. Hence, John Bright in the Anchor Bible correctly translates 6:14, "It is well! It is well! But it is not well!"

²⁶That Yahweh would intentionally allow the voices of false prophets to deceive the people is found elsewhere as well (1 Kg. 22:19-23; 2 Th. 2:10-12), and this seems to be particularly the case when there is a stubborn unwillingness to maintain a deeply sincere heart after God.

produced more temple worship, but no real return to the ancient paths (6:16). Though outwardly there was revival, inwardly there was no genuine repentance. The clergy blandly announced that peace had been achieved with God, but Jeremiah was perceptive enough to know that it would take more than a change in the formal ritual of worship to avert tragedy (6:13-14; 8:10b-11).²⁷ What he had evidently suspected all along became painfully evident when Josiah died.

The events of the close of the 7th century moved quickly. Josiah, though politically free by default for much of his reign from the Mesopotamian superpowers due to the internal struggles of Assyria, was once more facing a formidable antagonist. Babylon was on the march. In 616, Nebopolassar of Babylon invaded Assyrian territory. By 614, the sacred city of Ashur had fallen to Media, and a newly formed Medo-Babylonian alliance pushed the Assyrian defenders backward toward the west. In 612, Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, was put to siege and lasted only two and half months. Support came for Assyria from her vassal Egypt and prolonged her death struggle for another five years, but pushed back into northwest Mesopotamia, the Assyrians who had lived by the sword determined to die the same way. In 610, Haran, the temporary capital, also fell.²⁸

In the summer of 609, Pharaoh Necho II of Egypt marched northward in order to join forces with the tottering Assyrian army. Josiah, who had long enjoyed freedom from Assyrian sovereignty, determined not to allow his former suzerain to recover. He no doubt viewed the weakening of Assyrian power to be essential to his own independence, and in a last ditch effort to prevent the Egyptian army from joining the Assyrians, Josiah interposed his Judean army between the superpowers in the plain of Megiddo. It was too little too late. Josiah ignored the warning from Necho to stay away (2 Chr. 35:20-22), and he was mortally wounded by an enemy archer's arrow (2 Kg. 23:29-30). Jeremiah was left to compose court dirges in response to the death of his beloved king (2 Chr. 35:25).²⁹

The death of Josiah made clear the superficiality of the reform movement. His son Jehoahaz had reigned only three months before Necho sent him into exile (2 Kg. 23:31-33). Though there may have been hopes that he would be restored, Jeremiah predicted that Jehoahaz would die in Egypt (22:11-12), and so he did (2 Kg. 23:34b). In his place, Necho set up Jehoiakim as king, Jehoahaz' half-brother (2 Kg. 23:34a), and demanded an exorbitant tribute (2 Chr. 36:2-4). Jehoiakim returned to the ways of the syncretistic kings before him (2 Kg. 23:36-37). To be sure, the

²⁷J. Bright, *The Kingdom of God* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1953) 106-107.

²⁸F. Bruce, *Israel and the Nations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963) 82-84.

²⁹According to Jewish tradition, Jeremiah had warned Josiah against engaging Necho (1 Esdras 1:28). The court dirges which Jeremiah wrote in honor of Josiah were, according to tradition, preserved in the official court histories of the kings of Judah (1 Esdras 1:33), but they are no longer extant.

temple worship restored by Josiah continued, but it was a hollow form, and once again, Jeremiah stepped into the public arena.

The Temple, a Den of Thieves (7, 26)

Jeremiah's temple sermon, early in the reign of Jehoiakim (26:1), was a crucial juncture in the prophet's ministry, a fact indicated by it being described twice. The first version is given in Jeremiah's scroll (7), and the second is recorded in Baruch's memoirs (26). At the express instruction of Yahweh, Jeremiah stood in the temple courtyard near the gate to proclaim an oracle to the worshipers as they entered (7:1-2a; 26:1-6).

The content of the sermon is in 7:2b-15. It was a scathing denunciation of religious superficiality. The notion that a return to the ancient rituals would in themselves guarantee Yahweh's favor was terribly deceptive (7:4, 8). True religion was more than lip service--it was in life (7:5-7). Real reform must affect more than liturgy (7:3), and if the piety of formal worship did not match what happened in the marketplace, then the religion was bankrupt (7:9-11). Just as Yahweh had said to Jeremiah in his original call (1:12), he was watching (7:11b)! The sermon closed with a recollection of the devastation of Shiloh, the central shrine which had been destroyed in the days of Eli (7:12-15; 1 Sa. 2:12-17, 22-36; 4:1-22). Furthermore, just as had the northern nation of Ephraim,³⁰ Judah would also go into exile.

Disillusioned with the Deuteronomic reforms, Jehoiakim had led the nation in a return to her fascination with paganism. The Judahites made cakes for Ishtar, the mother goddess of Assyria and Babylon (7:18). The barbarous ritual of child sacrifice was revived, and pagan abominations were set up once more in the temple (7:30-31). For Jeremiah, this pathway could only lead to disaster (7:19-26), and in fact, Yahweh indicated that the people would remain implacable (7:27-28). Their stubbornness was so severe that Yahweh said he had abandoned them to destruction (7:29, 33-34; 8:1-3); it was not even worth praying for them any longer (7:16).

As might be expected, Jeremiah's sermon created an uproar. He had flatly ignored the royal Davidic covenantal theology which was thought to guarantee the safety of the nation. The opinion of the official clergy was that he ought to be executed (26:10-11), but Jeremiah stood firm (26:12-15), and the court officials, recalling the similar oracles of Micah a century earlier (Mic.3:12//Je. 26:18), saved the day for him (26:16-19, 24). The danger was real, however, as shown by Jehoiakim's execution of one of Jeremiah's colleagues (26:20-23).

³⁰It should be noted that in the prophets, the northern nation is often called Ephraim, after its most prominent tribe, just as the southern nation is called Judah, even though it also included Benjamin.

An Incurrable People (8-10)

The collection of poetic units (with a few prose elements) in 8:4--10:25 is a poignant description of the people of Judah and the city of Jerusalem as a community on its way to death. Two major themes dominate the oracles, the stubborn and incurable sinfulness of the people and the tragic fate that would overtake them.³¹ Though the oracles are undated, internal evidences make it not unlikely that they were uttered in the early years of Jehoiakim.³²

No Balm in Gilead

In a series of hard-hitting metaphors, Jeremiah pronounced that the people were incurable. Was it possible for a people to apostatize and never repent? Jeremiah said, "Yes" (8:4-6)! Unlike even the birds who know when to migrate, the people of Judah were incapable of returning to God (8:7). For Judah's wound, there was not a cure;³³ no doctor could help; no medicine was effective (8:22; 10:19). The nation was rampant with dishonesty and corruption (9:3-6). Religious and political leaders alike were equally deceptive. Priests, prophets and theologians³⁴ were shamelessly leading their people astray with pious platitudes (8:8-12). The shepherds (i.e., Judah's rulers) blatantly ignored God (10:21).

The Deuteronomic Curse

Because of her incurable sin, Yahweh intended to fulfil the curses promised to the nation in Deuteronomy (9:12-16). She would suffer drought (8:13, 20; cf. Dt. 28:18, 22-24), invasion (8:14-17; 9:20-22; 10:22; cf. Dt. 28:25-26) and exile (8:18-19; 9:10-11, 16-19; 10:17-18, 25b; cf. Dt. 28:36, 46-48, 63-64, 68). Such punishment was deserved (9:7-9), for while outwardly the nation maintained her traditional rituals, inwardly she was far from Yahweh (9:25-26).

The Futility of Pagan Worship

In denouncing the nation's sin, Jeremiah set up a vivid contrast between pagan idols and Yahweh. Paganism was filled with superstition and worthless deities who could neither speak nor act (10:1-5, 8-9, 11, 14-15). Jeremiah's memorable depiction of a pagan idol as a scarecrow in a melon patch deserves special mention (10:5). Yahweh, on the other hand, was unique (10:6-7). He had

³¹J. Bright, *Jeremiah [AB]* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965) 64.

³²Thompson, 297.

³³In antiquity, the balm (mastic, ointment or salve) of Gilead was famous for its medicinal qualities, cf. R. Harrison, *ISBE* (1979) I.406.

³⁴This is one of the first references to scribes in the OT as a special class, though here they are depicted as misusing their theological trade.

created the universe, and when he acts, the world comes to attention (10:10, 12-13, 16)! If there is any room for the wise and the strong to boast, let it be in Yahweh alone (9:23-24)!

The Pathos of Jeremiah

Jeremiah was heartsick at the plight of his people (8:18; 9:1), and he felt the sting of their corruption more than they themselves (8:20). Understandably, he was tempted with escapism (9:2). Like a betrayed lover (9:2b) or a yearning parent (10:20), he stood by helplessly while the nation plunged toward its death. It is probably true that the pathos of the prophet is intended to reflect the pathos of God.³⁵ Like a collapsed tent, this pathos engulfed him and reduced him to personal devastation (10:20).

Jeremiah closes this poetic section with a reflective prayer reminiscent of Job. The historical processes by which God deals with human life are inscrutable (10:23). The seeming totality of divine judgment upon Judah was almost more than Jeremiah could bear, and he begged for God's mercy (10:24). His final words call for divine wrath to be poured out upon the superpowers who would come to destroy his people (10:25).³⁶

His Conflicts with Kings and Prophets

A central theme in the Deuteronomic History of the books of Samuel and Kings is the conflict between the kings and the prophets. Samuel versus Saul, Nathan versus David, the unnamed prophet of Judah and Abijah versus Jeroboam I, and Elijah versus Ahab: all these conflicts reflect the Deuteronomic ideology and work toward a balance of power in the leadership of ancient Israel.³⁷ In the nations of the ancient Near East, where kings were considered to be divine, it is only in ancient Israel that a prophet could beard the king in his den and hope to escape.

Not only is there a consistent pattern of prophet against king, there is also a pattern which develops of prophet against prophet, beginning with the narrative of Micaiah, in the days of Ahab, who stood alone against the court prophets and their oracles (1 Kg. 22).³⁸ The Deuteronomic test of prophecy, of course, was historical accuracy (Dt. 18:20-22), and this was Micaiah's defense against the collusion

³⁵W. Brueggemann, *Jeremiah 1-25: To Pluck Up, To Tear Down* (Grand Rapids/Edinburgh: Eerdmans/Handsel, 1988) 4-5, 87-88

³⁶This passage also appears in Ps. 79:6-7. Psalm 79 is a lament over the exile, and it is possible that the psalmist deliberately quoted Jeremiah, cf. A. Anderson, *Psalms 73-150 [NCBC]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 578.

³⁷Carroll, 136-137.

³⁸S. DeVries, *Prophet Against Prophet* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 1-2.

between Ahab and his court prophets (1 Kg. 22:24-28). Court prophets, that is, prophets who operated under the wing of the monarchy like the ones which surrounded Ahab (1 Kg. 22:6, 10-12), made the support of the king their central task (1 Kg. 22:13, 24; Am. 7:10-13; cf. 2:12). Prophets who did not agree could be dismissed as madmen (Ho. 9:7). Right or wrong, the court prophets were obliged to support the status quo, and in so doing, they led the nation away from Yahweh (Ho. 4:5; Mic. 3:5-7, 11).

Jeremiah rises as the prophet *par excellence* who stood against both kings and court prophets. In his early oracles, such a stance was clearly taken (2:8; 5:31; 6:13-15//8:10-12). Later, it became even more pronounced.

Jeremiah and the Kings of Judah (21:1--23:8; 36; 45)

At the heart of the tension between Jeremiah and the kings of Judah was the royal theology based on the covenant with David. In the original covenant, David had been guaranteed a perpetual dynasty (2 Sa. 7:11b-16) as well as an undisturbed land from which the Israelites would never be driven (2 Sa. 7:10-11a). The inviolable nature of this covenant is clearly expressed in David's dying words (2 Sa. 22:51b; 23:5a). The Davidic covenant came to be firmly associated with the temple on Zion (Ps. 2:6-9; 78:65-72; 132:11-18). Zion had been chosen by Yahweh as his special home (Ps. 9:11; 48; 87:1-2; 99:1-3), and the city of Jerusalem and Mt. Zion were considered impregnable (Ps. 46; 125:1-2; 146:10).

Early warnings from the 8th century prophets indicated that the Davidic covenant must not be viewed as an unconditional guarantee (Am. 2:4-5; 6:1a; Mic. 3:10, 12), but nevertheless, the popular view persisted that Jerusalem and Zion were promised protection by God no matter what (Mic. 3:11; Zep. 1:12). Had not Yahweh saved Jerusalem in the nick of time during the days of Hezekiah when Sennacherib of Assyria had invaded with terrific force (Is. 36-37), and had not the city been saved specifically "for the sake of David" (Is. 37:35)? True, Judah's enemies might make life difficult (Is. 29:1-4), but at the last minute, Yahweh would defend his sacred shrine on Zion (Is. 29:5-8; 31:4-5). He would give to the Jerusalemites horns of iron and hooves of bronze with which to gore and trample their enemies (Mic. 4:11-13). Thus, the popular royal theology in Jeremiah's day was that the nation was safe (6:14; 7:10; 8:11). Small wonder that when Jeremiah preached his temple sermon in which he declared that Yahweh would do to Zion what he had done to Shiloh (7:12-15), the officials of Judah called for his death because he "prophesied against this city" (26:10-11).

It is against such a background that Jehoiakim burned Jeremiah's first scroll which Baruch had read publicly after Jeremiah was placed under gag orders and barred from the temple precincts (36; 45). Jeremiah's protests against the popular royal theology repeatedly brought him into conflict with the Davidic kings.

Jeremiah and the Dynasty of David

After Jehoiakim had burned Jeremiah's scroll (36:29), Jeremiah informed the king that God had rejected his family from occupying the throne of David (36:30-31; cf. 22:18-19). Jehoiakim's son, Jehoiachin, only lasted three months after his father's demise (2 Kg. 24:6, 8-9).

Repeatedly, Jeremiah addressed the kings of the royal house of David and called them to account. Repeatedly he warned them against the popular theology of guaranteed safety (22:1-9, 21). But their track record was horrible. Jehoahaz (Shallum), Josiah's son, had been deposed and exiled by the Egyptians (22:10-17; 2 Kg. 23:30b-33). In his place, Pharaoh-Neco had placed Jehoiakim, Jehoahaz' brother, as a puppet king (2 Kg. 23:34-37). Jehoiakim was not even provided a decent burial (22:18-19), and his son, Jehoiachin, was soon exiled as well (2 Kg. 24:10-16). In fact, Jeremiah described Jehoiachin as a discarded signet ring and a broken pot, and he declared that none of his sons would sit on David's throne (22:24-30). Zedekiah, Jehoiachin's uncle, was placed on the throne by Nebuchadnezzar as the last of the puppet kings (2 Kg. 24:17), but he was no better than his predecessors (2 Kg. 24:18-20). He attempted to break his vassal relationship with Babylon (2 Kg. 24:20b), hoping against hope that Yahweh would perform another miracle at the last minute (21:1-2), but Jeremiah scorned such speculation as foolish (21:3-7). In fact, the intelligent decision would be to simply surrender to the Babylonians (21:8-10). As for the royal kings of David's line who depended upon their supposed divine guarantee (21:11-13), Yahweh was against them (21:14; 23:1-2).

The Future of David's Dynasty

Given the blistering judgments which Jeremiah pronounced against the house of David, one might be tempted to assume that he had rejected the Davidic covenant outright. This would not be accurate, however. Though the Sinai covenant and the Davidic covenant were in tension, they were not mutually exclusive. In fact, Yahweh still held out a future for the Davidic dynasty and his promises to David. Though exile was inevitable according to the Sinai covenant, restoration was possible because of the Davidic promises. Yahweh himself would regather the people and establish them in safety (23:3-4). This future was to be realized when a righteous Branch of David's line would arise who would be named Yahweh-Tsidkenu [= Yahweh, Our Righteousness] (23:5-6). A second exodus would occur, this time not from Egypt but from Mesopotamia (23:7-8). The nation's life would be lost and then given back again. The Davidic tree would be felled, but a new Branch would grow out of the Davidic stump, just as Isaiah had promised a century earlier (cf. Is. 11:1-11).

Jeremiah and the Court Prophets (14; 23:9-40; 27-29)

Since the court prophets were primarily supporters of the Davidic king and the status quo, Jeremiah's assault on the royal theology naturally brought him into conflict with the prophetic guild as well as with the kings themselves. Four sections of Jeremiah especially develop this antagonism, though hints of it are to be found repeatedly throughout the book.

The Great Drought (14)

One of the specific Deuteronomic curses for covenant violation was drought and massive crop failure (Dt. 28:18, 22-24, 38-42; 29:19, 22-24). To fail to remain faithful to Yahweh meant that the land itself would suffer. Ironically, the Canaanite cults surrounding Israel were fertility cults in which the worship of Ba'al was believed to insure good weather and abundant harvests. This opposition of religious ideals between Yahwehism and the Ba'al cult continually forced the people to make a choice in which religion and economics were tied together. In the days of Elijah, the threat of no rain was a frontal assault upon not only the weather but the religion of Ba'al (cf. 1 Kg. 17:1). In the days of Jeremiah, a severe drought in Judah pointed both toward the ineffectiveness of the Ba'al cult (which the people were following) and Yahweh's determined commitment to fulfil the Deuteronomic code (which the people were ignoring). The cisterns were drying up (14:3), the ground was cracked (14:4a), the farmers were desperate (14:4b), and the pasture was exhausted (14:5-6). Yet while the people of Judah acknowledged that they had sinned, they blamed the drought on either Yahweh's unwillingness or his inability to help them (14:7-9). Their tentative admission of guilt was tainted with the insinuation that Yahweh was himself at fault. Such arrogance prompted Yahweh again to instruct Jeremiah that it was useless even to pray for the people (14:11-12; cf. 11:14; 15:1).

How came this penchant for defiance? Jeremiah saw clearly that it was augmented by the prophetic guild who preached a doctrine of prosperity (14:13; cf. 2:8, 26; 4:9-10; 5:12-13; 6:13-14; 8:10-11). These prophets were liars, and though they had the rhetoric for speaking the oracles of Yahweh, they had not been sent by him (14:14-16). Jeremiah was left to weep over the tragic aftermath of their insidious oracles (14:17-18). The nation was dying due to its failed leadership but could not seem to perceive that all was lost. Even though the terrible future was fixed, Jeremiah continued his petition on behalf of the nation (14:19-22), but to no avail (15:1).

The Third Commandment (23:9-40)

It is popular to understand the Third Commandment in the Decalogue as a prohibition against bad language (Dt. 5:11). While such an ideal is worthy, the Third Commandment is concerned with a much more serious matter, the improper

use of God's name in formulas, such as, in taking oaths and prophesying (i.e., "as Yahweh lives" or "thus says Yahweh").³⁹ Jeremiah's oracle against the prophets (23:9ff.) was not only because they abused their positions of influence (23:10b), not only because they were godless (23:11), and not only because they mixed the religion of Ba'al and Yahweh (23:13) while participating in sin (23:14), though these surely things guaranteed for them Yahweh's judgment (23:15). What was worse was that the prophetic guild had falsely spoken their messages in the name of Yahweh himself (23:16-18). He had not sent them (23:21-22). Their claims of divine communication, such as dreams, were simply human imaginations, not the true word of Yahweh (23:25-29). To preface an oracle with the formula, "Yahweh declares," proved nothing about authenticity (23:30-32). Because of these repeated abuses of Yahweh's name, which were violations of the Third Commandment, Jeremiah declared a moratorium on the prophetic formula, "Yahweh says" (23:33-40).⁴⁰

Jeremiah and Hananiah (27-28)

Early in Zedekiah's reign (27:1),⁴¹ Jeremiah was instructed by Yahweh to perform an acted-out parable in which he wore an ox-yoke constructed of the wooden bar which was normally to be attached to an animal's neck or lashed to its horns by leather thongs or cords (27:1-2).⁴² This contraption was intended to call attention to the fact that Judah and the nations which surrounded her would soon be in servitude to Babylon, the Mesopotamian superpower (27:3-15). Any prophet, whether from Judah or elsewhere, who had promised otherwise was a liar (27:9-10, 14-15). Not only had the false prophets predicted to their kings safety from Babylon, they had predicted to the Zion priests that the booty of utensils, which had been stripped from the temple at the time of Jehoiachin's exile (cf. 2 Kg. 24:13//2 Chr. 36:9-10), would soon be returned (27:16a). Such predictions were unforgiveable, and Jeremiah declared that not only would this *not* happen, the other temple treasures would soon follow into the hands of the foreigners (27:16b-22).

One of the court prophets, Hananiah, was so bold as to predict a reversal of Judah's fortunes within two years (28:1-4). He promised that the temple utensils

³⁹Craigie, 155-156.

⁴⁰The *massa* (= burden, oracle), which appears only in this passage in Jeremiah, carries a double meaning. Since it can mean either oracle or burden, it can refer simply to the prophetic disclosure given by Yahweh, yet at the same time, it can refer to the burden which Yahweh (and his prophet) must carry, a ponderous weight which leaves him exhausted, Brueggemann, 207-208.

⁴¹There is a textual discrepancy here. The MT reads "Jehoiakim" while the LXX and Syriac read "Zedekiah." The references to Zedekiah in 27:3, 12; 28:1 clearly favor the latter reading.

⁴²Bright, *Jeremiah*, 199.

would be returned and that Jehoiachin himself would be restored to take the Judean throne. Though Jeremiah could wish with all his heart that the oracle were true (28:5-6), the Deuteronomic test of prophethood--the test of historical fulfillment (Dt. 18:19-22)--had yet to be applied (28:7-9). Hananiah attempted to reinforce his prophecy with his own parabolic act. He broke the yoke from Jeremiah's neck (28:10), once more predicting a restoration in two years (28:11). Jeremiah merely turned silently away.

Sometime later, Jeremiah returned to Hananiah with a rebuke from Yahweh. The yoke of wood would be replaced with a yoke of iron (28:12-14). Furthermore, Hananiah had signed his own death warrant when he presumed to use the formula, "Yahweh says." Yahweh himself would carry out the death penalty called for by the Deuteronomic code (Dt. 18:29). Within two months, Hananiah was dead (28:17).

False Prophets Among the Exiles (29)

The problem of false prophets who spoke in Yahweh's name was not limited to the Jews of Jerusalem. Among the 10,000 exiles who had been deported to Babylon with Jehoiachin (2 Kg. 24:14) were other prophets as well. These, like their counterparts in Jerusalem, described an attractive future of restoration. In opposition to this popular but mistaken message, Jeremiah wrote a letter to the exiles to warn them not to listen to such speculation (29:1-3). He advised the exiles to be content in their new home and to work towards its well-being (29:4-9). The exile would extend for a full 70 years before there would be a restoration (29:10-14; cf. 25:11).⁴³ Not only would those already exiled not return in the near future, those left in the land would soon join them in exile (29:15-19). In particular, two of the false prophets, Ahab ben-Kolaiah and Zedekiah ben-Maaseiah, would suffer the Deuteronomic death penalty for their lies, just as had Hananiah (29:20-23).

Jeremiah's letter, as might be expected, caused repercussions. One of the leaders of the company of prophets in Babylon, Shemaiah, contacted the temple overseer in Jerusalem by letter to reprimand him for not putting madmen such as Jeremiah in stocks and shackles (29:24-28). The temple overseer reviewed this letter with Jeremiah, who shot back a return to the effect that Shemaiah and his family would perish. The Deuteronomic code would stand!

His Parables

Prophetic actions as well as prophetic words which proclaimed the mind of

⁴³Jeremiah's figure may merely have been intended as a round number, but even so, it was amazingly accurate. The interval between the destruction of the temple in 587 B.C. and its rebuilding in 520-515 B.C. was approximately seven decades (2 Chr. 36:20-23; Zec. 1:12), cf. Thompson, 513-514.

Yahweh were not uncommon. One may remember the unnamed prophet in the period of the Omride dynasty who pronounced the death sentence on Ahab of Israel by the unusual method of demanding that another prophet wound him after which he disguised himself with a headband over his eyes before confronting the king (1 Kg. 20:35-43). Another unusual prophetic action was the marriage of Hosea to a cult prostitute (Ho. 1:2-3). Isaiah's sons were named in such a way as to suggest a prophetic meaning (Is. 7:3; 8:1-4). Such prophetic gestures were more or less acted out parables, though they should not be confused with the more restricted definition of parable in the NT. One such acted out parable in Jeremiah's career has already been observed, the occasion when he constructed and wore an ox yoke as a symbol of the nation's coming exile (27:1ff.). There are several other occasions as well in which Jeremiah not only spoke an oracle but associated the oracle with a prophetic action. Some of these are dated, others not.

The Linen Loincloth (13:1-11)

At Yahweh's instruction, Jeremiah bought and wore a linen loincloth (13:1-2).⁴⁴ Though he was to wear it, he was not to wash it, presumably so that it might deteriorate more quickly when it was soaked with perspiration. Next, Yahweh instructed Jeremiah to hide the loincloth in a cleft of rock near the Euphrates River (13:3-5).⁴⁵ After a long period of time, Jeremiah was instructed to return and retrieve the loincloth, which by this time had rotted beyond usage (13:6-7). This parabolic action symbolized Yahweh's relationship with his people. Just as the loincloth was worn next to the most intimate part of the body, so the nation was supposed to cling to Yahweh (13:11). Just as Jeremiah removed and hid the loincloth, so Yahweh would reject the nation until it was spoiled and useless (13:8-10).

The Smashed Winejars (13:12-14)

To one audience, Jeremiah commanded that their every available wine jar⁴⁶

⁴⁴The loincloth was roughly equivalent to underwear, that is, the innermost piece of clothing, cf. W. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 8; Holladay, *Jeremiah*, 397.

⁴⁵There is some question as to whether or not the place name Perath (which normally refers to the Euphrates River, cf. Ge. 2:14; 15:18; Dt. 1:7; 11:24, etc.) is actually intended to mean that Jeremiah made two round trips of several hundred miles or simply went to a local site (such as Parah, just north of Jerusalem). Even if the latter is correct, however, it remains that the site symbolized the Euphrates River and the power of Babylon, cf. Holladay, 396.

⁴⁶While the Hebrew term *nebel* is sometimes used for a wineskin, the meaning here is winejar, a large earthenware container used for storing wine, cf. Harrison, *Jeremiah*, 99. As such, the NIV rendering could stand improvement.

should be filled with wine. The smashing of these full wine jars symbolized the downfall of the dynasty of David and the city of Jerusalem which were under the sentence of death, not merely from Babylon but from Yahweh. Both the king and queen mother were doomed (13:18), and the nation of Judah was destined for exile (13:19). Like a prostitute who has been raped and publicly exposed, so Judah would be shamed (13:22, 26-27).⁴⁷ She was as unchangeable in her stubbornness as the black skin of an Ethiopian or spots on a leopard (13:23).

Emotionless Stoicism (16)

To reinforce the abrupt end which was coming, Yahweh forbade Jeremiah to marry or to have children (16:1-2). Celibacy and childlessness symbolized the coming devastation (16:3-4). Furthermore, the prophet was forbidden to attend funerals or wedding feasts (16:5, 8). He was to be as emotionless as possible, neither mourning, showing sympathy or expressing joy. This emotionless stoicism pointed toward the coming disaster (16:6-7, 9).

The Potter's House (18)

At a potter's house, Jeremiah received the message that Israel, like clay in a potter's hand, was completely under the control of her sovereign Lord. The nation was not autonomous. Still, the condition of the clay was also a crucial factor. If the original intent of the potter was not possible, due to a deficiency in the clay, the clay would be reshaped into something else (18:4-6). Such a metaphor is double-edged, for it can result in disaster as well as in honor. That which was intended for honor can be rejected. That which was planned for destruction can become usable.

Extending this to the nation of Judah, Yahweh showed Jeremiah that the divine intent to uproot, tear down and destroy the nation (cf. 1:10a) could be altered by her repentance (18:7-8, 11). At the same time, his divine intent to build up and plant the nation (cf. 1:10b), an intent that was made clear in the exodus from Egypt, could also be reconsidered (16:9-10). Since the nation had persisted in its waywardness, disaster was now inevitable (18:12-17). Yahweh stood ready to act in new ways if Judah should respond with new behavior. Thus, the nation possessed a freedom that the clay did not, and so the metaphor of the clay asserts the sovereignty of Yahweh, while the breaking of the metaphor asserts the freedom he grants to his people. Yet the people had become hardened in their rebellion, and it was too late to hope for change.⁴⁸

⁴⁷Thompson, 373-375.

⁴⁸Brueggemann, 160-162.

The Smashed Clay Jar (19)

Still carrying the metaphor of clay vessels, Yahweh showed Jeremiah that while the clay was capable of reshaping while it was soft, when it hardened it was fit only for smashing. After buying a clay jar, Jeremiah took it to the valley south of Jerusalem near the Potsherd Gate (19:1-2). Both locations are important. The Valley of Ben-Hinnom was a cultic site for ritual child sacrifice. The Potsherd Gate was an exit from the city apparently named after the fact that the local potters dumped their wasted vessels just outside. Judah's hardened participation in the terrible ritual of child sacrifice made her like a useless, wasted jar, fit only for the potter's field (19:3-9). With priests and city elders looking on, Jeremiah smashed his clay jar as a symbol of the way Yahweh would smash Jerusalem and Judah (19:10-13). Returning to the temple, Jeremiah added yet another oracle of disaster because of the clay-hardened recalcitrance of the people (19:14-15).

The Cup of Wine (25)

Early in Jehoiakim's reign, just as Nebuchadnezzar came to power in Babylon (25:1-2), Jeremiah addressed the nation of Judah. For 23 years, he had preached to the people without noticeable effect (25:3-7). Now Yahweh had determined to destroy his people by the enemy from the north, and they would serve the Babylonians in exile for 70 years (25:8-11). Yet even though God would use the Babylonians as his instrument of judgment against Judah, he also intended to punish Babylon for her ruthlessness (25:12-14). In a vision, Yahweh handed to Jeremiah a cup of wine which symbolized his divine wrath against the nations (25:15-16; cf. Rv. 14:10). All the nations, Judah included, were obliged to drink from the cup (25:17-29). In an apocalyptic vision of the end of the world, Jeremiah described God's final devastation of the nations from one end of the earth to the other (25:30-38), a vision that has its greatest resolution in the Apocalypse of John (cf. Rv. 16:16; 19:19-21).

The Recabites (35)

Also during Jehoiakim's tenure as king, Jeremiah used the Recabites as a living parable of contrast with the unfaithful nation. The Recabites, a Kenite clan (cf. 1 Chr. 2:55), had for a long time reacted against the sedentary lifestyle of Israel while clinging to the semi-nomadic traditions of the far-distant past (35:6-10). Their ancestor had been a witness to and possibly a participant in Jehu's slaughter of the house of Ahab some two centuries earlier (2 Kg. 10:15-17). As nomads, vineyard farming and wine-making was virtually unknown to them, and in any case, their ancestor had forbidden it. They had only forsaken their semi-nomadic existence after the land had been invaded by foreigners (35:11).

Calling them to the temple, Jeremiah offered them wine, knowing in advance

that they would refuse (35:3-5). Their refusal to drink wine, in honor of a 200 year old edict, starkly contrasted with Judah's repeated infidelity to Yahweh (35:12-16). As such, Yahweh pronounced that the Recabites would be blessed for their faithfulness (35:18-19), but Judah would be cursed for her stubborn infidelity (35:17).

The Two Baskets of Figs (24)

After Jehoiachin had been exiled in the first deportation (598 B.C.) and Zedekiah had been established on the throne (2 Chr. 36:9-10), Yahweh called Jeremiah's attention to two baskets of figs which had been left in front of the temple (24:1-3). One basket held ripe figs, the other rotten figs.

In order to appreciate how Yahweh intended to develop the symbolism of the figs, one must remember that after the first deportation, there were two Jewish communities, one composed of civic leaders and skilled artisans who were now in exile in Babylon (deported along with Jehoiachin, the boy king) while the other was composed of the poor of the land who were left in Palestine and Jerusalem under the puppet king Zedekiah (2 Kg. 24:14). It is likely that these two communities developed contending theological self-identities, the one in exile maintaining that it was the purest form of the community, since it had the rightful Davidic king among them whom they hoped would be restored along with themselves (28:1-4; 29:8, 15-23), and the other in Palestine arguing that they must be the purest form since they had not suffered deportation like the others.⁴⁹ It was apparently to this latter group that the symbolism of the figs was directed.

The good figs were in fact *not* those left in the land. Rather, the good figs were those who had been deported (24:4-7). They corresponded to the positive side of Jeremiah's message, for in time they would be restored and planted (cf. 1:10b). The bad figs were those still left in the land with Zedekiah (24:8-10). Their future was certain destruction, for like rotten figs, they were so corrupt that they no longer had any value.

The Field in Anathoth (32)

Near the end of Zedekiah's reign, while the nation of Judah was in its final death throes (the armies of Babylon were even then in their final siege of Jerusalem, 32:1-2), Jeremiah had been confined to the palace courtyard (32:3-5). During a respite in the siege, he had attempted to leave Jerusalem briefly to visit his ancestral home in the territory of Benjamin, but had subsequently been accused of defecting to the Babylonians (37:11-15). Consequently, he had been imprisoned in the

⁴⁹Brueggemann, 208-209.

courtyard (37:16-21). Yahweh instructed him to buy a field from his cousin Hanamel (32:6-8), who had perhaps fallen into debt or was preparing to give up his ancestral land in view of the impending disaster (cf. Lv. 25:25-31). In any case, Jeremiah did indeed purchase the land, arranging for the deeds to be drawn up by Baruch, his scribe (32:9-12).

The purchase of the land was a parable of hope for the future of the nation. To buy property in the face of such overwhelming circumstances must surely have seemed the height of folly, particularly for someone like Jeremiah who had consistently announced the coming desolation (32:24-25). However, just as the original vision had indicated, Jeremiah's message was one of both doom and hope (1:10). A restoration was coming (32:13-15), and nothing was too hard for Yahweh (32:17b, 27). Once more, fields, houses and vineyards would be bought in the land (32:15, 42-44).

His Confessions

Within the Book of Jeremiah, there are a series of passages alternately called the Confessions, the Complaints, or the Lamentations of the prophet (not to be confused with the Book of Lamentations). They are poetic units of candid, direct and intimate prayers composed after the pattern of the laments found in the Psalms.⁵⁰

In these prayers, Jeremiah speaks his heart with a boldness that almost takes one's breath away. He gives full vent to his anguish, complaining of the abuse heaped upon him in his prophetic office and cursing his enemies. His questions and complaints to God are blunt, and if they did not proceed from a prophet of such profound faith, they might be suspected of verging on blasphemy.

A Gentle Lamb Led to Slaughter (11:20-23)

In the midst of Jeremiah's oracles of judgment against Judah because of her covenant-breaking stubbornness (11:1-17), Jeremiah was severely opposed by members of his home town, Anathoth. In their plotting, they threatened to destroy him and silence his prophetic voice. Before such powerful antagonists, Jeremiah felt as unprotected as a gentle lamb ready to be butchered (cf. Ps. 44:11, 22; Is. 53:7). As such, he prayed for divine vengeance against his foes. Yahweh answered Jeremiah's prayer for vengeance by assuring him that the men of Anathoth would be exterminated.

⁵⁰There is an opinion that the Confessions of Jeremiah represent liturgical expressions, that is, prayers made on behalf of the people, and as such they are not personally related to the experiences within the life of Jeremiah. Against this, however, see J. Bright, "Jeremiah's Complaints: Liturgy, or Expressions of Personal Distress?" *Proclamation and Presence*, ed. J. Durham and J. Porter (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1983) 189-214.

The Prosperity of the Wicked (12:1-6)

The second confession is a classic statement of the problem of why wicked people prosper, a problem also addressed in Psalm 73. It begins in near insolence with Jeremiah addressing Yahweh as though the Lord were a defendant in court with whom the prophet has a quarrel (though Jeremiah complains, as did Job, that the Lord will probably turn out to be innocent anyway, cf. Jb. 9:1-20). Still, the prophet intends to pursue his case: why do the wicked have it so good? They ought to be dragged off and butchered for giving their hypocritical lip service to God while raping the land as they have. Yahweh seems oblivious, and the violators themselves chirp that God will not see what they do anyway. Implicitly, of course, Jeremiah is also complaining that while the wicked prosper, the righteous do not.

Yahweh's answer to Jeremiah comes as a shock. If the prophet thinks it is bad now, it will quickly become much worse. If he thinks he is presently suffering, it will be nothing compared with the suffering that is on the horizon, for he will even be betrayed by his own family members (12:5-6). Furthermore, the present suffering of the prophet will be minor compared with the coming death of the entire nation. Yet, Yahweh is not aloof to the miseries which his judgment will bring, as the subsequent poem indicates (12:7-17). He fully intends to uproot the nation of Judah, but he does so out of a deep pathos.

The Suffering Prophet (15:10-21)

Jeremiah certainly did not relish his message that the nation was doomed to death (15:1-9). In a tremendous burst of emotion, he declared his wish that he had never been born (15:10a). He was continually being cursed for his preaching by his detractors, and it seemed to him that he stood alone against the entire nation (15:10b). Still, Yahweh had preserved him for his mission, however distasteful (15:11). The purpose of Yahweh was set, the iron and bronze enemy from the north was intractable, and the nation was doomed (15:12-15).

Yet again Jeremiah complained (15:15). Even though he had eagerly and faithfully responded to his prophetic mission (15:16), he had been ostracized (15:15b), terribly lonely (15:17), and his anguish seemed interminable (15:18a). In his distress, he even bluntly questioned the reliability of Yahweh (15:18b). God rebuked his impertinent prophet for such accusations. Jeremiah had told the nation to repent, and now God tells Jeremiah to repent (15:19a). The nation has also indulged itself in accusing God (14:8-9, and will Jeremiah now join in their diatribe? He must remain resolute and not be shaped by his audience (15:19b)! He must remain as unmovable as a wall of bronze (15:20-21)!

Vindication (17:14-18)

Relentlessly, Jeremiah preached against a hardened Judah (17:1). Disaster

would come to Mt. Zion and the other cultic high places alike (17:2-4). Dependence upon human ingenuity was folly, while dependence upon Yahweh was the only hope (17:5-8).⁵¹ Yet Judah was not depending upon Yahweh. Her citizens were fickle and incurable (17:9), and their greed and faithlessness would catch up with them in the end (17:10-13). The nation's Sabbath violations would bring upon their beloved capital a terrible disaster (17:19-27). So Jeremiah preached on.

However, the predicted disaster was not immediate, and this produced for Jeremiah a dilemma. His detractors, of course, were not slow about challenging him with this lack of fulfillment (17:15). It is of this that Jeremiah prays when he asks for healing. He wishes to be healed of the bleak situation in which his oracles have gone unfulfilled. His "healing" would only occur if Yahweh vindicated his predictions about the breaking of the nation.⁵² It would have been more convenient, of course, for Jeremiah simply to have remained silent, but even though he had no liking for what he was compelled to say (17:16b), he remained committed to his message (17:16a). So the prophet was left to pray that his enemies would be shamed (17:17-18). His prophetic vindication, that is his healing, could only come by the shattering of his own people.

Vengeance and Retribution (18:18-23)

Jeremiah could never be faulted for a lack of candor! When his enemies designed a campaign of slander to discredit him (18:18; cf. 11:18), he bitterly responded in the spirit of the Sons of Thunder (cf. Lk. 9:54). His prayer was certainly not offered in the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount! It was a vehement prayer for retribution and vengeance on his enemies and everything they owned, and it was offered in the tradition of the imprecatory psalms (cf. 35; 69; 137:7-9 etc.).

The No-Win Prophet (20:7-13)

Jeremiah's preaching cost him more than merely verbal insults. Pashhur, a temple officer, arrested him, had him flogged (possibly with 40 stripes, cf. Dt. 25:3), and punished him with a day in the stocks (20:1-2).⁵³ When he was released, Jeremiah retorted that Yahweh had renamed Pashhur as Magor-Missabib, that is, "Terror on Every Side" (20:3-6). Jeremiah predicted that Pashhur would see with his own eyes the terrible exile of the nation.

⁵¹The simile in this passage is remarkably similar to Ps. 1.

⁵²A. Diamond, *The Confessions of Jeremiah in Context* (Sheffield, England: JSOTS, 1987) 86. This interpretation seems more credible than that Jeremiah was asking for physical healing.

⁵³The term *mahpeket* (= stocks), from a root meaning "to distort," were a form of scaffold in which the prisoners were held in a stooped position which produced severe cramping (29:26; 2 Chr. 16:10), cf. Harrison, *Jeremiah*, 112.

However, Jeremiah's words of retort were turned against him. When his prophecy did not immediately come to pass, he was taunted with his own words as the local scoffers whispered and jeered, "The Terror! Let's turn him in!" (20:10). In prayer, then, Jeremiah bitterly complained that Yahweh had tricked him (20:7a).⁵⁴ Why did God keep forcing him to prophesy things that did not happen? This only left him in the lurch to become a laughingstock to his enemies (20:7b-8). Yet Jeremiah was under pressure no matter what he did. If he spoke, he was ridiculed; if he remained silent, God pressured him from within (20:9). Yet in the end, he knew that he must continue to rely upon Yahweh, for like a mighty warrior, the Lord would in the end vindicate his loyal spokesman through the coming catastrophe (20:11-13).

I Wish I Had Never Been Born (20:14-18)

The final confession of Jeremiah is perhaps the most bitter of all, for unlike the others, this one does not close with any resolution whatsoever. Jeremiah's cursing is far more severe than Job's, though it bears clear affinities (Jb. 3). In terrible dismay, Jeremiah curses his birthday (20:14). He curses the man who brought the news of his birth from the midwives to his father (20:15), and he curses the fact that he was not aborted before birth (20:17).

What is there to say about Jeremiah's depressions and inner bitterness toward his circumstances? Commentators seem at a loss to do more than simply describe his words. To curse the day of his birth is one thing, but to curse the innocent man who brought his father the news, in fact, to curse him with the same curses as Sodom and Gomorrah is inexplicable (20:16). The final resolution does not come until some seven centuries later, when another man was led like a lamb to butchery, a man who suffered ridicule and abuse. This man, also, was tempted to express vengeance and retribution. He, too, faced a bleak and bitter hopelessness which starkly contrasted with the prosperity of his accusers. Unlike Jeremiah, who prayed, "Do not forgive their crimes" (18:23), this man prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk. 23:34). It may well be that in the economy of God, the sufferings of Jeremiah and his scorching anger are intended to punctuate more vividly the sacrificial love of this other man -- the man who was God's only Son!

⁵⁴The piel perfect form of the verbal root *p-t-h* means to fool or to deceive, cf. Holladay, *Lexicon*, 300, and in other contexts, could even mean to abuse, harrass, seduce or take advantage of, cf. Brueggemann, 174; G. Couturier, "Jeremiah," *JBC* (1968) I.319.

The Book of Consolation (30-33)

The title for this section comes from the instruction of Yahweh to Jeremiah to record his visions of the nation's future hope in a document (30:2), hence, the "Book of Consolation." While the vast majority of Jeremiah's oracles were bleak as they described the death of the nation, the present collection is largely optimistic. Though Jeremiah never retracts his predictions of terrible disaster for the present generation, he nevertheless holds forth a distant hope for restoration that positively shines in its contrast with the immediate anticipation of doom.

Most scholars doubt that all the material in 30-33 was composed at the same time. It is more likely that this material is a collection of oracles from various periods of Jeremiah's life, but that they have been grouped together because of their similar content. Various attempts to date the different poems and prose sections have been attempted, but there is little consensus. More important is the fact that Jeremiah consistently maintained that the nation which was under the sentence of death by Yahweh, and more particularly, the dynasty of David, which was being cut to the roots, still possessed a future. Hints of this future had been given previously (cf. 3:14-18; 5:18; 16:14-15, 21; 23:3-8; 24:4-7; 27:21-22; 29:10-14), but now it is described in detail.

The End of Jacob's Trouble

The central message of the entire Book of Consolation is that Yahweh intends to bring Israel back to her land (30:3; 31:17; 33:7). The sufferings of exile, called the "time of trouble for Jacob" (30:7), are vividly described.⁵⁵ It is a time of terror (30:5) and pain (30:6). The ghostly figure of Rachel, the mother of the Benjaminite tribe in the south and the grandmother of the Ephraimite tribe in the north, is

⁵⁵The dispensational school of theology tends to push the vision of restoration ahead to the millennial reign of Christ at the end of the age. Both the scattering of Israel among the nations, her travail, and her restoration are interpreted in terms of the great eschatological tribulation and millennial restoration. The Scofield Reference Bible plainly says that the "time of Jacob's trouble" is identical to the tribulation and redirects the reader to Re. 7:14 (see *SRB* annotation at 30:7). The most recent dispensational commentary on the Book of Consolation consistently speaks of the entire section as pointing toward the end of the age, and the restoration is said to depict the millennial bliss of Israel in Palestine after the return of Christ, cf. C. Feinberg, "Jeremiah," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. F. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 558-594.

The context of the Book of Consolation in the oracles of Jeremiah clearly discourage such a thoroughgoing futuristic interpretation. While the consolation of which Jeremiah speaks may indeed stretch into the future, it must be remembered that the prophecies of Jeremiah were primarily about the relatively near future, not the far future. To be sure, Jeremiah sometimes depicts the tragedy of the Israelite nation in apocalyptic imagery (cf. 25:30-33), but this mode of prophecy is not unusual in any of the prophets. It is equally true that what Jeremiah said about the restoration of the nation has overtones that reach ahead to the Christ event. Nevertheless, the substance of his oracles cannot simply be extracted out of the context of the 7th century B.C. and transplanted into an eschatological schematic for the end of the world.

pictured as weeping for her banished children (31:15). Yet this distress would come to an end, and the nation of Israel would be saved from her trouble (30:7b). The bondage of exile would be broken, and the nation would once more serve a king from David's line (30:8-9).⁵⁶ Though Yahweh would not allow the sinful nation to go unpunished (30:11b; 33:1-5), her incurable wound would in fact be cured in the future by a divine healing (30:12-15, 17; 33:6; cf. 8:22; 10:19). The fallen tent of the nation with its broken ropes (10:20) would be pitched again (30:18). The nation would be saved from the land of her exile (30:10-11).⁵⁷ The community would be revived, and its new leader would be devoted to Yahweh (30:19-22).

Of course, this wonderful promise would be fulfilled for only a remnant (31:7b), those who survived the sword of exile (31:2). For this remnant would be rebuilt Jerusalem, its royal palace, and its temple on Zion (30:18b; 31:6b, 12, 23, 38-40), along with the other cities of Judah (31:24-25; 33:9-13). Even Samaria, the former capital of the northern nation, would be restored (31:5-6). All the clans of Israel would find a restored relationship with Yahweh (31:1). Just as God had wooed Israel in the desert of Sinai (31:3), so he would again restore Virgin Israel (31:4). He would bring the exiles from the lands of their northern enemy where they had been scattered, and he would care for them like a loving father and a faithful shepherd (31:8-14, 16). The tragedy of exile was like the disciplining of a wayward animal or even a prodigal child (31:18-20; cf. Ho. 11:1-11). But the road toward home would be open (31:21)! This promise of regathering, like the judgment of exile, is firmly grounded in the Deuteronomic curses and blessings. If the curse was exile (Dt. 28:36-37, 41, 49-52, 63-68), the blessing of repentance would be regathering and restoration (30:1-10).

The Sign of the Field in Anathoth

Jeremiah's purchase of the field owned by his cousin in Anathoth served as a sign pointing toward the predicted restoration (32:1-14). The deed and the terms of the purchase were sealed in a clay jar so that they would survive the years of captivity (32:15). The hope for such a restoration seemed preposterous in view of the present threat (32:16-25), but nothing would be too hard for Yahweh (32:17b, 26-27). Certainly Jerusalem would be devastated (32:28-29), for her citizens had

⁵⁶The promise of a future king in David's line is simply expressed as "David" (30:9), but this should be taken as a metonymy for a son within David's dynasty (cf. 23:5; 33:15, 17, 22). The notion that this is David *redivivus* in the millennium, such as espoused by Pentecost and others, is based on a misplaced literalism that has failed to come to grips with the idiomatic use of language, cf. D. Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958) 500-501.

⁵⁷The fact that Israel is here called the Servant of Yahweh is similar to the songs of the servant in the latter part of Isaiah (41:8-9; 44:1-2, 21; 45:4; 48:20; 49:3).

broken the covenant (32:30-35), and the Deuteronomic code could not be altered. Yet the Deuteronomic promise of regathering held true as well (32:36-42). The field of Anathoth, now owned by Jeremiah, stood as a sign representing all the fields which would be repossessed after the exile had ended (32:43-44).

The New Covenant

At the very beginning of his ministry, Jeremiah was told that his mission was to preach a message of uprooting, tearing down, destroying and overthrowing (1:9-10a). Yet there was also the more positive message of building and planting (1:10b). During the course of the future, Yahweh declared that he would be watching in order to guarantee that the predictions would be fulfilled (1:12). Part of Yahweh's watching was his evaluation of the nation's sins, as Jeremiah declared in his temple sermon (cf. 7:11). At the same time, part of his watching was to guarantee that after the exile, the Deuteronomic promises of restoration would be kept (24:4-7). This same double interpretation of Yahweh's watching eye resurfaces in the Book of Consolation (31:27-28).

In the restoration there would be a marked difference from the previous era. Torah had declared God to be not only the one who forgave sins but the one who inflicted the iniquity of the parents upon their children for several generations (Ex. 20:5-6; 34:6-7; Nu. 14:18; Dt. 5:9).⁵⁸ From this idea, the proverb became popular, "The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" (31:29; cf. Eze. 18:1-2). Consequently, those who suffered discipline at Yahweh's hand were apt to blame their punishment on their ancestors rather than shouldering the responsibility themselves, and in fact, they accused God of being unjust (cf. Eze. 18:3-32). Jeremiah as well as Ezekiel rejected this interpretation, declaring that every person's punishment was for his/her own sin (31:30; Eze. 18:4-29). Nevertheless, in the future there would be a new covenant--a covenant distinctly different in its formulation than the old one of Sinai (31:31-32).

This promise of a new covenant is the theological climax of Jeremiah's prophecies. It was to be established with the survivors of the unified nation, that is, with both the houses of Israel and Judah to the north and south (31:31). The contrast between this new covenant and the Sinai covenant is profound (31:32). Whereas the Sinai covenant was spelled out in an external law code, the new covenant would be internally written in human hearts (31:33). Whereas the Sinai

⁵⁸This repetitive statement is grounded in the corporate personality of ancient Israel in which the members of a household are bound together in the solidarity of transgression, cf. H. Robinson, *Corporate Personality in Ancient Israel*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980). It should also be noted that the idioms "showing love to thousands" and "visiting the iniquity of the fathers to the third and fourth generation" are intended to contrast the unbounded love of Yahweh with his limitations of punishment. It need not be taken as a wooden literalism.

covenant was grounded in an obedience-reward and disobedience-punishment motif, the new covenant would be grounded in forgiveness (31:34; 33:8). Whereas the justice of the old was retributive, the justice of the new was gracious (32:36-41). And whereas the tenure of the old could end by a divine rejection of the nation for its sin, the tenure of the new was guaranteed for all time (31:35-37; 32:40).

The Re-establishment of David's Line

Associated with the new covenant which Yahweh promised was the revival of David's dynastic kingship. Jeremiah had preached elsewhere of the Righteous Branch which would sprout from David's line (cf. 23:5-6). Earlier, this restoration was clearly to be associated with the return of the nation from exile (23:3-4, 7-8), and so it is here (33:6-13).⁵⁹ In the restoration, the ancient promise to David, that is, the promise that he would never lack a descendent to reign from his throne (cf. 2 Sa. 7:16; 23:5; Ps. 89:35-37), would be fulfilled (33:17). Furthermore, the priests and Levites were guaranteed a perpetual ministry (33:18). The covenant was bound by Yahweh's most solemn declaration of certainty (33:19-26).

Interpreting the New Covenant

There is little question but that the post-exilic community who returned from exile with the permission of Cyrus of Persia expected the new covenant and all its ramifications to be fulfilled immediately. Certainly some statements by Jeremiah clearly point in this direction (cf. 23:3-8; 30:3, 10; 31:23-25; 50:4-5, 19-20). When this did not fully happen, the disillusionment of the community is apparent in the post-exilic works of Zechariah, Haggai and Malachi. In the NT, of course, the new covenant is quoted and alluded to extensively (Mt. 26:28//Mk. 14:24//Lk. 22:20; Ro. 11:27; 1 Co. 11:25; 2 Co. 3:4-18; He. 8:7-13; 9:15; 12:24). For Christians, the new covenant is established in the death of Jesus Christ, and the benefits of the new covenant extend to all who come to faith in him.

Exactly how the new covenant is to be interpreted is debated among various schools of theology. Covenant theologians tend to interpret the categories of Jeremiah (i.e., Israel, Judah, the return from exile, the restoration of David's dynasty, the rebuilding of Jerusalem and Zion) in a spiritual way so that they are fulfilled in the post-Easter people of God. Dispensational theologians argue strongly that every

⁵⁹Many scholars see the section 33:14-26 as being a later addition inasmuch as it is missing from the LXX. However, the differences between the LXX and the MT of Jeremiah are well known (they diverge more than any other OT document, there are significant dislocations, and Jeremiah is about 1/8 shorter in the LXX than in the MT), cf. Bright, *Jeremiah*, cxxii-cxxiv. Against this theory of exclusion there are strong arguments that 33:14-26 are authentic to Jeremiah, cf. J. Unterman, *From Repentance to Redemption: Jeremiah's Thought in Transition* (Sheffield, England: JSOT, 1987) 144.

category must be read in a literal way. As such, the only true fulfillment will come at the end of history in the millennial reign of Christ on earth in Jerusalem with the Jews reestablished in their ancient lands, the Zion temple rebuilt, and the Jewish priests flourishing with the ancient rituals. All Christian schools of thinking agree that the establishment of the new covenant is anchored solidly in the passion of Jesus, and they also agree that the implications of the new covenant stretch ahead into the eschatological future, at least in some sense.⁶⁰ How the details will be worked out in this future remains to be seen.

Interpreting the Restoration

The dispensational view that the Promise is for the end of the age	
<i>Exile:</i>Diaspora after AD 70; the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by Titus
<i>New Covenant:</i>	...made with the nation Israel; based upon the blood of Jesus; fulfillment to begin after the 2 nd advent of Christ
<i>Regathering:</i>	...return of the Jews in 1948; recapture of the old city by the Jews; recognition of the state of Israel; continual return of Diaspora Jews to Palestine until the end of the age.
<i>Time of Jacob's trouble:</i>	...the great tribulation; the 70 th week of Daniel
<i>Enemy from the North:</i>	...Russia and China (allied with Arab states and the European Union nations)
<i>Full Restoration:</i>	...Israel in her land during the millennium; Jerusalem will be rebuilt; temple worship will be reinstated

⁶⁰A creative attempt to work out the implications of the OT covenants and promises within NT theology is to be found in T. McComiskey, *The Covenants of Promise* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985). For a treatment of the covenants with more emphasis on OT theology, see Bright, *Covenant and Promise* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976).

The covenantal view that the Promise was for the near future

- Exile:** ...Diaspora in 587 B.C.; the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple
- New Covenant:** ...made with the Israel of faith; based upon divine grace and forgiveness; fulfillment to begin in the undefined future.
- Regathering:** ...return of the Jews after 70 years in the repatriation edicts of Cyrus the Great of Persia; rebuilding of the temple
- Time of Jacob's trouble:** ...period of exile in Babylon (and Assyria)
- Enemy from the North:** ...Babylonians
- Full Restoration:** ...full restoration fails because of disobedience; Deuteronomic blessings and cursings still effective

The view that the Promise was for both the far and near future

This view attempts to do justice to both the theologies of the OT and the NT without sacrificing the integrity of either. It recognizes a partial fulfillment in the OT which does not exhaust the spiritual potential for a restoration in the future. Furthermore, it sees the history of salvation and the prophetic promises of God as capable of recapitulation, moving from the literal to the spiritual. What happens on a literal and partial level in the ancient sacred history also happens on a spiritual and more complete level in the future salvation-history, a history which climaxes with the person and work of Jesus Christ and is consummated at the close in Christ's second advent.

- Exile:** ...Diaspora in 587 B.C.; recapitulated in AD 70; spiritually corresponds to the alienation of the human race from God through sin.
- New Covenant:** ...made with the Israel of faith; based upon divine grace and forgiveness; established in the death of Jesus Christ; effective for all the seed of Abraham through faith, both Jew and Gentile (Mk. 14:22-25; Mt. 26:26-29; Lk. 22:14-20; 1Co. 11:25; 2 Co. 3:6; He. 7:22; 8:--10:18; 12:24; 13:20)
- Regathering:** ...return of the Jews after 70 years in the repatriation edicts of Cyrus the Great of Persia; rebuilding the temple under Ezra; rebuilding of the city under Nehemiah; recapitulated in the regathering of God's alienated people, both Jew and Gentile, through the reconciliation of the cross (Jn. 11:51-52; Ro. 9:24-26; Ja. 1:1; 1Pe. 1:1-2; Ep. 2:11-19; Ga. 4:24-28)
- Time of Jacob's trouble:** ...period of exile in Babylon (and Assyria); recapitulated in the Diaspora of AD 70; possible recapitulation in the closing period of the age, i.e., the

messianic woes depicted in Jewish apocalyptic, the Olivet Discourse, and the Apocalypse of John

Enemy from the North: ...Babylonians; symbolically, the forces of evil allied against God's people in the closing period of the age (Rv. 13:17-18)

Full Restoration: ...full restoration fails because of disobedience; Deuteronomic blessings and cursings still effective; spiritual level of restoration in the Christ event and the future life with Him, including the millennium and the after life (Lk. 1:46-55; 2:67-79; 3:8; Ac. 3:19-21; Ro. 4:1-25; Ga. 3:6-9, 14: 6:15-16; 1 Pe. 2:4-10; He. 12:22-24; Rv. 20:4; 21-22)

The Last Days of Judah and the Flight to Egypt

The closing period of Jeremiah's life was a vindication of all that he had predicted, terrible though it was. Jeremiah had prayed that Yahweh would "heal" him (vindicate him) by bringing the announced disaster upon Jerusalem (17:14-15). From the beginning, he had predicted that the future for Judah and her neighbors was that they would be uprooted, torn down, destroyed and overthrown (1:10; 12:14, 17; 18:7-10; 31:28; 45:4). When it did not happen immediately, Jeremiah was ridiculed as "The Terror" (20:10) and physically abused (20:2). Now his message of doom was to be validated before his very eyes and the eyes of those who had scorned him. The kings of David's dynasty and the court prophets who supported them would live to see the death of the nation.

The Siege of Jerusalem

Just as Jeremiah had predicted, the terrible enemy from the north, the Babylonian army, began its attack on the kingdom of Judah in 589 B.C.

The Siege Begins (34:1-7)

The northern army and its mercenaries began the final crush of Judah by stripping the capital of its outlying defense cities (34:1). Jeremiah warned Zedekiah that this military action was the beginning of the end (34:2-3), though Zedekiah himself would not personally perish in the assault (34:4-5). The last two of the defense cities to survive were Lachish and Azekah (34:6-7), and the desperate situation has been independently verified in the archaeological discovery in 1935 and 1938 of the famous Lachish Letters, correspondences written on ostraca (pieces of broken pottery) between the military commander of Lachish and outpost commanders who were looking for signal fires from Lachish, since the signal fires from Azekah had gone out.⁶¹

⁶¹J. Thompson, "Lachish Letters," *The New International Dictionary of Biblical Archaeology*, ed. E. Blaiklock and R. Harrison (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983) 284. The inscribed potsherds, called ostraca, describe the stress of the invasion. They are military letters with urgent orders calling for special arrangements of signal fires, the sending of a military mission to Egypt (presumably for help), the inspection of guards, and the general increase of military activity, cf. J. Thompson, *The Bible and Archaeology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962) 150. In all, twenty-one letters or fragments have been found. They mention several names also known to us from the Book of Jeremiah, such as, Gemariah, Jaazaniah and Neriah. The most intriguing aspect of the letters are references to a prophet, and in Letter VI, the king is said to have accused this prophet of demoralizing the country, charges that were also raised against Jeremiah (38:1-4), cf. R. Wright, "Lachish and Azekah Were the Only Fortified Cities of Judah that Remained (Jeremiah 34:7)," *BAR* (Nov./Dec. 1982) 72-73. It has been suggested that the ostraca were drafts (or trial versions) later to be incorporated into official letters on papyri, cf. O. Borowski, "Yadin Presents New Interpretation of the Famous Lachish Letters," *BAR* (Mar./Apr. 1984) 74-77.

Translations of the Lachish Letters can be found in J. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of*

The Temporary Withdrawal of the Babylonian Armies (37)

During the siege of Jerusalem, a report that the Egyptians were mobilizing caused the Babylonian army to withdraw in order to confront this new threat to the south (37:1-5). The respite in the siege brought new hope to the king and the people (37:9; cf. 21:2), and Zedekiah requested Jeremiah's perspective on the situation (37:3). However, Yahweh's word to Jeremiah was that the withdrawal of the Babylonians was only temporary. They would return and completely torch Jerusalem (37:6-10).

During this period of temporary withdrawal, Jeremiah attempted to return to his ancestral home at Anathoth, just to the north of Jerusalem (37:11-12).⁶² At the Benjamin Gate, he was arrested as a defector, flogged, and imprisoned in the vaults of a cistern house (37:13-16).⁶³ That Jeremiah was thought to be in the process of defecting to the Babylonians may have been related to his advice that the citizens of Jerusalem should simply surrender in order to save their lives (cf. 21:8-10; cf. 38:1-2). After a lengthy incarceration in this dungeon, King Zedekiah again called for Jeremiah (37:17a). The word from Yahweh was the same. The city would surely fall (37:17b), and Zedekiah ought to accept this as a certainty rather than the false oracles of the court prophets who had been wrong all along (37:19; cf. 28:2-4, 10-11). Jeremiah also requested that he be granted a reprieve from the cistern-pit, so Zedekiah had him held in the courtyard of the palace guard (37:20-21).

The Release of the Slaves (34:8-22)

During the siege, Zedekiah made a solemn covenant with the citizens of Jerusalem to release their slaves, possibly hoping that this action would induce Yahweh to lift the blockade (34:8-10). The emancipation of the slaves would rectify many generations of abuse and an outright violation of the Deuteronomic code (34:12-15; cf. Dt. 15:12-15). When the siege was temporarily lifted, however, the Jerusalemites reneged. Once more they stripped the emancipated slaves of their freedom (34:11, 16). Jeremiah preached that this reversal of freedom would recoil upon them, however, for Yahweh now declared that the enemy would be "free" to invade Judah (34:17-22).

Jeremiah in the Cistern (38:1-13)

Though this was not the first time Jeremiah had advocated surrender (cf. 21:8-9), his advice at this time that the Jerusalemites should defect to the

Texts and Pictures (Princeton: Princeton University, 1958) I.212-214.

⁶²How this visit to Anathoth relates to Jeremiah's purchase of the field from Hanamel is not entirely clear (32). We have taken the view that the field was purchased after Jeremiah's attempted visit, cf. J. Thompson, 633. For a view which reverses the order of events, see R. Harrison, *Jeremiah*, 153-154.

⁶³Lit., "into a house of the cistern-pit and into the vaulted cells;" apparently, some sort of subterranean room.

Babylonians in order to save their lives was perceived as treason (38:1-4).⁶⁴ Consequently, Zedekiah gave permission to his officials to do with Jeremiah what they wished. They consigned him to the bottom of a deep cistern which, though it had no standing water, was filled with mud (38:5-6). Had it not been for a friend in the king's court, Jeremiah would no doubt have died there (38:7-9). His friend managed to save him and at least return him to his incarceration in the courtyard of the guard (38:10-13). For this kindness, he was promised by Yahweh that in the fall of the city, he would escape with his life (39:15-18).

The Private Oracle to Zedekiah (38:14-28)

Once more, Zedekiah called for Jeremiah's counsel, promising not to seek redress regardless of the prophet's words (38:14-16). Once again, Jeremiah's words were piercing. Zedekiah's only chance was immediate surrender (38:17-18). Though the king feared that he might be turned over to Jewish defectors if he surrendered, and apparently a number of Jews had taken Jeremiah's advice and had indeed "gone over" to the Babylonians (21:9; 38:2; 39:9; 52:15), Jeremiah assured him that this would not happen (38:19-23). Vacillating and indecisive to the end, Zedekiah seemed paralyzed. He only advised Jeremiah not to reveal their private conversation, and Jeremiah agreed to deceive the other officials in order to preserve his life (38:24-28).

The Fall of Jerusalem (39, 52)

Finally, in 587 B.C., Jerusalem could no longer withstand the siege. Tortured by famine from within (52:6; cf. 2 Kg. 25:3) and weary with defending against the siege works from without (39:1; 52:4-5; cf. 2 Kg. 25:1-2), the terrible Deuteronomic curse at last took its toll (Dt. 28:52-57). All efforts at defense had been exhausted, and when the wall was finally breached, the defense collapsed altogether (39:2-4; 52:7-8; 2 Kg. 25:4).⁶⁵ The remains of the Judean army attempted to escape, along with the king, but all were captured (39:3-7; 52:7-11; 2 Kg. 25:4-7). The Babylonian army sacked the city, torched the temple, broke down the walls, and

⁶⁴See footnote #61 regarding an external reference to the prophet in the Lachish letters.

⁶⁵Ancient cities defended themselves against siege in several ways, including city walls (often casemate walls in which two parallel walls were divided by cross sections), offset-inset walls (where a section of wall protruded outside the main line so as to give defenders a better view of the wall line), a glacis at the outside base of the walls (often with as much as a 40 degree incline), and towers at strategic positions on the walls, O. Borowski, "Five Ways to Defend an Ancient City," *BAR* (Mar./Apr. 1983) 73-76.

The aggressors, on the other hand, used blockades, siege ramps, battering rams, and mobile towers from which to hurl missiles or burning tar, Thompson, *Jeremiah*, 774; H. Shanks, "Destruction of Judean Fortress Portrayed in Dramatic Eighth-Century B.C. Patterns," and "Defensive Judean Counter-Ramp Found at Lachish in 1983 Season," *BAR* (Mar./Apr. 1984) 48-73.

burned to the ground every important building in Jerusalem (39:8; 52:12-16; 2 Kg. 25:8-10; 2 Chr. 36:19). The valuables from the temple were salvaged as plunder and carried to Babylon along with a deportation of the most important citizens (39:9-10; 52:17-30; cf. 27:16-22; 2 Kg. 25:11-21; 2 Chr. 36:18, 20).

Jeremiah, for his part, was treated with kindness. He was allowed to stay in Jerusalem with the poor who were not deported (39:11-14). Back in Babylon, Jehoiachin, the boy king who had been exiled in the first deportation, was released on parole and given a royal pension (52:31-34). The fact that Jeremiah was not deported with the others is very significant in that he still remained as a prophetic voice in conflict with the survivors among the poor of the land. The exile was not the end of Jeremiah's ministry nor the end of his tension with the nation. He continued to advise the survivors, and they in turn continued to reject him.⁶⁶

Jeremiah's Release (40:1-6)

Apparently there was a staging area at Ramah, some five miles or so north of Jerusalem, where the exiles were put into formation for deportation. By some mistake, Jeremiah was chained with the others in spite of the previous order for his freedom (40:1; cf. 39:11-12). When the commander of the imperial guard released him, he reaffirmed to Jeremiah the prophet's interpretation of the disaster (40:2-3). Furthermore, he left Jeremiah the option of either going to Babylon or staying anywhere he pleased in Judea or even staying under the protection of the newly appointed Governor, Gedaliah. Jeremiah decided in favor of the latter choice.

Gedaliah's Assassination (40:7--41:15)

Nebuchadnezzar appointed Gedaliah, a Jewish noble, to be the governor of those Jews who had not been deported (2 Kg. 25:22). Asylum was granted to the guerrilla fighters who had escaped to the outlying regions (40:11-12), and Gedaliah advised the entire community to regroup and give their attention to rebuilding their farms (40:7-10; 2 Kg. 25:23-24). However, though Gedaliah was able to rally the survivors temporarily, another Israelite prince, Ishmael, was not pleased. Whether from sheer jealousy or because he perceived Gedaliah as a collaborator, he had determined, at the urging of Baalis of Ammon, to kill Gedaliah. One of Gedaliah's officers warned him of the plot, but Gedaliah would not believe it (40:13-16). Sure enough, with a vigilante force of ten, Ishmael assassinated Gedaliah during a dinner (41:1-2; 2 Kg. 25:25), and he also slaughtered Gedaliah's attendants as well as some Babylonian soldiers (40:3). The next day, he butchered 70 others, this time pilgrims

⁶⁶C. Seitz, *Theology in Conflict: Reactions to the Exile in the Book of Jeremiah* (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1989) 4-5.

who had come to Zion to worship (41:4-9). Seizing what was left of the provisional court in Mizpeh, Ishamel began his escape toward Ammon in the transjordan (41:10). Gedaliah's officers caught up with them at the pool in Gibeon, where in the time of David and Saul, a great gladiatorial contest had been staged (cf. 2 Sa. 2:12-16).⁶⁷ The captives were recovered, though Ishmael himself escaped (41:11-15).

The Flight to Egypt (41:16--43:13)

The assassination of Gedaliah and its aftermath threw the entire group into a panic. What might the Babylonians do now? The officers determined they would be safest if they escaped to Egypt, as far away from the power of Babylon as possible (41:16-17). Still, since Jeremiah was part of the group, the officers were at least willing to approach him to inquire if there was any word from Yahweh, and they promised to do anything Yahweh said (42:1-6). It was ten days before Jeremiah received a word from God (42:7), and when he did, it was that the people should stay in the land. In their own land, Yahweh promised that they would be built up and planted (cf. 1:10b). They could set their hearts at ease regarding Nebuchadnezzar, for there would be no repercussions (42:7-12). However, if they persisted in their plans to go to Egypt, they could count on a disastrous trip, for there they would encounter war, famine and plague (42:13-22).

When the officers had heard Jeremiah's response, they accused him of lying and of being manipulated by Baruch, his scribe (43:1-3).⁶⁸ Why they should have thought that Baruch was trying to entrap them is not explained. In any case, they determined to go to Egypt, and to Egypt they went, taking Jeremiah and Baruch with them to the area of Tahpanhes (43:4-7; 2 Kg. 25:26).⁶⁹ While there, the word of Yahweh again came to Jeremiah to enact another of his parables. He selected some large stones and buried them in the brick pavement at the entrance to Pharaoh's palace as a sign that Nebuchadnezzar would attack Egypt, burning down the Egyptian temples and wreaking death and destruction to all who were in the area (43:8-13).⁷⁰

⁶⁷This site has been thoroughly excavated, cf. J. Pritchard, *IDB* (1962) II.392-393.

⁶⁸Perhaps they believed that Jeremiah, who was now old, had succumbed to the greater youth and vitality of Baruch, S. Hopper, "The Book of Jeremiah," *IB* (1956) V.1093.

⁶⁹Tahpanhes, mentioned also in 2:16, was in the northeast Delta, and it was probably a place in which some Jews were already living (cf. 44:1).

⁷⁰Part of the actual pavement mentioned in 43:9 has been discovered by archaeologists, though the stones placed there by Jeremiah were not found. In 568/7 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar did indeed invade Egypt on a punitive expedition, thus fulfilling Jeremiah's words, cf. C. DeVries, *ISBE* (1988) IV.716.

Oracle to the Exiles in Egypt (44)

Jeremiah's conflict with his own people continued in full vigor! After they arrived in Egypt, the Jewish refugees continued their habits of worshiping the Queen of Heaven (cf. 7:18).⁷¹ In response to this, Jeremiah urged the community to realize that the desolation of Jerusalem was a direct result of such idolatry (44:1-6). The fact that this idolatry was continuing, even in Egypt, was evidence that the people had not learned from their tragedy (44:7-10). Further disaster was inevitable (44:11-14).

Instead of heeding Jeremiah's warning, however, the men in the Jewish community bluntly opposed Jeremiah (44:15-16). In fact, they maintained that the disaster at Jerusalem had occurred because they had neglected to worship the Queen of Heaven (44:17-19). But Jeremiah reiterated to them that the desolation of Judah was a judgment upon them because of their idolatry (44:20-23), and not only so, but it was a judgment that would be leveled at them again in Egypt, since they refused to listen (44:24-30). The Jewish community in Egypt would also be destroyed, and only a few would escape to return to Judah (44:28, cf. 44:14). Pharaoh Hophra would also be deposed.⁷² Jeremiah was willing to put his predictions to the Deuteronomic test of history (44:28)! As for the refugees, they had come full circle. Yahweh was still watching them (44:27; cf. 1:12), and he who had revealed his name to them in Egypt (Ex. 3:14) and brought them to Canaan had now taken his name away from them (44:26) when they returned to Egypt!⁷³

Oracles About the Nations

Chapters 46-51 form a distinct unit in the Book of Jeremiah.⁷⁴ At the very beginning of his ministry, Jeremiah was appointed by Yahweh as a prophet, not only to Judah, but "to the nations" (1:5b). Yahweh was not merely a provincial God, and his prophets were not merely provincial preachers. Like Amos, Nahum, Obadiah, Jonah, Isaiah and Ezekiel, Jeremiah addressed the nations of the ancient Near East as well as Israel and Judah. Yahweh was Lord of the nations of the world, and their

⁷¹The Queen of Heaven was a female astral deity, probably Ishtar (Astarte), and part of the pantheon of gods and goddesses connected with the zodiac, stars and other celestial phenomena. Cakes were baked with her image impressed in them, possibly in the shape of a crescent or star, cf. R. Harrison, *ISBE* (1988) IV.8.

⁷²Hophra was in fact deposed by a young relative, Amasis, and when Hophra attempted to win back the throne, he was killed in 566 B.C., cf. J. Wilson, *IDB* (1962) II.644.

⁷³Holladay, *Jeremiah*, II.304.

⁷⁴Chapters 46-51 appear in a different place in the LXX, after 25:13, and they are arranged in an entirely different order. It may be that this section circulated independently of the rest of the book for a time, cf. Bright, *Jeremiah*, 307. Many scholars view the order and placement of the unit in the LXX as the more primitive, though most English Versions follow the MT, cf. Couturier, *JBC* (1968) I.333.

destinies, as well as the destiny of Israel and Judah, lay in his hands.

The order within the Hebrew Bible in which the nations are addressed is along geographical lines, from south to north, and west to east. The oracles begin with Egypt in the south, then progress to the Philistines in the west, then east into the transjordan with Moab, Ammon and Edom, then farther north to Damascus, Kedar and Hazor, and finally even farther east to Elam and Babylon in Mesopotamia.

The primary theme in each oracle is war, and in each case, the wars against the nations are directed by Yahweh, who is the Man of War *par excellence* (cf. Ex. 15:3).⁷⁵ It is Yahweh who fights against Egypt (46:10), Philistia (47:6-7), Moab (48:10), Ammon (49:2), Edom (49:8, 20), Damascus (49:27), Kedar and Hazor (49:32b), Elam (49:35), and Babylon (50:15, 21, 25; 51:2). The aggressive nations who conquered others, whether they realized it or not, were Yahweh's war club, his battle weapon with which he shattered the kingdoms under his divine judgment (51:20-23). In the context of these wars, some nations were given hopes of restoration, while others were to be eliminated altogether. Egypt, Moab, Ammon and Elam were promised a future (46:26b; 48:47; 49:6, 39). Philistia and Damascus were not. Kedar and Hazor were promised desolation forever (49:33), and Edom and Babylon were to be destroyed with the terrible finality of Sodom and Gomorrah (49:18; 50:39-40). Also interspersed among the hopes for the nations is the hope for Israel, a hope which would be realized in her regathering from exile and her new covenant (46:27-28; 50:4-5).

In summary, then, the oracles of Jeremiah to the foreign nations point towards God's sovereignty over them and his intention to hold them accountable. Because God had chosen Israel for a special purpose did not mean that the other nations were outside his provenance.

Oracles About Egypt (46)

This first oracle is dated at 605 B.C., the year of Egypt's conflict with Babylon at Carchemish in northwest Mesopotamia. Here Pharaoh Neco was soundly defeated, an event not only predicted by Jeremiah (46:1-12) but verified by the Babylonian Chronicles.⁷⁶ This event left Nebuchadnezzar as the leading power

⁷⁵The frequent use of the war name *Yahweh Tsabaoth* (= Lord of Hosts or Lord of Armies) throughout the section, a name which in fact is typical of the whole Book of Jeremiah, lends itself to this war theme. The NIV renders this war name as "LORD Almighty."

⁷⁶The Babylonian Chronicles are cuneiform tablets translated in 1956 by D. J. Wiseman. The relevant text regarding this encounter runs as follows: "He [Nebuchadnezzar] crossed the river [Euphrates] to go against the Egyptian army which lay in Carchemish. The armies fought with each other and the Egyptian army withdrew before him. He accomplished their defeat and beat them to nonexistence. As for the rest of the Egyptian army which had escaped from the defeat so quickly that no weapon had reached them, the Babylonians overtook and defeated them in the

of the ancient Near East. Since this oracle was given during the reign of Jehoiakim, a number of years before the eventual fall of Jerusalem, it should have served as a verification of Jeremiah's prophetic legitimacy, since it proved him to be a prophet according to the stipulations of the Deuteronomic code.

The second oracle is undated, but if it describes Nebuchadnezzar's advance toward Egypt following the Battle of Carchemish, and after a brief interval when his father died, it should be dated at about 604 B.C., when Nebuchadnezzar pressed southward once again.⁷⁷ Of special interest is the sarcastic labeling of Pharaoh as an empty braggart,⁷⁸ and the LXX rendering of 46:15, "Why has Apis fled?" (so RSV).⁷⁹

Attached to the oracles about Egypt is a reaffirmation of the promise made to Israel and Judah in the Book of Consolation (cf. 30:10-11).

Oracle About Philistia (47)

Again, this oracle is undated, and even the enemy is unclear.⁸⁰ The circumstances quite possibly refer to an invasion of Philistia by Nebuchadnezzar near the end of the 7th century B.C., which in the Babylonian Chronicle specifically mentions the fall of Ashkelon.⁸¹ The reference to Caphtor in 47:4 reflects upon the origin of the Philistines in Crete, before their migration to Palestine with the Sea Peoples' invasion.⁸²

Oracle About Moab (48)

The message concerning Moab, Israel's cousin from the transjordan,⁸³ is comparatively long. It echoes judgments upon Moab that Jeremiah had pronounced elsewhere (cf. 9:26; 25:21; 27:1-7), and in several places it contains quotations from Isaiah 13-16. Here, too, there would be terrible destruction by war. The place

district of Hamath so that not a single man escaped to his own country. At that time Nebuchadnezzar conquered the whole of Hatti-land," cf. R. Harrison and E. Blaiklock, "Carchemish," *Dictionary of Biblical Archaeology*, 119.

⁷⁷Thompson, *Jeremiah*, 691. For treatment of the oracle as referring to a later encounter, see Holladay, *Jeremiah*, 328.

⁷⁸His name in 46:17 is variously translated as "King Bombast" (NEB), "Much-noise-but-he-lets-the-chance-slip-by" (JB), "Crash" (Driver) and "Loudmouth" (Harrison), cf. D. Wiseman, "Jeremiah," *The International Bible Commentary*, ed. F. Bruce (England/Grand Rapids: Marshall Pickering/Zondervan, 1986) 792.

⁷⁹Apis is the Egyptian bull-deity of Osiris.

⁸⁰The designation in 47:1 is a time reference and may or may not refer to the enemy of the oracle.

⁸¹Wiseman, 793. Excavations have revealed signs of destruction at about this same time, cf. D. Freedman, *BA* 26 (1963) 139.

⁸²The Sea Peoples from the Aegean overwhelmed the ancient Hittite Empire and then invaded Egypt in the 13th Century B.C. One branch of the Sea Peoples, the Peleset, became the biblical Philistines after they were repelled in Egypt and permitted to settle in southwest Palestine, cf. C. Pfeiffer, *Old Testament History* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973) 217-219.

⁸³The Moabites were descended from Lot by an incestuous union (Ge. 19:37), and the Israelites' first major encounter with them came toward the end of the exodus (Nu. 22-25).

names move from the north to the south, implying that the enemy is Babylon. This nation of the desert plateau (48:8), a nation which had not experienced the same kind of attention from the foreign empire-builders as had Israel and Judah (48:11), would finally be crushed (48:12, 15-16). Her national god, Chemosh, would be helpless (48:7, 13, 46). Her greatest sin was that she had defied Yahweh (48:26, 42). In addition, Moab trusted in her own strength (48:7), fostered pride in herself (48:29-30), and gloated over the misfortunes of Israel (48:27).

Oracle About Ammon (49:1-6)

Just to the north of Moab lay Ammon, also descended from Lot (Ge. 19:38). The Ammonites had encroached upon the tribal inheritance of Israel's tribe of Gad (49:1), yet this nation also, along with her god Molech (or Milcom), would be destroyed.

Oracle About Edom (49:7-22)

Descended from Esau (Ge. 36:1, 8-9, 19), the Edomites lived south of Moab. The oracle against them quotes from Obadiah (cf. 49:14-16; Ob. 1-4), and it predicts that Edom, who is much more deserving of judgment than even Israel and Judah, must also drink the cup of defeat (49:12-13).

Oracle About Damascus (49:23-27)

Damascus, as the capital, stands for the cities of Syria. They had fallen to Tiglath-pileser III a century earlier, but now even the remnant would be destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. Ben-Hadad (= son of Hadad)⁸⁴ was more than likely a throne name for Syrian rulers, and there are at least two, possibly three, rulers by that name in the OT.⁸⁵

Oracle About Kedar and Hazor (49:28-33)

Jeremiah now turns to the Bedouin tribes of the Syrian desert. In the Babylonian Chronicles, Nebuchadnezzar recorded his raids against these tribes in 599-598 B.C.⁸⁶

Oracle About Elam (49:34-39)

Elam, to the northeast of the Persian gulf, attacked Babylon in 596-595 B.C.

⁸⁴Hadad is the proper name of the god Ba'al.

⁸⁵K. Kitchen, *NBD* (1982) 130-131.

⁸⁶Couturier, *JBC* (1968) I.335; for the Babylonian Chronicles, see footnote #76.

according to the Babylonian Chronicles. When Nebuchadnezzar advanced against them, they fled in panic.⁸⁷

Oracle About Babylon (50-51)

The final oracle concerns the primary enemy of Judah, Babylon herself. Babylon represents the world system which both attracts and persecutes the people of God, a fact made clear by the obvious parallelisms between Revelation 17-18 and Jeremiah 50-51. Like the gods of the other nations, the Babylonian gods Bel and Marduk would also be powerless before Yahweh, the Divine Warrior (50:2). Once Babylon had been the nation from the north swooping down upon Palestine, but now an enemy even farther to the north would swoop down upon her (50:3, 9, 41; 51:48).⁸⁸ When Babylon would fall, the prediction by Jeremiah that the Jews would return from their exile to their own land could be fulfilled (50:4-7, 16, 19, 33-34; 51:5-6, 10, 45). Babylon's aggression toward Judah would be repaid in full (50:11-12, 17-18; 51:55-56), and Israel would be restored (50:19-20). Babylon, who was once Yahweh's war club, would herself be shattered (50:23). Babylon had destroyed Yahweh's holy temple on Zion, and now Yahweh would destroy her (50:28; 51:11, 24, 35, 50-51). Babylon's destruction would be permanent, and there was no hope for her restoration (50:39-40; 51:26, 39, 57, 62).

This entire oracle was given by Jeremiah to Baruch's brother, so that it might be carried to Babylon and read aloud (51:59-62). Doubtless, such a message would have been a strong word of comfort and hope to the exilic community living there. As he had himself performed earlier, Jeremiah prescribed for his courier an acted out parable to reinforce his message. The scroll containing the judgment about Babylon was to be tied to a stone and thrown into the Euphrates from the midst of the Babylonian capital, the capital of the greatest political power on earth (51:63-64). With this, Jeremiah's oracles were complete (51:64b).⁸⁹

⁸⁷Wiseman, 795; for the Babylonian Chronicles, see footnote #76.

⁸⁸The new enemy from the north is the Median federation under Cyrus which conquered Babylon in 539 B.C., cf. Wiseman, 796.

⁸⁹This final statement marks off the text from the appendix in Chapter 52.