

Studies From The Book Of Jeremiah (Part I.)

LESSON 1: Jeremiah's Call And God's Case Against Israel

Introductory Material

A. The objectives of the study.

1. More than any other, Jeremiah was the prophet associated with the decline and fall of Jerusalem.
2. His name signifies, "the Lord shall exalt," or "be exalted"; or, "exalting the Lord" (Gill).
3. He was a priest in Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin, receiving his prophetic call in the thirteenth year of King Josiah in 628/627 BC, continuing his work till the eleventh year of Zedekiah and the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 (Jer 1:1-3; Josh 21:8).
4. Serving as he did, under several kings and a variety of conditions, this study will be organised according to the major political periods. It is not a verse-by-verse examination of the text but rather different passages have been selected to bring out the major developments. Note also that the approach and much of the material has been drawn from L.A. Mott's study guide and so direct quotes will not be attributed.
5. It has been pointed out that 1:2 and 3:6 of Jeremiah refer to activity of the prophet during the time of Josiah. Chapters 1 through 6 contain prophecies delivered while Josiah was king (3:6) and the next specific indication of time is not given till 21:1. This would suggest that everything between 1:2 and 21:1, i.e., the first 20 chapters, occurred during the reign of Josiah unless something specific in the text requires otherwise. Commentators do not share this view but we must come to our own conclusions based on our personal study. The material here is organised accordingly.
6. The objectives are to gain a better understanding in two primary areas. Firstly, Jeremiah's position in the history of God's people and secondly, of God's purposes in the management of world affairs.
7. All quotations are taken from the New King James Version unless stated otherwise.

B. Josiah's reforms

Background

1. Josiah was the last of the good kings of Judah, doing "[what was] right in the sight of the LORD" walking "in all the ways of his father David" (2Ki 22:1-3). Coming to the throne aged eight, he reigned 31 years.
2. Actions tracked by years (2 Chron 34:1-15):
 - From eighth, he began to seek the Lord, aged about 15 (3).
 - In twelfth began to purge Judah and Israel of idolatrous places of worship (3-7).
 - Jeremiah called to office in thirteenth (Jer 1:2).
 - In 18th repaired/cleansed Temple, in process of which the book of the Law was found (8, 14).
3. The state of the nation's religious corruption can best be seen by the extent and depth of the measures the king took to irradicate it (2 Chron 34:3-7; 8-13; 2 Ki 23:4-20).

Josiah's reactions to God's pronouncement (2 Chron 34:19-33).

1. When he heard the words of the Law he tore his clothes and sent instructions to Hilkiah to enquire of the Lord (19-21).
2. Word came back from Huldah (23) that God would "bring calamity on this place and on its inhabitants, all the curses that are written in the book which they have read before the king of Judah" (24) but "... your eyes shall not see all the calamity which I will bring on this place and its inhabitants" (28).

3. The king gathered the people together, read the Law in their presence, renewed the covenant in their name, caused them to pledge themselves to its keeping and made an even stronger effort to rid the land of all the elements of its idolatrous practices - the spiritualism, witchcraft, and false prophets/prophetesses (29-33).
4. Notwithstanding the LORD did not turn from the fierceness of His great wrath “because of all the provocations with which Manasseh had provoked Him” (2Ki 23:24-26). Judgement was not averted, only delayed (27).
5. The limitation of these reforms.
 - They were only external and did not change the hearts of the people. There was an appearance of a return to God but their hearts were not converted. They worshipped the Lord in pretence and reverted back to idolatry on Josiah’s death (Jer 3:6-10).
 - Jeremiah was no doubt in favour of these reforms though he is not mentioned in the historical books until his lamentation at Josiah’s death (2 Chron 35:25). Beginning his ministry in the thirteenth year of the king’s reign, thus one year after their commencement he recognised their weakness. His assignment was to work on the hearts of the people.

Part One

During The Reign Of Josiah

First Reading: Jeremiah Chapter 1 - Call To Prophetic Office

The Background for Jeremiah is found in 2 Kings 22-25 and 2 Chronicles 33-36.

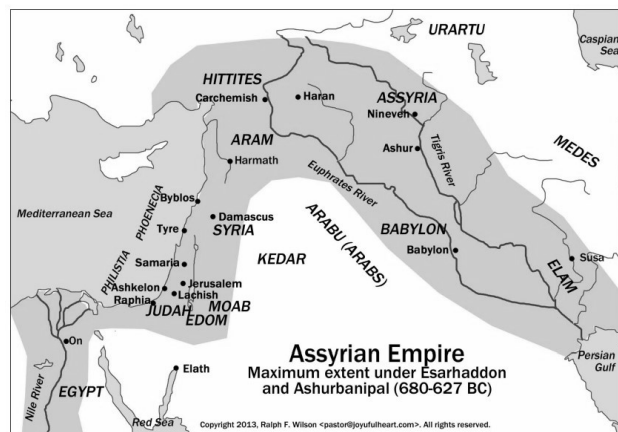
A. Historical setting (1-3)

The kings of the time.

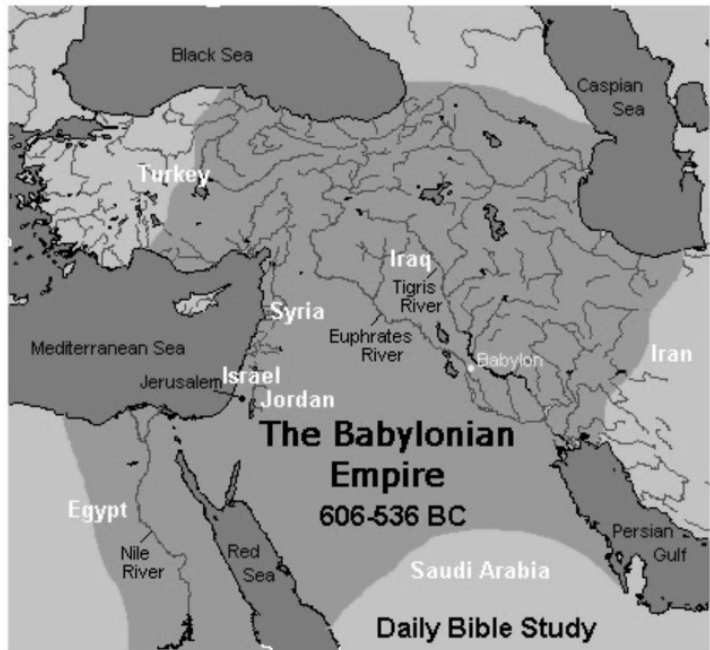
1. Manasseh 687/86–643/42 (2 Ki 21:1-18; 2 Chron 33:1-21). After the death of Hezekiah Manasseh led the people astray to a depth of evil beyond that of the displaced Canaanite nations (2 Ki 21:10). His repentance and reformation had no lasting effect upon the nation and probably this accounts for it not being recorded in Kings.
2. Ammon 643-42. His son succeeded and reigned two years before being assassinated. He forsook the Lord and re-built the altars demolished by Manasseh (2 Ki 21:19-26). Against this background not even the reforms of Josiah could save the nation.
3. Josiah 641/640-609.
4. Jehoahaz (sometimes Shallum; Jer 22:11; 1 Chron 3:15) 609.
5. Jehoiakim 609–598.
6. Jehoiachin (Coniah Jer 22:24) 598–597.
7. Zedekiah 597–586.

International affairs

Assyria experienced a rapid decline during the reign of Josiah. In 612 BC a Medo-Babylonian coalition took the Assyrian capital of Nineveh. The Assyrian king with the remnants of his army withdrew and attempted a last stand in northern Mesopotamia. Pharaoh-Neco of Egypt who was trying to regain Palestine and Syria for Egypt evidently thought it would be advantageous for Egypt to have the greatly weakened Assyria survive as a buffer between Egypt and Babylon. In 609 BC he took his armies into northern Mesopotamia to support Assyria against the Medes and Babylonians. Note the RSV, NKJV and NASV translations of 2 Kings 23:29. Josiah, perhaps to keep Palestine out of Egyptian hands, attempted to head the Egyptians off at Megiddo. Josiah was killed, but Egypt was not able to prevent Assyria from being finally crushed at Haran by the Medo-Babylonian alliance.



After Josiah's death, Judah was briefly dominated by Egypt (2 Ki 23:31-35). But in 605 BC Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon administered a crushing defeat to Egypt in the Battle of Carchemish (cf. Jer 46:2-12). That decisive battle determined that Babylon, not Egypt, would be the power to dominate the ancient near eastern world for the next seventy years. Jeremiah understood the significance of Carchemish and advised Judah and the surrounding nations to submit to Babylon (Jer 25:8-9, 27). But Judah vacillated between Babylon and Egypt and wove a web of political intrigue which would be the immediate cause of its destruction.



B. The prophet's call (1:4-10).

The Lord's opening words (5-6)

1. "A prophet to the nations" (5; Ex 4:16).
2. The message Jeremiah was to carry would be opposed from the beginning.
 - The false prophets would cry "peace, peace" when there was no peace (8:11; 23:16-18; 28:1-11) and cause the Jews to deny that he spoke on God's behalf saying "You speak falsely! The LORD our God has not sent you to say..." (43:2).
 - They sought to take his life (26:8-9; 37:11-15; 38:4) including his acquaintances (20:7-21:1).
3. Though others would deny it, Jeremiah must be absolutely convinced from the outset of his commission, that he was to be God's spokesman.
4. It was with the intention of bolstering Jeremiah's belief that he was told, "before I formed you in the womb I knew you; Before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations" (1:5).
5. God chose Jeremiah in the same way that he chose Jacob Rom 9:10-13; John the Baptist (Lk 1:13, 15-17) Saul (Gal 1:15-16) to be instruments in the accomplishment of different facets of His purpose. This does not require that those involved had no choice in the matter.
 - Paul did not think that the fact that he was chosen to be an apostle guaranteed his salvation (1 Cor 9:24-27).
 - Foresight does not eliminate individual free-will. Illustration.

Jeremiah's reaction and God's response (6-10)

1. "Behold, I cannot speak, for I [am] a youth" (6; cf. Gen 14:24; 34:19 where same Hebrew used). He argued a lack of maturity and wisdom associated with greater years.
2. God's response (7-10).
 - Just go where I send and say what I command (7).
 - Do not be afraid for I am with you (8). He had to take the step of faith and obey; his adversaries were strong and would reject the message but he was not to "diminish a word" delivering it in its entirety (26:2).
 - The Lord touched his mouth, likely in a vision (9; cf. Eze 2:8-3:3; Dan 10:16) and that day "set" him "over the nations and over the kingdoms, To root out and to pull down ..." (10). The Hebrew "over the nations" elsewhere rendered "overseer" (Gen 39:4-5) and "governor" (Jer 40:5, 7). This authority was exercised on God's behalf as His representative; His word was not to no effect but like a "fire," and "a hammer which shatters a rock NASV" (23:29).

Two visions designed to Reassure and confirm regarding the charge (11-16)

The branch of an almond tree (11-12).

1. This provided the certainty that a spokesman of God would need as he began his work.
2. The lesson of the vision turns upon the almond tree being the first to put out blooms; it means the “early awake tree” (Coffman).
3. It represents Jehovah and His attitude towards his word. He will be continually watching to ensure that it happens.

The boiling pot (13-16). As the first rested upon its certainty, this second does upon the content of the message.

1. Jeremiah saw a pot boiling on a fire which was tilted away from the north, the implication being that it was poised to pour its scalding contents from this direction (13).
2. This symbolised disaster which Jehovah was going to send from the peoples of the northern kingdoms (14-16). To the objection that Babylon was not geographically to the north of Judah Coffman points out quoting from Herodotus: “Strictly speaking, the Babylonians were an eastern people from the point of view in Palestine; but the caravan-roads which the Chaldean armies had to take entered Palestine at Dan and then proceeded southward.”
3. The fulfilment recorded (Jer 39:1-4).

The command and assurance of Divine help (1:17-19)

1. Jeremiah’s only hope (17).
2. The Lord’s protection (18-19). “I have made you this day A fortified city and an iron pillar, And bronze walls against the whole land ...”

Second Reading: Jeremiah 2:1-3:5 - God’s Case Against Israel

Introductory comments

1. 2:1-2 would suggest that this speech followed on from Jeremiah’s commissioning in the thirteenth year of Josiah’s reign (1:1-2) and so approx. one year after the commencement of the religious reformation.
2. They were, of course, first delivered orally and only afterwards put into written form (111)
3. As Jeremiah began, he confronted a people which denied their guilt (23, 35) and complained against Jehovah about the chastisements brought upon it (29-30). Jeremiah's task was to set forth Jehovah's indictment of the nation in an effort to convict the people of their sin. That is the burden of this first speech.

The devotion of Israel's youth (2:1-3).

1. This has reference to the early history of Israel - the later sojourn in Egypt before entering a covenant relationship at Sinai (2).
2. “Israel [was] holiness to the LORD, The firstfruits of His increase” (3). The firstfruits were not for common use but to be given to the Lord (Ex 23:19; Lev 23:10-14; Num 18:12-13). As with the firstfruits, “All who ate of it became guilty; Evil came upon them ...” (3 NAS). Consider the destruction of the Amalekites as an example (Ex 17:8-16).

Israel's defection from its Divine benefactor (2:4-8).

1. Israel, including those taken into captivity, were challenged to name any injustice in the Lord which would justify their desertion (4-5).
2. God in Israel’s journey to Mt. Sinai had tenderly led Israel through innumerable dangers and difficulties to a land of plenty so what had gone wrong (6-7).

3. Jeremiah cited four groups of people as being culpable- the priests, Levites, leaders, and prophets (8).

Israel's apostasy held up for examination (2:9-13)

1. This was Astonishing and Unprecedented. Kittom came to represent Cyprus and Kedar "the home of Bedouin tribes in the Syro-Arabian desert" (NIV footnotes) 2.10; and so go west or east and you won't see such a thing (9-10; cf. Eze 27:6).
2. Coffman observes "... They had deserted the true God and gone after Baal. Furthermore, in all history it was never heard of that even a pagan nation would forsake its ancestral gods!" (10-11)
3. The heavens were called upon to register their horror (13).
4. Two sins identified (13).

The bitter consequences of Israel's course (2:14-19).

1. A slave was treated like a possession of another and was treated accordingly. Israel was not a slave but was overrun by other nations as if she belonged to them (14).
2. Details of this maltreatment (15-16).
3. V. 17 answers the earlier question (14); Israel had brought it on herself.
4. Israel's reactions to the self-inflicted troubles was to seek help from foreign nations (17-18). The reference to Egypt does not demand a later date since overtures were made during Isaiah's time (e.g., Isa 30:1-3, 7; 31:1-3; 36:5-6, 9).
5. Judah to be punished as a result of her own manoeuvrings (19).

Illustrations of Israel's passion for idolatry mixed with denial (2:20-28).

1. Israel had long ago broken her yoke (2:20a). "Note that the ASV margin preserves the reading, thou hast which rendering is supported by the RSV and ISV. This sense better suits the context. As has been commented, "The harlotry, or whoredom, was both literal in the sexually oriented worship of Baal, and spiritual in the people's abandonment of Jehovah for other gods." Supplied is a list of seven similes illustrating Israel's apostasy.
2. The similes (20-28). (Adapted from Coffman).

An ox that throws off the yoke and refuses to work (20a).

A prostitute (20b).

The choice grapevine that became a degenerate shoot of a foreign vine (21).

Israel's guilt, a stain that neither lye nor soap can remove (22). Is this a reference to Josiah's reforms?

A she-camel in rut, running around in all directions seeking a mate (23).

A she-ass in heat, crazed by desire, seeking a male partner (24-25).

Israel's shame - like that of an apprehended thief (2:26-28).

3. Israel's denial in the face of the evidence (23). "How can you say, 'I am not polluted, I have not gone after the Baals?'" Said not explicitly but by their response to Jeremiah's preaching. It reveals the hopelessness of the prophet's mission; the nation was determined to persevere in apostasy and would not listen to any plea to desist.

Israel's guilt, in spite of its denial (2:29-37).

1. The nation's rejection of correction (29-30).
2. God's treatment provided no grounds for desertion (31).
3. The unnaturalness of forgetting God (32).
4. Exclamation at the extent to which Israel would go to practise idolatry, here in the figure of love (33).

5. Guilty of openly shedding innocent blood, yet her culminating sin was the stubborn protestation of innocence despite all these things (34-35).
6. Though they express feelings of safety (35a), Israel sought protection through foreign alliances - Assyria (2 Ki 16:7-9) and perhaps Egypt (36) but they would not prosper (37).

Conclusion Of The Discourse: Jehovah's call to repentance and Israel's response (3:1-5).

1. Despite Israel's faithlessness, Jehovah pleads "yet return again" (1)
 - This rendering has the support of the ASV but many of the translations render it as a question.
 - Admittedly 3:6 would indicate the commencement of a different speech but the sense of pleading would align with v. 7 and 12-13 provided Judah fully repented.
2. The evidence of harlotry (2)
 - The "desolate" or "bare heights" refers to the places of idolatrous worship (Hos 4:13).
 - "As the Arabian... The freebooting propensities of the Bedouin had passed in ancient times into a proverb. As eager as the desert-tribes were for plunder, so was Israel for idolatry" (Barnes).
3. Disciplinary measures imposed too no effect (3)
4. Judah's response to Jehovah's invitation (4-5)
 - "From this time" may refer to the time of the drought (3:3) or that of the reformation (4).
 - Judah response to the call for a return, with a return in appearance only (5).

Questions

1. Where was Jeremiah when he was called?
2. What was his mission?
3. What assurances was he given? How might these help us?