



## An Introduction to the Book of Jeremiah

### Author and Title

Determining the authorship of the Book of Jeremiah is complicated by several factors: the variety of types of literature found in the book, the differences between the Hebrew and Greek versions of the book, and the difficult lives Jeremiah and his scribe Baruch lived. However, these complications described below do not make it impossible for the contents of the book to be Jeremiah's words, as the Bible says they are (1:1).

### The variety of literary types in Jeremiah.

The Book of Jeremiah contains various types of literature. It includes autobiography (1:4-19), long poetic discourses (2:1-6:30), reports of oral sermons (7:1-8:3 and 26:1-9), reports of sermons delivered in written form (36:1-8), historical narratives (37:1-43:13), messages to individuals (45:1-5), and messages denouncing foreign nations (46:1-51:64). Since this diverse material is not presented in chronological order, the book requires readers to know the outline of Judah's history and theology, and to be able to move backward and forward in time. The book reports that Baruch wrote down some of Jeremiah's messages (36:1-4). Therefore, it is quite possible that he wrote down the various types of 'words of Jeremiah' (1:1) at Jeremiah's dictation.

### The Hebrew and Greek versions of Jeremiah.

The Greek version of Jeremiah differs from the Hebrew version. It is shorter, in part, because it does not include all the section introductions, all the repetition of material, or all the instances of the phrase 'says the Lord'. Thus, the Greek version is shorter due to the lack of redundant material, not because vital doctrinal passages like 31:31-34 are absent. It also has a different structure: in the Greek version the messages against the nations appear after 25:13, and the nations are addressed in a different order.

Scholars offer two basic solutions to these differences. Some commentators believe that a later editor expanded the Hebrew underlying the Greek version to yield the present Hebrew text of Jeremiah. Others propose that a later editor trimmed the Hebrew version of material that seemed to be unnecessary and placed the messages to the nations at the point in the book when Jeremiah addressed the envoys of the nations in Jerusalem; that trimmed-down version later served as the basis for the Greek translation. A decision between the two options involves many theological, literary, and historical factors, but the second option is more compelling. Although editors differ in their approaches, it is unclear why an editor would add material that has already occurred in a book and remove messages from a clear context and place them at the end of a book. The Hebrew version is surely the more difficult to read in chronological and contextual order, which makes it more likely that someone tried to simplify it for later readers.

If this description is accurate, the Hebrew version of the book may be shaped as it is because Baruch and Jeremiah wrote it piecemeal in the midst of their turbulent lives. They preserved each part, and Baruch collected the pieces in an order intended to stress God's covenantal relationship with Israel in the midst of trying times. There is repetition because the whole of the parts was preserved. Thus, this book reads more like what political prisoners and refugees write than what persons writing in settled places and times produce. Of course, the book itself presents Jeremiah and Baruch as the former sort of writers.

### Jeremiah's difficult life.

Jeremiah was born and raised in Anathoth, a small town a few miles northeast of Jerusalem. He was called to be a prophet circa 627BC and served for over 40 years. At the time of his call he was a youth, still financially dependent on his parents, so he could have been born circa 645BC, although no certain date can be established. He became a priest and lived in an area allotted to the tribe of Benjamin (1:1), so he was possibly a descendant of Abiathar, high priest during David's reign. Solomon removed Abiathar from service because of his support of Adonijah (1 Kings 2:13-26). Thus, Jeremiah was from a small town, served a small tribe, and perhaps came from a deposed priestly lineage. He lived close enough to Jerusalem to understand its people, their worship, and their daily activities. He was far enough removed from Jerusalem that he was not afraid to criticise what he saw happening there.

### Israel and Judah at the Time of Jeremiah (circa 597BC)

The Book of Jeremiah is set during the politically tumultuous times following the fall of the Assyrians and the rise of the Babylonians. Jeremiah witnessed multiple deportations of Judæans to Babylon and the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. Although the precise boundaries of Judæa and the surrounding regions during this period are difficult to ascertain, they likely resembled those that

previously existed under Assyrian rule, with the exception that Edom (Idumæa) had now migrated to the area formerly belonging to southern Judah.



Regional Map

Jeremiah had a difficult life. His messages of repentance delivered at the Temple were not well received. His hometown plotted against him, and he endured much persecution in the pursuit of his ministry. At God's command he never married (16:1-4). A faithful preacher, he apparently had only two converts: Baruch, his scribe, and Ebed-melech, an Ethiopian eunuch who served the king. These are the only two mentioned in the entire book who respond favourably to Jeremiah's preaching. Although the book does not reveal the time or place of Jeremiah's death, he presumably died in Egypt, where he had been taken by his countrymen against his will after the fall of Jerusalem (43:1-7).

Many authors have called Jeremiah the 'weeping prophet'. While he does occasionally weep for Israel's condition, and this depth of concern speaks well of him, this emphasis on his weeping may mislead readers regarding his toughness. Jeremiah was a determined, dedicated, longsuffering, and visionary follower of God. His courage and stamina serve as examples to even the most faithful of all God's embattled servants. The apostle Paul certainly viewed his own ministry as being like Jeremiah's (2 Corinthians Chapter 3). Thus, Jeremiah's weeping hardly summarises his character. He could perhaps more accurately be called 'the persevering prophet'.

Part of his perseverance was in the composition of the book that bears his name. It was not easy to remain invested in the production of what is now called the Book of Jeremiah, for there were various reasons he could have given up the process. That Jeremiah and Baruch remained committed to composing the book is a testament to their faith, as well as to the power of the Holy Spirit: **<<because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God>>** (2 Peter 1:21).

### Date

It is impossible to know exactly when the Book of Jeremiah reached its final form. Jeremiah certainly died within a decade or two of the last events recorded in the book, and the same is likely true of Baruch. Thus, the book was probably composed by 550BC

### Theme

Jeremiah exhibits many great themes that stress God's judgement on covenant infidelity and worldwide sin, as well as God's determination to restore an international people for himself through the establishing of a new covenant.

### Purpose

There is no way to determine with any level of accuracy the first readers of the Book of Jeremiah in its present state or the specific occasion that led to its being

read by that audience. Most likely it was read by persons awaiting the end of Judah's exile and the return of God's people to the land.

Its purpose is clearer: Jeremiah and Baruch wished to leave behind a record of the tumultuous times in which they lived, God's message for those times, and God's message for the future of Israel and the nations.

Jeremiah lived during troubled times. He became a prophet during Josiah's reign (640-609BC). Josiah was the last faithful king in Judah's history (2 Kings 22:1-23:27). His death (2 Kings 23:28-30) marked the beginning of the last years of the nation of Judah. Political, social, financial, moral, and spiritual decay led to the country's demise within two short decades. Other prophets, such as Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah, also ministered to Judah during this time.

During Josiah's era the world political scene shifted greatly. Assyria had been the dominant world power since the reign of its mightiest king, Tiglath-pileser III (745-727BC), although Babylon, Egypt, and other nations had regularly challenged Assyria. In 612BC the Babylonians conquered Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, an event described in the Book of Nahum. Assyria rallied with the aid of Egypt, but Babylon completed its triumph over its ancient foe in 609BC, the same year Josiah was killed fighting Egypt.

Immediately after Josiah's death, Egypt dominated Judah's political landscape because Babylon could not yet consolidate all the territory that had been under Assyrian servitude. Unsatisfied to leave Jehoahaz on the throne, the Egyptians replaced him with Jehoiakim in 609BC (2 Kings 23:31-35). Babylon marched south by 605BC, however, and Jehoiakim stayed in power only by shifting his allegiance from Egypt to Babylon. That year Babylon took its first group of exiles from Judah. Daniel and his friends were among the persons removed (Daniel 1:1-7). Jehoiakim rebelled against Babylon, but died in 598BC before he could suffer the consequences of his actions (2 Kings 24:1-7). His successor, Jehoiachin, who reigned for only three months in 598-597BC, was left to feel the Babylonians' wrath. Babylon's King Nebuchadnezzar led his army to Jerusalem, deposed Jehoiachin, and placed Zedekiah on the throne (2 Kings 24:8-17). Babylon again took captives (2 Kings 24:16). Ezekiel was part of this group of exiles (Ezekiel 1:1-3).

Zedekiah's reign (597-586BC) was marked by decline, intrigue, indecision, and ultimately defeat. Judah aligned itself with nations committed to throwing off the Babylonian yoke (Jeremiah 27:1-15), while paying lip service to Nebuchadnezzar. Such a policy could not succeed for long. Eventually Zedekiah's rebellion became pronounced (2 Kings 24:20). In response, Nebuchadnezzar invaded Judah, laid siege to Jerusalem, and sacked the city (Jeremiah 39:1-10). He then appointed Gedaliah, a Judæan, to be governor of Judah (40:5).

Gedaliah tried to work with the remaining inhabitants of the land, and the economy was good for those who still lived in the land during the early days after the Babylonian army left (40:7-12). However, there were plots on Gedaliah's life (40:13-16). Ishmael succeeded in killing the governor. He also murdered several pilgrims coming to Jerusalem to worship and took several hostages (41:1-10). Although the hostages were rescued, the people feared what Babylon would do in retaliation for Gedaliah's murder (41:11-16).

The leaders advised everyone associated with the Gedaliah episode to flee to Egypt (41:17-18). Before doing so, however, they decided to ask Jeremiah to seek God's will on the matter (42:1-6). Despite his unequivocal urging that they should remain in the land (42:7-22), the people rejected Jeremiah's word, left for Egypt, and forced Jeremiah and Baruch to accompany them, as if they were some sort of magic charm against God's wrath (43:1-7). Once in Egypt, Jeremiah fulfilled his calling to be a prophet to the nations by preaching against Judah's sins, Egypt's sins, and those of other countries, including Babylon (Chapters 46-51). He most likely did not live to see the devastation he mentions in Chapters 46-51, but he certainly would not have been surprised at how world events unfolded, given what he experienced in his lifetime.

### Key Themes

Jeremiah was a biblical theologian. He embraced and used truths found in Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Hosea, the Psalms, and other scriptural passages. Thus, he stressed many of the great themes about God and his people found elsewhere in the Bible. At the same time, he was a creative theologian whom the Holy Spirit inspired to write fresh treatments of old themes and some ideas that were new when Jeremiah penned them. The older ideas he employed include the nature of God, the Messiah, God's covenant with Israel, human sinfulness and need of repentance, threat of judgement, and restoration. His chief unique contribution was his articulation of the new covenant between God and his people.

God and humanity. Jeremiah includes virtually every biblical teaching about the nature of God and human beings. He presents God as the sovereign one who calls and equips his servant with his holy word (1:1-19). Jeremiah claims that God alone is a living God and that he alone made the world. All other so-called gods are mere idols (10:1-16). This Creator God called Israel to a special relationship (Chapters 2-6), gave her his holy word, and promised to bless her Temple with his name and presence (7:1-8:3).

God rules the present and the future, protects his chosen ones, and saves those who turn to him. Jeremiah proclaims that God is absolutely trustworthy; he keeps his promises. Therefore, Jeremiah assures readers that when people repent and turn to God, his grace triumphs over sin and judgement.

Jeremiah's view of human beings is grimly realistic. He claims that the human heart is sick and beyond curing by anyone but God (17:9-10). He writes that the nations worship idols instead of their Creator (10:1-16). Worse yet, he notes how Israel, the people with whom God made a special covenant sinned against him. They went after other gods (Chapters 2-6), defiled the Temple by their unwillingness to repent (7:1-8:3 and 26:1-11), and oppressed one another (34:8-16).

Since Israel and the nations have sinned against God (25:1-26), the Creator also becomes the Judge of every nation on the earth he created (Chapters 46-51). God will not allow human sin to continue unchecked. Jeremiah warns that punishment is coming. Chapters 21-29 probably contain the most urgent messages of this type for Judah, and Chapters 46-51 present the most straightforward warnings to the nations. Thus, Jeremiah contributes to the OT's teaching about 'the day of the Lord' (4:5-12), a term that encompasses both judgements in history such as the fall of Jerusalem and trans-historical judgements like the final judgement.

Given this situation, the prophet asks people over 100 times to 'turn around' or 'repent'. He promises that when people turn from their sins and return to God they will receive forgiveness and healing. He firmly believes that God will renew a repenting people, and he mourns the lack of repentance in his day (8:18-22). God comforts him with the knowledge that repentance and renewal would eventually come (33:14-26).

The old covenant, Messiah, and new covenant. Like the other true prophets in the Bible, Jeremiah believed that God had made a covenant with Israel. Although no brief definition can do justice to the concept, the covenant between God and Israel in biblical context was a binding relational agreement between God and Israel, based on deeds done by God and promises made by God, which Israel accepted by faith in God, for the purpose of living for God as his unique people in the world.

This covenant was rooted in God's promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Genesis Chapters 12-50). It was based on God's redemption of Israel from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 1:1-20:2). It included standards of living (Exodus Chapters 20-24) that the people who were called to be <<**a priestly kingdom and a holy nation**>> (Exodus 19:6b) should uphold as they trusted God and lived for him. It included faith-based sacrifices (Leviticus Chapters 1-16), and prayers (Psalm 32 and 51 etc.) to deal with the people's sins. It included clear accountability for this kingdom of priests in the form of benefits (blessings) and consequences (curses) (Deuteronomy Chapters 27-28).

As time passed, God's covenant with Israel incorporated God's promise to David of an eternal kingdom (2 Samuel Chapter 7; 1 Chronicles Chapter 17). From this promise came the concept of a Messiah, which literally means 'anointed one'.

Jeremiah does not mention the Messiah as often as Isaiah, but the concept is not missing altogether. Jeremiah conceives of a time when God will ‘gather the remnant’ of Israel and raise up ‘for David a righteous Branch’ who will reign over the faithful ones (Jeremiah 23:3-5). When he comes, this King will be ‘our righteousness’ (23:6). In this way God’s eternal covenant with David will be kept fully at a time in the future that Jeremiah leaves unspecified (32:14-25).

God established this covenant with all Israel, irrespective of faith in God on the part of many individuals. However, the only persons that God was pleased with and redeemed spiritually were persons like Jeremiah who placed their faith in God, which was demonstrated by obedience to his word (Hebrews Chapter 11). Such persons are part of the remnant that the Messiah will gather (Jeremiah 23:3-5). Sadly, as Chapters 2-6 indicate, the nation of Israel had a long history of covenant breaking. Collectively they were not a faithful covenant partner, although Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and others proved that covenant faithfulness was possible through God’s grace.

God used Jeremiah to deliver the good news that in future days God would <<***make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah***>> (31:31b). This covenant would be different in one chief respect: the new covenant partners will not break the covenant, as most of the old partners did even though God was unwaveringly faithful (31:32). Instead, the new covenant partners will have the Word of God so ingrained in their hearts through God’s power that they will know and follow God all their lives (31:33-34).

Thus, all the new covenant partners will be believers who are forgiven and empowered by God; he will ‘remember their sin no more’ (31:34). Hebrews 8:8-12 quotes Jeremiah 31:31-34 as evidence that the new covenant has come through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The coming of Jesus the Messiah fulfils God’s promises to Abraham, Moses, David, and the prophets of a new faithful people of God in continuity with the old people of God.

### History of Salvation Summary

Jeremiah was called to speak to the people of Jerusalem during a revival under King Josiah and continued to speak to them during that city’s final fall to the Babylonians. His task was to hammer home the message that Jerusalem’s fall was not due to any lack on God’s part but was due entirely to Judah’s unfaithfulness toward God, specifically by listening to false prophets rather than true ones, with Deuteronomy 18:15-22 in the background. Even this horrifying disaster, however, was not the end: Jeremiah foretold a return from exile, an everlasting covenant, and a new covenant in which God’s people would at last embrace the covenant in their hearts. Israel and Judah would be reunited and finally fulfil their calling to bring light to the world.

## Literary Features

Jeremiah is an anthology or collection of writings drawn from an entire lifetime of prophetic ministry. The narrative sections scattered throughout the book are loosely structured around the main events of Jeremiah's life in ministry, which themselves were shaped by Judah's decline, fall, and exile in Babylon. However, most of the material in the book is prophetic, much of it in the form of poetry. This material does not always follow a historical sequence; the logic of its arrangement is sometimes topical rather than chronological.

It may be helpful to think of the Book of Jeremiah as a notebook or scrapbook of things written by the prophet about his ministry. Jeremiah includes enough 'news clippings' to piece together the story of his life, but just as important are the prophetic poems he wrote to address the spiritual needs of his generation and to express the emotions of his own suffering soul. The list of subgenres shows how diverse the anthology is: call narrative, covenant lawsuit, jeremiad (a long recitation of mournful complaints), doom poem, satire, sermon, oracle of judgement, oracle of salvation, memoir, lament or complaint, soliloquy, prophetic object lesson, predictive prophecy, messianic prophecy, epistle, prayer, royal audience, rescue narrative, murder story, and judgement narrative.

The two main unifying elements in the book are the person of Jeremiah himself and the city that he loved, Jerusalem. Reading the Book of Jeremiah, one watches the prophet in action, following the broad contours of his biography in the years leading up to and following the cataclysmic fall of Jerusalem. At the same time, one sees through windows into the prophet's soul and witnesses the grief that he suffered in watching the people he loved persist in sin and finally fall under the judgement of God. The many minor characters in the book, especially the rebellious kings, lying prophets, and unruly priests who constantly oppose the prophet's ministry, as well as the handful of his faithful supporters, are all seen in relationship to Jeremiah. Viewed as a story, the Book of Jeremiah has a unifying plot conflict: will God's people listen to God's warnings and repent of their sin, or will they reject the message of God's prophet and be destroyed? The city of Jerusalem also has a strong unifying presence in the book.

## Outline

- I. Introduction (1:1-19)
  - a. Jeremiah's historical setting (1:1-3)
  - b. Jeremiah's Call and Commission (1:4-19)
- II. Israel's Covenantal Adultery (2:1-6:30)
  - a. Israel has been a Faithless Spouse (2:1-3:5)
    - i. God Pleads with Israel to Repent (2:1-37)

- ii. Unfaithful Israel (3:1-5)
  - b. A Call to Repentance (3:6-4:4)
  - c. Disaster is Coming (4:5-31)
    - i. Invasion and Desolation of Judah Threatened (4:5-18)
    - ii. Sorrow for a Doomed Nation (4:19-31)
  - d. The Utter Corruption of God's People (5:1-31)
  - e. The Imminence and Horror of the Invasion (6:1-30)
- III. False Religion and an Idolatrous People (7:1-10:25)
  - a. Judah's Improper Reliance on the Temple (7:1-8:3)
    - i. Jeremiah Proclaims God's Judgement on the Nation (7:1-15)
    - ii. The People's Disobedience (7:16-8:3)
  - b. The Blind Perversity of the Whole Nation (8:4-17)
  - c. The Prophet Mourns for the People (8:18-9:16)
  - d. The People Mourn in Judgement (9:17-26)
  - e. Idolatry Has Brought Ruin on Israel (10:1-16)
  - f. The Coming Exile (10:17-25)
- IV. Jeremiah's Struggles with God and Judah (11:1-20:18)
  - a. Jeremiah Surprised by Opposition (11:1-12:17)
    - i. Israel and Judah Have Broken the Covenant (11:1-17)
    - ii. Jeremiah's Life Threatened (11:18-23)
    - iii. Jeremiah Complains to God (12:1-4)
    - iv. God Replies to Jeremiah (12:5-17)
  - b. Jeremiah Feels Betrayed by God (13:1-15:21)
    - i. The Linen Loincloth (13:1-11)
    - ii. Symbol of the Wine-Jars (13:12-14)
    - iii. Exile Threatened (13:15-27)
    - iv. The Great Drought (14:1-12)
    - v. Denunciation of Lying Prophets (14:13-18)
    - vi. The People Plead for Mercy (14:19-22)
    - vii. Punishment Is Inevitable (15:1-9)
    - viii. Jeremiah Complains Again and Is Reassured (15:10-21)
  - c. Jeremiah renewed by God (16:1-17:18)

- i. Jeremiah's Celibacy and Message (16:1-13)
    - ii. God Will Restore Israel (16:14-21)
    - iii. Judah's Sin and Punishment (17:1-13)
    - iv. Jeremiah Prays for Vindication (17:14-18)
  - d. Jeremiah Burdened by Constant Opposition (17:19-18:23)
    - i. Hallow the Sabbath Day (17:19-27)
    - ii. The Potter and the Clay (18:1-11)
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    - iv. A Plot against Jeremiah (18:18-23)
  - e. Jeremiah Endures Suffering and Questions his Calling (19:1-20:18)
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- V. Jeremiah's Confrontations (21:1-29:32)
  - a. Jeremiah opposes Judah's Kings (21:1-23:8)
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    - ii. Message to the House of David (21:11-14)
    - iii. Exhortation to Repent (22:1-10)
    - iv. Message to the Sons of Josiah (22:11-23)
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    - vi. Restoration after Exile (23:1-4)
    - vii. The Righteous Branch of David (23:5-8)
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    - iii. Jehoiakim Burns the Scroll (36:20-26)
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    - iii. Jeremiah in the Cistern (38:1-6)
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- vii. Jeremiah, Set Free, Remembers Ebed-melech (39:11-18)
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