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978-0-521-09769-7 - The Book of the Prophet Jeremiah Chapters 1-25

Ernest W. Nicholson

Excerpt

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## THE BOOK OF THE PROPHET

## JEREMIAH

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JEREMIAH'S MINISTRY IN ITS HISTORICAL  
SETTING

Jeremiah received his call to be a prophet in the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah king of Judah (640–609 B.C.; see 1: 2), that is, in 627 B.C. His ministry took place during the period from this year until not long after 587 B.C. when a group of Judaeans, fearing reprisals by the Babylonians because of the assassination of Gedaliah whom Nebuchadrezzar had appointed governor of Judah after the destruction of Jerusalem, forced Jeremiah to accompany them into exile in Egypt (cp. 43: 1–7). The last recorded episode of his career took place there and it was there, we must presume, that he eventually died. He came from Anathoth, about 3 miles (about 4.8 km) north of Jerusalem, and was the son of a priest, Hilkiah, though there is nothing to suggest that Jeremiah himself was a priest. Jeremiah's prophetic ministry spanned a period of over forty years and covered the reigns of the last five kings of Judah. These years, though they began with renewed hopes under Josiah, saw the decline and fall of Judah and the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians under Nebuchadrezzar, the ablest monarch of the neo-Babylonian empire which emerged and rose to power towards the end of the seventh century B.C.

Josiah was the grandson of Manasseh whose long reign (687–642 B.C.), according to the author of 2 Kings 21, saw a resurgence of Canaanite and other pagan cults which his father Hezekiah had suppressed by a reformation carried out towards the end of the eighth century B.C. (2 Kings 18: 3ff.).

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Manasseh is portrayed in 2 Kings 21 as a patron and innovator of pagan cults and practices on a scale hitherto unsurpassed in Judah. His son and immediate successor Amon (642–640 B.C.), about whom we know very little, was assassinated by a group of his courtiers. His assassins were themselves executed by a popular rising among the people, who placed his son Josiah on the throne.

Josiah proved himself to be a courageous leader of the nation. He gained independence for his kingdom from the Assyrians who had held Palestine and neighbouring lands in subjection for more than a century. We cannot be certain when Josiah made his first move to shake off the Assyrian yoke. The last years of the reign of the Assyrian king Assurbanipal, who died shortly before or shortly after 630 B.C., were troubled ones for the Assyrians, largely because of internal struggles, and it is possible that Josiah took advantage of this to make his move for national independence. But though independence was achieved, the struggle to maintain it went on and we know that Josiah was killed in battle at Megiddo against the Egyptians in 609 B.C. when he was attempting to prevent them from getting across to help the Assyrians against the Babylonians whose rise to a position of power and control of the Near East was beginning at that time.

What Josiah is most remembered for in the Old Testament, however, is the reformation he carried out on the basis of 'the book of the law' found in the temple in the eighteenth year of his reign (622 B.C.; 2 Kings 22: 1–23: 25; cp. 2 Chron. 34 which presents a different account, strikingly divergent in a number of ways from that in 2 Kings, but which, if used with caution, provides some supplementary information to that given in 2 Kings). Scholars are almost unanimously agreed that 'the book of the law' was the book of Deuteronomy with the exception of a few chapters, for the reforms carried out by Josiah, especially his centralization of worship in Jerusalem, reflect closely the main demands of Deuteronomy. The information supplied by the narrative in 2 Kings 22: 1–23: 25

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together with a study of Deuteronomy itself has revealed that this book was composed probably during the second half of the seventh century B.C., though a few chapters (most of chs. 1-4 and 29-34) are generally agreed to have been added some time later, very probably during the period of the exile.

Deuteronomy was the product of a group of reformers who sought to renew the nation's loyalty to its God, Yahweh, and to extirpate the Canaanite religion and cults which had gained widespread popularity among the people and threatened to submerge Yahwism altogether. In a preaching style striking for its intensity and sense of urgency they emphasized God's love for his people, his redemption of them from bondage in Egypt and his gracious gift to them of the good land of Canaan, all of which was intended to evoke a response of love and fidelity from Israel, God's chosen people. The book is imbued with warnings against the danger of apostasy, of worshipping other gods, and laws are set forth to deal with any attempt to encourage such worship. The abolition of all sanctuaries apart from 'the place' appointed by God for the nation's cult is demanded. (Various considerations make it clear that 'the place' is to be identified with Jerusalem.) The nation is described as under an oath of obedience to the divine will, the law as set forth in the central section of the book (chs. 12-26). Promises of blessing as reward for faithfulness are set forth but also threats of the dire consequences of apostasy and disobedience (ch. 28). (For fuller detail, see *Deuteronomy* in this series.)

We know almost nothing of Jeremiah's life during the reign of Josiah and can only infer what the content of his message was during those years. For although there are many narratives in the book describing incidents and events in his life during the reigns of Jehoiakim and Zedekiah, there is none dealing with the period of Josiah's reign. Furthermore only one short passage in the book is explicitly dated in the reign of Josiah (3: 6-11) and it is almost certainly not from Jeremiah but was composed by the Deuteronomic authors to whom the book owes its present form (see the discussion of the composition of

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the book on pp. 10–16). The evidence suggests that the most intense period of Jeremiah's ministry took place during the reigns of Jehoiakim and Zedekiah. This is not surprising, for the period during which these two kings reigned contrasted sharply with the years of revival, reformation and hope under Josiah. We note also that in 605/4 B.C. Jeremiah made a collection of the oracles which he had hitherto spoken and now applied them anew to the situation at this time under Jehoiakim (see ch. 36). This also points to the new and intensified activity of the prophet which began with the advent of Jehoiakim to the throne.

Although we cannot be certain, it is possible that some of the sayings in, for example, chs. 2 and 3 of the book derive from the earliest years of Jeremiah's ministry. The bitter attack here on the nation's 'harlotry', its worship of the Canaanite god Baal, would certainly fit the period immediately after his call in 627 B.C. when as yet Josiah's reformation was not inaugurated (or was only in its initial stages) and the apostasy which had flourished under Manasseh would very probably still have been widespread. In addition, some of the sayings in these chapters, especially those which portray Israel as the unfaithful 'bride' of Yahweh, may be evidence of the influence on the young Jeremiah of the preaching of the great eighth-century prophet Hosea. Likewise, the impassioned appeal to the nation to turn again to God in passages such as 3: 12f., 19–22; 4: 1–9 would also fit the early years of the prophet's ministry. The evidence suggests that as time went on, and especially during the reigns of Jehoiakim and Zedekiah, Jeremiah became increasingly convinced that the nation's rebellion against God was so deep-seated that judgement was inevitable and that only through judgement could a new beginning be made. A number of commentators believe that the sayings in the early chapters of the book announcing the coming of the 'foe from the north' derive from the earliest years of Jeremiah's ministry and some have suggested that the foe in question at this stage in his preaching was the Scythians, a name used rather loosely

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for marauding bands known from this period. But the book as it now stands clearly identifies the 'foe from the north' with the Babylonians; accordingly, it seems more likely that the oracles announcing the terrifying approach of the 'foe from the north' belong to the later stages of the prophet's ministry. They fit the early years of Jehoiakim's reign well.

What Jeremiah's attitude was towards Josiah's reformation can only be inferred. The one passage in the book (11: 1-17) which would indicate that he enthusiastically supported the reformation is very probably not from Jeremiah but from the Deuteronomic editors of the book (see the commentary on this passage on pp. 107 ff.). What we can say, however, is that Jeremiah held Josiah in the highest esteem (see 22: 15f.) and this, coupled with the aims and intentions of the reformation, which the prophet could only have welcomed, points to the strong probability that he shared the hopes to which Josiah's reforming zeal gave rise. Indeed it is possible that as a result of the reformation he withdrew from his ministry for some years. This would account for the absence of any information about his activity during Josiah's reign and for the difficulty in assigning more than a few oracles and sayings to that period. It is true that in time Jeremiah seems to have become disenchanted with the reformation. But this was not because he believed it to have been in any way wrong or even deficient in the first instance but evidently because in some circles the law which had been the foundation of the reformation became the basis for a new orthodoxy which resulted in an easy complacency and blinded the nation to the ever new and challenging word of God. In this way the law was being reduced to nothing more than a fetish (see the commentary on 8: 8-9).

As we have seen, Josiah was tragically killed at Megiddo in 609 B.C. He was succeeded by his son Jehoahaz (Shallum) who was acclaimed king by the people. But he reigned for only three months before being deposed by Pharaoh Necho, the victor at Megiddo, who placed another son of Josiah, Eliakim

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(whose name as king was Jehoiakim), on the throne (cp. 22: 10–12). Under Jehoiakim (609–598 B.C.) Judah remained subject to Egypt until 605 B.C. The Egyptians exacted a heavy tribute from Judah and as if this was not a heavy enough economic burden on the nation, Jehoiakim himself, probably early in his reign, set about building a new and grandiose palace for himself for which he incurred a scathing condemnation from Jeremiah (see 22: 13–17). Jehoiakim turned out to be the very opposite of all his father Josiah had been. Not only was he a tyrant, but under him the reforms enacted by his father lapsed. He was Jeremiah's bitterest enemy. We know that he executed a prophet, one Uriah, whose message is said to have been similar to Jeremiah's, and that but for the protection afforded Jeremiah by certain state officials he too would have been removed from the scene by Jehoiakim (26: 20–4; cp. 36: 19, 26).

It is recorded in 26: 1 that at the beginning of Jehoiakim's reign Jeremiah preached his famous temple sermon in which he condemned as false the popular belief that the mere presence of the temple in Jerusalem was a guarantee against divine judgement upon the nation for its rebellion against God. (This sermon was subsequently edited and developed by the Deuteronomic editors of the book and is now found in 7: 1–15.) This in itself is evidence that Josiah's reformation had now ceased to be effective. In addition, pagan practices of the most heinous nature, the Molech cult, the chief characteristic of which was human sacrifice, again became popular (cp. 7: 31f.) as also did the cult of 'the queen of heaven' (cp. 7: 18).

As a result of all this and the disastrous policies which Jehoiakim pursued, Jeremiah's ministry now entered its most vigorous period. He became the unrelenting opponent of the king and proclaimed the inevitable judgement of God upon the nation. Very probably it was during these early years of Jehoiakim's reign that the oracles announcing the devastation to be wrought upon the country by the 'foe from the north' were proclaimed by the prophet.

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For a few years the Babylonians were not an immediate threat to Judah. But this state of affairs was soon to be drastically altered. In 605 B.C. Nebuchadrezzar defeated the Egyptians at Carchemish on the Euphrates and was poised to invade Palestine itself. It was probably these events which prompted Jeremiah to compile a scroll of the oracles which he had hitherto uttered and have them re-proclaimed as a unit in the temple by his scribe Baruch (cp. ch. 36). If up to that point his oracles of judgement had been ignored or dismissed as false, in the new situation which had now come about, they took on a frightening significance for the people whose confidence was now severely shaken: the 'foe from the north' had terrifyingly materialized!

The danger which loomed for the nation at this time was overcome when, in 604 B.C., Jehoiakim submitted to the Babylonians. But his loyalty to Nebuchadrezzar was short-lived and as a result of further war between the Babylonians and the Egyptians in 601 B.C. he rebelled against his overlord. It was not for some time that Nebuchadrezzar was able to march in power to quash Judah's rebellion, though he engaged some Aramaean, Moabite and Ammonite contingents to harass Jehoiakim in the meantime (cp. 2 Kings 24: 2). Late in 598 B.C., however, the Babylonian army invaded Judah and besieged Jerusalem, Jehoiakim died (he may have been assassinated), and his eighteen-year-old son, Jehoiachin, succeeded him. When, however, only three months later, that is, in 597 B.C., Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians, the young king and his mother as well as various officials and other top-ranking citizens were carried into exile in Babylon (cp. Jer. 13: 18; 22: 24-7). Jehoiachin's uncle Mattaniah, whose throne-name was Zedekiah, became king and was to be the last reigning monarch of Judah.

Under Zedekiah the nation's decline continued. He appears to have been a weak ruler easily manipulated by his nobles. His position was not helped by the fact that Jehoiachin, though in exile, appears to have been regarded officially by the Baby-

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lonians as still being king of Judah. The exiles themselves regarded him as king, whilst in Judah itself it was popularly believed that Jehoiachin and the exiles would soon be brought back to Jerusalem (28: 1-4). Such a state of affairs would have placed limitations on Zedekiah's authority.

Jeremiah inveighed against the optimistic beliefs which sprang up after 597 B.C. that God was about to destroy the power of Babylon and return the exiles to the homeland. He announced that the yoke of Babylon would remain upon the neck of not only Judah but the other kingdoms of Syria-Palestine (ch. 28). At the same time he declared that God's blessing was already upon those in exile and that the future restoration of the nation would be brought about by God through these exiles (ch. 24), whilst those who had remained in the homeland were under divine judgement soon to befall them. He wrote to the exiles in Babylon encouraging them to settle down and assuring them of God's care for them and their ultimate redemption from bondage (ch. 29).

Because of this he became increasingly the object of abuse at the hands of his fellow countrymen and more than once during the reign of Zedekiah, and especially during the final years of it, he suffered greatly and at times came near to losing his life (cp. 20: 1f.; 37; 38). He was regarded as a traitor and was condemned and isolated. Though we cannot date precisely those passionate and intensely personal outbursts of Jeremiah commonly referred to as his 'confessions' (cp. 11: 18 - 12: 6; 15: 10-18; 17: 14-18; 18: 19-23; 20: 7-13, 14-18), it is in every way probable that they belong at least for the most part to this period of his ministry.

Notwithstanding the assault on Judah and Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 598-597 B.C. and its dire consequences, the spirit of rebellion continued and given the opportunity would flare up into activity. Probably as a result of disturbances in Babylon in 594 B.C. (cp. 29: 21-3), Zedekiah became party to an attempted coalition between Edom, Moab and Tyre with a view to rebellion against the Babylonians and consultations

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between ambassadors of these states took place in Jerusalem (cp. ch. 27). But for reasons unknown to us nothing came of this attempt. Jer. 51: 59 may be an allusion to Zedekiah's desire to reassure Nebuchadrezzar of his continued loyalty.

But if the plans on this occasion came to nothing, outright rebellion was to come but a few years later. By 589 B.C. Zedekiah had committed himself irrevocably against the Babylonians. His reasons are not known to us. Undoubtedly the same nationalistic spirit which exhibited itself earlier and which was sustained by promises by popular prophets of an imminent reversal of the set-backs and exile of 597 B.C. asserted itself again. In addition, the Egyptians now as in times past entered the scene with encouragement to Zedekiah and assurances of military backing. Nebuchadrezzar did not delay to attack. Early in 588 B.C., the ninth year of Zedekiah's reign, the Babylonian army reached Jerusalem and besieged it whilst at the same time setting about reducing and gaining control of such strongholds as they had not already taken. Jerusalem had a brief respite later in the year when the promised, but in the end ineffectual, Egyptian help materialized and forced the Babylonians to lift the siege on Jerusalem (cp. 37: 3-5). But the Egyptians were quickly routed by the Babylonians who promptly surrounded Jerusalem again. Resistance continued for months. During this time and probably also before it Zedekiah considered surrendering and suing for peace. He consulted Jeremiah who had all along called for submission to Nebuchadrezzar (cp. 21: 1-7; 37: 1-10, 17f.; 38: 14-23). But in spite of the prophet's message and counsel, the resistance was carried on until 587 B.C. when the city had exhausted its food supplies (cp. 2 Kings 25: 2f.; Jer. 52: 5f.). Zedekiah got out of the capital by night in an attempt to escape but was captured near Jericho and brought to Nebuchadrezzar at Riblah in Syria. His sons were executed and Zedekiah himself, having witnessed their death, was blinded and taken in chains to Babylon where he died. A few weeks later Nebuzaradan, captain of Nebuchadrezzar's bodyguard, entered Jerusalem

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and razed it to the ground and burned down the temple. A further body of Judaeans were now deported to Babylon. Jeremiah, who had been imprisoned in the guard-house during the final stages of the siege, was now released by the Babylonians (cp. 39: 11-14; 40: 1-6).

Judah, now devastated and with the cream of its population either dead or in exile, became a province of the Babylonian empire. Nebuchadrezzar appointed Gedaliah as governor and the centre of his administration was Mizpah. How long he governed is not clear and estimates of anything from a few months to several years have been proposed. He was assassinated by one Ishmael who had the backing of the Ammonites (40: 13 - 41: 3). Fearing reprisals from the Babylonians, the community at Mizpah, though appealed to and warned by Jeremiah to remain in Judah (cp. 42: 7-22), fled to Egypt and forced the prophet to go with them. The last recorded episode of his ministry took place in Egypt and there, we may presume, he died, whether soon after his arrival or later we do not know.

## THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH

The book of Jeremiah contains three kinds of literary material. Firstly, there are many poetic oracles and sayings such as we find in most other prophetic books in the Old Testament. Secondly, there are many narratives describing incidents and events in the life and times of Jeremiah. Thirdly, the book contains numerous sayings, some of them lengthy discourses or 'sermons', in prose. The poetic oracles are for the most part from Jeremiah himself, whilst the historical narratives are usually believed to be a biography of the prophet composed by the scribe Baruch. But the many prose sayings and 'sermons' pose the most difficult problem in understanding the composition of the book.

Scholars have long acknowledged that these prose sayings and 'sermons' are closely akin in both style and vocabulary to the Deuteronomic literature which comprises the books