

Jeremiah the Weeping Prophet

The Scriptures tell us far more about Jeremiah than any other prophet. The biographical elements found throughout the book give detail not just about his life, but also how he felt.

Jeremiah was born into a priestly family at Anathoth, 3 miles north-east of Jerusalem (1:1). The LORD called him to be a prophet in 627 BC, the thirteenth year of good King Josiah's reign (1:2). Like Moses before him, Jeremiah questioned his own ability, protesting that he was a mere 'youth.' This word probably shows him to be a teenager when he was called (1:6).

Most teenagers at this time would have been married, but the LORD did not allow Jeremiah to get married or even go to the funerals of his friends. All this was to be a visual aid of the grief that was to come upon God's people as a whole.

Good King Josiah made sweeping reforms to the nation after discovering the Book of the Law in the temple. He sacked idolatrous priests, cleared idols from the temple, tore down the houses of shrine prostitutes and destroyed idol sites across the nation.

Yet as we shall see, this was not enough to change people's hearts and Babylonian invasion became inevitable. Jeremiah's persistent warnings led him to face significant persecution. Pashur the priest beat him up and put him in stocks (20:2), priest, prophets and indeed all the people threatened him with death (26:8) and royal officials kept him in a dungeon and a muddy cistern (37:16, 38:6). One preacher has compared Jeremiah's unenviable task before King Zedekiah like this: to what it would have been like if in the Second World War, Churchill's defiant 'never surrender' speeches were followed by the Archbishop of Canterbury saying that German invasion was inevitable, and that Britain should allow it to happen. Jeremiah's unpopular message was to persuade God's people to give in and accept Babylonian exile as the LORD's discipline for them.

The last we hear of Jeremiah is when he was taken to Egypt by a group wanting to avoid Babylonian oppression. Jeremiah warned them of the futility their decision and that even there judgment would follow them. Perhaps that is where he died.

Jeremiah's reaction to his dangerous calling is found in the book's 'confessions.' They are not so much petitions for forgiveness as deep outpourings of his heart. Like Job, he cursed the day of his birth because his calling brought only agony (20:14-18). In public he was indeed the 'iron pillar and bronze wall to stand against the whole land' (1:18). But in private he was often crushed, lonely, weeping and in despair.

The History of the Book

Jeremiah's ministry covers a 40-year period under three Kings- good King Josiah, Babylon's puppet King Jehoiakim and then evil Zedekiah who was King when the Babylonians invaded and destroyed Jerusalem in 587 BC. The fall of Jerusalem is the book's concluding chapter.

A chronological account of what happened can be found in 2 Kings 23-25. But The Book of Jeremiah is not laid out as a historical chronology. For example, chapters 32-34 are during Zedekiah's reign and chapters 35-36 are under previous King Jehoiakim's reign. Instead, The Book of Jeremiah is a mixture of prophetic sermons and oracles, biographical accounts and personal responses.

The material was probably collected by Baruch, Jeremiah's scribe, with the additional help of Seraiah (see 36:1-4, 43:6, 45:1 and about Seraiah, 51:59-64). After Jehoiakim destroyed a scroll of Jeremiah's

prophecies, God commanded that a new copy be made. Chapter 36 tells us that this new copy was a new and expanded edition (36:32). In God's providence we have still have both a shorter and a longer version. The shorter one comes most likely from the time when Jeremiah and Baruch were in Egypt (the Greek Septuagint version). The longer version (the Hebrew Masoretic version) is what we have in our English Bibles and was written most likely to exiles in Babylon to explain what had happened to them. It ends with an additional closing chapter on the fall of Jerusalem which the shorter version doesn't have. By comparing the two, scholars can see clear markers on how the longer version is carefully put together.

The book is not aiming to be a chronological account like the book of Kings. It is a theological work about the word of the LORD, as we shall now see.

The Structure of the Book

The structure of Jeremiah can be determined by noticing repeated phrases. The most important phrase is 'the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD' which comes ten times. This is used to begin a major section in the book. Within these major sections there are other phrases used to start new subsections: 'The word of the LORD that came to Jeremiah, saying' or if Jeremiah is the speaker, it is 'The word of the LORD came to me, saying.'

The main character of the book isn't actually Jeremiah. It is the word of the LORD. This word enters the mouth of the prophet for what are the key verses for the whole book:

"Then the Lord reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, 'I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.'" (1:9-10)¹

There are six things that the word of the LORD would do, and the first four of them are destructive. The effect of Jeremiah's ministry was to be one of uprooting, tearing down, destroying and overthrowing before there was any space for building and planting. Much like the developer who buys a derelict house and demolishes before he builds, or the farmer who ploughs up before he sows, the LORD does the same with his word.

Andrew Shead is Head of Old Testament at Moore Theological College in Sydney and has written what I think is the best technical book on Jeremiah: *A Mouth Full of Fire: The Word of God in the words of Jeremiah*. Most of what is useful here comes from his book! Below is a simplified outline of the structure he has found. He compares each major section to a different point of view in a film. Each one is a different camera angle on the same key events.

Major section	Chapters	Subsections
1. The word of the LORD announces Judah's destruction	1-24	a. Warnings against idolatry and adultery ignored (2-6) b. Consequently, every part of Judah is dismantled, provoking an outpouring of poetic grief, confession and symbolic acts (7-24): Temple (7-10) Covenant (11-17) Election (18-20)

¹ The same words and phrases are found for example in 12:17; 18:7-10; 24:6-7; 31:27-28; 42:10; 45:4; 48:42, 47; 51:56

		c. Kingship (21-24)
2. The word of the LORD is found on Jeremiah's lips offering new covenant promises for the future	25-34	a. True prophecy is found on Jeremiah's lips (25-29) b. A radical new covenant lies in the future (30-34)
3. The word of the LORD destroys the nation it created and plants seeds of new life	35-44	a. The indestructible word brings destruction (35-39) b. The remnant self-destruct (40-43) c. No escape from God's word even in Egypt (44)
4. The word of the LORD sends a tide of judgment across the earth yet his promises to his people remain	45-52	a. Baruch, who preserved the word, will himself be preserved (45) b. The word which tears down the nations resurrects dead Israel (46-51:58) c. Seraiah, who wrote down Babylon's end, ends Jeremiah's book (51:59-64) d. Back to the present, where the word preserves the Davidic King (52)

The Purpose of the Book

- a. **Jeremiah's initial hearers:** The openings chapters show that judgment could have been avoided if Judah had repented (see 4:1-4). When it became clear that they refused to repent, judgment is presented in more certain terms. Once this tipping point was reached, they were not to fight against invasion from the LORD's servant Babylon. They were to allow themselves to be taken to Babylon, accepting it as the LORD's discipline. They should get on with life there, all the while clinging on to the promise of the seventy-year exile ending and to the future promise of the new covenant. They should take the LORD's word seriously in a way they had failed to before.
- b. **Jeremiah's hearers in exile:** The short and long versions of Jeremiah were arranged differently to suit their purpose. The longer version (to Babylonian exiles, which is now in our Bibles) has the additional closing chapter about the King of Babylon's destruction of Jerusalem and some extra details. Andrew Shead notes that these additions 'serve to bring Babylon and its king into greater prominence as the place where God's plans for the future are centred.'² The book has paired bookends. The key verse of the whole book, chapter 1 verse 10, is seen in uprooting and tearing down of the people of God by their exile in Babylon. Yet closing verses of the book records the exiled Davidic King generously provided for at the king of Babylon's table, even being given pocket money! That same word also builds and plants. The people of God were to take the LORD's word seriously. Within the book are clear statements about the problem of the human heart. It is indeed 'beyond cure,' and only God himself can come to do something about it, which he promises to do in chapter 31. Hope for the people of God was in the future, when the LORD would write his law on their hearts, enable them to obey, and forgive all sin and wickedness.
- c. **Us today:**
 - **Know that the LORD's word will tear down as well as build up:** As for Jeremiah's post exilic readers, the key verse is still chapter 1:10. His word won't always be a 'planting and building' word. His word will also 'uproot and tear down,' 'destroy and overthrow.' In 1969 the Christian Apologist Francis Schaeffer wrote a book based on Jeremiah and Romans called *Death in the City*. He was painfully aware how The West

² p.50, *A Mouth Full of Fire*

was trampling on the truth of its Reformation heritage and all the blessings it brought. Schaeffer saw Jeremiah as the most important book to find out how to live in this 'post-Christian' world. We should weep like Jeremiah, mourning the 'death in the city' that comes from the rejection of God's word. And we should first preach judgment. Schaeffer was often asked what he would do if he met a 'really modern man' on the train and only had an hour to talk to him. In the book he states that he would spend 45-50 minutes on our negative dilemma and the judgment of God before sharing the gospel: 'If I am to speak to a culture such as my culture, the message must be the message of Jeremiah.'³

- ***The LORD disciplines those he loves:*** The primary application of Jeremiah, however, is to the church, rather than to the world. The church is to be 'Bible-centred' and devoted to obeying him. As with Jeremiah's original hearers, we are to pay careful attention to his word, and respond in obedience. If we don't, we cannot claim 'new covenant immunity' from the LORD's discipline. Hebrews 10:26-31, 12:4-13 and Revelation 2-3 all warn of disciplining judgment against us if we fail to live a life of repentance. Perhaps this is the greatest warning to the church in the west. Do we really 'take God at his word' in our church life, both corporately and individually? If we don't, we can be sure that restorative discipline is on its way.
- ***See the cruelty of false prophets and false religion:*** Jeremiah was right to say that worshipping idols made the people worthless themselves (2:5). This could be seen starkly in the willingness of the LORD's people to burn even their own children as sacrifices to false gods (7:31, 19:5). The false prophets, right among the people of God, refused to speak of judgment. Their message was 'peace, peace' even though there was no peace (see especially 23:9-40 and 7:14; 8:11; 28).
- ***Sin is not just lawbreaking; it is idolatry against our creator and unfaithfulness towards our husband:*** Jeremiah gives us penetrating descriptions of sin. The idolatry chapters of 2 and 10 expose the folly of creating idols and worshipping them. But the dominant description of sin is even more personal and penetrating: 'Return, faithless people,' declares the LORD, 'for I am your husband.' (3:14). Any marital adultery is deeply personal and rightly arouses jealous anger. How much more does the LORD react to our spiritual adultery.
- ***Notice our desperate need for new hearts.*** Jeremiah is full of references to the heart of the problem, which is indeed the problem of the heart. Their stubborn rebellion was beyond cure:
 - i. 'You have the brazen look of a prostitute; you refuse to blush with shame' (3:3)
 - ii. 'They cling to deceit; they refuse to return.' (8:5)
 - iii. 'All these [surrounding pagan] nations are really uncircumcised, and even the whole house of Israel is uncircumcised in heart' (9:26)
 - iv. 'They did not listen or pay attention; instead, they followed the stubbornness of their evil hearts.' (11:8)
 - v. 'The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?' (17:9)
 - vi. 'Your wound is incurable, your injury beyond healing.' (30:12)

³ p.251, *Works of Francis Schaeffer Volume 4: Death in the City*

The solution to this incurable problem can only lie with the LORD himself. And that is where the promises of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31 are quite breathtaking. 'I will, I will, I will' says the LORD. He will deal with our problem of backsliding just as he promised in 3:22. It is useful to go to Ezekiel to see more about the heart surgery that the LORD promises: *'I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.'* (Ezekiel 36:26-27). Though Jeremiah doesn't mention the work of the Holy Spirit, his work underlies all that Jeremiah says. The Holy Spirit will enable us to obey in a way that is impossible on our own.

- ***Trust the Lord Jesus Christ as our only hope:*** All these blessings only come under the action of the LORD our Righteous Saviour (33:16), the Davidic King (33:21). He came to forgive our sins and remember our wickedness no more through his death on the cross. This must come before we are given the promised Holy Spirit to enable us to obey the law written on our hearts. It is striking how the book ends with a focus on the Davidic King being preserved whose greater son Jesus is the only hope for the people of God.
- ***Be in fear and tremble at the abundant goodness the LORD will shower on his people in the new heavens and new earth.*** Jeremiah is not just about law written on the hearts of individuals. The good purposes the LORD has for his people are much bigger than that:
 - i. *"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'* (29:11)
 - ii. *'They will be my people, and I will be their God. I will give them singleness of heart and action, so that they will always fear me and that all will then go well for them and for their children after them. I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good to them, and I will inspire them to fear me, so that they will never turn away from me. I will rejoice in doing them good and will assuredly plant them in this land with all my heart and soul.'* (32:38-41)
 - iii. *'Nevertheless, I will bring health and healing to it; I will heal my people and will let them enjoy abundant peace and security. I will bring Judah and Israel back from captivity and will rebuild them as they were before. I will cleanse them from all the sin they have committed against me and will forgive all their sins of rebellion against me. Then this city will bring me renown, joy, praise and honour before all nations on earth that hear of all the good things I do for it; and they will be in awe and will tremble at the abundant prosperity and peace I provide for it.'*
 - iv. The Levites who minister before him will be *'as countless as the stars in the sky and as measureless as the sand on the seashore'* (33:22), a clear reference to the Genesis 15:5 promise to Abraham being fulfilled.

Further reading

Jeremiah and Lamentations: The Death of a Dream, and What Came After by Michael Wilcock is a simple commentary that would be a great accompaniment for Bible studies or personal devotions.

A Mouth Full of Fire: The Word of God in the words of Jeremiah by Andrew Shead is a technical commentary. Not an easy read, but very rewarding!

Jeremiah: Encountering the Weeping Prophet by Roger Ellsworth is a series of very simple studies that focuses especially on the person of Jeremiah.

Death in the City by Francis Schaeffer is a prophetic book, applying Jeremiah to the West's decline. Though I disagree about his primary application being to the west as a whole rather than the church, it is a stirring read.

The LORD says in Jeremiah 23:29: "Is not my word like fire and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?" May we experience the heat and power of his word among us this autumn, transforming us for his greater glory.

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