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The chapters of Jeremiah: likely dates

Chapters 1–20: for the most part these chapters probably derive from the period 627–05 (the 13th year of Josiah to the fourth year of Jehoiakim, twenty-three years: 1:2; 25:1–2). Jeremiah was instructed to collect these oracles into a single scroll.

Chapters 21–45—mostly 605—c. 585. Most of these chapters are dated as follows:

- 21—final siege of Jerusalem begins—588
- 22—oracles on kings from Josiah to Jeconiah/Jehoiachin—598
- 23—false shepherds, righteous Branch, false prophets—no date
- 24—good figs and bad—597 or after
- 25—seventy years exile predicted—605
- 26—Temple sermon—609 or after
- 27–28—call to accept yoke of Babylon—594
- 29—letter to captives—after 597
- 30–31—Book of Consolation—no date
- 32–33—Jeremiah buys property while in prison as sign 588/7

- 34—temporary lifting of the siege; exploiting slaves 588
- 35—lesson from the Rechabites—after 601 (cf. 35:11 with 2 Kings 24:1-2)
- 36—the scroll and its burning—605-604
- 37—Jeremiah arrested and imprisoned—588
- 38—the miry pit—588/7
- 39—the city falls—587
- 40—Jeremiah joins Gedaliah at Mizpah—587
- 41—Gedaliah assassinated—587 or after
- 42-43—emigration to Egypt, taking Jeremiah—587 or after
- 44—The refugees to Egypt defend their apostasy—585?
- 45—an early message to Baruch—605
- Chapter 46-51*—undated oracles brought together; in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint (LXX), these are found not here but between vv. 13a and 15 of our chapter 25.
- Chapter 52*—epilogue, a footnote added after King Jehoiachin's release from prison in Babylonian exile in 561.

Introduction

Social media star Jeremiah becomes Bible's most quoted ran the surprising headline.¹ The CO-DEC research Centre for Digital Theology of St. John's College, Durham University, was reporting that, 'Whereas John 3:16 was the "poster-boy" text of the 20th Century, the latest star is Jeremiah 29:11.' This much-loved verse reads (in the ESV): 'For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for wholeness and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.' The verse is the favourite in ten countries including the UK, Canada and Australia. Apparently messages 'of hope and prosperity on social media find greater resonance with the younger generation' who find words about Jesus' death on the cross 'a bit heavy'. It is in line, so we are told, with 'the trend of displaying wellness and spirituality online' and passages like John 3:16 that deal with an eternal perspective and hope beyond death are not easy concepts to convey on social media which 'doesn't really do context or nuance'.

So what should one expect of Jeremiah? Is he the prophet of judgment or of hope? The answer, of course, is both. God's commission to him reads, 'See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant' (1:10). One would expect twice as much destruction as construction on

the basis of this verse, and in terms of quantity that is pretty accurate. Yet what stays with the reader at the end?

What, indeed, would have stayed with the original readers, Jews in exile in Babylon? They had seen the destruction of their city and their homes, the burning of their houses and their beloved temple, the end of the kings in the line of David, the end of their possession of the land, the apparent end of the privileges of their election as a nation, the end of all their national and religious institutions. They were in a foreign land, experiencing the curses of the covenant, which they now realised God took as seriously as the promises. What would Jeremiah (the book) mean to them?

They would have been reminded of forty years of Jeremiah's faithful preaching, from the thirteenth year of King Josiah, twenty-three before his son Jehoiakim contemptuously cut off and burned a scroll containing the first edition of the book. These readers could not have missed the plentiful references to Deuteronomy and its covenant curses (familiar to older exiles, perhaps, from the impetus the discovery of that book in the temple gave to the reforms of Josiah) or perhaps the references to the 'word'² of God—over ninety, more than in any other book of the Bible. They would have read the excoriating rebukes with which Jeremiah lashed the false prophets, the corrupt priesthood, the wicked or ineffective kings who followed Josiah, and the people themselves. They would have read the detailed descriptions of what judgment would look like; they would have been reminded of the arrogance, the presumption, the supreme self-confidence and the wilful disobedience with which Jeremiah's ministry was met. They might have shaken their heads and said, 'Why did they (or we) not listen? Truly this man was a prophet.'

The readers in Babylon, as they considered the written version

of what had once been preached, thankful perhaps for the phenomenon of God's word written as well as spoken, might also have realised just how much the preacher lived his message. Here was a man who spoke as a prophet, who at times seemed to represent God, not only as his mouthpiece but even in his emotions, and at others to represent Judah, the people facing decimation for their persistent idolatry and rebelliousness. How could one man so represent God and his people? They might wonder at how Jeremiah suffered, lamented and dared to cast accusations at God, as he wrestled with what his calling had got him into. This was no ivory tower theologian; Jeremiah was a suffering servant if ever there was one.

Then again, readers would have noted here and there in the early chapters, much more in the second half of the book, overwhelmingly in what we call chapters 30–33, words of glorious hope. The Lord promised to restore Israel and Judah to the land, to give them a future and a hope. Some would perhaps recall the promises in the letter Jeremiah had written to those exiled in the first great deportation, when King Jehoiachin was captured, words that both warned that the exile would be seventy years, but also promising it would be *only* seventy years, before God crushed Babylon and released the captives. They now read of a new covenant, far better than the old one. Toward the end of the book they learn again that God is the Lord and Judge of the nations, that the severest judgment is reserved for Babylon and that there are reminders of promised grace for Israel amongst the warnings of doom on the nations.

What of Jeremiah the prophet? Battered and bruised, placed in stocks and imprisoned, his life threatened by neighbours and politicians, abandoned in a muddy cistern but rescued, listened to but ignored, Jeremiah survived and presumably ended his days in old age in Egypt. He had been taken there by refugees

who constitute a kind of anti-remnant, in contrast to those in Babylon to whom the word of God came. Yes, Egypt, from where God had rescued his people a thousand years earlier, and to which, now in disgrace, some of them return. The wheel of history has turned full circle, not because, as pagans and pantheists believe, this is simply what history does and 'god' is locked inside it, but because God is governing it and directing it towards the fulfilment of his purposes, many centuries, even millennia, after the time of Jeremiah.

What should stay with you as you finish Jeremiah? You should be reminded of the holiness of God; that he is of too pure eyes to behold evil—especially in his own people—that his word does not change, and that your sin will find you out. He is a faithful God, faithful to his warnings as well as his promises. The covenant is the stage on which his faithfulness is manifest and the backdrop to both judgment and hope. Sin is defined in relation to the old covenant, hope is defined in terms of the new covenant. You might be amazed that a God who performs so little in the way of miracles and mighty acts in Jeremiah's life, is yet so evidently in control of history. You should sense the intimacy of the relationship that Jeremiah had with the Lord, the reality of his prayers, his faithfulness to his task and the price he paid for it. Above all, you should come away with a sense of the sheer greatness of God, the Lord of hosts who is King, as we are reminded three times in the closing chapters (46:18; 48:15; 51:57). The transcendent and immanent God, Creator and Redeemer, God of the nations, but wonderfully God of his new covenant people—this God stays in our minds and with us long after we have finished reading Jeremiah the book. And that, I am quite sure, is what Jeremiah the prophet would have wanted.

Windows on Jeremiah

Biblical context

God called his people out of slavery in Egypt and delivered them through the Red Sea into the wilderness. At Sinai, through the mediation of Moses, he made a covenant with Israel and gave them his law. On the borders of the Promised Land they rebelled against him and for nearly forty years he led them through the wilderness until the next generation entered Canaan under Joshua. At God's command they settled in the land, killing, driving out or subduing the resident tribes. They repeatedly sinned against God, worshipping the gods of Canaan. He sent hostile nations to discipline them and raised up judges to deliver his people.

Eventually the people called for a king. Saul was appointed, then David, then his son Solomon. After Solomon, and as a punishment for his idolatry with the gods of his foreign wives, existing tensions within the nation came to the surface in the reign of his son Rehoboam. The northern tribes under Jeroboam broke away and became known as Israel, leaving Judah with Benjamin as the southern nation of Judah. For two hundred years Israel's kings led the northern nation in idolatry and unfaithfulness and in 722 BC God delivered them into exile in the empire of Assyria.

For a further hundred and thirty years the southern kingdom of Judah survived. Assyria nearly swallowed them up but through the prayers of King Hezekiah (716–686 BC) and the ministry of the prophet Isaiah, God miraculously delivered the city of Jerusalem from the hand of the Assyrian king Sennacherib (2 Kings 19; Isaiah 36–37). The consequences of this deliverance were not all good. It probably contributed in no small measure to the confidence of the people of Jeremiah's day

that God would never let Jerusalem fall. They mistook, as we can often do, a demonstration of grace for a guarantee of constant indulgence. Faith came to rest not in God, but in presumption as to how he would behave. The obligations of the covenant were forgotten; however we live, Judah came to think, God is on our side. Judah dreamed that God was always safe for them, forgetting that first of all he is good, and what that entailed. It was Jeremiah's thankless task to try to turn the people away from the idol they had made of the Lord, to the Lord himself.

*Historical context*³

At this point it would be worth reading 2 Kings 21–25 and 2 Chronicles 33–36. These chapters will take you from King Hezekiah, through the reign of his son Manasseh, to the end of Judah's national existence in 587 BC.

The last king worthy of the throne of David, Josiah, was born in 648 BC, a few years before Jeremiah. By this time the Assyrian Empire was beginning to lose its grip. Its last strong king, Ashurbanipal, died in 627 BC. Nabopolassar, Assyria's last governor in Babylon, declared himself king of Babylon and the Babylonian Empire began to rise. In 612 BC the Assyrian capital Nineveh fell to Babylon, ending Assyrian dominance. A series of capable rulers in Egypt created a powerful nation there. In 609 BC Pharaoh Neco II passed through Judah to assist Assyria against Babylon. Fearing, probably justifiably, Egypt's intentions with regard to Judah, King Josiah determined to meet him in battle and was killed at Megiddo. Egypt maintained control in Palestine for several years but was crushed at the battle of Carchemish in 605 BC when under crown prince Nebuchadnezzar,⁴ Babylon attained unquestioned dominance in the Near East. Babylon also attained a unique status in the Bible. Not only is she the 'foe from the north' of Jeremiah, who is the Lord's instrument in punishing Judah and taking her in to exile;

she becomes a symbolic name for Rome and a symbol of wicked worldly power in the New Testament (1 Peter 5:13; Revelation 17:5). Babylon is 'the enemy' though she is always the enemy under the Lord's hand and serving his purposes.

Josiah had become king of Judah in 640 BC at the age of eight. At the age of sixteen he sought the Lord and four years later (628 BC) began to purge Judah of idols and idolatry (2 Chronicles 34:3). In 622 BC the Book of the Law was discovered during repair work at the temple—this was probably the book of Deuteronomy. It speaks volumes for the state of the nation that the law of God could have been lost, in more ways than one, among the very people who prided themselves on being God's people. When Josiah heard the words of the law, 'he tore his clothes' (2 Chronicles 34:19); he seems to have been struck particularly by the warnings of curses for disobedience in Deuteronomy 27 and 28, realising that 'great is the wrath of the LORD that is poured out on us, because our fathers have not kept the word of the LORD, to do according to all that is written in this book' (2 Chronicles 34:21). He sent to the prophetess Huldah, who confirmed that his reading of the book was correct (34:22–28). This gave impetus to Josiah's reforms (34:33) and he kept a great Passover in Jerusalem (35:1–19).

After Josiah's death in 609 BC, his son Shallum was placed on the throne by the people (2 Chronicles 36:1); he took the name Jehoaahaz. His reign only lasted three months before he was taken prisoner by Egypt. The Egyptians installed his elder brother Eliakim, known to us as Jehoiakim, a king who typified all that was wrong with Judah. His name is forever associated with the burning of the scroll of the word of the Lord (Jeremiah 36:23). He had no fear of God. Any lasting value of Josiah's reforms was lost and Judah sank further into its idolatry.

Nebuchadnezzar first subdued Jerusalem in 605 BC after the