

PARALLEL GUIDE 29

Jeremiah and the Fall of Jerusalem

Summary: From the first days of Josiah's reforms through the Babylonian Exile, Jeremiah continually preaches doom, giving harsh oracles against Judah's faithlessness. Knowing that Babylonian victory is Yahweh's judgment, Jeremiah urged surrender. The chapter closes with the more optimistic vision of a restored people, who have a "new covenant" with the law inscribed "upon their hearts."

Learning Objectives

- Read **II Kings 23:30b-25:30, Jeremiah**
- State the historical background of the prophet Jeremiah
- Identify the dates and events surrounding the first and second falls of Jerusalem
- Become familiar with the life of Jeremiah
- State the basis for Jeremiah's lamentations
- State the message of hope in Jeremiah

Assignments to Deepen Your Understanding

1. What are the "characteristics of the narrative of a prophet's call"? Record your answer in your notebook.
2. Define "theodicy" and record your answer in your notebook.
3. **Who are the prophets today who echo Jeremiah's appeal?**
4. Passages in the oracles of Jeremiah contain many features worthy of study. Exegete (state the meaning) of the following:

2:1-12—The folly of a people who change their god

2:20-25—On harlotry

2:26-28—The futility of idolatry

3:1-5—Can a divorced wife return to her first husband?

3:6-14—Faithless Israel and false Judah

4:19-22—The anguish of prophecy

Questions to guide your exegesis:

- a) What is the imagery in this oracle? What does it mean?
- b) Are there allusions to other biblical materials in the historical or prophetic tradition?
- c) Are words used in a special way as symbols, analogies, or references to ancient customs which you would need to explain to someone who was not familiar with the Bible? If so, how would you explain them?
- d) Is there a message in this passage for us today?

Preparing for Your Seminar

State what you consider to be Jeremiah's significance for today.

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Additional Sources

Walter Brueggemann, *To Build, To Plant: Jeremiah 26-52* (Eerdmans, 1991).

John Bright, *Jeremiah*, Anchor Bible Series (Doubleday, 1965), is not intended to be a commentary but rather "a fresh translation" with introduction and notes. The introduction is excellent with "preliminary remarks" on prophecy in Israel as well as a complete discussion of Jeremiah's life and the Book of Jeremiah against the background of their times. The translation is "fresh" and insightful, but the comments that accompany it are not always helpful. Bright's caution is to be accepted: this is not a commentary. Bright's tendency to "fix" the text and to "restore it to its original order" make the book as a whole less helpful for the church, which accepts the entire canon as scripture.

Walter Brueggemann, *To Pluck Up, To Tear Down: Jeremiah 1-25*, International Theological Commentary Series (Eerdmans, 1988).

R. E. Clements, *Jeremiah*, Interpretation Series, (John Knox Press, 1988).

John Gray, *I and II Kings*, The Old Testament Library, 2nd ed. (The Westminster Press, 1970).

Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology, vol. 1* (Harper & Row, 1962). von Rad treats Jeremiah in vol. 2, pp. 188-219.

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Chapter 29 JEREMIAH AND THE FALL OF JERUSALEM

Jeremiah lived during the reign of Josiah, and therefore saw the fruits of the Deuteronomic reform. But he also lived to see Jerusalem fall to the Babylonians. Through Jeremiah we learn that the results of Josiah's reform were from the beginning less glorious than they appear in the pages of the Deuteronomic historian. After Josiah's death, his reforms eventually lost whatever luster they may have had. To the city "where YHWH's name dwelt," Jeremiah preached a constant message of doom, interpreting the empire of Babylon as God's instrument for the punishment of Judah.

After looking briefly at the historical background in II Kings 23:30-25:30, we examine several typical passages from the Book of Jeremiah. First read II Kings 23:30-25:30. For the discussion of Jeremiah, please read each section of the biblical text as you come to it in the lesson.

Jeremiah began his prophetic career in 627 BCE, almost coincident with the reform of Josiah discussed above. Jeremiah's career continued, however, until the time of the Babylonian Exile in 587 BCE. Josiah's reign is discussed in II Kings 22:1-23:30 and reviewed above. We must now look at the reign of his successors, if we are to have a full understanding of Jeremiah's long career.

Josiah's encounter with Pharaoh Neco at Megiddo was ill-fated for him as well as for Judah: Josiah lost his life, and Judah became a vassal to Egypt. But before the pharaoh could concern himself with the little kingdom whose monarch he had killed, the "people of the land" anointed Josiah's son Jehoahaz as king. Three months later, when Neco finally turned his attention to Judah, he ordered Jehoahaz brought as a prisoner to his camp at Riblah in the northern extremity of what had once been Israel. Then he chose another son of Josiah and proclaimed him king of Judah in the place of Jehoahaz. This asserted not a preference for one son over the other, but the total subjection of Judah to Egyptian power. And Neco made the point even clearer by changing the new king's name—"Eliakim" became "Jehoiakim." The symbolism of this act is the same as that seen in YHWH's changing the names of Abram, Sarai, and Jacob: as "Abraham," "Sarah," and "Israel" were claimed as YHWH's by the change of name, so Eliakim became—as "Jehoiakim"—the possession of the king of Egypt. Moreover, Neco required tribute from Jehoiakim, and—as John Gray points out—"it is noteworthy that there was no longer anything in the treasury of palace or Temple on which to draw for the tribute, as in the case of Hezekiah's tribute to Sennacherib" (I and II Kings, p. 751). Jehoiakim must tax the land.

2II Kings 24:1-7 Jehoiakim Revolts Against Babylon

Behind these few verses lie monumental shifts in the political power structure within the Fertile Crescent. Assyria had been defeated by the Babylonians at the battle of Carchemish. Assyria's ally, Egypt, was not itself overrun, but its possessions in

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Palestine, including Judah, were stripped from it by the victorious Babylonian empire. For Jehoiakim these shifts meant primarily that he now had to pay his tribute money to Babylon instead of to Egypt.

Apparently, after three years under Babylonian control, Jehoiakim rebelled. The lack of practical wisdom displayed by this act almost surpasses belief. Yet an equally foolhardy act would be repeated soon afterwards by still another Judaeen king. In spite of all its corruption—if the prophets' judgments were true—Judah still seemed to possess a spirit of rugged independence which was difficult to quench.

II Kings 24:8-17 The First Fall of Jerusalem (597 BCE)

Jehoiakim did not live to see the massive suppression of his revolution. His young son, Jehoiachin, enjoyed the throne only three months before he had to surrender it to the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar. (This is the spelling of the king's name in II Kings and in Daniel. With only a few exceptions it is spelled Nebuchadrezzar in the Book of Jeremiah, a spelling closer to the Babylonian original, and the one we hereafter use.)

Nebuchadnezzar took Jehoiachin—also called Jeconiah (I Chron. 3:16) and Coniah (Jer. 22:24)—with the queen mother and the palace court into exile in Babylon. The temple treasury was also taken, along with many of the cultic furnishings. A large number of other officials of the government and the army were also captured, as well as many workers. The numbers given in vv. 14 and 16 do not agree. Probably the total was considerably fewer than the numbers either one claims. Left behind as king of a Judah deliberately depleted of human resources was Jehoiachin's uncle, Mattaniah. Once again a name is changed, and "Mattaniah" becomes "Zedekiah," the possession of Babylon.

II Kings 24:18-25:7 The Second Fall of Jerusalem (587 BCE)

Slightly less than a decade after the Babylonian king had snatched his nephew from the throne of Judah, Zedekiah also rebelled against Babylon! The biblical record is a spare announcement with no indication of Zedekiah's motivation, though it has been suggested that the revolt was concurrent with the accession of a

new and strong pharaoh in Egypt (Apries, called Hophra in Jer. 44:30). We are given some account of YHWH's motivations in "allowing" this insurrection, though vv. 19-20a are not entirely clear. "The thought seems to be that YHWH had consented to the sin of Zedekiah because he had already doomed Israel for her earlier sins" (Gray, I & II Kings, p. 762). Whatever the precise thought of these verses, their general intention is clear. However it happened—whoever the agent—YHWH brought about the fall of Jerusalem.

This time, for his part, Nebuchadnezzar would leave no doubt in the minds of the people of Judah that their nation was finally dead. The fate of the nation was symbolized in that of their king: Zedekiah was captured, forced to watch his sons killed before his eyes, and then—his own eyes gouged out—he was taken as a prisoner to Babylon, where he died.

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II Kings 25:8-21 The Second Deportation and the Destruction of the Temple

Another contingent of leading citizens was taken to Babylon. Only the poor of the land were left behind. In addition, Nebuzaradan, the Babylonian commander, ordered a number of executions. Taken and killed were officers of the temple—including Seraiah, the chief priest and grandson of Hilkiah who brought the book of Law to Josiah—and commanders of the army. In addition, sixty of the "people of the land," the mainstay of Judah outside Jerusalem, were discovered hiding in the city and were killed by the Babylonians. As John Gray notes in his commentary, we need always to "note the distinction between 'the people of the land,' indicating the people in general, the heirs of the sacral community, and [as here] the official class in the feudal system in the army or the civil bureaucracy in Jerusalem, which held its status from the king" (p. 769).

The temple had become the primary symbol for the people's continued belief that Jerusalem would remain under YHWH's protection. The Deuteronomic reform, even if it had effected the ethical behavior and faithfulness to YHWH which its authors anticipated, had made such a symbol of the temple. To seal the fate of Judah beyond question, Nebuchadnezzar had the temple with all its remaining furnishings destroyed. (There are indications that the destruction was not as total as the II Kings account describes, for the temple was rebuilt later in a fairly short time.)

II Kings 25:22-26 The Death of a Governor and the Flight to Egypt

This and the passage that follows seem to be appendices to the record of I and II Kings. The natural conclusion comes with the final phrase of 25:21: "So Judah was taken into exile out of its land."

This time Nebuchadnezzar appointed no new king for Judah—Zedekiah was the last king of the house of David. A man named Gedaliah, who had no connection with the Davidic line, was appointed governor, primarily for matters of finance (Jer. 40:10). Judah no longer existed as a kingdom, or even as a vassal state—she was now a province of Babylon. Indeed, although Gedaliah held the title of "governor," there were also Babylonian officials in the land (v. 26). Gedaliah sought peace (v. 24), but the independence movement was not dead. A small group of rebels under the leadership of Ishmael, described as a member of the royal family, killed the governor. Fearing reprisal, a large number of Judahites fled to Egypt. As Jeremiah 43:6 indicates, this group of refugees from Judah took Jeremiah with them, although he went unwillingly. The Jewish colony in Egypt survived for centuries, growing in numbers. Eventually they became so large as to warrant a translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek, the universal language of that later time. Thus the Septuagint came into existence.

II Kings 25:27-30 Jehoiachin is Freed

Evil-merodach succeeded Nebuchadnezzar as king of Babylon and apparently began to treat the exiled Jews less harshly. The Jews were still prisoners, exiles from their homeland, but it would seem that their life—at

least in physical terms—was not unpleasant. Moreover, the Babylonian king allowed Jehoiachin to leave prison and apparently even treated him as a royal guest in Babylon.

There has been some scholarly discussion about the theological reasons for placing this note at the end of the books of Kings. Gerhard von Rad has suggested that mention

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of this incident is intended to indicate a modified messianic hope. It is not that in the Deuteronomist's vision of history the judgment on Israel was not deserved. Indeed, "on the basis of his theological presuppositions he had . . . no reason to lighten the darkness of this judgment. On the other hand, he could never concede that the saying about the lamp which was always to remain for David had now in fact 'failed'" (Old Testament Theology, vol. 1, p. 343). So, to use von Rad's image, he leaves the door of history open. In Jehoiachin there remains—even if in Babylon—a king of the line of David. The possibility of a Davidic dynasty has not completely failed.

John Gray cannot agree, though he admits that the survival and release of Jehoiachin was significant to the prospects of Israel. Nevertheless, "the specific mention of it may have been motivated by the primitive superstition that to close the book on a despondent note was to bring the future under the same evil influence, whereas to close it on an auspicious note was to open up a brighter prospect" (I and II Kings, p. 773). Still, Gray admits, the release of Jehoiachin does suggest, even in the midst of punishment, the possibility of grace for Israel. How did the prophet Jeremiah interpret the events that led up to this situation? It is to that matter that we turn now.

Jeremiah

Jeremiah lived through all of this turmoil. No other prophet of whom we have knowledge was as completely rejected by his people. They not only rejected his words but also made every effort to keep him from saying more. They put him in stocks, behind bars, down an empty cistern; finally they succeeded in packing him off to Egypt, a virtual prisoner.

Reading his message, we find it easy to understand why he met with such total rejection. His oracles against the faithlessness of Judah are no harsher than those of other prophets. Although he truly predicts the fall of the holy city of Jerusalem—and this nearly costs him his life—wise heads in the councils of the king remembered that Micah had done the same and had not been punished for it. But Jeremiah attacks the high status that the temple had achieved under the Deuteronomic reform, and this had not been done before. Though worship had been denounced as empty countless times, the "place which YHWH your God" chose as the dwelling place of God's name had never before been held up to ridicule. Worst of all, Jeremiah is so convinced that Babylon was the instrument of YHWH that he even advises surrender to the conqueror Nebuchadnezzar! **Patriots in that day did not take kindly to that sort of advice.** The prophet was seen as a subversive influence, undermining the morale of the people and especially of the armed forces of the nation. It was for this—and under suspicion of even more open treason—that Jeremiah was arrested.

Jeremiah's life, as could be imagined, was a lonely one. Much of the Book of Jeremiah seems to have come from the pen of Baruch, his faithful disciple and secretary, writing either in the form of memoirs or as a secretary, recording the prophet's oracles.

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In spite of his unpopularity, Jeremiah felt a strong identification with his people. A series of six laments scattered through the book indicates the depth of anguish that he suffered over the dread message he was

compelled to deliver to Judah. We can envision Jeremiah more fully because we know more about his life than about those of the other prophets. At any rate, in his book we have inherited a document in which some of the deepest of human feelings are mingled with an overpowering sense of compulsion under the will of God.

Jeremiah 1:4-19 The Call of Jeremiah

The story of the call of YHWH to Jeremiah comes to us in a form similar to the call stories of the prophet Isaiah (Isa. 6:1-10) and of the prophet Ezekiel (Ezek. 2-3). In each of these cases, YHWH appears to the prophet: to Jeremiah YHWH announces himself in his word. YHWH speaks to the prophet: telling Jeremiah that YHWH has “consecrated” him, appointed him a prophet from even before his conception. The prophet raises opposition to the call, usually in an attempt to avoid it, the opposition based in the prophet’s unworthiness. Thus, Jeremiah does not know how to speak—we remember Moses’ objection to his call from YHWH, that he was “not eloquent” but “slow of speech and slow of tongue” (Exod. 4:10); moreover, Jeremiah is still too young to be YHWH’s prophet. At least this is the traditional understanding. However, an extra word is inserted in English: “only” a youth, a “mere” lad, and so forth. There is no adjective or adverb at this spot in Hebrew, nor in God’s answer. The noun translated “youth” or “boy” or “lad” also means “servant.” There is some evidence that in certain contexts it refers to an individual who has a special relationship with God. **Perhaps the force of Jeremiah’s objection is based on the fact that he already is serving the Lord and does not want to take on the tasks of a prophet.** God, however, answers that he is not to use his previous relationship as an excuse to evade the Lord’s new calling.

YHWH’s reassurances come next in the call story as YHWH overcomes the prophet’s objections. Jeremiah’s mouth is touched, not so much to give purification, as in Isaiah’s case, as to give empowerment—the divine word is placed in Jeremiah’s mouth. This was extremely important to Jeremiah’s self-understanding, as John Bright points out: “The prophet [meaning Jeremiah in particular] understood himself quite literally as the mouthpiece of YHWH, the messenger who reported what he had heard YHWH say in the heavenly council . . .” (Jeremiah, p. 7). Finally, the prophet is given a particular commission: Jeremiah is set over nations; his empowerment is dreadfully real and even agonizing; he has the power both to destroy and to build (1:10).

These elements in the narrative of a prophet’s call—the appearance of God, the prophet’s call, his opposition to it, YHWH’s reassurance and the commission—may take varying forms, and they need not be in this order, but they occur regularly in almost every such story. In the Jeremiah story they are accompanied by two visions found in vv. 11-16.

These verses are not, strictly speaking, part of the account of the call story. The two separate visions, of a rod of almond and of a boiling pot, are recounted as further reassurance to the young prophet that he would speak with the authority of YHWH.

The vision of the rod of almond depends on a play on words for its effect. The Hebrew word for “almond” (shaqed) sounds like the word shoqed, which means “be awake” or “watch.” Thus an almond rod becomes for Jeremiah a sign meaning that YHWH is “watching” over God’s word to ensure its success (v. 12). The vision of the boiling pot, tilted on its side so that its scalding liquid pours toward the south, means that a powerful kingdom from the north will overrun Judah. The identity of the kingdom, later revealed as Babylon, is still unclear at this point. What is clear is that disaster is coming.

Jeremiah’s Laments

Verses 17-19 seem to reach back to the call itself. Perhaps they were originally attached to it and the intervening verses only later interpolated. At any rate they provide a powerfully fitting conclusion to chapter

1. Jeremiah is to deliver his message, confident that YHWH will protect him—“They [the kings of Judah, the nobility, the priests, and the ‘people of the land’] will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the LORD, to deliver you” (v. 19).

The story of Jeremiah’s call to prophecy sets forth in miniature the nature of his career as prophet. It was a career characterized by opposition and reassurance. Though it is an oversimplification to characterize Jeremiah as “the weeping prophet,” the title is not unfair. Jeremiah did weep. He was not one to suffer in stoic silence. The six “confessions” or “laments” that we discuss now speak loudly of the pain that the prophetic role brought Jeremiah. They are full of angry recriminations against God and fits of despair that become almost suicidal. In the face of YHWH’s presence—even if that presence does not always comfort—Jeremiah could never bring himself to quit his prophetic office. Whatever pain they brought him, he would continue to speak the words YHWH put in his mouth.

Jeremiah 12:1-6 and 11:18-23

The text of 11:18-12:6 presents problems. As it stands in NRSV, the passage begins abruptly and ends with Jeremiah being informed of a plot against him, about which he seems to have known from the beginning. So 12:6 must precede 11:18 in time. The solution followed here—that 12:1-6 should be read before 11:18-23—is simple, has the support of many scholars, and makes good sense.

We begin with Jeremiah’s question about the prosperity of the wicked. “He is told, in effect . . . that if this upsets him, he will soon have much more to upset him, for (12:6) his own family is plotting to kill him” (Bright, pp. 89-90). This leads to 11:18-23, where Jeremiah pleads with YHWH to take his part.

In the face of what seems to him unjust persecution, Jeremiah in fact asks one of the most difficult questions of theodicy, the theological problem of reconciling belief in a good God in a world in which evil abounds. “Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all who are treacherous thrive?” (12:1). This is the first time that the question is raised in the text of the Bible. The Book of Job, a post-exilic “wisdom” book, raises the question again and explores it more fully than any other Old Testament book. But Jeremiah’s problem, which would be acute enough in any case, is intensified further by the Deuteronomic theology which

maintained that disobedience to the will of God inevitably brings a curse, just as obedience brings a blessing.

The answer to the problem in the Book of Job is puzzling, and the one given in this Jeremiah passage is no more satisfying, at least from the standpoint of orderly logic. “If you have raced with foot-runners, and they have wearied you, how will you compete with horses? And if in a safe land you fall down, how will you fare in the thickets of the Jordan?” (12:5) YHWH’s reply is not an answer to the sweeping theological issue that Jeremiah has raised. It is a response to the fearful predicament and the mood of despair that the prophet feels. One would hardly call it reassuring, suggesting as it does that even harder times and more serious challenges to his faith still lie in store for Jeremiah.

Indeed, a plot against Jeremiah’s life has arisen in **his home town of Anathoth**. The precise reason why his fellow townspeople seek to kill him is not given: something in his prophecies seems to have angered them so much that they have forbidden him to continue on penalty of death (11:21). Perhaps Jeremiah gave support to the elevation of the Jerusalem priesthood over the country priests as dictated by Josiah’s reform; this would have been seen as disgraceful treason on the part of one who was a descendant of a priestly family from Anathoth (Jer. 1:1). And yet, the priestly line in Anathoth were descendents of the high priest who had been banished by Solomon. The family could well have had mixed feelings toward the Jerusalem temple “establishment.”

Whatever the nature of the plot against him, Jeremiah feels himself “a gentle lamb led to the slaughter” (11:19). And if he has no right to impugn God, who is ever righteous, there are specific cases he would like to plead before God (12:1). So here: judge against those who plot against me, “for to you I have committed my cause” (11:20). It is in this context that Jeremiah finally speaks the judgment of YHWH on the people from Anathoth. Surely then evil will be punished by evil.

Jeremiah 18:18-23 “Is Evil a Recompense for Good?”

The same issue is raised again in this “confession.” Though not much is known of the historical circumstances—we can only guess that the time is early in Jehoiakim’s reign—it seems that once more Jeremiah’s oracles have stirred up anger and threats from the established leaders of Jerusalem. They insist that in spite of Jeremiah’s condemnation of them, the priests still are the proper guardians of the Law (presumably referring to the ceremonial aspects of it) and the sages and “prophets” are still to be heeded (18:18). In anger they strike out at the accuser.

Jeremiah complains to YHWH against the injustice of his situation. He has begged God for mercy on the very people who now seek to destroy him (vv. 19-20). Now, in his anger, he prays for merciless vengeance on his enemies. Calling down the wrath of God on their entire households, he prays that their iniquity may never be blotted out of YHWH’s sight (vv. 21-23), that YHWH may deal with them in anger and without mercy.

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Jeremiah is bitter almost beyond description, but even if we cannot describe it, we must acknowledge it as part of the particular humanity of this particular prophet. As Bright tellingly points out, we shall not be able to hear rightly the prophetic word of Jeremiah until we can accept Jeremiah’s humanity.

Jeremiah 15:10-21 and 20:14-18 Jeremiah Laments His Birth

The two preceding laments show the prophet striking out in despair and anger against his foes. In the next two we discuss, we see that his feelings are directed inward. In the first of this pair of laments he again asks for vengeance, but it is a fleeting element in his thought (15:15). For the rest of the lament, Jeremiah pours out his agony. His wound is “incurable, refusing to be healed” (15:18). So great is his pain that he cries out his woe to his mother, bemoaning the fact that she gave him birth (15:10).

In response, YHWH promises to defend him if he speaks the words he is given to speak (15:19a). Those who reject his words now eventually will turn to him—he must not change his outlook to conform to theirs (15:19b).

In 20:14-18, Jeremiah once again laments his birth, this time in a sustained cry of grief. Few passages in poetic literature equal this abject outpouring of grief and misery. “Why did I come forth from the womb to see toil and sorrow, and spend my days in shame?” (20:18) The peace of death would be preferred to the curse of this life.

Jeremiah 17:14-18 and 20:7-13 The Terror of the Word of YHWH

Jeremiah has been given words of destruction to speak, but his hearers do not believe what he has said. The taunts of the unbelievers hurt him (17:15), and he asks that YHWH demonstrate the truth of his—that is, YHWH’s—dire predictions by bringing upon the taunters of God’s prophet the “day of disaster” (17:18). It was not from Jeremiah’s own hatred or anger that the words of destruction came: “. . . nor have I desired the fatal day. You know what came from my lips; it was before your face” (17:16). The prophet only speaks what he has heard in the councils of YHWH.

The burden of speaking words of violence and destruction is so great that in 20:7 Jeremiah accuses God of deceiving him at the time of his call. The reassurance that YHWH gave him then is inadequate now, and the entire episode of his call takes on the hue of coercion—"you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed." The coercion, however, is not caused by an external power—by threat or manipulation. It is internal: "If I say, 'I will not mention [YHWH], or speak any more in his name,' then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot" (20:9). The "word of YHWH" in these passages and throughout the Book of Jeremiah means more than simple communication. The word of YHWH carries with it its own power. It forces its way out of the interior of the prophet's heart and through his lips; it also brings about, with inescapable and inevitable effectiveness, the judgment that it has declared. Jeremiah knows that what he speaks as YHWH's

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word will come to pass and this is a burden to him. Jeremiah aches with pain for his people, so he cannot utter his words of destruction from a lofty vantage point of righteous indignation. Indignant he is, and angry as well, but deeper than both feelings and more powerful than either is his anguish for Judah.

More powerful still is the will of YHWH. This, Jeremiah's fifth "confession," brings together the poles of the prophet's experience of YHWH. We find that Jeremiah can experience God as simultaneously coercive and protecting. It is as if in the experience of YHWH's overpowering him, Jeremiah realizes the power of God to protect him also. The same God who forces him to speak evil to Judah stands with him as "a dread warrior" to fend off his persecutors. The cause to which Jeremiah has committed himself may expose him to danger; at the same time, it has the power to protect him.

These laments give us a picture of the inner feelings of the prophet. We turn now to several other passages for an understanding of the content of his message and the historical situations to which he spoke.

Jeremiah 7:1-15 and 26:1-19

This sermon is recorded three times, once in 7:1-15 and again, in summarized form, in 26:1-6, and once in a section of the book (chapters 26-45) which has been traditionally attributed to Baruch, Jeremiah's disciple and scribe.

The Temple Sermon

The occasion of the temple sermon occurs at the beginning of the reign of Jehoiakim in 608 BCE. The entire situation in Judah has changed with the failure of Josiah's attempt at independence for the nation. Babylon is now in control and has a puppet king in Jerusalem. Still, the people continue to believe in the official theology that YHWH will always protect Jerusalem because of the presence of the temple in the city. They have made a slogan of their belief in the temple's power to save them, saying, "the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD" (7:4)—but these are "deceptive words," not to be believed.

What YHWH has really promised is this: ". . . if you act justly with another, . . . and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever" (7:5-7). But the people have broken the foundational law, represented by the Decalogue—stealing, murdering, committing adultery, swearing falsely, and having other gods "before YHWH" (7:9). (Since there were not yet chapter and verse numbers, one way to refer to a particular passage was to quote a portion of it. Jeremiah does not need to mention each law specifically in order for the entire list to be called to mind and to be understood as part of his indictment.) How can they now expect the presence of the temple to deliver them? With words which were almost certainly in Jesus' memory when he drove the money changers from the temple centuries later, Jeremiah speaks YHWH's word: "Has this house,

which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight?" (7:11) Because of the wickedness of the people and their mistaken notion of safety, YHWH will destroy the temple, as YHWH destroyed Shiloh during the days of Saul (7:14).

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This speech of Jeremiah is regarded as nothing less than blasphemy by his hearers. Baruch's account of the sermon tells us that Jeremiah was seized and that the people called for his death (26:7-11). Jeremiah's response is submissive, but he warns his captors that these are YHWH's words that he has spoken (26:12-15). And he reminds them of the long tradition which has protected a prophet who spoke unpleasant oracles. "Do with me as seems good and right to you. Only know for certain that . . . the LORD sent me to you to speak all these words in your ears." "Freedom of speech" was not a right guaranteed to everyone, but from the time of Nathan's confrontation with David, we know that prophets took on authority to oppose even kings, sometimes at great personal risk, as Elijah experienced at the hand of Ahab and Jezebel. This tradition expresses in practical terms the notion that all Israel, even king—here, even temple—stands under the rule of YHWH. God's word is always the final authority.

In the name of this tradition, cooler heads among the people remind the others that in earlier days Hezekiah had not killed Micah for predicting the destruction of Jerusalem. Thus they should not now bring down the wrath of YHWH by killing the prophet Jeremiah (26:16-19).

Jeremiah 36:1-32 Baruch's Mission to the Temple

Now we move to the fourth year of Jehoiakim's reign, 605 BCE. The king has foolishly attempted to rebel against Babylon and the forces of the empire are bearing down upon Judah to crush the revolt. Jeremiah seems to think that at this particular moment the words which he has been saying in separate oracles might be heard. He dictates all the words he has spoken in the past, and Baruch the scribe writes them down. For some reason, perhaps because of the "temple sermon," Jeremiah has been prohibited from going to the temple. Baruch is to go in his stead and read the words Jeremiah has dictated (36:4-10).

A temple official, Micaiah, hears the reading and goes to the palace where he tells a group of court officials what the oracles have said. The officials send for Baruch and have him read the scroll to them. Deeply impressed, but also wary of the effect the oracles might have on the king, they take the scroll from Baruch and advise him to take Jeremiah and go into hiding (36:11-19).

The scroll is read to the king. When "The Book of the Law" was read to Josiah, he rent his garments. Jehoiakim is not affected that way by Jeremiah's prophecy (v. 24). As Jeremiah's scroll is being unrolled and read to him, he cuts off each column and throws its bitter prediction into the fire. This response may demonstrate careless disdain for the mouthings of the prophet, but it may also be intended to show courage in the face of the Babylonian armies already en route to verify the truth of Jeremiah's words. Whichever it is, the show is empty. When the reading is over, the king commands that Baruch and Jeremiah be brought to him, "but the LORD hid them" (36:26). The king is powerless in the face of the power of YHWH. He cannot find the prophet if YHWH does not will it. **Neither his disdain nor his bravery can prevent the prophet's words from coming true, if YHWH wills them to be so. The truth that Jeremiah speaks on God's behalf is in no way influenced by any person, not even a king.**

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Nor can the truth Jeremiah has spoken be destroyed. Jeremiah dictates a copy of the burned scroll and, at the command of YHWH, adds to it an introductory oracle which pronounces doom on Jehoiakim—he will have no offspring to occupy the throne, and his corpse will remain unburied, "cast out to the heat by day and the

frost by night” (36:27-31). This scroll is of interest to us because it marks the beginning of the process by which the sayings of Jeremiah were collected and put into writing. The ultimate result is the Book of Jeremiah as we have it today.

Jeremiah 18:1-17 and 19:1-20:6 Two Visits to the Potter

These passages, part of Baruch’s memoirs, include no notation to indicate when the actions they describe took place. The two stories seem to have been put together because both use the metaphor of the “potter.”

In the first visit, Jeremiah discovers the potter working with the clay. He observes that whenever a pot turns out poorly, the potter reshapes it and makes another pot, even a pot of an entirely different kind. Then the word of YHWH comes to Jeremiah explaining the meaning of this. YHWH is the potter who can do with Israel as the earthly potter does with clay. The point is not, as some think, that YHWH will continue to work patiently with the people and, in spite of the fact that they may temporarily thwart YHWH, will in the end make them the ‘vessel’ that God had intended them to be. This is to misunderstand v. 4, the point of which is precisely that the clay can frustrate the potter’s intention and cause him to change it: as the quality of the clay determines what the potter can do with it, so the quality of a people determines what God will do with them (Bright, p. 125).

This point is developed in the verses which follow. Here are echoed the words of Jeremiah’s call. YHWH is like the word that he has given the prophet to speak. At any time, depending on the quality of the people, that word can “pluck up and break down and destroy” (v. 7), or it can “build and plant” (v. 9). It depends upon the circumstances, the nation the word addresses, the clay with which the divine potter is working.

At the second visit, Jeremiah buys an earthen flask and smashes it as an enacted prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem. In 19:3-9, frightful disaster is predicted for Judah and Jerusalem, extending in its horror even to cannibalism among the people. Then Jeremiah (vv. 10-13) is instructed to smash the flask.

This is a terrifying action. We must remember that it is not intended to be merely an illustration of Jeremiah’s point. It is the point—it represents YHWH’s word in action and, as such, was probably understood as actually setting that word of destruction into motion. If the prophetic word contained the power to bring about its fulfillment, even more so did an enacted sign.

It is no wonder then that Jeremiah is arrested, seized, and put in stocks. Pashhur the priest personally arrests him and beats him (20:1-2). When he is released the next day, Jeremiah prophesies that Pashhur will be taken captive to Babylon where he will die (20:3-6). If there is a play on words between the name “Pashhur” and “Terror on

every side,” the point of it is lost—the word used here for “terror” is magor, which bears little resemblance to “Pashhur.” Perhaps the point is that while the priest may call himself Pashhur, that is not the name YHWH intends for him. YHWH will rename him, and the new name will symbolize his fate.

Jeremiah’s Treason—“He who Surrenders Shall Live.”

Jeremiah was convinced that the victory of Babylon over Judah and the destruction it would bring were the will of YHWH. Opposition to Babylon was not only futile, it was virtually the same as opposition to YHWH. This was not a new idea—Isaiah had called Assyria “the rod of YHWH’s anger”—but there is a difference between speaking of a future event as the will of God and accepting it as such when it becomes a present reality. Isaiah’s theological judgment was not put to the test of an immediate political response—if the Assyrians had breached the walls of Jerusalem, what would Isaiah have done? Jeremiah’s theological

judgment was tested in the arena of political decision. In the following three passages the consistency of his actions is shown.

Jeremiah 21:1-10 Zedekiah Asks for an Oracle

By this time, Jerusalem has already fallen once to Babylon. During that event Jehoiakim was spared the retaliation of Nebuchadrezzar—he died and left his son Jehoiachin to face the conqueror. Now Zedekiah, his name changed at the whim of the Babylonian king, has been placed on the throne and, less than ten years later, he is rebelling.

Jeremiah has not been welcome in the official circles of Jerusalem for many years. Now the king, worried about how Babylon will deal with its rebellious puppet, sends messengers to ask him for an oracle. In his anxiety, Zedekiah hopes that YHWH will save Jerusalem from its enemy as YHWH did a century earlier during the reign of Hezekiah (21:1-2). We are not to think that Zedekiah is different from anyone else who turns to God in time of fear: his hope for divine intervention is probably sincere. It is likely that this is the reason he chooses to “inquire of YHWH” from a prophet whose integrity he can trust.

The oracle he receives from Jeremiah is not what he had hoped for. It is not salvation but total destruction that will come. YHWH himself will fight against Judah “with outstretched hand and mighty arm” (21:5). The result will be a “holy war” such as Judah has fought in the past with YHWH at her head. This is the answer to Zedekiah’s inquiry. In an originally separate saying (vv. 8-10), Jeremiah turns to address the people, and in words reminiscent of those spoken by Moses in Deuteronomy (Deut. 30:19), Jeremiah offers a choice. “See, I am setting before you the way of life and the way of death. Those who stay in this city shall die . . . but those who go out and surrender to the Chaldeans [Babylonians] who are besieging you shall live and shall have their lives as a prize of war” (2:8-9). The prophecies, made by so many prophets, have finally become the voice of YHWH calling for surrender of the holy city! To be defeated is a possibility everyone faces in a time of war; to surrender is a voluntary act. It cannot be surprising that Jeremiah was regarded, on the basis of these statements, as a traitor to his country. It would be unfair, as John Bright points out, “to suppose that he spoke

out of cowardice or defeatism, or as one whose sympathies were pro-Babylonian” (Jeremiah, p. 217). Quite the contrary. Convinced that the yoke Nebuchadrezzar would impose on Judah was a divine judgment from YHWH, convinced that to rebel against that yoke was to rebel against YHWH, Jeremiah had to counsel submission. It would have been unthinkable for YHWH’s prophet to counsel otherwise. “Whatever one may think of Jeremiah’s attitude, it was motivated by the desire to save his country from destruction by bringing it into conformity with the sovereign will of its God” (Bright, p. 218).

Jeremiah 38:1-28 Jeremiah is Arrested for Subversion

As Jerusalem lies under siege by Babylon, Jeremiah continues to urge surrender. The words quoted (38:2) are those he spoke to Zedekiah in his oracle to the king (21:8-9): he who surrenders shall live. Some members of the court, hoping that Egypt will still come to the aid of Jerusalem, see Jeremiah’s counsel of surrender as treason: “he is discouraging the soldiers who are left in this city, and all the people, by speaking such words to them. For this man is not seeking the welfare of this people, but their harm” (38:4).

With the tacit approval of Zedekiah, the weakling king, Jeremiah is arrested and dumped down a cistern which is empty except for mire on the bottom—the siege has all but exhausted the supply of drinking water in the city. Were it not for the intervention of an Ethiopian eunuch slave who appeals to King Zedekiah, Jeremiah would certainly have died in the cistern. The eunuch, with the king’s timorous consent—Zedekiah’s wavering attitude indicates the extent of his fear—lifts Jeremiah out of the cistern.

Brought before the king in secret, Jeremiah can do nothing but repeat his warning: resistance is hopeless. Zedekiah seems to agree, but his weakness of character once again prevents him from taking the right course (v. 19). Jeremiah is afforded more lenient treatment, however. Until the fall of Jerusalem he will remain under a kind of house arrest in the court of the guard.

Jeremiah 29:1-32 A Letter from Jeremiah to the Exiles in Babylon

The Jews who were taken to Babylon in the first deportation (597 BCE) are apparently being encouraged to expect a speedy return to Jerusalem. There is, after all, still a king from the line of David on the throne, and the temple is still intact. Jeremiah has no such delusions. The word of YHWH has decreed that the destruction will be complete and the time of exile a lengthy one. To reconcile the exiles to their fate, Jeremiah writes them a letter.

His advice is astounding: they are to settle in Babylon! They are to marry and have children and encourage their children to marry and have families. They are to become good citizens of Babylon, seeking the welfare of the city, “for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (29:7). Even more astonishingly, they are to pray to YHWH for Babylon!

Jeremiah’s letter becomes the ultimate form of treason in the eyes of at least one of the exiles. A man named Shemaiah responds with a letter to the newly appointed priest in Jerusalem, demanding that Jeremiah be arrested for writing such things

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(29:24-28). **To a Jew loyal to his country and city, Jeremiah’s acts would of course seem like treason.** But Jeremiah’s acts sprang from a vision of God’s justice which transcends a narrow understanding of the “everlasting covenant” with the house of David. The Babylonian victory must be the victory of YHWH, and those who are loyal to YHWH—rather than to any “holy” place—must accept it.

More is involved here than acceptance of Babylon’s role. Jeremiah gives expression to what develops into the next stage in YHWH’s salvation-history: worship of YHWH can no longer be tied to a particular national location. Neither the temple nor Jerusalem is now essential to worship of YHWH. Jews can worship YHWH in the land of Babylon—so Jeremiah asks the exiles there to pray to YHWH for that city.

This gives a slight hint of the solution to a vexing problem, and it goes unnoticed because of the heat generated on the level of emotional patriotism. The problem of how to be Jews—people of YHWH—in a land far removed from Jerusalem was to become central in the life of the exiles. Eventually it would be resolved as Jeremiah suggested—Judaism without a temple and scattered far from Jerusalem could continue as a vital force in the history of the world. The idea which was considered treason when Jeremiah first put it forth became by necessity the norm.

Jeremiah 31:27-34 Visions of a Restored People

Many passages could be studied to discover the rich variations in Jeremiah’s preaching, but one remains which cannot be omitted—especially by Christian students of the prophet. In a lengthy passage containing a series of oracles about the return and restoration of Israel and Judah, a picture of the future hope is given exceeding any which has gone before it.

Jeremiah 31:27-30 Individual Responsibility

This is the first of three oracles introduced by the phrase, “The days are surely coming . . . (cf. v. 31, v. 38).

The image of reseeding a field is used to describe the rebuilding of the two kingdoms of ancient Israel. The sins of the past will be forgotten. The Law's claim that the sins of one generation shall be visited upon succeeding ones has been expressed in almost physical terms by a popular proverb—"The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" (31:29; it is also quoted in Ezek. 18:2). The feeling seems to have been prevalent that the nation was being unjustly punished for the sins of previous generations. This will no longer be true when YHWH restores the people—everyone will die for his or her own sins. This has been taken as an expression of individualism, as distinguished from a more communal idea of sin that had prevailed before. It is not individualism in any modern sense of the term. It does not mean that what happens to one person has no effect on another, but rather that succeeding ages are freed from the guilt of their ancestors.

Jeremiah 31:31-34 The New Covenant

"The days are surely coming," when YHWH will make a new covenant with the people. "But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (31:33). These words may or may not be Jeremiah's—scholars differ about that—but there is

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no doubt that they express his thought. The "new covenant" will be new in only one sense: the Law will be an inner reality, instead of an external code. All else is the same. The terms are no different, nor is the relationship with YHWH. But the relationship will really happen, for the response of Israel will be from the heart. The Deuteronomic reform had insisted that obedience to the commandments, the statutes, and the ordinances of YHWH was the way to life. But it was a mediated way, at least according to the official theology, involving the Temple and the Davidic monarchy. Jeremiah's vision of the future portrays the hope in a different way. *It is not . . . based in the promises to David as that of the official theology had been, [nor does it anticipate] some future reconstitution of the monarchy and its institutions: the covenant with David with its immutable promises is not mentioned at all. Rather it is the expectation of a new act of divine grace through which YHWH would restore the primitive Mosaic covenant, yet in a far profounder way.* (Bright, p. cxviii)

In the people's bondage, YHWH renews the covenant with them, forgiving their sins. God will inscribe the Law on their hearts, so that they have the power to obey it. Obedience will become natural to God's people. No longer will the Deuteronomic stress on teaching the Law be necessary, for each person will know YHWH directly and individually (31:34).

When Zedekiah's revolt had been crushed and Judah made a province of Babylon, Jeremiah's work was done. He was taken to **Egypt** for his own protection—but against his will—and was heard from no more.

He left behind him an important legacy. Israel could not have survived as a people without an explanation—a faith explanation—for the tragedy of the Babylonian Exile. Jeremiah's message of judgment—precisely because it was a message of judgment—begins to formulate that explanation. *"By ruthlessly demolishing false hope, by ceaselessly asserting that the tragedy was YHWH's doing, his righteous judgment on the nation for its sin, Jeremiah as it were drew the national disaster within the framework of faith, and thus prevented it from destroying faith"* (Bright, p. cxiv).

Jeremiah (with Ezekiel) did more than that. He not only "explained" the tragedy of defeat and exile; he also looked beyond it. For, if Israel were to survive the tragedy, it could not be in any revival of the former national-cultic community to which every citizen automatically belonged. . . . Her statehood destroyed, her people scattered through the world, Israel would never again be coterminous with any political unit or geographical area. If she was to survive as a recognizable entity at all, this would of necessity be in the form

of a community based far more in the loyalty and personal commitment of individuals than the old community had ever been. (Bright, p. cxv)

To survive, Israel must become what Jeremiah had hoped for, a natural community of the circumcised heart.

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Nor now

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I doubt this

His home town back

Which brings up the question, **who was he?**

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Jeremiah's work was done back

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Well yes, if God is against you, who can be for you? But I don't like the religious triumphalism that U see underlying this commentary.

How?

My favorite story about omens [back](#)

(from Wikipedia) Publius Claudius Pulcher (d 249 BC/246 BC) (of the Claudii family) was a Roman general. His father was Gaius Claudius. He was the brother of the famous Roman politician Appius Claudius Caudex (consul in 264 BC). He was the first of the Claudii to be given the cognomen "Pulcher" ("handsome"). He was curule aedile in 253 BC and consul in 249. As consul he was given command of the Roman fleet during the First Punic War. He lost the Battle of Drepana against the Carthaginians after ignoring a bad omen when the sacred chickens refused to eat. According to Valerius Maximus, Suetonius[1] and Cicero, Claudius threw them into the sea, ut biberent, quando esse nollent ("so that they might drink, since they refused to eat"). He was recalled to Rome and ordered to appoint a dictator; his nomination of his subordinate Marcus Claudius Glicia was overruled. He was tried for incompetence and impiety and was fined, and died soon afterwards, possibly by suicide. He was the father of Appius Claudius Pulcher, consul in 212 BC

Jeremiah's letter [back](#)

The powers that be are ordained of God, right?

Seem like treason [back](#)

I'd have had the bastard shot.

Jeremiah's work was done [back](#)

How true.

To Egypt for his own protection [back](#)

There's an interesting lost story here. But I also think of Markus Wolf, last head of the Stasi, who fled to Russia after reunification.

Well, not quite today, but how about Oswald Moseley, Philippe Pétain, Charles Lindbergh?

In that day ^{back}

Nor now

Already serving the Lord back

I doubt this

His home town ^{back}

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