



Jeremiah

The book of Jeremiah recounts the life and ministry of the prophet Jeremiah. It tracks Jeremiah's message that the Kingdom of Judah will fall to the Babylonians from the point, a long time before the exile took place (around 626 bc), when his ministry began to after the exile had begun in 587 bc. Jeremiah, often called the prophet of doom, condemns the wickedness and idolatry of the people to whom he spoke and looks to a hopeful future beyond disaster when they could return to God once more. If you count its verses and words, Jeremiah is the longest book in the Bible and one of the most complicated, making it very hard to follow what was happening when.



How long will it take?

Reading time: 4 hours
Short of time? Just read 1.1-19; 7.1-8.3; 24.1-10; 38.1-13; 52.1-34



Genre

Prophecy



Anything tricky?

Reading this book is tricky. It jumps about and is hard to follow. It is worth knowing this before you begin.



Inspiring quotes

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

(Jeremiah 1.5)

Thus says the Lord: Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls. But they said, "We will not walk in it."

(Jeremiah 6.16)

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

(Jeremiah 29.11)



About the Author

Jewish and Christian tradition both view Jeremiah as the author of this book. There can be no doubt that Jeremiah is the source of much of the contents of the book, but the way the book jumps around suggests that it has been edited over a long period of time collecting together different parts of Jeremiah's message.

As a result many regard Jeremiah as the author of the words in the prophecies, but not necessarily as the editor of the final book. One possible candidate for the editing of the book is Baruch, mentioned in chapter 36 as gathering Jeremiah's prophecies together.

What do we know about him?

Jeremiah was the son of a priest, Hilkiah, from the tribe of Benjamin. His ministry began around 626 bc when he began prophesying about the destruction of Jerusalem, a prophecy which came true around 39 years later when the Babylonian exile began. Jeremiah's message of doom caused numerous plots against his life (see for example 11.21-23; 38.1-13). Slightly oddly there is no mention of Jeremiah in 2 Kings or 2 Chronicles. This has caused some scholars to wonder whether he actually existed or not.



About the times

The late seventh and early sixth century bc were troubled times in Judah. Judah, the southern kingdom, had survived the onslaught of the Assyrian army when Israel was destroyed in 722 bc. This bred confidence in some that God would save them no matter what. Part of Jeremiah's message was to bring home to God's people the message that they too could fall.

What were people feeling?

The original prophecies were addressed to people largely before the exile took place and the evidence of Jeremiah is that these people felt happy and confident (you might say too happy and too confident). They did not believe Jeremiah's message, especially when there were other prophets who were prophesying peace, when Jeremiah was prophesying doom. In other words the people felt fine but they shouldn't have done!

The book itself was addressed to the people who were by now in exile who were asking why this catastrophe had befallen them. They would have been feeling distraught and despairing at the disaster that had hit the nation. In an odd way then Jeremiah's message of doom would have had an element of hope in it. This was a punishment but it would come to an end.

Other books set around this time

2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, Isaiah (part of), Ezekiel



What kind of Book is it?

Prophecy. The three big prophetic books (Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel) are all similar in that they contain a majority of prophecies, but with elements of narrative history woven around the prophecy.



How is it structured?

1–25	The earliest and most important part of Jeremiah's message
26–29	Some biographical accounts and Jeremiah's encounter with other prophets
30–33	God's promise of a new covenant
34–45	Jeremiah's conversation with Zedekiah and the fall of Jerusalem
46–51	Divine punishment to the nations surrounding Israel
52	An appendix that recaps 2 Kings 24.18–25.30



Look out for...

One of the key themes of this book is faithfulness and unfaithfulness, look out for it as you read and ask yourself why faithfulness was such an important issue for Jeremiah.

Be aware that the book jumps around chronologically. Keep this in your mind and if you find yourself getting confused, see if recognizing that the book has jumped timeframe helps.

God's wrath runs all the way through the book. At first it can be a very off-putting theme but ask yourself why God was angry with the people and see if this helps.



What could this mean for me?

Jeremiah is a book of doom interwoven with hope. Hope could only come after the people recognized fully the dire state they were in. Is there anything to learn from this today?



Discussion group questions

- Were there any parts of the book that you particularly liked or which inspired you?
- Were there any parts of the book that you disliked or which troubled you?
- What did *you* think the book was about?
- How did the prophecies of doom read to you? Would you have listened to them if they were addressed at you?
- For good reason, we often shy away from a call to repentance in our churches today. Is there anything to be said for it? If so what would be the best way of doing it? If not why not?
- How did you relate to the wrathful God portrayed in Jeremiah? Did you find that the message of hope sat well or badly with the message of doom?
- Did you read anything in the book that touched you, expanded your faith or made you think more deeply about your life and how you live it?



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