



A CONDENSED STUDY OF THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH



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INTRODUCTION

It isn't easy to read through Jeremiah and understand it. It's one of the lengthy prophetic books of the Old Testament and, like most writings of that time, it isn't in chronological order.

The book of Jeremiah suggests to us that it has written by Jeremiah himself, though many scholars question whether he wrote all of it. Some suggest that his secretary, Baruch, had a great hand in it. Be that as it may, anyone who sits down to make a serious study of the book from beginning to end has doubts as to:

1. Whether there were one, two or more authors, and
2. If only Jeremiah, the man's insanity!

If it was written by a sane man with an orderly mind, then he has done his best to confuse us! It's very scrappy and consists of bits and pieces which don't easily follow after each other. It's very badly ordered, that is, from our orderly point of view.

To understand the book, we must remember two things in particular:

1. Most of the Old Testament prophets were not primarily writers.

They were preachers who spoke rather than wrote the word that God gave them. A good illustration of this is in **Jeremiah 35** where Jeremiah dictates the scroll to his secretary Baruch.

2. They didn't write in the orderly, chronological, methodical way that we write.

This method used in Jeremiah and elsewhere was normal in those times and in that part of the world. We must also, as Christians, remember another thing. This is God's Word brought to us through God's servants. God used them to give us a message.

If we thus question the authorship, the sanity, the method of writing then we question God himself. Let it suffice us to say that this prophetic message from God, at the hand of Jeremiah, has survived for hundreds of years because God intended it that way. And let us look at the message in a positive way and see what God was telling His people, Israel through His prophet Jeremiah.

In the approximate year 527 BC, God ordained a timid young priest to the prophetic ministry. This young man was destined to become a prominent figure of redemptive history during a very eventful period of history, from approximately 625 to 575 BC.

What kind of man did God choose? How did God shape him, mould him, into the messenger that he needed? Who was this Jeremiah of Anathoth? Why was this a time of historical interest to us? Let us examine these in more detail.

THE TIME

Let us briefly look at the important events of the time:

722 B.C. The fall of Samaria, the original name Shemer. A man from the north, called Jehu, bought this city. The city was sieged by Shalmaneser V, but Sargon is credited with taking it. Jehu had fortified the city so well that it withstood 3 years of sieges.

606 B.C. This was the first time of these three deportations from Jerusalem, To Babylon. At this time, Daniel and the princes were taken.

597 B.C. The Babylonians return to Jerusalem and this time they take the craftsmen.

584 B.C. Again, they return and take the remnant with them. They leave only the old people and the very sick.

The Babylonians followed the system of conquering used at that time. They would take the fittest and scatter them throughout the country so that they couldn't get together to start an uprising, a riot. They replaced these people with other captured people from other countries. This eventually bred discontentment among the people.

THE CIRCUMSTANCES

They were in exile for 70 years from 606 B.C. to 536 B.C. Jeremiah seems to have prophesied for about 50 years. He told them in detail that they would be punished in this way.

First of all, he tells them that they are going into exile, how many years, and by whom, **Jeremiah 25:11-12**. They have been warned, and they have been told that it is for many years, **Jeremiah 29:10 / Jeremiah 29:28**.

Jeremiah gives them God's message. You are going to be there a long time so settle down, build houses, and plant gardens. Jeremiah was the messenger and the message was God's. Jeremiah was telling them to surrender, but the people didn't want to know.

JEREMIAH, THE MAN

In the opening verse of the book of Jeremiah the author clearly identifies himself, his family, his lineage and his hometown.

'The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, one of the priests at Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin.' **Jeremiah 1:1**

This is about all that is known of Jeremiah prior to his call to the public office of a prophet. But these few notices can be amplified by deductions drawn from the total of Jeremiah's writings.

What then can be said about Jeremiah the man?

Jeremiah is the biography of a man. It's a book that is often misunderstood, and the man himself is misunderstood. Four times we find the prophet weeping. He is sometimes known as the weeping prophet. He was morbid and sad.

Jeremiah had many enemies, from all classes of society, kings, idolatrous priests, and false prophets. The priests were only out for gain, so they regarded Jeremiah as a great enemy. His friends were few and far between, although he was friendly with a powerful group of people who were influential in Josiah's day, Gedaliah son of Ahikam being mentioned by name, **Jeremiah 40:6 / Jeremiah 41:16 / Jeremiah 43:6**.

Jeremiah was a bit like Hosea the prophet. He had conflicting emotions. He had an intense love for his country and deep convictions of sin. He didn't have Hosea's unwavering faith in God. Jeremiah often doubted and struggled, His weaknesses were only overcome by the power of God. There were times when he isolated himself from others, mainly because of messages of doom and hopelessness. And partly because he just wanted to be alone. He loved nature. He lacked self-confidence.

This made it difficult for him to deal with people. He was prone to bursts of anger. Of all the prophets he was the frailest and most human. When God called him, he showed his lack of confidence, his human reaction was, ‘I don’t know how to speak.’

He did in the end, there was a fire in his bones later and he had to speak what the Lord told him. He also said, ‘I am too young’, but God didn’t consider this important. I am going to send you, said God and you are going to go, I will command you and you will speak. Don’t be frightened, because I shall be with you, **Jeremiah 1:6-8**.

JEREMIAH WASN’T MARRIED

‘Then the word of the LORD came to me: ‘You must not marry and have sons or daughters in this place.’ Jeremiah 16:1-2

Jeremiah was hated and laughed at all the time. He had a lonely, miserable life. It would have been good to come home to an understanding wife, who could comfort him having faced the people all day long, his people, who hated him. But God said you mustn’t have a wife and children. You would have thought that God would look down on him and give him this small comfort.

Does this seem harsh? On the face of it yes.

But the reason is given in **Jeremiah 16:4** ‘They will die of deadly diseases. They will not be mourned or buried but will be like dung lying on the ground. They will perish by sword and famine, and their dead bodies will become food for the birds and the wild animals.’

This shows how God sees over the fields of time, that it would have been good for Jeremiah to have children, but their end would have been carcasses for the birds of the air. God, in His tender mercy, knew that Jeremiah would watch his wife and children dying, and would have known that this would have been more harrying to Jeremiah than having no children at all.

For a few brief moments in these passages the veil which conceals from us the inner life of a prophet is lifted. We not only hear Jeremiah publicly preaching, but we also listen to him wrestling, agonising in prayer. Not only may we admire the courage he displayed in the face of opposition, but we glimpse something of the uncertainties, the black moods of despair and bitterness which lie behind such courage.

Above all we see a man who is bearing his soul to God, locked in conflict with God, a man for whom the way of faith wasn’t easy, a man who could accuse God of deceiving him. This is a very human prophet, touched by our weaknesses, haunted by the kind of doubts which plague us.

For the last years of Jeremiah’s life, he was prophesying during the siege of Jerusalem. As it covers about 50 years of his life, Jeremiah probably started prophesying around 640 B.C., remember the first deportation was in 606 B.C., Jeremiah was a quiet, refined man. He had a priestly upbringing, he was one of the priests from Anathoth. He was a studious, learned type.

He lived about 5 miles from Jerusalem at Anathoth. He loved the Israelites. God comes to this quiet man and tells him to go out to the people he loves and prophesy their destruction, their end. He had to tell them that they were doomed. In studying the Old Testament, we see that many of God’s chosen people didn’t want to take on this kind of responsibility. But this quiet man was chosen by God before he was born, **Jeremiah 1:5**.

God said that while you were in the womb, ‘I knew you’, and ‘I appointed you’. Before he was born God had chosen him as a prophet, but God will make him strong enough to do the job, **Jeremiah 1:9-10 / Jeremiah 1:17-18**.

God said that he will make him three things:

1. A fortified city.
2. An iron pillar.
3. A bronze wall.

God isn't speaking literary. He is saying that he will make him strong. I know you are a quiet, meek man, but I will make you strong and able, **Jeremiah 1:11-14**.

In **Jeremiah 1:11** God had asked Jeremiah, 'What do you see?' He replied, 'An almond tree branch'. The almond branch tells him that it will be soon. Again, God ask the question, 'What do you see?' in **Jeremiah 1:13**. 'A boiling pot from the north'. God says from the north disaster will come. The Babylonians, although they lived east of them, came from the north, through the Fertile Crescent.

So, we have the time, circumstances and the man.

JEREMIAH, THE PROPHET

This may seem an unnecessary statement to make, but it is essential to the understanding of both this man and his book. Jeremiah's eloquence and unusual poetic gifts have been praised by many, his deep insight, unquestionable courage, unwavering commitment and fervent proclamation of the word of God make him one of the truly outstanding heroes of Bible history.

We know he has his weaknesses, and these I have mentioned. But he was an honest man, honest enough to reveal to all succeeding generations his inner doubts, fears and frustrations. He was a gentle man who was filled with compassion for his countrymen. He was a statesman, perhaps the most outstanding statesman in Judah in those desperate days of the nation's dying agony. But no matter how true these things are, they don't help to understand Jeremiah.

Jeremiah was first and foremost a prophet of God. He believed to the very depths of his soul that he was a spokesman for the Living God. If we fail to recognise this in him, we will never understand Jeremiah. In the thirteenth year of king Josiah, Jeremiah was called by God to the prophetic ministry, **Jeremiah 1:2**.

The circumstances of his call are not known. He could have been in the temple or he could have been in his home. He could have been meditating on the green hillsides around his home. It doesn't seem to have been his privilege to see a vision of divine majesty such as Isaiah saw. But his call made him aware that God had a claim on his life and that he had been predestined to fill the prophetic office before he was born.

JEREMIAH, THE PREACHER

Jeremiah felt an uncontrollable urge to proclaim the message of God. When he tried to hold back the word of God, he became a burning fire shut up in his bones, **Jeremiah 20:8-9**.

God was speaking through his lips. For this reason, he could always start his sermons by saying, 'this is what the Lord says.' The purpose of his preaching ministry is stated in **Jeremiah 1:10** 'to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.'

The negative aspect of this ministry seems to receive greater emphasis than the positive in this verse. Jeremiah preached against sin and warned about judgment. He wasn't merely preaching doom. There was a genuine positive thrust to his preaching. He offered encouragement to those of his countrymen who wanted to listen, encouragement to those who had been deported to Babylon, **Jeremiah 29**. He predicted the coming of the Messiah. **Jeremiah 23:1-8** and of an age of a new covenant, **Jeremiah 31-34**. These are among the grandest passages in the Old Testament.

JEREMIAH, THE WRITER

He wasn't only a priest, a prophet and a preacher. He was also a writer. He felt it his duty to point out some of the false opinions of the Jewish captives in Babylon. So, he wrote a letter to them, **Jeremiah 29:1**.

This letter must have been widely circulated among the exiles for it created quite a stir. False prophets in Babylon sent a letter back to the high priest in Jerusalem demanding that Jeremiah be silenced, **Jeremiah 29:24-29**.

When Jeremiah was forbidden to preach the message of doom he committed his sermons to writing. A scroll dictated by Jeremiah to his faithful scribe, Baruch, got the prophet in trouble with king Jehoiakim. When the scroll was read in his presence, Jehoiakim slashed it to pieces and burned it upon the firepot. Jeremiah then produced a second copy of the scroll adding to the original contents 'many like words.' **Jeremiah 36:32**.

Jeremiah also composed certain lamentations. Tradition assigns the Book of Lamentations to the prophet. In some of the oldest arrangements of the Hebrew Bible, Lamentations seem to have been part of the Book of Jeremiah.

Lamentations is a collection of five poems which lament the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., and the ruin and the exile. Despite the very mournful nature of the book, we see also the note of trust in God and a real hope for the future. The poems are used by the Jews in their remembrance worship of fasting and mourning to commemorate the national disaster of 586 B.C.

HIS MESSAGE IS IGNORED

The people don't accept his message, **Jeremiah 18:18**. Already the people are beginning to hate him for his prophecies. He was under pressure. The message was consistent, so the hate was persistent. This began to affect Jeremiah, **Jeremiah 20:14-15**.

The man was at breaking point. We can come to a time when we wish we hadn't been born. This is a man who is doing the will of the Lord, **Jeremiah 20:9**.

He felt he wanted to say no more about God, He was ridiculed all day long, and everyone mocked him, **Jeremiah 20:7**. His words brought him insult and reproach, **Jeremiah 20:8**.

So, he felt like he wanted to give up, but God was in his bones. He knew that he had to go on. For about 50 years he prophesied and seemingly had no followers. Imagine being sent somewhere as an evangelist, operating in that area for, say, 20 to 30 years, and not having one convert! Such a person would have lost his support years ago! In Jeremiah's case, all they did was laugh at him, ridiculed him, mocked him and insulted him.

VISUAL AIDS

Let us look at some of his visual aids: The is the story of the linen belt, **Jeremiah 13:1-9**. God told him to buy the belt, tie it around his waist, don't let water touch it. He was told to bury it in rocks in the Euphrates, and later told to retrieve it. When he dug the belt out it was completely ruined and useless. And God says in **Jeremiah 13:8-9** that in the same way, he will ruin the pride of Judah and Jerusalem, **Jeremiah 19:1-15**.

The clay jar from the potter. Break the jar said the Lord, I will smash this nation and this city just as this potter's jar is smashed and cannot be repaired, **Jeremiah 27:1-2**.

The yokes of wood and iron. Hananiah the false prophet broke the wooden yoke over his knee, **Jeremiah 28:10 / Jeremiah 28:17**. God told Jeremiah to make a yoke of iron, that Hananiah couldn't break. He also told Hananiah that he would die. He died in the seventh month of that same year, **Jeremiah 24:1-10**.

The good figs and the bad figs, **Jeremiah 51:6**. The stone. Tie the scroll to the stone and throw it into the Euphrates, so will Babylon sink tom rise no more because of the disaster you will bring upon her.

PEOPLE TRUST THE TEMPLE BUT NOT GOD

Jeremiah 7 explains to us the feelings of the people, 'Do not trust in deceptive words and say, 'This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!' **Jeremiah 7:4**.

The repetition here, three times, is for emphasis. In **Jeremiah 22:29** we have the triple experience again, **Jeremiah 22:29**. And God goes on to say that this man, Jehoiachin, is to be recorded as childless, **Jeremiah 22:30**.

He wasn't childless, he had seven sons. But God says count this man as childless because none of his children will sit on the throne of David, **Ezekiel 21:27**.

Going back to **Jeremiah 7** and the triple temple, **Jeremiah 7:4**. This emphasises that they put their trust in the temple, but not in the God for whom the temple was built, **Jeremiah 7:8-11**.

This says that they will steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods, and then go to the temple and say, 'we are safe', safe to do all these detestable things. Has my house become a den of robbers? God asks.

People today live evil lives, adultery, perjury etc., and then go to church on Sundays. Many are doing the very things for which the condemnation of God came down on his very people. And what does God say in **Jeremiah 7:16**? 'So, do not pray for this people nor offer any plea or petition for them; do not plead with me, for I will not listen to you.' **Jeremiah 7:16**

The people had gone so far away from God that he turned His back on them.

LIGHT IN DARKNESS, HOPE SPRINGS ETERNAL

During this siege, it looks as if the future is bleak, which it is, **Jeremiah 32:1-8**. Babylon was besieging Jerusalem. Jeremiah was confined in the courtyard of the royal palace. God tells him that his cousin, Hanamel will come to him to ask him to buy his field in Anathoth. When Hanamel came to Jeremiah, Jeremiah bought the land because he 'knew that this was the word of the Lord.'

Jerusalem is under siege. It looks like the end. So, who would want to buy that land?

The place is going to be taken over by the Babylonians. But God says to Jeremiah, buy it. Why? Because you will come back. Jeremiah showed his confidence in God. After all of this, there will be a future, you will come back to the land, **Jeremiah 32:37**.

Jeremiah 37, there is a stillness in the procedure. Pharaoh's army had marched out of Egypt and, when the Babylonians heard this, they withdrew from Jerusalem, **Jeremiah 37:5**.

God told Jeremiah to go and tell the King of Judah that the Babylonians are coming back to burn the city. As Jeremiah was leaving the city, to sort out his property, he was arrested because they thought he was deserting to the Babylonians, **Jeremiah 37:13**.

He continued to anger the people with his prophecies about the city being burned. So, they threw him into a muddy cistern, **Jeremiah 38:6**.

Ebed-Melek an Ethiopian, thought this was wicked and went and asked the king to release him. The king said 'yes'. He lowered the ropes to Jeremiah to haul him out of the mud. They threw down old rags to put under his arms so that the ropes wouldn't hurt him, **Jeremiah 38:12**.

God told Jeremiah to tell Ebed-Melek that he would not perish because of what he had done for his prophet, **Jeremiah 39:15-18**. The Israelites were deserting God, but God gives His promise of safety to a foreign man.

THE GREAT MESSAGE, A NEW COVENANT

In the heat and cauldron of the Jerusalem siege, Jeremiah stands up and gives this message, that the time of Christ is coming, **Jeremiah 31:31**.

THE SCROLL AND THE FIREPOT

Jeremiah 36, Jehoiakim is the king of Judah. God tells Jeremiah to take a scroll and write down all the words he has spoken, **Jeremiah 36:3**.

Jeremiah dictated the words to Baruch and then instructed Baruch to read them in the temple on a day of fasting. When the royal palace got to hear of this they told Baruch to come and read the scroll to them. The king got to hear of this and also asked to have the scroll read to him, **Jeremiah 36:22-23**.

The scroll is telling the king about the perils to come, but the king thought it was a big joke. He cut them up and burnt them. You can imagine some of the people laughing. Some tried to warn the king not to burn them but to listen, but instead, the king ordered Baruch and Jeremiah to be arrested, but the Lord had hidden them, **Jeremiah 36:25**.

God appeared to Jeremiah and told him to write another scroll. And he said of King Jehoiakim, **Jeremiah 36:30-31**.

And the last verse says that Jeremiah dictated another scroll to Baruch, **Jeremiah 36:32**.

THE REKABITES

Jeremiah 35, this chapter tells the story of the Rekabites. The Rekabites didn't drink wine 'because our forefather Jehonadab son of Rekab gave us this command: 'Neither you nor your descendants must ever drink wine.' **Jeremiah 35:6**.

You can join a Rekabite insurance group today. To join you must sign a declaration that you won't ever touch drink. This story shows that God sent Jeremiah to the Rekabite family to invite them for a drink. The Rekabites just wouldn't touch it, **Jeremiah 35:8**.

The lesson to the story is given in **Jeremiah 35:12-16**. Here we have manmade rules, says God. It is a good rule, but it isn't from God. But they will not break it because 'they are obedient to their father'.

God's people should be as obedient to their father, the God of Israel. As far as God's word is concerned the men of Judah and Jerusalem can go on breaking it again and again and again.

CISTERNs THAT HOLD NO WATER

God's people had committed two sins, **Jeremiah 2:13**.

1. They had forsaken Him, the fountain of living water.
2. They dug cisterns that can hold no water.

They say to wood, 'You are my father,' and to stone, 'You gave me birth.' **Jeremiah 2:27**. This is in reference to idolatry. They called tree trunks father and stone mother, but they had forsaken the God of power. It's so difficult to understand their stupid reasoning.

JEREMIAH STILL PLEADS AND WARNS

This is how it will be when the Babylonians come, **Jeremiah 6:9**. As the vine is picked clean of its fruit, so the Babylonians will 'pick clean' the remnant of Israel when they return, **Jeremiah 6:14**.

The people were saying don't listen to Jeremiah, there is peace already and peace will remain, **Jeremiah 6:16**.

Jeremiah was still pleading with them to come back, **Jeremiah 12:5**.

If you think you are spiritual people now, what in the future? You have lived in a peaceful land of plenty. You have had an easy time. So, how will you manage when you get away from this easy land, this easy life? How are you going to it away from the temple and in a foreign land? If you cannot manage with men on foot, how will you manage with horses? **Jeremiah 15:1**.

God brings out the sinfulness of the people. He has named two of the greatest leaders, Moses and Samuel. These were great leaders of the Israelites. But he says, even if they were to plead with me I would not listen. They have become as deep in sin, I will not listen. This is how hard they are, **Jeremiah 17:1**.

WHAT MORE CAN BE SAID?

As you read through Jeremiah you find that it is all rather repetitive. Jeremiah is throughout making prophecies of what God is going to do. When you come to **Jeremiah 46**, each chapter after that is what God is going to do to the heathen nations. So, the prophecies of the Israelites end in **Jeremiah 46**. But **Jeremiah 52** picks up their story again, it deals with the actual fall of Jerusalem as depicted by Jeremiah.

In **Jeremiah 40** we read of the good man Gedaliah. The king of Babylon put him in charge of the conquered land. Some Jewish zealots murder him. They decide to flee the country. **Jeremiah 41-42** deals with the flight into Egypt. **Jeremiah 43** shows that they take Jeremiah with them to the land of the Egyptians. Jeremiah was taken forcibly and if we are to believe tradition because the Bible doesn't tell us this, Jeremiah died in Egypt. Jeremiah is an object lesson to us on how to survive under constant, continuous pressure against us.

CONCLUSION

As I have written previously, there are many problems with the Book of Jeremiah and its composition. But we should not concern ourselves with academic matters. However, the book got into its present shape, we can be sure of one thing. Through every page, even in the repetition, comes a message and a story of the activities of a great prophet.

A man who was courageous and vulnerable, sensitive and compassionate, a man almost crucified by his contemporaries. There is much to shame us in these pages but there is also much to inspire us, and much from which we can learn.

When we take a look back along the brief journey we have taken through the book of Jeremiah, what remains most vividly in our minds? Is it the man's courage? The man's honesty? The man's loneliness? The man's faithfulness? or perhaps the man's weaknesses? All of that I am sure. But even more, what are the lasting theological truths and challenges of the story? As every other book does, it will speak to us in different ways.

BUT TWO THINGS STAND OUT

1. There is the challenge that we should be very, very careful not to confuse the main essentials of our faith with the often-comparable forms in which it comes to us.

Much of the busy, so-called religious activity that Jeremiah witnessed about him he had to dismiss as absolutely meaningless because it was completely against God's wishes.

There were many things that his people considered essential to their religious life. The temple in Jerusalem, for instance. This was God's dwelling place on earth, a resplendent building with its impressive ritual. Then there was the 'indestructible' city, the city of God.

These are the things that the prophet said to his people, you will now have to live without. In the end, only God is indispensable, and he cannot, and must not, be imprisoned within even the most hallowed and sacred traditions with which we surround him.

It seems that many people would rather die for traditions than live for God. I'm not saying that traditions, patterns of church life, forms of worship, etc., are unimportant because they are. But neither are they to God. And woe betides us if we ever assume that they are.

2. How do we know, today, what the Word of God is for us?

There were plenty of people, including priests and prophets, in Jeremiah's day, who were convinced that they knew exactly what God's word was for them. But they were very wrong. Not only were they wrong, but they were also insincere, and they reflected the religious opinion of their day.

We don't get any easy answers from the Book of Jeremiah, as to how we can know the true word of God. But we get warnings over and over again that it's fatally easy, in all sincerity, to confuse the will of God with our own desires, or with the interests of our own country, or of our own congregation.