

Introduction to Jeremiah

Where is it in the Bible?

Jeremiah is the twenty-fourth book in the Old Testament and is found between Isaiah and Lamentations. It is the second book of the Major Prophets. In Hebrew Bibles it also follows Isaiah, but Ezekiel comes after it without Lamentations intervening.

Who wrote it?

Traditionally the book was considered to have been written by the prophet Jeremiah; chapter 36 describes how Jeremiah had his scribe Baruch write down the words of the Lord on a scroll. However, the book is very complex and the history of its composition is not clear. "While the book probably has a major collection of Jeremiah's preaching, it is now usually understood to be the product of a long growth of development in which many authors/editors have had an important role, especially Jeremiah's secretary, Baruch"¹

When was it written?

Most of the book was probably developed over a period of about fifty years and completed during the exile in Babylon. It should be noted, however, that the Septuagint version of the book has a different order and is about one-eighth shorter than the Hebrew text found in the Masoretic Bible. This has led to speculation that the Hebrew version continued to develop after the Greek translation was done in the third century B.C.E.

What is it about?

The book describes the ministry of Jeremiah during the 40 years leading up to the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C.E. and for a period shortly afterward. There are several different types of material in the book, including poetic oracles, stories about Jeremiah, oracles against the nations, and prose passages that resemble sermons.

How is it structured?

- I. The Call of the Prophet (1:1-19)
- II. Prophecies Concerning Judah (2:1-6:30)
 - a. Judah's Faithlessness and Call to Repentance (2:1-4:4)
 - b. Judgment Will Come (4:5-6:30)
- III. Temple Sermon (7:1-10:25)
- IV. Broken Covenant (11:1-13:27)
- V. Judah's Punishment (14:1-17:18)
- VI. Keeping the Sabbath Holy (17:19-27)
- VII. The Potter and the Jug (18:1-20:18)

1 Terence E. Fretheim at <http://www.enterthebible.org/oldtestament.aspx?rid=44>

- VIII. Condemnation (21:1-25:38)
 - a. Indictment of Leadership (21:1-23:40)
 - b. Vision of the Figs (24:1-10)
 - c. The Coming Exile (25:1-29:32)
- IX. The Book of Consolation (30:1-33:26)
- X. Historical Appendix (34:1-36:32)
- XI. The Last Days of Jeremiah's Ministry (37:1-45:5)
- XII. Oracles against the Nations (46:1-51:64)
- XIII. The Fall of Jerusalem (52:1-34)

What are some things to look for?

- **Baruch:** Baruch was Jeremiah's companion and secretary. In chapter 36, he is specifically instructed to write down the words of the LORD that Jeremiah dictated to him. There is speculation that Baruch also wrote the prose sections in chapters 36-45 that describe Jeremiah's activities.
- **God's Character:** Many aspects of God's character are seen in this book. God is seen as sovereign over all and the ruler of the present and the future. God works in various ways, even through Israel's enemies, to achieve God's purposes. "The range of emotions shown by God ... is unparalleled in biblical literature: sorrow, lament, weeping, wailing, grief, pain, anguish, regret, heartache, anger, disappointment, and frustration are all evident."² God's anger is perhaps the most obvious. Although God's response to the people's unfaithfulness is exhibited in wrath and judgment, there is also agony for God over what has happened. God is bound by promises that have been made because God will be faithful to them. God's grace triumphs over judgment when people repent and turn to God.
- **Mixture of Prophecy and Biography:** The book of Jeremiah is unique in the way it combines prophetic material with information about what is occurring in the life of the prophet. This makes it easier for readers to connect the word of God with the actual situations to which it is addressed.
- **New Covenant:** In Jeremiah 31:31-34, the prophet speaks of a "new covenant" that will be made between God and the people. It will be written on people's hearts and essentially be unbreakable (31:32). This is the only place in the Old Testament where the phrase "new covenant" is found. Christians see the fulfillment of this prophecy in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The title "New Testament" for the second part of the Christian Bible is derived from this passage, since *covenant* and *testament* are alternate translations of the Hebrew word used there.

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