

Jeremiah 1: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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- [0 : 0 0] Jeremiah chapter 1 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.
- Then I said, Our Lord God, behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth. But the Lord said to me, Do not say, I am only a youth, for to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak.
- Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, declares the Lord. Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth, and the Lord said to me, Behold, I have put my words in your mouth.
- 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. And the word of the Lord came to me, saying, Jeremiah, what do you see?
- And I said, I see an almond branch. Then the Lord said to me, You have seen well, for I am watching over my word to perform it. The word of the Lord came to me a second time, saying, What do you see?
- [1 : 3 6] And I said, I see a boiling pot facing away from the north. Then the Lord said to me, Out of the north disaster shall be let loose upon all the inhabitants of the land.
- For behold, I am calling all the tribes of the kingdoms of the north, declares the Lord. And they shall come, and every one shall set his throne at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem, against all its walls all around, and against all the cities of Judah.
- And I will declare my judgments against them, for all their evil in forsaking me. They have made offerings to other gods, and worshipped the works of their own hands. But you, dress yourself for work, arise, and say to them everything that I command you.
- Do not be dismayed by them, lest I dismay you before them. And I, behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls, against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests, and the people of the land.
- They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you. For I am with you, declares the Lord, to deliver you. Jeremiah is the largest prophetic book, and one of the three major prophets.
- [2 : 4 6] Jeremiah, as we learn from the beginning of his prophecy, prophesied from the thirteenth year of Josiah, which is 627 BC. It was in this year that Asurbanipal of Assyria died.
- During this period, Assyria was in decline, and Babylon was the rising power. Jeremiah continued until a few years after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC, over 40 years later, when he wrote from Egypt.
- Jeremiah's ministry was in the final decades of the kingdom of Judah, prior to the captivity in Babylon, and he foretold what awaited the nation. The book shares its final chapter with the book of 2 Kings.

The book of Jeremiah is a compilation of material. Jack Lundbaum writes, Collections of oracles, confessions, dialogues, liturgical compositions, and other prophetic utterances, supplemented by a rich corpus of historical, biographical, and autobiographical material written in another hand, combined to give us the most complete profile of a Hebrew prophet, also one of the best profiles of any figure in the ancient world.

The character of the book of Jeremiah as a compilation has led some to question its literary unity. However, closer study of the book will reveal ways in which both various parts, and perhaps even the whole, all hang together.

[4 : 06] It is entirely possible that the logic by which it hangs together may be strange to us as moderns, but we should not dismiss its coherence on that account. The ordering is strongly influenced by chronology, but not determined by it.

Material is placed out of chronological order at several points in the book. As Lundbaum maintains, Chronology is merely one of several criteria by which the compilation of such a book would proceed.

At some points material of a specific genre is clustered together. At others, thematic considerations seem to be more determinative of the order. And at yet others, material is ordered according to the audience to whom it is addressed.

The division of the material addressed to different nations in the later part of the book is an instance of this principle dominating the ordering. Lundbaum notes the importance of catchwords, key repeated words or phrases, which can also serve as connective tissue between adjacent units of material, especially in the first 20 chapters.

The material of the book is very diverse in character. Much of the material first took an oral form, but was already written down in Jeremiah's lifetime, according to divine instruction and dictated by Jeremiah himself to Baruch, the son of Nariah.

[5 : 21] This is something recorded in the book itself. The fourth year of Jehoiakim, 605 BC, is a key date in the prophecy. In chapter 36, we learn that in that year, Jeremiah gathered together his past prophecies and dictated them to Baruch.

The writing down of Jeremiah's prophecy is part of the story recorded in the book, and the book, in its various parts and in later editions as its collection grew, wasn't just a sort of cold storage to preserve the past words of the prophet, but is, as it were, an active player in the story itself, serving as a testimony.

There are differences between the Masoretic text and the Septuagint, the Hebrew and the Greek versions of the text. The Septuagint version is significantly shorter, having a greater difference in length than any other Old Testament book.

The versions diverge at chapter 25, verse 13, and in the Masoretic text, there is verse 14 as a bridge to the material that follows. It's followed by oracles against the foreign nations in the Septuagint, which are situated in chapters 46 to 51 in the Masoretic text.

The oracles against the nations are differently ordered in the Septuagint version as well. The Septuagint misses various superscriptions for prophecies. The Masoretic text contains various clarifying single words or phrases.

[6 : 43] There are some duplicated passages in the Masoretic text, which accounts for some of the discrepancy in the length of the books. The shorter Septuagint version was rejected by the rabbis in favour of the longer Masoretic text, and there are good reasons for their judgement on this point.

Lundbaum suggests that chapters 1 to 20 were the initial edition of the Book of Jeremiah, from which the collection later grew. These are followed by a collection addressed to the royal house of Judah and to the prophets.

Much of the heart of the Book of Jeremiah, from chapter 24 to 45, is narrative material concerning Jeremiah. Near its heart is a body of material that has been called the Book of Restoration, or the Book of Comfort, or the Book of Consolation, from chapters 30 to 33.

From chapter 46 to 51, there are a series of oracles of judgement against foreign nations, culminating in the declaration of judgement upon Babylon in chapters 50 and 51.

The book ends with a historical appendix taken from 2 Kings. It seems likely that two versions of the book were formed, one in Egypt and the other in Babylon. The opening three verses of the book are the superscription for the book, likely from the hand of Baruch the scribe, although it is possible that it does not cover the entirety of the material in the book, as there is some material that was produced after the captivity.

[8 : 05] The superscription's dating, by terminating with the captivity of Jerusalem, highlights the importance of the captivity as a sort of event horizon for Jeremiah's ministry. The northern kingdom of Israel had already been removed by the Assyrians about a century earlier.

While Josiah's reforms initially held out hope for the nation of Judah, following Josiah's tragic death, Judah was under the dominance of first Egypt and then Babylon. Jerusalem surrendered to Babylon in 597 BC, with Zedekiah being installed as king by Nebuchadnezzar.

After a second rebellion against Babylon, Jerusalem was destroyed and there was a mass deportation. In 586 BC, Jeremiah prophesied in dark days and his ministry was marked by personal sorrow and suffering.

Jeremiah came from the village of Anathoth in the hill country of Benjamin, about two to three miles north of Jerusalem. He is the son of Hilkiah, one of the priests. Although the high priest at that time was called Hilkiah, he was likely not Jeremiah's father.

The fact that Jeremiah had a priestly background is not mentioned elsewhere. It may not be an especially relevant fact for the story of Jeremiah in this book, but as Lamborn notes, it serves as a corrective to flat interpretations of a life which, in reality, was dynamic and complex.

[9 : 27] Jeremiah was a historical figure, whose identity, character, story and background exceed that which is recorded in the book of his name. We have several prophetic call narratives of various kinds in scripture.

The Lord appears to and commissions Moses at the burning bush at Horeb. Isaiah chapter 6 describes a temple vision given to Isaiah, where he was sent as a prophet to a nation that would not hear.

Ezekiel chapters 1 to 3 relate Ezekiel's theophanic chariot vision of the Lord and his vocation as a watchman for the nation. Jeremiah's call is recounted in this first chapter.

This section opens the book proper and the smaller body of it from chapter 1 to chapter 20. As Lamborn observes, the material of this section is bracketed by the opening words of the Lord in verse 5 and the closing words of Jeremiah in chapter 20 verses 14 to 18.

Verse 5 of this chapter reads, Jeremiah's words in chapter 20 verses 14 to 18 read, Let him hear a cry in the morning and an alarm at noon, because he did not kill me in the womb.

[11 : 00] So my mother would have been my grave and her womb forever great. Why did I come out from the womb to see toil and sorrow and spend my days in shame?

The final verse of chapter 20 serves as an inclusio or bookend for the entire section of the book. The Lord declares to Jeremiah that he appointed him as a prophet from the very womb of his mother.

The setting apart of Jeremiah for his ministry is presented in three parallel expressions in verse 5. A similar claim is made by the apostle Paul in Galatians chapter 1 verses 15 to 16.

However, such claims are not that common.

Beyond Paul and Jeremiah, the setting apart of prophets from the womb is not usually mentioned. However, we do see something similar in the story of John the Baptist, who leapt in his mother's womb when visited by Mary, who was bearing Jesus in her womb.

[12 : 14] Samuel and Moses are also both set apart from their earliest days. Isaiah talks about the servant of the Lord being formed in the womb by the Lord. Jeremiah's election from the womb, as the Lord describes it, is an intimate matter.

He was known before he was formed and, by implication, formed accordingly, prepared for the task for which the Lord had for him. He was consecrated in the womb, set apart for the Lord's mission.

His appointment as a prophet to the nations preceded the Lord's informing him of that fact. The Lord's purpose for Jeremiah, as we can see in Jeremiah's words that end this initial part of the book, exceeds Jeremiah's own grasp.

A parallel between Jeremiah and Samuel can be drawn in this chapter. As the Lord declares to Jeremiah that he has been appointed in this manner, Jeremiah is keenly aware of his youth and he questions his call, describing himself as a boy or a lad.

It is likely that we should consider Jeremiah as being in his teens, possibly his early teens, at the time of his call. Jeremiah's sense of his own inadequacy is answered by the Lord's assurance of his equipping of him.

[13 : 22] This sense of inadequacy, specifically in the area of speech, is a common complaint of prophets at the time of their commission. Moses complains about his speech difficulties and Isaiah of his unclean lips.

Jeremiah also feels in his youth his inability to stand before the authorities and rulers. He is just a lad, not a mature man. The Lord assures him of his commission.

Jeremiah will be operating under and with the authority of the Lord's message, which sets him over the nations to whom he has sent. He has no reason to be afraid of them. The Lord has sent him to them and the Lord can deliver him from them.

The Lord, to assure him of this fact, touches his mouth. Jeremiah's mouth is directly empowered and commissioned by the Lord. We see something similar in Isaiah chapter 6 verses 6 to 7.

The Lord's words are placed into his mouth.

[14 : 31] Jeremiah chapter 5 verse 14 also speaks of this. The connection between the word of the Lord and the prophet is an especially close one.

The prophet does not just relate to the word of the Lord as something outside of himself. The word of the Lord is taken inside of himself. He starts to embody the word. He is part of the message himself, as we will see in the case of Jeremiah.

We see something of this also in the book of Ezekiel chapter 2 verse 6 to 3 verse 2. And you, son of man, be not afraid of them, nor be afraid of their words, though briars and thorns are with you and you sit on scorpions.

Be not afraid of their words, nor be dismayed at their looks, for they are a rebellious house. And you shall speak my words to them, whether they hear or refuse to hear, for they are a rebellious house.

But you, son of man, hear what I say to you. Be not rebellious like that rebellious house. Open your mouth and eat what I give you. And when I looked, behold, a hand was stretched out to me, and behold, a scroll of a book was in it.

[15 : 47] And he spread it before me, and it had writing on the front and on the back, and there were written on it words of lamentation and mourning and woe. And he said to me, Son of man, eat whatever you find here.

Eat this scroll and go, speak to the house of Israel. So I opened my mouth, and he gave me this scroll to eat. The prophet is more fully identified with the word that he bears.

He's not just a messenger boy. He himself is part of the message, as we will see in the biographical and the autobiographical elements of this book, which are both very important.

James Jordan has spoken about the development from the priest to the king to the prophet. The priest is connected with the law, primarily expressed in the do this, don't do that of the commandments.

The king is associated with wisdom and insight. The king is able to look at the world and bring wisdom from the law to bear upon it. The king then has internalized elements of the law.

[16 : 46] In the character of the prophet, there is an even further development. The prophet is a sort of embodiment of the word. Here, the authority of the word is something that Jeremiah himself is described as possessing.

He is not just a messenger bearing an external word. The word that will tear down and build up nations is a word that he is part of. The word is not just an authority over against him.

The word is an authorizing power that drives him. The first vision that Jeremiah is given is a surprising one. It's a vision of an almond branch. The reason for it is because the Lord is watching over his word.

The Lord is going to ensure that the words of Jeremiah do not fall to the ground. He will speak with authority and that word will come to pass. The meaning of this vision is difficult for us to perceive in English.

It is based upon a pun. The almond, shokade, is connected with the watching from the verb shokad. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, the almond tree's significance is seen in its connection with the lampstand in the tabernacle and also with the high priest who is connected with that.

[17 : 53] Aaron's rod budded and it budded with almond blossoms. Jeremiah is given a second vision and this time it's a boiling pot facing away from the north. The pot is on its side, its contents about to spill out.

It's facing towards the south having received a blow from the north. A boiling pot could be seen as a powerful image of a city. All the affairs of life that occur within the city are like this big boiling pot and now it's about to be tipped over.

God is going to bring disaster from the north, judgment against his people. Rulers from other lands are going to be gathered together against them, surrounding the city, besieging it.

They're going to be sitting in the gate on thrones. The city gate is the place of judgment and foreign kings will sit there in that capacity. We see that later on in the prophecy being fulfilled in chapter 39 verse 3.

However, as we see in verse 16, it will be the Lord who is declaring judgment upon the city when that happens. He will be judging them because they have forsaken him for idols. Jeremiah needs to prepare himself for action.

[18 : 59] He must gird up his loins. He must declare what the Lord has commanded him to declare. He has an incredibly difficult task ahead of him. Jerusalem's walls will be surrounded and ultimately captured by besieging forces.

Jeremiah himself would be besieged by the people, all levels of the population and their rulers, but would be made like an effectively fortified city by the Lord. They will all fight against him, but they would ultimately be frustrated in their assaults.

We return to this theme in chapter 15 verses 20 to 21. And I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze. They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail over you.

For I am with you to save you and deliver you, declares the Lord. I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless. As Jeremiah will discover, one person with God is a majority, or as the Apostle Paul puts it, if God is for us, who can be against us?

A question to consider, can you see any parallels between Jeremiah's call and Jesus' statement to Peter in Matthew chapter 16 verses 17 to 19?