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Reading Jeremiah

TIMOTHY M. WILLIS

The Book of Jeremiah is a book of prophecy. More than any other book of prophecy, the Book of Jeremiah reveals to us how a book of prophecy came into being. This gives us some helpful pointers about the nature of a book of prophecy and how we are to read it. In particular, it shows the importance of distinguishing between the message in an isolated prophecy—read in the light of its original context—and the message in the same prophecy as it is presented within the context of an entire book of prophecy. A good place to begin to see this is with Jeremiah 1.1–3 and Jeremiah 36. The former opens the door to the historical setting of Jeremiah and his book, and the latter points us more directly to the phenomenon of prophetic writing.

JEREMIAH IN THE HISTORY OF ISRAEL

The introduction to the book (Jer 1.1–3) lumps together the prophecies of the book within a general forty-year time span, from 627 B.C.—the thirteenth year of Josiah—until 586 B.C.—the fall of Jerusalem. We can push this date for the final composition of the book down even further, because the extended narrative in Jeremiah 39–44 relates events that occurred in the first few years after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. The final chapter concludes with the freeing of King Jeconiah (a.k.a. Jehoiachin or Coniah) in 561 B.C. This gives the general parameters for the dates of Jeremiah’s prophetic career, but we need to expand our scope to understand the historical situation in Israel during those years. We need to recognize the important events in Israel that took place during the years before, during, and after Jeremiah’s prophetic career leading up to the time the book was compiled in order to appreciate more fully what Jeremiah was saying during his career.

1. Before Jeremiah

The introduction to the book mentions that Jeremiah was a “son of Hilkiyah, of the priests who were in Anathoth” (Jer 1.1). The priests of Anathoth were almost certainly descendants of the priest Abiathar, who himself was a descendant of the priest Eli (see 1 Sam 1–4; 14.3; 22.20; 2 Sam 8.17; 15.24–29). This family was a living example of people who had fallen out of favor with the Lord to such an extent that he had revoked his covenant with them (1 Sam 2.27–36). This falling out culminated in the expulsion of Abiathar to Anathoth by the decree of Solomon (1 Kgs 1.7; 2.26–27). This in turn set up a long-standing rivalry between Jeremiah’s family and the descendants of Zadok, the priestly family that led worship in the Jerusalem temple throughout most of Israel’s history. We find several passages in the Book of Jeremiah where Jeremiah faces direct opposition from these Zadokite priests (like Pashhur, in Jer 20.1–6).

These descendants of Zadok had a strong relationship with the House of David. It is likely that Isaiah was among Zadok’s descendants, and that he supported and guided the Davidic king, Hezekiah, to trust in the Lord to deliver Jerusalem and the temple from the powerful Assyrians (2 Kgs 18–20). That deliverance (in 701 B.C.) cemented the claims of David’s family to the throne and the claims of Zadok’s family to the

priesthood. Seventy-five years later, a young Jeremiah would have been watching as the Zadokite priests carried out the reform of King Josiah, in accord with the commands of Moses.

2. Josiah's Reform (622-609 B.C.)

The reform of Josiah began in 622 B.C., just five years into Jeremiah's ministry, and it continued until the death of Josiah in 609 B.C. (2 Kgs 22–23). The Bible identifies the primary catalyst for this reform as “the book of the law.” For many years most scholars have agreed that the details of this reform match the guidelines for worship found in Deuteronomy, so that it is generally accepted that this “book of the law” contained Deuteronomy. It is no small coincidence, then, that there are many expressions in Jeremiah that one also finds in Deuteronomy. Jeremiah assesses the conduct of his listeners from the standpoint of God's laws in Deuteronomy. In a sense he is calling them “back to the Bible.” He is holding up the word of the Lord to the people as a mirror for evaluating their words and actions. His hope is that their lives will conform to God's will. His assessment of King Josiah is always positive. Sadly, Jeremiah's assessments of Josiah's successors are anything but complimentary.

3. Babylon's First Invasion of Judah (597 B.C.)

Following the death of Josiah in 609 B.C., the next major event to affect Judah was the invasion of the Babylonian armies in 597 B.C. The years in between these two events saw some of the harshest criticisms by Jeremiah. These are the years of King Jehoiakim, son of Josiah. The return to wickedness in his reign represents the last straw in Israel's untrustworthy relationship with the Lord. Jeremiah repeatedly calls the king and his subjects to an internal devotion to Yahweh and not just physical actions intended to meet the visible requirements of the law. The tone of Jeremiah's message during these years is one of threat, as he proclaims that the Lord “plans” to do unless the hearts of the people change. The reactions of the Zadokite priests (Jeremiah 19–20) and King Jehoiakim (Jeremiah 36) give us clear indications of how the Israelite leaders and the nation as a whole were responding. The death of Jehoiakim in December 598 B.C. and the succession of his son Jeconiah might have provided a ray of hope for some. The appearance of the Babylonians at the gates of Jerusalem a couple of months later signals the end of that hope. The Babylonians cart away Jeconiah and 10,000 others, and they appoint his uncle Zedekiah in his place.

There is a noticeable shift here in Jeremiah's tone, as he now speaks solely about the impending destruction of Jerusalem. He sees no possibility for repentance and another miraculous deliverance. Throughout the reign of Zedekiah (597-586 B.C.), Jeremiah's constant refrain is that “sword, famine, and plague” await the people of Jerusalem. Their only hope for survival lies through the dark tunnel of exile in Babylon. He repeatedly advises his listeners to surrender, so that they might be carried to Babylon, because it is in Babylon that they have a future and a hope (Jer 29.1–23). There is no more hope for the city of Jerusalem, but there is still hope for the people of God.

The inability of the people to distinguish between these two exposes a core misunderstanding held by Jeremiah's listeners. They could not distinguish the spiritual kingdom of God from the physical place of Jerusalem. They could not distinguish the spiritual presence of God from the physical “home” of God.

4. The Fall of Jerusalem (586 B.C.)

This points to the deeper significance of the fall of Jerusalem, which is the final major event in Jeremiah's career. It comes after an agonizingly futile defense of the city, which lasted for eighteen months. The people's natural reaction to the fall of Jerusalem will be to think that the Lord has abandoned his people forever. They will think that he has destroyed his home, and he cannot return. As Jerusalem falls, the tone of Jeremiah's message changes. Now he gives message after message filled with reasons for the people to have hope. These words of hope are particularly strong in Jeremiah 30–33, where Jeremiah speaks of salvation, restoration, rebuilding, replanting, redemption, grace, healing, mercy, comfort, gladness, and good fortune.

Such a message of hope is implicit in the production of the Book of Jeremiah for an audience of exiles, because the book is not there to justify the Lord's destruction of Jerusalem; it exists to equip readers to lead righteous lives. To do this, they need to learn to look beyond the physical to the spiritual. The Lord has to strip away Jerusalem and its physical delusion of the Lord's presence in order for them to discern where the Lord truly dwells—in the hearts of his followers.

JEREMIAH THE BOOK

The Book of Jeremiah intends to re-present the prophecies of Jeremiah, as a whole, to a new audience. These are prophecies that Jeremiah spoke within a span of about forty years, but now the book presents them as a single collection to an audience living a generation after the destruction of Jerusalem. The book takes the prophecies of Jeremiah and presents them for the "consideration" of an audience living after 561 B.C. This process of taking what Jeremiah has already spoken and re-presenting it to a new audience is something that Jeremiah himself had begun. Jeremiah 36 relates a story about this from the middle of Jeremiah's career (605-604 B.C.), during the reign of Jehoiakim. Jeremiah has been prophesying for twenty-three years, and the Lord now directs him to dictate his prophecies to Baruch, the scribe. The Lord's stated purpose in doing this is to get the people currently living in Judah at that time to hear about God's plans to punish them. His hope is that a reminder about Jeremiah's message will prompt the people to repent of their wicked ways (Jer 36.2). He is unsuccessful in that attempt, but the later production of the Book of Jeremiah constitutes another attempt, for another audience.

These opening verses of chapter 36 reveal a couple of basic principles about committing prophecy to writing. The prophecies that Jeremiah dictates to Baruch at this time are prophecies he had delivered orally over the previous two decades. When he had spoken them, they were "the word of the Lord" to the people of Judah. The Lord has Jeremiah commit them to writing here because the people had not "heard" them the way the Lord desired. Putting them into writing gives the people a second opportunity to hear the word of the Lord and respond to it. Circumstances would have changed since the original delivery of those prophecies. Providing a second opportunity implies the hope that intervening events might have made the people more receptive to the Lord's message. Even though most of that message involves threats against Jerusalem, there is still the hope that the people can change for the better.

This story in Jeremiah 36 divides the career of Jeremiah in half. Many of the prophecies now in the book were spoken before Jeremiah committed them to writing, and many more were spoken after this event. We should be aware, however, that there is a lack of chronological arrangement in the present Book of Jeremiah. In many cases there is no indication of the date for the original delivery of a given prophecy; in other instances, the text moves back and forth between prophecies he uttered before the events in Jeremiah 36 (605-604 B.C.) and prophecies he uttered after the events in Jeremiah 36. As evidence of this, the following chart shows the probable dates for the prophecies just in chapters 21–28.

- 21.1–10—588-587 B.C. (siege of Jerusalem)
- 21.11–22.9—uncertain
- 22.10–12—609 B.C. (reign of Shallum/Jehoahaz; see 2 Kings 23.31–35)
- 22.13–23—609-598 B.C. (reign of Jehoiakim)
- 22.24–30—597 B.C. (reign of Coniah/Jeconiah)
- 23.1–8—597-588 B.C. (reign of Zedekiah)
- 23.9–40—uncertain
- 24.1–10—597-588 B.C. (reign of Zedekiah)
- 25.1–14—605 B.C. (fourth year of Jehoiakim's reign)
- 25.15–38—uncertain
- 26.1–24—607 B.C. (beginning of Jehoiakim's reign)
- 27.1–28.17—594 B.C. (fourth year of Zedekiah's reign)

It is clear that the book is not concerned with presenting these prophecies in chronological order. This suggests that the writer/compiler of the book does not expect his readers to interpret these prophecies simply within their original historical context, from the perspective of the original readers, and solely from their point of view. That is to separate the reader from the original hearer, as if the reader is allowed to attribute the original hearer's initial rejection to some fault peculiar to that hearer. The writer does not want this. He wants the reader to identify with the original hearer; but he also wants later readers to take advantage of hindsight, and to read these prophecies in the light of preceding and subsequent prophecies and events.

This principle applies not only to reading across chapters, but also within a single chapter. For example, Jeremiah's Temple Sermon (Jer 7.1–15) is followed by Yahweh's decision not to hear Jeremiah's prayers on behalf of the people (7.16–20) and by oracles about how the people's failure to listen eventually leads to their destruction. The Lord speaks *through* Jeremiah in the Temple Sermon, but he speaks *to* Jeremiah in verses 16–20; then he speaks *through* him in verses 21–26 and *to* him in verses 27–29, and *through* him again in 7.27–8.3. The compiler of the book apparently wants the exilic readers to read these prophecies in conjunction with one another, even though they originally came to Jeremiah at different times and under different circumstances. He wants the reader to see that the original hearers did not listen to the Lord's words through Jeremiah, and that their rejection eventually led the Lord to ignore Jeremiah's prayers on their behalf (7.16–20) and to bring disaster on them (7.21–8.3).

These observations reveal two basic assumptions about prophetic literature. The first is that prophetic writing constitutes "the word of the Lord" that is being "recycled" and used by the Lord in a new context. This is fundamental to books of prophecy. Every book of prophecy consists of oracles spoken to one audience but then re-presented to a later audience. The second audience is expected to take advantage of their improved vantage point (provided by hindsight) and learn from the successes and failures of that original audience. The second assumption is that the word of the Lord *can* change people, although it is never certain that people *will* change. Jeremiah 18.1–11 is a prophecy that specifically illustrates this assumption. The Lord gave the original prophecy with the expectation that the audience would "hear" it and change accordingly. The Lord has the prophecy placed in a book with the same expectation for later readers, that they will change their lives according to the words that the prophet has spoken. This "recycling" of prophecies also shows that the initial audience's response to a prophecy does not dictate how a subsequent audience will respond. Committing prophecy to writing accords every generation of readers—every reader—the opportunity to hear or to reject the word of the Lord. The Lord expects people to hear his word. Changing historical circumstances coupled with the nature of the human heart (Jer 17.9–10) continually make that result uncertain. For this reason the prophetic call to "hear the word of the Lord" is always a fresh challenge.

CENTRAL THEMES OF JEREMIAH

These comments regarding the human heart bring us to one of the central themes of the Book of Jeremiah. It would be good for us to be cognizant of these themes as we enter into the book. We have already made some allusion to the connections between Jeremiah and Deuteronomy. Let us consider a couple of the most prominent themes common to these two works and then conclude with a few suggestions about where this might lead us in our reading of Jeremiah.

Perhaps the most comprehensive theme common to Deuteronomy and Jeremiah is covenant. Deuteronomy constitutes the final efforts by Moses to get the people to devote themselves to their covenant with the Lord. He not only reminds them of the terms of that covenant, he appeals to them over and over to remain faithful to it. Jeremiah's primary goal is to provoke the people of his day to rededicate themselves to covenant relationship with the Lord. Jeremiah looks to Deuteronomy for the language to describe a genuine understanding of that relationship. Even when he writes of a "new covenant" (Jer 31.31–34), the

expectations for that covenant have their origin in the words of Moses in Deuteronomy (see, for example, Deut 6.6; 11.18; 26.16–19; 29.12–15).

The clearest illustration of the linguistic element to this link comes in Jeremiah's use of the word "heart." Moses calls on the people to "love the Lord your God with all your heart" (Deut. 6.5; 10.12; 13.3; 26.16). The writer of Kings declares that King Josiah, the king of Jeremiah's youth, had done this (2 Kgs 23.25), but Jeremiah accuses the rest of the people of not following their king's example (Jer 3.10). Their sins, rather than the Lord's laws, are written on their hearts (Jer 17.1). It is the "stubbornness of their evil hearts" that leads to the exile (Jer 3.17; 7.24; 18.12); but it will be their repentance to the Lord "with all their hearts" that will lead to their return (Jer 24.7; 29.13). Such repentance requires the "circumcision of their hearts," just as Moses had prescribed for their ancestors (Deut 10.16; 30.6; Jer 4.3–4; 9.25–26; cp. Rom 2.28–29).

These references to the "hearts" of the Israelites remind us of one other central theme of Jeremiah. This is the theme of (proper) worship. Readers quickly become aware of the problem of idolatry that Jeremiah confronts, and in this he again relies heavily on the language of Deuteronomy. For example, both books speak of idols as "gods whom you have not known" (Deut 11.28; Jer 7.9), and Jeremiah calls on his audience to "know the Lord" instead (Jer 9.23–24). In this Jeremiah is simply appealing to his listeners to "love the Lord with all your heart," as Moses had said (Deut 4.39–40; 6.5). But Jeremiah also goes deeper with this than others before him. He shows that idolatry had crept into the worship of Yahweh in more subtle ways. He accuses the people of trusting in the temple (Jer 7.14) and the worship that they perform there, when they should be trusting in the Lord who had chosen that place as his home. He similarly implies that they trust in the presence of the Davidic king for their safety, rather than the God who had chosen that royal line.

It is in ways such as these that Jeremiah continues to challenge readers of his book with the word of the Lord, a word spoken originally to a different audience in a different setting but now presented in this book. It is a call to "hear the word of the Lord," a word that intends to teach us, reprove us, correct us, and train us in righteousness, that we too can love the Lord our God with all our hearts.

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