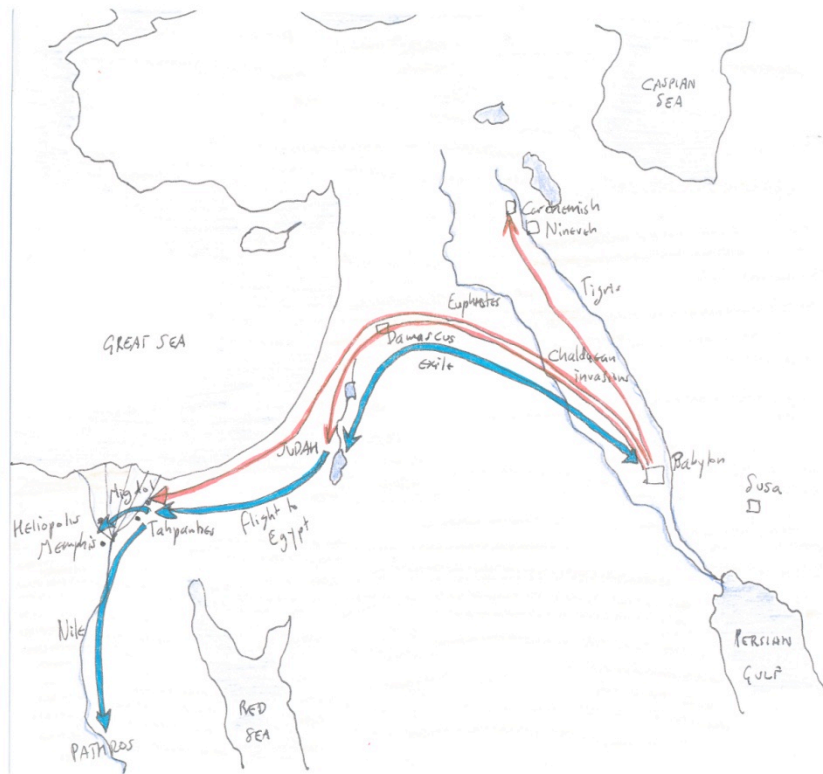


the Book  
of  
Jeremiah





# The Book of Jeremiah

## Introduction

These notes support a series of four talks to be held at St Bart's Bible Study Group. The content of the sessions will be:

1. Jeremiah's own life story
2. Events in Judah and the Ancient Near East during Jeremiah's life.
3. Looking at Jeremiah's prophecies and preaching.
4. The imagery Jeremiah used, and how we find relevance in his teaching and the events in his lifetime today.

Jeremiah is a complicated book: it is very long, and it has been edited greatly during its earlier history. Parts of it seem to have been compiled from other shared sources, and many of the narratives and prophecies have layers of extra notes and detail added. It has also been rearranged so that it is out of chronological order, and there are repetitions within it. Thus, although it contains information about Jeremiah's life and about the historical events leading up to the fall of Jerusalem, an extremely important phase in the history of the Jewish people, it is quite hard to untangle and decipher.

## Themes to watch out for

Jeremiah was prophesying around the time of the fall of the Southern Kingdom, Judah, to the Babylonian invaders, a long-drawn out process which eventually led to a large contingent of the Jewish people going off into exile, a very traumatic displacement for a nation whose identity was based around worshipping God in their temple in Jerusalem.

Jeremiah made repeated efforts to warn the complacent people of God's growing dissatisfaction with their behaviour, and of how futile their attempts to persuade other powerful rulers to intervene on their behalf were going to be. In order to get the king, the court, the priests' and the people's attention he made use of imagery, including acting out allegories of what would happen, and repeated similar metaphors in prophecy over and over again.

All the time, he knew he would rather be able to give the people a comforting message, but he could not lie, and that was not what God had called him to do. At every turn the people seemed to ignore his advice and do the exact opposite, so he saw more and more troubles heaped upon them. Jeremiah's "confessions" in the book are heartfelt pleas to God about the inner turmoil he feels at having to prophesy this way.

Finally, though, he was sure that God would one day return the people to their homeland, and would cause the Babylonian empire itself to fall. He also

predicted that the people would be so joyful on their return that they would have a real relationship with God and would willingly sign up to a new covenant. However, he did not see this happening in his own lifetime.

## Jeremiah's life

- ◆ Jeremiah was born in around 646 BC, a century after Isaiah, to a priestly family near Jerusalem.
- ◆ His call by God happened in around 627 or 626 BC, during the reign of Josiah, who was a religious reformer.
- ◆ After Josiah died, the succeeding kings disagreed with him and he was in danger – having to flee, getting imprisoned.
- ◆ He was prophesying throughout the turbulent times in Palestine – Nebuchadnezzar took control of Palestine but failed to seize Jerusalem at once.
- ◆ The people of Judah rebelled and sought help from Egypt, unsuccessfully, and eventually Jerusalem fell.
- ◆ Jeremiah remained in Palestine at first
- ◆ Once his friend Gedaliah, appointed governor by the Chaldeans, had been assassinated, a party of Jews carried Jeremiah off to Egypt where he probably died.

(It's often hard to date Old Testament events too closely as the Israelites used a different calendar system, starting in what would be our springtime. They also recorded dates by the year of the king's reign, and part-years were counted as whole years.)

A table of accounts of Jeremiah's life in the book:

Chapter reference	Event
19:1 – 20:6	Jeremiah buys and breaks a jug to show the calamity that will befall the people, in the valley of Topheth; the priest Pashur arrests him as he makes this prophecy in the temple
26	Jeremiah is arrested again in the temple, but some important protectors amongst the people speak for him against the priests. Another prophet, Uriah, is not so lucky.
36	Jeremiah writes a scroll of prophecies, dictating it to his scribe Baruch. Baruch reads it out to the palace scribes, who advise him and Jeremiah to go into hiding. The scroll is sent on to the king, who burns it piece by piece as it is read out.
45	Jeremiah tells Baruch that he will escape with his life.
28 – 29	The false prophet Hananiah and Jeremiah have a public disagreement. Hananiah breaks the yoke Jeremiah is wearing as a symbol, and Jeremiah warns that light yokes can be replaced with heavy ones, and that is what YHWH will do. Jeremiah then warns the first set of exiles in Babylon to settle down, not to expect to be

	rescued very soon, although their descendants will come back eventually.
51:59 – 64	Jeremiah predicts the fall of Babylon, and gives the scroll to Seraiah to throw into the Euphrates.
34:8 – 22	King Zedekiah said that all the people should free their Hebrew slaves, but they changed their mind and recaptured them. Jeremiah predicted sword, famine and plague as a result of this failure to follow YHWH's will.
37 - 38	Zedekiah consults Jeremiah about whether he should try and form an alliance with Egypt. Jeremiah tries to leave Jerusalem to go and buy his family field, but is arrested and imprisoned in a storage well, then later removed to the Court of the Guard and treated better.
39 - 40	Jerusalem falls, and the Chaldeans put Jeremiah in the custody of Gedaliah, who becomes governor of the region once many of the people are deported to Babylon, but he is assassinated.
41 – 44	Jeremiah is taken to Egypt against his will by the military leaders, despite explaining that YHWH has told him he will look after the remaining people if they stay where they are, but not if they run away to Egypt. When Jeremiah tells the people to stop their idolatry they tell him that, on the contrary, they think all their troubles started when they stopped worshipping the Queen of Heaven.

Jeremiah himself was gentle and loving, but called upon to warn the people about of God's dissatisfaction with them "to uproot and to knock down, to destroy and to overthrow" (11:10) and forthcoming calamities (20:8). Because this did not go down very well, he was constantly at odds with those around him, and suffered through doing his duty. He felt the suffering purified him (compare with Paul's view of suffering for God in Romans 5:3-5).

Jeremiah's "confessions" about his inner turmoil:

Chapter reference	Event
11:18 – 12:6	He feels naïve as he did not guess that the people were plotting against him for his prophecies, until YHWH revealed this to him. He wonders why evil people seem to prosper, assuming they will eventually get their just deserts.
15:10 – 21	He feels his life is a disaster: he does nothing wrong but is hated for serving YHWH and telling the truth about what YHWH says to him. He believes YHWH will restore him, and the people, eventually, if they repent.
17:14 – 18	He has never wanted to prophesy disaster, he would much rather the people changed and averted YHWH's anger instead.
18:18 – 23	He knows people are plotting against him and asks YHWH to save him and punish them.
20:7 – 18	He feels as if he has been seduced by YHWH (a very strong image).

	He is insulted all day long and people are watching for him to make any mistake. He feels his whole life is a curse.
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He felt that there would be reconciliation with God and a new covenant one day in the future, after the people had been changed by their experience of exile. (31:31-34).

Jeremiah's own faith was inward and heartfelt. He originated or accepted new ideas about traditional teachings:

Chapter reference	Event
11:20	God examines the heart: knowing people's motives and thoughts as well as their actions.
31:29-30	God rewards works, and individual people for what they do, vs. the earlier idea of visiting the sins of parents upon their children.
2:2	We are to be friends with God: God remembers the people's love and affection for him when they followed him through the wilderness.
4:4, 17:9, 18:12	We are broken by sin, our will is perverted. People should consider what is in their hearts, and YHWH will reward them.

Jeremiah saw the Mosaic Law as ideally an inward force, and that we needed to be motivated by love of God to comply with it, for it to be real. He was disappointed to see how little effect Josiah's reforms had on the nation's character. His writings influence Ezekiel, Deutero-Isaiah and perhaps some of the psalms.

The book of Jeremiah is a mixture of poetic passages, biography, prose sermons in the style of the seventh and early sixth century BC, and the distinct character of Jeremiah's theology. The Greek text we have is one-eighth shorter than the Hebrew Masoretic text. Copies of both versions were found amongst the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran. Some passages contain references to Jeremiah's secretary, Baruch, writing down his words or taking his scrolls to the king and powerful people once written (e.g. in Ch 36 Jeremiah dictates to Baruch and he takes the scroll to Jehoiakim, who burns it). Some of the different styles probably mean that the writing is not all Jeremiah's own: e.g. the sayings against the nations of Edom and Moab, and the saying against Babylon dates from the end of the exile, which Jeremiah himself did not live to see. The exiles in Babylon probably inserted short passages in the book as they used it. Lots of duplicate passages have arisen due to the editing process, and the chronological sequence has been disrupted. (The Lamentations, the next book in the bible, are often attributed to Jeremiah but it is unlikely that he wrote them as their style is very different.)

The book can be divided into three main sections:

- I. Threats against Judah and Jerusalem 1:1 – 25:13
- II. Prophecies against the nations 25:13 – 38, 46 – 51

III. Collection of more positive material, some apparently written down by Baruch 26 - 35

### History

A table of events and dates:

Date (BC)	Event	Reigns of kings	Others
646	Birth of Jeremiah	Manasseh 687-642	For this period in context see 2 Kings 18-25 and 2 Chronicles 29-36
627 - 626	Call of Jeremiah (25:3)	Amon 642-640	Prophet Zephaniah: around 630
622	Discovery of the Law in the temple (2Kings 23:25)	Josiah 640-609	
612	Fall of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, Chaldaean empire expands	Necho Pharaoh of Egypt 609-594	Prophet Nahum: around 612
609	Death of King Josiah at Megiddo as Necho's armies advance	Jehoahaz 609 (3 months)	
605	Nebuchadnezzar in control of Palestine; defeats Necho at Carchemish (jer 46:2, 2 Kings 24:17)	Jehoiakim 609-598	Prophet Habakkuk: around 600
598-7	Judah makes an alliance with Egypt and the Babylonians respond by attacking - Nebuchadnezzar captures Jerusalem after a two-month siege and Jehoiakim 16 <sup>th</sup> March 587 after Judah rebels	Nebuchadnezzar - Sept 605 - 562	Ezekiel 1-23 predates the fall of Jerusalem
589	Jerusalem revolts again under Zedekiah and there is another siege, 18 months this time	Jehoiachin 598-597	
587	Chaldeans capture Jerusalem and destroy temple	Pharaoh Psammeticus II: 594-589	
587	The deportation to Babylon; Gedaliah appointed governor of occupied Palestine; Jeremiah taken to Egypt	Zedekiah 597-587/6	
582/1	Further deportations (Jer 52:30)	Pharaoh Hophra 598-566	

## The political situation

In Jeremiah's time, the power of Assyria (the people who had conquered the northern kingdom of Israel many years before) was on the wane. The empires of Egypt to the south and Babylon to the north were contending for supremacy, and the people of Judah were involved in their battles, either as the war moved onto their territory or because they were asking one side for protection against the other. Eventually Babylon emerged the victor.

As the temple had been safe despite the loss of Israel, there was a strong belief amongst the people of Judah that it, and therefore Jerusalem and their line of Davidic kings, would always be preserved by God. This led them to underestimate the danger they were in from more powerful countries around them.

Babylonian forces entered Jerusalem in 597 and deported the king. After another revolt by the pro-Egyptian people remaining in Judah, Jerusalem is again besieged and captured by the Babylonians in 587, and this time there is far more destruction – the city is burned and plundered and the temple destroyed.

## Looking to exile and the future

In his earliest prophecies Jeremiah appeared to believe it was possible, if unlikely, that the people would return to earnest worship of God and would therefore not suffer. Later on, he realised this was not the case, and started advocating surrender to Babylon as quickly as possible, believing that this way the people would be protected from the worst that an angry conquering power could do, and that the sooner they accepted defeat, settled in Babylon and dedicated themselves to transforming their lives, the better. The political powers saw this as defeatist.

At the end of his prophecies, despite the other exiles in Egypt not paying his calls to stop idolatry much attention, he predicted a change of heart by the people one day and a return from exile. The physical return from exile would be accompanied by a spiritual renewal, where the new covenant would be part of their very being rather than a set of laws to which they paid lip service.

Eventually, Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon in 539 and the people were allowed to return home. Their experience of exile changed how they felt about faith, and their identity, forever. Although they rebuilt the temple, their decades in exile in a city without a single central temple had made differences to their worship and they had instituted synagogues and more worship based on teaching of the word without animal sacrifice.

## Jeremiah's prophecies

## Symbolic actions

Jeremiah is one of the prophets notable for his use of symbolic actions: acting out allegories of what would happen to the people of Israel. Here are some examples:

Reference	Action
Ch 1	<b>Almond tree and pot.</b> Jeremiah sees an almond tree (sheqed in Hebrew) and says it suggests God is ever awake (shoqed: watchful or vigilant). Jeremiah also sees a cooking pot, on the boil and tilting over, as disaster will come upon the country from the north.
Ch 13	<b>Waistcloth:</b> Jeremiah buries a worn cloth under a rock until it rots and is useless. The pride of the people of Judah and Jerusalem will be similarly ruined by God.
Ch 16	<b>Remaining single and set apart:</b> in a society where almost everyone married and wanted to have children, Jeremiah is forbidden to marry, and forbidden to enter houses where there is mourning or feasting.
Ch 18	<b>Potter:</b> Jeremiah visits a potter and sees him squash and remake a pot that went wrong on the wheel. God is able to do the same to his creation.
Ch 19	<b>Jug:</b> Jeremiah buys a jug and breaks it as he prophecies in the temple about God destroying the people for their idolatry.
Ch 24	<b>Figs:</b> Jeremiah sees two baskets of figs, one full of excellent fruit and the other so bad they were uneatable. These are like the people who will be taken into exile and those who will remain.
Ch 27-8	<b>Yoke:</b> Jeremiah is to put a yoke on his neck to portray to the people the way they will soon be subject to the king of Babylon.
Ch 32	<b>Buying a field:</b> in the middle of political turmoil, Jeremiah goes to buy a field from his cousin. He is indicating that there is a future in the promised land, one day.

Jeremiah is not the only prophet to use this method. Other examples include Ezekiel, who frequently preached in this way, and also linked events in his own life to God's word. Isaiah and Hosea did the same when discerning a meaning to events in their own lives.

Prophet	Reference	Action
Isaiah	Is 7:3, 8:1-4	Isaiah's children are given names like "A remnant will return"
	Ch 20	Walking about naked and barefoot as a sign of an Assyrian victory over Egypt and their allies in the promised land
Hosea	Hos 1-3	Hosea's marriage to an unfaithful woman and the naming and renaming of his children
Ezekiel	Ch 4	Using a brick model of a siege to predict the fall of

		Jerusalem
	Ch 4	Ezekiel's food to warn people of famine under siege conditions
	Ch 5	Hair: dividing his cut-off hair into three locks and burning, chopping them up and releasing them on the wind.
	Ch 12	Mime of exile; packing a bundle and leaving
	Ch 24	Boiling a pot full of meat to warn of the siege of Jerusalem
	Ch 24	Death of his wife: YHWH does not allow Ezekiel to mourn
	Ch 37	Two sticks: making the divided kingdom of Israel and Judah one united and faithful people

### Imagery used

In Jeremiah's writings there are many vivid and recurring images. He has a poetic gift for description and allegory rooted in the sights and sounds of the society around him.

As well as the sustained allegories of the symbolic actions there are all kinds of metaphors and allusions to:

Agriculture, shepherding, animals and plants	<p>"Gleaning" what is left of Israel (6:9) one of several references to the practise of leaving some of the harvest for the poor to scavenge. Also the Ammonites in (47:9) The people will one day have a new shepherd (3:14-18). The people as nomads or fleeing in packs (10:17-25). Winnowing (i.e. removing chaff from wheat) (15:7; 51:2).</p> <p>YHWH as a shepherd re-gathering his flock (31:10) and gifts of wheat, new wine, oil, sheep and cattle (31:12).</p> <p>Egypt as a heifer at the mercy of a gadfly (46:19).</p> <p>Sustained metaphors for Moab, a wine-producing country, of failed grape harvest, or drunkenness (Ch 48:11-38).</p> <p>The Ammonites will wrap themselves in sackcloth, sing dirges and run to and fro in the sheep-pens (presumably because the sheep are gone?) (47:3)</p> <p>Lost sheep (50:6-8).</p> <p>Babylon like a threshing floor being trodden (50:33)</p>
Wild animals	<p>Conquered Jerusalem as a lair of jackals (9:9-21) and allusions to wormwood and poisoned water for bitterness.</p> <p>Hissing like a snake (46:22).</p> <p>A forest at the mercy of woodcutters, as many as a plague of locusts (46:23), and soldiers like grasshoppers</p>

	<p>(50:14,27).  YHWH will hover over the ruins of Moab like an eagle (48:40)  Wild cats, jackals and ostriches will lurk in abandoned Babylon (50:39).  YHWH as a lion (50:44).</p>
Forces of nature	<p>Almost creation in reverse: tractless wastes – formlessness was a great taboo amongst the Jewish people (4:23)  Famine caused by God’s anger (12:7-13) – also natural world metaphors such as a bird of prey being attacked, and shepherds trampling vineyards.  Droughts so severe that the animals and grass die (Ch14).  Frequent reference to multiple woes e.g. plague, sword, famine and captivity (Ch15:1-4).  YHWH’s anger like a fire (17:4, 15:14).  Jerusalem as a rock in the plain, or a forest (21:13,14).  The desert as a scene of conversion (Ch31).  A reminder that the heavenly bodies are creations of YHWH (31:35).  A sea that cannot be calmed (49:23) – the Hebrew people had a great fear of the sea.  Four winds from four corners (49:36).</p>
The technology of the day – pottery, building, water courses, refining metal	<p>How perverse would it be to abandon the living water and dig your own cisterns, which only held stale water and were cracked anyway? (2:13)  The people are as hard as iron, but if refined no pure metal would be found, only dross (6:28-30); Egypt as an iron-foundry (11:1-14).  The people and the city can be smashed like wine jugs or broken like pottery (13:12, Ch 19, 22:28)</p>
The military	<p>A sword portrayed as a living thing that will “devour until gorged, until drunk with their blood” (46:10)  Pharaoh’s army like a rising flood 47:2).  Sounds of war: hooves like thunder, chariots crashing, wheels grinding (47:3).</p>
Women and childbirth; prostitution	<p>Prostitution, adultery and the activities of animals on heat are frequently used as metaphors for idolatry (2:24, Ch 3). Fainthearted soldiers and subjects of conquered cities are also compared to women in labour, rape victims or occasionally widows mourning their only sons (6:24, 26, 13:20). This might make uncomfortable reading for some of us today. Childlessness is also seen as a disaster (22:30). Fathers may panic and forget about</p>

	their children (47:3).
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### Reading Jeremiah today

What do we take from this book? What effect does it have on our faith today?

How does it compare to other accounts of the same events or of similar issues – such as the historical books of the bible, or the other prophets of his era or earlier or later?

Does this book have something to say about war today? Or how we should relate to politics and government in our own country?

A lot of the power of Jeremiah's writing is due to his use of sustained and repeated images set in the everyday life of his time: the agriculture, the wild animals, the works of nature. What imagery would we use to describe our faith to people around us today? How should our prayer and worship, especially our communal religious life, respond to new developments in culture and society versus retaining traditions?