

The Book of Jeremiah

1. Background / historical context
 - a. The oracles recorded for us in the book of Jeremiah are not always in chronological order
 - i. Jeremiah ministered during the reigns of several different kings, including Josiah, Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah (1.2-3)
 - ii. Though God has given us his word out of chronological order (for a reason), keeping the historical context in mind can help us make sense of what we read and why we read it
 - b. Jeremiah's ministry under the reign of King Josiah
 - i. His prophetic ministry began in 626 B.C. at age twenty
 - ii. He ministered freely under Josiah and condemned many of the apostate practices Josiah sought to reform... though there is no record of their meeting
 - c. Jeremiah's ministry between the death of Josiah and the Fall of Jerusalem
 - i. Those following Josiah refused to listen to Jeremiah's message (2 Ch 36.12; Jer 34, 36, 37)
 1. King Jehoiakim destroyed Jeremiah's scrolls (36)
 2. King Zedekiah permitted Jeremiah's arrest as a traitor when warning the people not to resist Babylon (37.11-21)
 3. King Zedekiah later protected Jeremiah after receiving word that he would not be killed in the siege (38.14-28)
 - ii. Baruch went into the temple on Jeremiah's behalf after he was banned (36.4-5 ff.)
 - d. Jeremiah's ministry during the exile
 - i. The Babylonians offer Jeremiah freedom and honor for urging Judah to surrender peacefully (39.11-18), but Jeremiah chose to stay in Jerusalem (40.1-16)
 - ii. After Gedaliah's murder, Jeremiah is taken to Egypt against his will and against his earlier warning from God (43.1-13)
 - iii. More than likely, Jeremiah died while in exile in Egypt
2. The prophet
 - a. Jeremiah was the 'son of Hilkiah' (1.1)
 - b. Jeremiah was born into a priestly family in Anathoth (about three miles northeast of Jerusalem)
 - i. He would have been intimately familiar with the rites, rituals, etc. of the Old Covenant
 - ii. He would have known the Torah in-depth
 - iii. He would have seen first-hand the neglect of the spirit of Torah for the 'letter of the Law'
 - iv. He would have an audience with priests, prophets, and worshipers in the Temple
 - c. His ministry consisted of proclaiming the word of God orally (2.4; 5.21; 7.2; 13.15; 19.3; 34.4; 44.24-26) and in writing (30.2; 36.2-4, 32; 51.50-64)
 - i. The Book of Jeremiah is a collection of both kinds of oracles with historical information to tie portions together
 - ii. Again, these events are not recorded for us in chronological order!
 - d. Baruch was Jeremiah's scribe and assistant (36.4, 26; 43.3, 6; 45.1-5)
 - e. Perhaps more than any other prophet but Hosea, God used Jeremiah to give very graphic and powerful illustrations through the experiences of his life (13.1-11; 18.1-23; 19.1-14; 27.1-11; etc.)

3. A 'brief' outline of the Book of Jeremiah ¹
 - a. Introduction (1.1-3)
 - b. Jeremiah's calling (1.4-19)
 - c. Warnings of judgment from Jeremiah's early ministry (2.1-6.30)
 - i. God's rebuke of Judah's faithlessness and attraction to idols / false gods (2.1-37)
 - ii. Appeal to return to God / promise of forgiveness and blessing to the contrite (3.1-4.4)
 - iii. Announcement of an invasion from the North (4.5-31)
 - iv. Indictment of the total sinfulness of Judah (5.1-31)
 - v. The coming siege and fall of Jerusalem (6.1-30)
 - d. Jeremiah's temple sermon and other warnings (7.1-10.25)
 - i. Temple sermon (7.1-15) ²
 1. Misplaced trust (7.1-11)
 2. Warning from Shiloh's fate (7.12-15)
 - ii. Worshiping the Queen of Heaven (7.16-20)
 - iii. A disobedient nation (7.21-29)
 - iv. Judgment against human sacrifice (7.30-34)
 - v. Coming desecration of the dead by the enemy (8.1-3)
 - vi. Judah's stubborn refusal to return to God (8.4-13)
 - vii. Resignation to the coming invasion (8.14-17)
 - viii. Lament for a smitten people (8.18-9.6)
 - ix. God's justification for the coming punishment...his covenant faithfulness (9.7-16)
 - x. The only basis for boasting is in God (9.23-24)
 - xi. The worthlessness of circumcision without true faith (9.25-26)
 - xii. Preparation for exile (10.1-25)
 - e. The broken covenant and Jeremiah's complaints (11.1-15.21)
 - i. The broken covenant (11.1-8)
 - ii. Covenant breakers will be punished (11.9-13)
 - iii. Jeremiah forbidden to pray for the people (11.14-17)
 - iv. The plot against Jeremiah's life (11.18-12.6)
 - v. God rejects his inheritance (12.7-13)
 - vi. A conditional promise for Israel's neighbors (12.14-17)
 - vii. A corrupt people and their deserved punishment (13.1-27)

¹ There are as many different outlines of the Book of Jeremiah as there are commentaries, articles, and papers written on the subject. The very fact that these oracles are not recorded for us in chronological order makes outlining the book very difficult. For the sake of brevity and simplicity, I have chosen to use a shortened version of F.B. Huey's excellent outline from the New American Commentary series. While this outline is still fairly long, we would do better to include too much detail than to omit significant events pertaining to the message of this great book.

² As mentioned earlier and described below, the closer Babylon came to Jerusalem, the more strongly Judah clung to God's 'eternal' promises never to forsake his land or temple...promises that were misinterpreted and misapplied by an apostate people. God's covenantal promises are always unconditional in the sense that God graciously 'works' out all the facets and details of his pledge; however, the covenant always has a conditional side—the promises must be applied by faith for individuals to appropriate and enjoy the blessings. Faith is the 'hand' that receives God's work on our behalf!

- viii. Judgments that cannot be averted (14.1-15.9)
- ix. Jeremiah's complaint and God's rebuke (15.10-21)
- f. Warnings, exhortations, and a prophet's despair (16.1-20.18)
 - i. Threats and promises (16.1-21)
 - ii. Further warnings and exhortations (17.1-27)
 - iii. Jeremiah's visit to the potter, a display of God's sovereignty (18.1-23)
 - iv. Lessons from the broken clay jar (19.1-15)
 - v. Jeremiah's humiliation and despair (20.1-18)
- g. Messages to Judah and the nations (21.1-25.38)
 - i. Messages against the kings of Judah (21.1-10)
 - ii. Promise of a better day, the Righteous Branch (23.1-8)
 - iii. Messages against the false prophets (23.9-40)
 - iv. Two baskets of figs, hope for the exiles (24.1-10)
 - v. Seventy years of captivity / God's wrath against the nations (25.1-38)
- h. Jeremiah's controversy with the false prophets (26.1-29.32)
 - i. Another temple sermon and its consequences for Jeremiah (26.1-24)
 - ii. Jeremiah's symbolic yoke (27.1-22)
 - iii. Conflict between Jeremiah and Hananiah, a false prophet (28.1-17)
 - iv. Letter to the exiles, the 'whole truth' (29.1-32) ³
- i. Messages of hope for restoration (30.1-33.26)
 - i. Promises of restoration (30.1-24)
 - ii. A new covenant (31.1-40)
 - iii. Jeremiah purchases the field in Anathoth, an act of hope (32.1-44)
 - iv. Promises of restoration (33.1-26)
- j. Events and messages near the fall of Jerusalem (34.1-39.18)
- k. Events after the fall of Jerusalem (40.1-45.5)
 - i. Jeremiah released (40.1-6)
 - ii. Governorship of Gedaliah (40.7-41.18)
 - iii. Flight to Egypt (42.1-43.7)
 - iv. Jeremiah's messages in Egypt (43.8-44.30)
 - v. Encouragement for Baruch (45.1-5)
- l. Judgment against foreign nations (46.1-51.64) ⁴
- m. Recital of events from the 2nd deportation (598 BC) to Jehoiachin's release (561 BC) (52.1-34)
- 4. Important themes / teachings from the message of Jeremiah ⁵
 - a. False hope in God's promises (Jer 7.1-15)

³ Jeremiah's difficult message to the exiles was to 'get used to it' by settling down. He had the unpleasant job of telling the refugees that they would be there for a generation, so they might as well go on with life, building houses, getting married, having children, and seeking the welfare of the city they were placed in. There is certainly application here for believers today, especially Jeremiah's last point of seeking what was best for those around them.

⁴ Note that just about every nation in the known world at that time is judged for their sin and refusal to acknowledge the true God of Israel. While this may seem unfair to those who had 'never heard the message,' the reality of God's just judgment is reflected in similar fashion in the opening of Romans.

- i. Jeremiah blasted those at the temple for ‘standing on the promises of God’ (7.10) while living lives that were completely opposite of God’s revealed will (7.8-15)
 - 1. The people were involved in idolatry, social injustice, stealing, murder, adultery, rampant commandment breaking...and flaunted it
 - 2. At the same time, they claimed God’s promises as their security and ‘fire insurance’
- ii. As seen earlier, God revealed his covenant in a ‘pyramid’ of relationships (God-people-land)
 - 1. God presented his covenant as unconditional and everlasting, which it is
 - a. Remember Abraham, who was passed out during the covenant ceremony?
 - b. This picture signified that God was the one working to bring the covenant promises into reality
 - c. This picture did not exempt Abraham (or his descendants) from responding to God’s covenant promises in true faith
 - 2. In practice, Israel acted as though God’s unconditional promises placed no demands or expectations upon them in any sense...this is fatalism not biblical religion
 - 3. In reality, God’s unconditional promises did not mean, “I will give you these blessings no matter what,” but “Through faith in my word, I will give you these blessings. There is no need for you to labor to make these promises come to fruition, only believe.”
- iii. As warnings of judgment / destruction / exile grew closer, Israel clung more tightly to their misguided understanding of God’s covenant promises, sure that God would not forsake his land (especially the temple) or his people, because he had promised he would not
 - 1. Was God unfaithful to his covenant? Absolutely not!
 - 2. The exile was a mark of God’s faithfulness to his word, a covenantal response to the infidelity and faithlessness of the people
 - 3. Exile (judgment) was an act of grace (‘fatherly discipline’ to use NT terms), designed from the very beginning to turn the people back to God in repentance and true faith
- iv. Our application: Let us ask ourselves, “How often do we claim to be ‘standing on the promises of God’ while walking in faithlessness and overt sin?”
 - 1. We have no more right to expect blessing from God in these times than faithless and sinful Israel...in fact, what we should expect is God’s judgment and correction
 - 2. God’s promises are unconditional in that he requires no ‘works’ from us, but they are always conditional with respect to faith in his covenantal promises (ultimately in the work of Christ on our behalf)
 - 3. Faith is not a work but the hand that received the work God has done of our behalf
- b. The nature of true religion (Jer 7-9)
 - i. Attendance at the house of God is no substitute for a real meeting with Him (7.1-7)
 - 1. The people claimed the presence of the temple (i.e., God’s dwelling place) and their attendance at worship as the reason for their security and hope

⁵There are many, many applications that may be drawn from a book the size of Jeremiah; however, these four main themes and teachings provide points of connection by which to apply the timeless truths of Jeremiah’s message, even if his context and historical situation are far remote or difficult to understand.

2. These works offer no real security for those without faith
- ii. Religious exercises are no substitute for obedience to the will of God (7.21-34)
 1. God is being ‘sarcastic’ (is ‘rhetorical’ a more palatable term) in vv. 21-22. Of course he required their sacrifices, but their faithless ritual missed the bigger point
 2. God did not prescribe ritual and rites for their own sake but as a means to draw near to him in true faith...this was always ‘the point’ from God’s perspective (v.23)
- iii. Possession of the word of God is no substitute for putting it into practice (8.4-12)
 1. Israel rightly esteemed God’s word as a blessing in itself
 - a. God told Israel they would be the envy of the nations because of he had graciously given them his Torah or ‘law’ (Deut 4.5-8)
 - b. God’s word was especially gracious in light of other nations, whose ‘gods’ revealed very little in terms of how man might find forgiveness and reconciliation
 2. At the same time, merely possessing God’s word was not enough to make Israel righteous or wise, especially as its interpretation had been perverted by the scribes, false prophets, and apostate priests
 3. God had given his word as a means of grace that it might effect real change in the lives of its hearers / readers, not merely as an end in itself (see below)
- iv. Mere (or even profound) knowledge of theological / theoretical truth is no substitute for knowing the One who is Truth (9.1-26)
 1. The people’s behavior demonstrated that their knowledge of God was theoretical and not experiential
 - a. We constantly run the danger of emphasizing one over the other
 - b. Biblical faith is a balance of both knowledge and experience
 2. When knowledge results in boasting about one’s knowledge / wisdom / strength / etc., we have missed the point, our only grounds for boasting is in God himself (Jer 9.23-24; 1 Cor 1.31; etc.)
- c. God’s sovereignty over human / international affairs (Jer 18-19)
 - i. Though we commonly think of Paul when pondering the analogy of God as potter and humanity as the clay, God used this very vivid illustration first through the prophet Jeremiah
 1. In Jeremiah, this image is used on an international scale, describing the rising up and tearing down of nations...all at the decree of God ⁶
 2. In Paul, this image is used on a personal level, describing the mystery of God’s election and calling to salvation
 - ii. In both Jeremiah and Paul the point is clear—God is in control of all things from an individual level to an international level
 1. For those living in defiance, disbelief, and sin, this is a message of judgment
 2. For those abiding in faith in the work of God, this is ultimately a message of hope!

⁶ Let us not forget previous discussions about the King of Assyria and God’s design (Is 10.5-19). There is real tension between God’s decree to use Assyria as an agent of his judgment, the reality of the king’s sinful motivation for his actions, and God’s real judgment / accountability for the sin of the king. While acknowledging the reality of ‘first’ and ‘second causes,’ the tension must be allowed to remain if we are to think biblically about these matters.

- d. Covenant renewal / the New Covenant (Jer 31.23-40)
 - i. Though we often go straight to Jer 31 when talking about the New Covenant, we must be aware that Jeremiah speaks of the broken covenant as well as covenant restoration and renewal throughout his oracles (cf. 3.12-18; 7.21-26; 11.1-13; 12.14-17; 16.10-21; 22.8-10; 23.1-9; ch 24; chs 30-33)
 - 1. Almost always, the fact that Israel has (repeatedly) broken covenant with God is explicitly given as the reason that God, in his grace, promises restoration and renewal
 - 2. The New Covenant passage in Jer 31 is part of a 'bigger picture' described throughout
 - 3. At the same time, Jer 31.23-40 is clearly the climax of Jeremiah's prophecies of hope, as evidenced by the NT usage of this text
 - ii. A brief outline of this passage ⁷
 - 1. The re-establishment and blessing of Judah, a Pastoral Image (31.23-26)
 - 2. The renovation of Israel and Judah, an Horticultural Image (31.27-30)
 - 3. The renewal of the covenant with Israel and Judah (31.31-40)
 - a. Divine timing, "The days are coming..."
 - b. Divine initiation, "...declares the Lord..."
 - c. Divine action, "...I will make a new covenant..."
 - d. Divine description, "...new..." ⁸
 - e. Divine participants, "house of Israel...house of Judah" ⁹
 - f. Divine terms / promises
 - i. Internalization of God's torah ('law')
 - ii. Knowledge of the Lord
 - iii. Forgiveness of sin
 - iv. Relationship with God
 - g. Divine guarantee ¹⁰
 - iii. Significance of the New Covenant
 - 1. It is graciously initiated by God
 - 2. It results in true obedience to the revealed will of God
 - 3. It establishes a new relationship to God
 - 4. It results in universal knowledge of God
 - 5. It results in moral cleansing
 - iv. What is new about the 'New Covenant'?

⁷ I am indebted to Dr. Daniel Block, a former professor of mine, for this outline and for pointing out the necessity to read Jeremiah's oracle here within its larger context in the rest of the book (and the OT).

⁸ Elsewhere this same covenant is called 'the eternal covenant' (Is 24.5; 55.3; 61.8; Jer 32.40; 50.5; Ezek 16.60; 37.26) and the 'covenant of peace' (Is 54.10; Ezek 34.25; 37.26)

⁹ A highly literal understanding of the fulfillment of OT prophecy runs into some serious problems here. God explicitly describes the New Covenant as one made with Israel and Judah, but the NT use of this text finds its fulfillment in all those united to Christ in faith, regardless of nationality. At this point, the demand for a highly literal fulfillment explicitly fails...we are better to understand this prophetic oracle and others along the lines of the type / antitype paradigm we have used all along where prophecies find their primary fulfillment in Christ.

¹⁰ See God's same guarantee in Gen 9, the fixed order of the universe

1. Looking at the divine terms / promises listed above...nothing! ¹¹
 - a. Internalization of God's torah ('law')...had always been reality for the faithful
 - i. Often described as the 'circumcision of the heart' (cf. Deut 10.16; 30.6; Ps 19; 119; Jer 4.4, etc.)
 - b. Knowledge of the Lord...a covenant relationship without intimate knowledge described here was as much an absurdity in the OT as it is in the NT
 - i. In Exodus, God described his actions as means by which people might know him and that he was the true God
 - ii. Hosea and Jeremiah had blasted the people for their lack of knowledge due to apostasy and sin
 - c. Forgiveness of sin...always a part of being in covenant with God
 - i. Leviticus gives many instances where faithful offering of sacrifices wrought forgiveness ('...and he shall be forgiven' is used over and over)
 - ii. Ultimately, of course, the efficacy of OT sacrifices is found in Christ's sacrifice on the cross, as Hebrews points out (Heb 10)
 - d. Relationship with God...this is what a covenant is all about!
2. The 'newness' of the New Covenant is this:
 - a. For the first time, the physical and spiritual boundaries of Israel would be the same, (equal, coterminous, etc.), i.e. no more idea of the 'faithful remnant'
 - i. Some had always had these marks of the covenant, but it was always a minority
 - ii. The 'norm' in Israel to this point was a faithful few ('remnant') in the midst of an unbelieving / unfaithful majority
 - b. In other words, the newness of the New Covenant is its *scope*
 - i. Jeremiah doesn't describe how this would happen, but...
 - ii. The New Covenant is described as already fulfilled...
 1. In the NT, Jesus announces its fulfillment at the Lord's Supper (Lk 22.20; 1 Cor 11.25; 2 Cor 3.6)...the New Covenant would be sealed at the cross
 2. Hebrews describes its fulfillment in Christ (Heb 8.6-13; 10.16-17)
 - iii. The New Covenant is described as not yet fulfilled...
 1. The Book of Revelation looks forward to its final, universal fulfillment that is yet to come and be completely realized (Rev 21.3)
 - iv. In the meantime, we live in the 'already-not yet' time we have seen before, the overlap between the Present Age and the Age to Come, where the New Covenant is fulfilled but not yet totally complete

¹¹ You cry out, 'What!' Please keep reading...this is totally orthodox, I assure you!