# Jeremiah (Book and Person)

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## I. Hebrew Bible/Old Testament

**1. Introduction.** "YH(WH) will/may raise, lift up" is the meaning of the programmatic Hebrew name Jeremiah. The book normally appears after Isaiah and before Ezekiel in the Latter Prophets.

This order follows the chronology indicated in the respective beginnings of the "Major Prophets" Isaiah (1 : 1, with kings of the 8th cent. BCE), Jeremiah (1 : 2–3, specifying a time span of 627–587 BCE), and Ezekiel (1 : 1–2, starting with 593 BCE). All three deal with the downfall of Judah and Jerusalem, but in very different ways. The book of Isa-

iah is more inclined to show how God works salvation, Ezekiel's book is oriented towards the renewed temple, and the book of Jeremiah focusses on the roots and the dynamics of this disaster. All we know about the prophet Jeremiah stems from the book of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah is the longest book of the Bible, with 21,819 words in Hebrew. This length is the expression of a particularly rich and profound thinking, engaging with many other positions and insisting on a theology of the type of *sola gratia*, namely that the survival and the new life for the people is only due to God's grace, because the community as a whole and all of its members have become guilty and are constantly unfaithful and treacherous (Jer 9 : 1–8).

**2. The Book of Jeremiah.** ***a. Its Text(s).*** The Hebrew text of Jeremiah is well attested in some manuscripts of Qumran, like 4Q70, dating to around 200 BCE, and 4Q72, providing large parts from Jer 4 : 5 to Jer 33 : 16–20 (Tov 1997). The whole text of Jeremiah is conserved in the large codices of the Masoretic tradition (MT: Cairensis, Aleppo, Leningradensis). It displays high uniformity, and accords to a large extent, even in details, with the mentioned largest and best preserved Jeremiah-manuscripts of Qumran.

The Greek version of the LXX (Ziegler), on the other hand, presents a very different text. The most obvious difference regards the sequence of the oracles against the foreign nations. Whereas in the Hebrew text they appear near the end of the book (Jer 46–51 MT), the LXX places them in the middle of the book (Jer 25 : 14–31 : 44 LXX); also the order of the nations differs. Furthermore, Jer-LXX is around a sixth shorter than Jer-MT (Tov 2012), and differs in many details (Stipp).

The discussion about the priority of one or the other text form has gained momentum by the interpretation of especially one, tiny, Hebrew Qumran fragment of Jeremiah: 4Q71 contains thirteen lines of traces of the left margin, offering small parts of the text of Jer 9 : 22–10 : 21. It goes together in some instances with Jer-LXX, and its reconstructed line lengths correspond better to the text of the LXX than to that of MT. G. Janzen, P.-M. Bogaert, E. Tov, H.-J. Stipp, and many others have argued that 4Q71 testifies to a more original, shorter Hebrew version of Jeremiah than MT, and thus confirms the superiority of the Greek text of Jeremiah.

Yet there are problems with such a position: 4Q71 also confirms some readings of MT (Fischer 2007). Its supposed accordance in length and arrangement with Jer-LXX is solely based on reconstruction, speculating about non extant parts of an obviously very irregular manuscript, of abnormal length and extremely uneven letter spaces, ranging between 112 and 147 per line. Furthermore, Jer-LXX obviously harmonizes quite often, as a detailed investigation in participant referent shifts shows (Glanz). Jeremiah 52 demonstrates probably in the clearest way, that the Greek translator of Jeremiah changed the text, as it is based on 2 Kgs 24 : 18–25 : 30 as its *Vorlage* and confirms largely Jer-MT (Fischer 1998), whereas Jer-LXX deviates from the source in 2 Kings as well in length as in details. All these and other observations indicate that MT generally has preserved the more original form of Jeremiah than the LXX.

The Hebrew text of Jeremiah shows traces of Aramaic influence, the best example being an entire verse in this language, in the center of the passage contrasting YHWH with other deities and their followers (Jer 10 : 11), allowing for a word-play (*lāʾ ʿăbadû – yēʾbadû*: "Gods who *did not make* heavens and earth *shall perish* from earth and from under these heavens!"). Other features, too, are signs of a development towards late Biblical Hebrew, on the way to what can be seen in the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles (Kim).

***b. Composition of Jeremiah.*** Diachronic approaches have dominated modern research on Jeremiah. A classic example is the division of Jeremiah by Sigmund Mowinckel who distinguished four sources: Source A contains oracles and first person singular reports, mainly within Jer 1–25; source B has reports of others above Jeremiah, the main block being Jer 36–44; source C holds the major speeches, like Jer 7; 11; 18 etc.; and the postexilic source D is formed by the salvation oracles in Jer 30–31 (Mowinckel).

Thiel has put forward a concurring theory about the genesis of Jeremiah (Thiel 1973 and 1981). He demonstrates the closeness to Deuteronomic and Deuteronomistic vocabulary and thoughts, and interprets this as a sign of a Deuteronomistic redaction. According to him, it intervened heavily in the words transmitted of the prophet Jeremiah, and inserted own oracles. Albertz has further elaborated this thesis, by distinguishing three different Deuteronomistic redactions (Albertz).

McKane has taken a different route, proposing the idea of a "rolling corpus" (McKane). He thinks that there were "kernels" containing original words of the prophet Jeremiah, mostly poetic, which in the course of time were handed onwards and enhanced, adding similar words, also in prose. This process, similar to the movement of an avalanche, in his eyes, has led to the formation of Jeremiah.

There are serious problems with these and other diachronic hypotheses about the genesis of Jeremiah. First of all, they are not able to explain the arrangement of the book, displaying a very strange mixture of poetry and prose, a great number of repetitions, many variations of the same motifs, and an order not following the chronological sequence (e.g., Jer 21 deals with the time around 588–87 BCE, Jer 24 with the group of those exiled with

King Jehoiachin in 597 BCE, and Jer 25 refers to the fourth year of the reign of King Jehoiakim, corresponding to 605 BCE). Second, these theories are highly speculative, can hardly be proved, and leave many questions unanswered: For Mowinckel it is difficult to explain why Jer 52, taken from 2 Kgs, forms the final chapter of Jeremiah. Thiel stops his analyses with Jer 45, leaving aside the oracles against the foreign nations (Jer 46–51) which are necessary for the dynamics of the whole book. McKane presupposes a lot of Jeremianic kernels; their inner relationship and their present organization in Jeremiah receive no explanation. – For the moment we do not know how Jeremiah came into being (Carroll).

***c. The Structure of Jeremiah.*** The previous theories about the composition of Jeremiah originated partly from the desire to understand a seemingly "chaotic" book. Stulman, with his study *Order amid Chaos* (1998), provides an important, new key for the comprehension of Jeremiah. He observes that speeches in prose (like Jer 7; 11) hold strategic positions, clarify the surrounding poetic material, and thus help the readers to orient themselves. They introduce blocks, and allow for a subdivision of Jeremiah in the following way:

Jeremiah 1: *Incipit* and vocation of Jeremiah (prose), introducing the whole book.

Jeremiah 2–6: poetic oracles, mainly dealing with the people's infidelity and guilt.

Jeremiah 7 : 1–8 : 3: first temple sermon (prose), continued by 8 : 4–10 : 25, a series of reactions to it (mostly poetry).

Jeremiah 11 : 1–14: God's declaration of the broken covenant (prose), starts the part containing the so-called "confessions" (lament texts, poetic, mostly attributed to Jeremiah) and ends with ch. 20; therein 18 : 1–17, which describes the experience of the potter, in prose, as was the case at the beginning of the last subsection.

Jeremiah 21 : 1–10: God announces his fighting against his people (prose), followed by indictments against Judean kings and prophets (many of them poetic), up to ch. 24.

Jeremiah 25 is the central chapter of Jeremiah and its main pillar, bringing God's universal judgment. It is connected with Jer 1 by a time reference, divides the whole book into two halves, and develops the scenario up to Jer 52, the final chapter, announcing two steps in God's plans: First he will judge all the nations through Babel and "my servant" Nebuchadrezzar (v. 9). Yet afterwards, Babel, too, will experience God's verdict and downfall, as his final word (Brueggemann 1991).

The second half of Jeremiah has larger blocks:

Jeremiah 26, the second "temple sermon" (in prose) introduces the part up to Jer 35; in it salvation oracles are condensed the most within Jer, especially in Jer 29–33, 30–31 being mostly poetic.

Jeremiah 36, king Jehoiakim's burning of Jeremiah's scroll, starts the section leading to the conquest of Jerusalem and the reversal of the "exodus," in the flight of the remaining Judeans to Egypt, in fear of the Babylonians. It is entirely in prose, and goes up to Jer 45, a word for Baruch, Jeremiah's confidant.

Jeremiah 46–51, the oracles against the foreign nations, all of them poetic, fulfill a special role within Jeremiah. Its two main exponents, Egypt (Jer 46), and Babel (Jer 50–51), frame the final section, and are prominent throughout the whole book (for Egypt: Maier; for Babel: Hill). God's plans of judgment on both these nations, exposed in Jer 25, become thus realized.

The final chapter 52, dependent on the end of 2 Kings, confirms once more, after Jer 39, the downfall of Jerusalem. It adds the burning of the temple, not reported in Jer 39, and stresses, even more than its source text in 2 Kings, the enormous loss of lives and precious temple inventory. It also knows about a third exile, five years later than the second conquest (v. 30, in 582 BCE). Jeremiah 52 is the necessary conclusion to the book, hinted at already with the remark of an exile "in the fifth month" at the beginning, in Jer 1 : 3; the only correspondence to it within Jeremiah is 52 : 12–15 which must be seen as its fulfillment.

***d. Literary Features of Jeremiah.*** In Jeremiah God and his word are at the center (Shead); this is supported by a huge number of speech introduction formulas (166x "oracle of YHWH"; 154x the "messenger formula"; 36x the *Wortereignisformel* ["the word of YHWH came to me," or similar]). The mostly deficient response ("not listen"), in connection with deceit, leads into calamity.

Stylistically, Jeremiah presents some accented features. It has many quotes, starting with God's address of Jeremiah in 1 : 5–10. The sequence in 1 : 11–14 presents two dialogues, which signals intense interaction. In Jer 2 : 20–37 God quotes nine times what the people say; he engages – indirectly, through the prophet – in a dispute with them and confronts them. Questions are another rhetorical device, typical for Jeremiah (e.g., 2 : 5, 6, 8, 11). Jeremiah has a predilection for lists, like the one with contrasting verbs (1 : 10 "to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant"), and repetitions (see the variations of this verb list in 18 : 7,9; 24 : 6; 31 : 28; 42 : 10; 45 : 4). Doublets are another specialty of Jeremiah; typical examples are the repetition of 6 : 12–15 nearly exactly in 8 : 10–12, confirming the disastrous condition of the community, and the repetition of 6 : 22–24 in the oracles against Babylon in 50 : 41–43, reverting the former judgment against Jerusalem to its oppressor (for further rhetorical devices see especially the works of Lundbom).

The most distinctive literary feature of Jeremiah is intertextuality, more specifically, that Jeremiah

refers to and picks up expressions and motifs from many biblical books. The range of "source texts" for Jeremiah covers approximately half of the HB (Fischer 2007), including the whole Torah, the entire "Former Prophets," among the "Minor Prophets" certainly Amos, Hosea, and Micah, most probably also Obadiah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah. Jeremiah seems to draw on texts of Isaiah, modeling the figure of Jeremiah upon the "servant of YHWH" (Fischer 2013). It even knows and uses Ezekiel (Leene). This means that the Book of Jeremiah is a product of *Schriftgelehrsamkeit*, in fact of a very high form of learnedness, spiritual writing and religious dispute, and that, as a whole, it cannot be earlier than the 4th century BCE.

The "intertextual" working technique of Jeremiah is present throughout the whole book, indicating some kind of uniformity in its composition, despite the various genres and seemingly chaotic arrangement (see above). Jeremiah 1:7, 9 are based on Deut 18:18 and present Jeremiah, the prophet, as the announced successor of Moses, similar to him, to whom God personally hands over his words. Jeremiah 2:5 combines references to Deut 32:4, the "Song of Moses," and 2 Kgs 17:15, the reflection on the downfall of Samaria and the Northern Kingdom, etc. The last chapter, Jer 52, is nearly completely dependent on the end of 2 Kings, the defeat of Jerusalem in 587 BCE. These examples already show that Jeremiah refers to very specific, important texts, and it quotes them often with marked, coined expressions. As Jeremiah draws extensively on several books and combines them with its own, rich, and fast changing thoughts, this leads to an anthological style, close to what can be observed with mosaics. It also makes the reading and understanding of Jeremiah a challenging endeavor.

**3. Jeremiah, the Prophet.** The book of Jeremiah is the only source to "reconstruct" the life of the prophet Jeremiah (for attempts in this direction see Holladay; Lundbom), if such a figure existed historically at all. Given its heavily intertextual character and time distance to the events narrated, one has to be cautious about inferring historical conclusions from the book.

Nevertheless, the book of Jeremiah has a clear ambition to portray the "life" of Jeremiah, presenting crucial moments. In this respect it surpasses all other Writing Prophets. Jeremiah 1:2–3 dates the prophet's career to the last forty years of the Judean monarchy, and thus contrasts his commission to its beginnings under King David and Solomon, each one reigning also forty years: What they built up, is now torn down, and the central figure switches from the kings to the prophet. Yet, 587 BCE is not the end of Jeremiah's mission. The events of Jer 41–44 are most probably related to an anti-Babylonian revolt in 582, indirectly referred to in Jer 52:30.

Jeremiah, a priest from the tribal territory of Benjamin (Jer 1:1, possibly going back to Abiathar, 1 Kgs 2:26), says to be "young" (*naʿar*, 1:6), when God calls him in 627 BCE. God forbids him to marry and have children (16:2); given the early age of marrying, this must have followed quite soon after his vocation. The bulk of Jeremiah's messages is dated to the kings Jehoiakim and Zedekiah, with a special emphasis on the fourth year of Jehoiakim, the date of the battle of Carchemish and the rise of the Babylonian empire to universal dominion, serving as a structuring device for Jeremiah (25:1; 36:1; 45:1; 46:2). Chronologically, the last "records" of Jeremiah are to be found in Jer 43–44, where he is forced to go down with the fugitives to Egypt (43:5–6), and proclaims disaster upon them there.

Taking all these indications together, Jeremiah presents the life of a prophet who was called very early, in the time of King Josiah, still five years before the "Book of the Torah" was found in the temple (2 Kgs 22:8). "Jeremiah" experienced the last decades of the Judean monarchy and the downfall of Judah, Jerusalem and the temple, as well as the conflicts in the years after 587, leading to an "exodus" of Judeans to Egypt. He is the leading figure interpreting in God's name these events and revealing its backgrounds and dynamics.

The roles attributed to Jeremiah, already in Jer 1, confirm his importance. He is "prophet to the nations" (1:5), a unique title showing his universal significance. From descent, he is a priest (1:1). In 1:10, God conveys to him power and authority, similar to those of high political representatives and corresponding to divine activities – see the verb list, which only here is connected with a human individual, in all other instances with God himself. In 1:11, 13 Jeremiah appears as a visionary. Finally, in 1:18, God makes him a "fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls," indicating that the prophet will replace Jerusalem, its temple and fortifications, and for the better.

Clearly, such roles, and even more in times of a breakdown, are not easily accepted. Jeremiah becomes the object of rejection and scorn, as also the confessions testify to (e.g., Jer 11:19; 15:10; 17:15; 18:18; 20:7–10). People in his home village attempt to hinder him proclaim God's words, threatening to kill him (11:21). Pashhur, a colleague as priest and prophet, confines and tortures him, putting him in the "stocks" overnight (20:2). When Jeremiah announces that Jerusalem and its temple will perish if the people don't listen, he is threatened with a death sentence (26:8). Several texts speak of his imprisonment in a courtyard in the time of the Babylonian siege (starting with 32:2); this seems to be an improvement with regard to a provisional "prison" in the house of an official (37:20–21). Earlier, King Jehoiakim had tried to seize Jeremiah and Baruch, but in vain (36:26). In the final phase of the siege, officers had thrown Jer-

emiah who instigated to desertion into a cistern where he was going to die; only the courageous and well-planning Ethiopian official Ebed-Melech rescues him from there (38:7–13). Kidnapped by his own people, Jeremiah's traces disappear in Egypt (Jer 43–44).

Jeremiah's suffering leaves its traces. The confessions and other lament texts in Jeremiah bear testimony to inner suffering, in a way not previously described. Jeremiah displays a new language of expressing feelings and inner conflicts, and remains outstanding in revealing thoughts and processes in mind and soul connected with a prophetic commission so fundamentally challenged. This also leads to an increased emphasis on prayer, Jer 32:16–25 being its longest example.

**4. Message and Significance.** From the beginning to the end Jeremiah is replete with analyses of the guilt of the people and announcements of disaster, as its consequence. It starts in Jer 1:14–16, increases in Jer 2–6 with many sharp accusations, and continues throughout the book, until the very last chapter. There is no longer passage in Jeremiah that would not have, at least in the background, or indirectly, some hint to the failures of the community and the resulting pain and suffering, up to the exile (O'Connor).

One main factor in the waywardness of God's people lies in their political and religious leaders. They are mentioned very often (e.g., 1:18; 2:8; 5:5), and frequently in opposition to Jeremiah. Priests and prophets persecute and confront Jeremiah (see the example of Pashhur in Jer 20; or the case of the prophet Hananiah in Jer 28), even want to sentence him to death (26:7–11). No other book of the Bible treats the issue of "false prophets" so extensively as Jeremiah (further important texts are 6:13–14; 14:13–15; 23:9–40; 27:16–22; 29:15–23). They are a negative foil for the only one "true" prophet, Jeremiah. Jeremiah, in this respect, reflects on the role of prophets and contains a distinguished theory of these divine messengers (Knobloch).

The guilt comprises all, even the "lower" strata of the society, as Jer 5:1–4 shows, enhancing God's mercy to an extreme: Abraham, in Gen 18, had reached an agreement with God that ten just people would suffice to rescue the city; here, in Jer 5, God offers, that a single one "doing right and seeking fidelity/truth" would cause him to spare Jerusalem. The "universal culpability" is used in Jeremiah to explain the downfall of Judah and its capital in 587 BCE, in a similar vein as in Deuteronomy and the "Former Prophets." Carroll has called such a theological and tapered interpretation of historical facts and developments "ideology." In this regard Jeremiah follows deuteronomistic ideas (see also the argument with Manasseh, Jer 15:4 and 2 Kgs 21:10–16).

However, Jeremiah goes still further, by negating any chance, even for the prophet, to be a mediator for God's grace in such a situation. Three times God forbids him to intercede (7:16; 11:14; 14:11), reverting so the motif known from Exod 32; 1 Sam 7; Amos 7 and other texts showing prophetic intercession on behalf of the guilty people. Only Jeremiah has this prohibition, and it underlines the gravity of the broken relationship with God (Rossi). However, it does not remain God's last word: In Jer 33:3 God invites the prophet to address him, and promises him to answer favorably. And Jer 42 is an example that God has dissolved his interdiction and responds to Jeremiah's intercession.

This new development reveals the deeper meaning of what happens to Israel in its history. Downfall and exile are not God's primary intent, as his tears clearly show: In Jer 9:9 (NRSV v. 10) and 14:17 YHWH declares to weep over the desolate situation of his land and the wounds of his people. Jeremiah is the only book of the HB/OT explicitly to portray God weeping (Heschel; most probably also in 48:32, there wailing over Moab). The outward sign of tears unveils God's inner feelings, being emotionally bound to his people (see his soliloquy in Jer 31:20) and engaging himself for them tirelessly (cf. the Hebr. locution *škm* in the hiphil infinite absolute combined with another verb, "relentlessly doing something," ten times [of eleven in the HB], starting with 7:13).

Disaster and exile on one hand, heavy divine emotions on the other – how can this tension be solved? Jeremiah knows about a change, stressing it with the idiom *šûb šĕbût*, "restore the fortune," or "change the (negative) fate." Jeremiah picks up Moses' announcement from Deut 30:3, and repeats it eleven times, beginning with Jer 29:14. Thus it emphasizes that the experiences of suffering, death, exile are transitory, a passage towards a new life, bestowed by God's gracious forgiveness and mercy. The six poems of the "scroll of consolation" (Jer 30:4–31:22) describe this process as regularly taking place, and involving systematically both genders (Bozak). God changes all kinds of pain and need for good.

A key to Jeremiah's message is the concept of "spiritual metamorphosis" (Weinfeld). It describes fundamental changes in Israel's belief: Jerusalem itself will take over the role of the (lost) ark of the covenant (Jer 3:16–17). To listen to God's voice is more important than sacrifices (7:22–23). The exodus out of Egypt will be surpassed by a new exodus, out of the countries of the exile and diaspora (16:14–15 // 23:7–8). There will be no collective retribution any more, but everybody will personally be responsible (31:29–30). The most influential change follows immediately thereafter, with the announcement of a new covenant (31:31–34) that goes beyond the old, broken one from Sinai – this

has been picked up by Jesus (Luke 22 : 20) and the NT (Heb 8 : 8–12, the longest quote of the HB/OT in it). All these elements envision clearly a shift towards a more actual, personal faith, thus confirming once more what has become visible in the new language of prayer in Jeremiah's laments.

Second Chronicles presents two early references to Jeremiah. In 2 Chron 35 : 25 it is noted that Jeremiah composed laments over the death of King Josiah of Judah, and 2 Chron 36 : 21 notes that the judgment that befell Jerusalem would fulfill the word of YHWH to Jeremiah so that the land might keep the sabbath for seventy years (cf. Jer 25 : 11; 29 : 10).

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*Georg Fischer*