

JEREMIAH - SHORT VERSION

Historical context and division of chapters. “At the beginning of Jeremiah’s prophetic ministry, King Josiah ruled the southern kingdom of Judah (2 Chronicles, chapters 34-35). He was a good king who expanded Judah’s territory and started a religious reform. Jeremiah approved of Josiah and Josiah’s reforms, but he was afraid they were too little, too late. Chapters 2-5 of his book contain his prophecies during Josiah’s rule. In them, he speaks out against Israel’s sin and corruption but hopes that things will improve if the people turn to God (4:1-2). Unfortunately, King Josiah was suddenly killed in battle, and things went from bad to worse.

Kings Jehoiakim and Zedekiah were the main rulers who followed Josiah, and they were Josiah’s complete opposite (2 Ch 36:1-14). Both were ruthless, power hungry, and corrupt. During Jehoiakim’s reign, Jeremiah had to go into hiding out of fear for his life. Chapters 7-20 of Jeremiah’s book contain his prophecies during this time, when his preaching against the sins of Israel became stronger. Chapters 21-29 and 34-45 record his life and preaching during Zedekiah’s reign – the last few years before the Babylonian Exile. While Zedekiah ruled, Jeremiah was imprisoned, beaten and thrown into a well to die.

Jeremiah survived his experience in the well to see Jerusalem and the Temple destroyed by the Babylonians. To give the people hope that God was still on their side, he prophesied the destruction of all Israel’s enemies, especially Babylon (see chapters 46-51).

Ultimately, Jeremiah realized that even a new king like David would not be enough to correct what was wrong. The people were unable to fulfill God’s commandments because they had hearts of stone. In chapters 30-33, the *Book of Consolation*, Jeremiah said that the Lord would make a new Covenant with Israel in the future, and this time, the law would be written on the people’s hearts (31:33-34)” (The Catholic Youth Bible p. 891).

The confessions of Jeremiah. A very unique feature of this biblical book is the five so called *confessions* of Jeremiah: 11:18-12:6, 15:10-18, 17:12-18, 18:18-23 and 20:7-18.

Division of Chapters

The book of Jeremiah is not written in an orderly fashion. It is scrappy, built up of many bits and pieces which do not always follow as easily from one to another. In the *Collegeville Commentary*, the book is divided as follows:

Part 1: Jeremiah’s call (Chapter 1)

Part 2: Jeremiah’s preaching from 626 to 604BC (Chapters 2-20)

Part 3: Prophecies against the kings and false prophets (Chapters 21-25)

Part 4: Biographical material and the new covenant (Chapters 26-33)

Part 5: Disobedience and destruction (Chapters 34-39)

Part 6: After the Holocaust (Chapters 40-45)

Part 7: Collected oracles against the nations; conclusion (Chapters 46-52)

Suggested texts to read

1:4-10– The call of Jeremiah

7:1-8:3– Temple sermon

12:1-6– The first of Jeremiah’s famous “confessions” – sharings from his heart about his ministry and relationship with God.

13:1-11- Parable of the loincloth. Despite her closeness to God, Judah’s closeness will cause her to rot just as the loincloth had rotted in the cross cleft of the rock.

15:16-20- Jeremiah’s second confession – another powerful look into the soul of the prophet. Life for Jeremiah has become one long hassle. He is continually at loggerheads with his community.

17:14-18- Jeremiah’s third confession - this confession should be interpreted in the light of Jeremiah’s observations concerning the mysterious

workings of the human heart mentioned in 17:1, 5-10. As in his first and second confessions, Jeremiah begs God to heal him (v. 14), to observe the blasphemous scoffing of his enemies (v. 16), and to remember how he did not press for his enemies' total destruction (v. 16). Naturally, he prays that his enemies and not he himself be confounded (vv. 17-18), for only then will it be seen that God is a just God (Collegeville Commentary, p. 863).

18:18-23 – Jeremiah's fourth confession – a prayer for vengeance. Jeremiah is outraged at his enemies because they plot to destroy him. In reaction Jeremiah prays a prayer of vengeance: *“Deliver their children to famine... Let their wives be made childless and widows; let their men die of pestilence... (v. 21). Forgive not their crime...” (v. 23).*

What are we to make of this prayer of Jeremiah? First, we might be grateful that it is recorded in scripture. When our emotions swing from love to hate, we know we have a friend in Jeremiah. While Jeremiah has been compared to Jesus, we know he is not Jesus. Rather, he is a flawed human being like the rest of us. In his prayer, Jeremiah asks that his enemies; sin not be forgiven (v. 23). On the cross, Jesus pleads that his enemies be forgiven.

20:7-18 – Jeremiah's fifth confession – Goaded to despair, Jeremiah, in a magnificent passionate soliloquy, accuses God of seducing him into accepting a mission that brings only *“derision and reproach all the day” (v. 8). His gloom and doom message makes him a hated person amongst his own people. Jeremiah even contemplates abandoning his vocation. “I say to myself I will not speak in his name no more” (v. 9). But then he has another amazing experience. He says that the word of God “becomes like a fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones” and the effort to not speak it only wearies him (v. 9). Despite all of his misgivings about God and his vocation, he experiences God's presence. “The Lord is with me like a mighty champion” (v. 11). With a burst of confidence he once again asks God to avenge his enemies (vv. 12-13). Finally, emotionally, he curses the day he was born (vv. 14-18). “Many have observed that this particular confession of Jeremiah says more about the nature of inspiration and the hardships of the prophetic mission than a dozen learned treatises” (Collegeville Commentary p. 464).*

No other prophet has spoken so much about his spiritual trials and “dark nights of the soul.” The next

section of this book explains the reason for his inner trials, namely, his conflicts with the monarchy and the false prophets of his time.

29:4-15 – 21-23- Jeremiah's letter to the exiles. 29:11-13 are some of the best known verses in the Old Testament.

31:31-34 – In this famous passage quoted in the New Testament (Hebs 8:8-12), Jeremiah speaks of a new covenant that God will make with his people.

32:16-25 – A prayer by Jeremiah.

The influence of Jeremiah

Concerning the influence of Jeremiah in the life of Israel, scripture scholar, Fr. Peter Ellis writes:

There is no simple measure of the influence of Jeremiah. In time his words, like a two-edged sword, penetrated the marrow of Israel, stirred the heart of the nation in exile, and reverberated through sacred writ even into the books of the New Testament.

Like Moses before and Jesus after him, Jeremiah lived at a turning point in his people's history and bridged the gap between the old and the new. In his inaugural vision he was set “over nations and over kingdoms, to root up and to tear down, to destroy and to demolish, to build and to plant” (1:10). He fulfilled his mission to the letter. He saw Assyria disappear from the stage of history and Babylon take over center stage. He preached the funeral oration for Judah and the Sinai covenant and at the same time foretold the institution of a new covenant. He declared the Davidic kings rejected but heralded the coming of a new David.

Of Jeremiah it can be said: no man did more for his nation and was treated worse. The mystery, however, is not in the prophet's suffering but in the resurrection of the nation that died and was buried in Babylon in fulfillment of his prophecies. (Collegeville Bible Commentary, pp 479-480)