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Introduction to the Book of Jeremiah

Six prophet books were written over a period of 100 years.

- Joel written to Judah circa 845 BC.
- Jonah written on account of Nineveh circa 780 BC.
- Amos written to Israel circa 765 BC.
- Hosea written to Israel circa 750 BC.
- Isaiah written to Judah circa 740 BC.
- Micah written to Judah circa 735 BC.

Many of these prophets had some rather strange acts and actions.

- Both Isaiah and Micah stripped themselves and proclaimed a message of the Lord by their nakedness.
- Hosea proclaimed the word of the Lord via his poor marriage.
- Hosea and Isaiah's children bore names of grave significance to their generation.
- Jonah was consumed by a large fish.
- Joel was harried by a locust plague of apocalyptic proportions.
- They all saw visions and proclaimed dreams.
- Some if not all of them were opposed, ridiculed, threatened, beaten, neglected, despised, and forsaken. In fact, Isaiah was told from the outset that few if any would listen to him!
- And in some of their works, we see their struggle to be a servant of the Lord in the midst of trial and difficulty (e.g., Jonah).

Now combine all of this, and still we do not have an accurate portrayal of the life and times of the prophet Jeremiah! In Jeremiah we behold numerous dramatic sign-acts on the part of Jeremiah involving all sorts of things including:

- Living a life of singleness to proclaim a sober message of judgment to his generation.
- Purchasing a field he could never use.
- Walking around with a wooden yoke on his neck.
- Neither attending weddings or funerals in his local town.
- Wearing a pair of under wear for a time, walking possibly 350 miles one way to bury the underwear in a crevice by the Euphrates river, returning to Judah, and then going back and retrieving the garment- each trip taking no less than three months!
- The list goes on and on!

While the other prophets behold visions from the Lord, Jeremiah did to the utmost! Where other prophets were persecuted, ridiculed, and opposed; Jeremiah experienced this time and time again- being imprisoned, beaten, thrown in wells, and left for dead on multiple occasions! Where the other prophets struggled with fulfilling their call, multiply that by 20 and you will have a good understanding of Jeremiah's struggle! In fact, Jeremiah 1:6 details Jeremiah's call. The Lord summoned the prophet and out of the gate Jeremiah is struggling, "Alas, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, because I am a youth."

And yet it is this factor that makes this prophecy so down to earth and real. Jeremiah is no "other worldly" man who did not struggle with God, His providence, and His calling. Jeremiah, like all of us, lived in the trenches where he bled and cried numerous times!

Background

Jeremiah 1:1-3, "The words of Jeremiah, the son of Hilkiyah, of the priests who were in

Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, to whom the word of the Lord came in the days of Josiah, the son of Amon, king of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign. It came also in the days of Jehoiakim, the son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the end of the eleventh year of Zedekiah, the son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the exile of Jerusalem in the fifth month.”

The biographical information in these verses place the life and ministry of Jeremiah under the last five leaders of Israel: Josiah, Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, Zedekiah (and eventually Gedaliah the Jewish governor placed over Jerusalem after the exile). In order to understand the content of this prophecy, we need to be versed in the Near Eastern geo-political affairs of the seventh and sixth centuries BC. To do that we begin with Manasseh (696-642) in light of whose legacy Jeremiah and the last generation of Israel lived.

2 Chronicles 33:1-2, “Manasseh was twelve years old when he became king [696 BC], and he reigned fifty-five years in Jerusalem. And he did evil in the sight of the Lord according to the abominations of the nations whom the Lord dispossessed before the sons of Israel.”

In the midst of Manasseh’s sin and rebellion, God sent prophets to Judah who spoke this way:

2 Kings 21:11, “Because Manasseh king of Judah has done these abominations, having done wickedly more than all the Amorites did who *were* before him, and has also made Judah sin with his idols...”

With these two passages we are introduced to the fourteenth king of Judah, Manasseh. He was the son of the godly king Hezekiah. He began his reign in Jerusalem at the age of twelve and reigned fifty-five years, probably as coregent with his father from 696 to 686 B.C., and then as sole ruler from 686 to 642 B.C.¹

And yet Manasseh is the poster child for the warning, “Apostasy is only a generation away!” Truly his father’s godly influence appears to have affected Manasseh only negatively, and he reverted to the ways of his wicked grandfather, Ahaz. Accordingly, Manasseh is roundly condemned for his aberrant ways. Manasseh restored everything Hezekiah had abolished (recall that Hezekiah restored the worship of God to the people after the gross rebellion of King Ahaz):

- Manasseh erected altars to Baal.
- He erected an image of Asherah in the Temple.
- He instituted the worship of the sun, moon, and stars.
- He recognized the Ammonite god Molech and sacrificed his son to it (2 Kings 21:6)!
- He approved of divination and so encouraged its use in the worship of God’s people.
- And he killed all who opposed or even protested his evil actions.
- In fact, it is possible that he killed the prophet Isaiah; rabbinical tradition states that Manasseh gave the command that Isaiah be sawn in two (see also Hebrews 11:37).

Truly, his reign was a time of religious retrogression, caused by terror over Assyria and a fascination with her cults. This resulted in a syncretism of Baalism, a cult of Astarte at the “high places,” astral worship, and the growth and proliferation of spiritism and divination. This is important for Jeremiah contains passages in which the prophet endeavored to deliver God’s people from superstition and the fear of omens!

If all of this wasn’t bad enough, Manasseh’s abandonment of God’s law was not limited to the royal court; through the king’s example, idolatry spread to the people of Judah and Jerusalem like never before (2 Kings 21:9). Furthermore his long reign was bloody, reactionary, and notorious for the introduction of illegal altars into the Temple courts and “the passing of his sons through the fire” in the valley of the son of Hinnom (the valley on the south side of the city of Jerusalem).

Scripture summarizes Manasseh’s reign by saying he “seduced them [Judah] to do evil more than the nations whom the Lord destroyed before the sons of Israel” (2 Kings 21:9). On account of his wickedness and rebellion, Manasseh was directly to blame for the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of Judah, so great was his sin.

2 Kings 21:10-15, “Now the Lord spoke through His servants the prophets, saying, ‘Because Manasseh king of Judah has done these abominations, having done wickedly more than all the Amorites did who *were* before him, and has also made Judah sin with his idols; therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, “Behold, I am bringing *such* calamity on Jerusalem and Judah, that whoever hears of it, both his ears shall tingle. And I will stretch over Jerusalem the line of Samaria and the plummet of the house of Ahab, and I will wipe Jerusalem as one wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down. And I will abandon the remnant of My inheritance and deliver them into the hand of their enemies, and they shall become as plunder and spoil to all their enemies; because they have done evil in My sight, and have been provoking Me to anger, since the day their fathers came from Egypt, even to this day.’”²

It is so important that we understand this! After Manasseh’s regency, it was just a matter of time before judgment came! In fact, though Manasseh did in fact repent toward the end of his life (2 Chronicles 33:10-16), the damage had been done such that everything the king did to “undo” the harm which he brought on Judah was “too little too late!” Because of Manasseh judgment would come!

This ought to give us a renewed appreciation for the godly work of Josiah or the prophets: Jeremiah, Zephaniah Habakkuk, and the like. They did not labor to avert judgment, for they knew it was coming. No! All that they did was out of a love for the Lord and His Kingdom!

Amon (642-640)

2 Chronicles 33:21-23, “Amon was twenty-two years old when he became king, and he

reigned two years in Jerusalem. And he did evil in the sight of the Lord as Manasseh his father had done, and Amon sacrificed to all the carved images which his father Manasseh had made, and he served them. Moreover, he did not humble himself before the Lord as his father Manasseh had done, but Amon multiplied guilt.”

The indiscretions and folly of our youth most always bear fruit. So it was with Manasseh’s sin in the life of his son, Amon. Amon became king at the age of 22 and reigned for only two years. His reign was characterized by the sin and the rebellion of his father. In fact, he could very well have been deliberately named after the Egyptian god, Amun-Ra (who at the time was the chief god of their pantheon)! The text is very clear that Amon was no lightweight when it came to sin. He not only matched his father’s abuses, but unlike his father, Amon did not repent. As such, he is remembered as one of the more wicked kings who sat on the throne of Judah (though he only reigned two years)!

Yet God was gracious to His people. Though it is clear that the Lord did not avert the judgment that was coming to Judah on account of Manasseh, nevertheless and again God only allowed Amon to reign on the throne for two years.

2 Chronicles 33:24-25, “Finally his servants conspired against him and put him to death in his own house. But the people of the land killed all the conspirators against King Amon, and the people of the land made Josiah his son king in his place.”

It is not known what motive inspired Amon’s assassins, but the fact that his assassins were in turn put to death by “the people of the land” suggests that Amon was the victim of court intrigue rather than of a popular revolution. Regardless, the sin of Manasseh worked its way in and through Judah. Yet it wasn’t always dark and bleak!

Josiah (640-609 BC)

2 Kings 22:1-2, “Josiah was eight years old when he became king, and he reigned thirty-one years in Jerusalem; and his mother’s name *was* Jedidah the daughter of Adaiah of Bozkath. And he did right in the sight of the Lord and walked in all the way of his father David, nor did he turn aside to the right or to the left.”

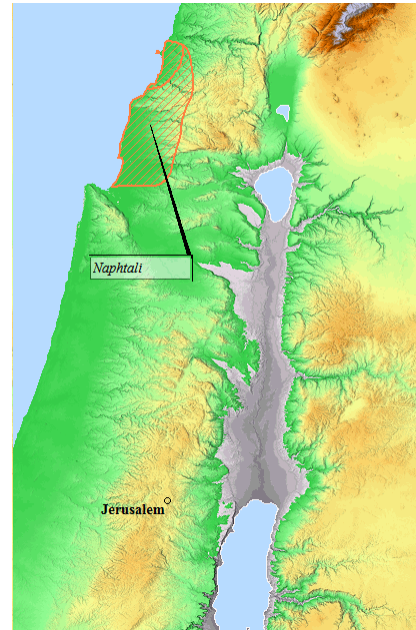
Josiah was THE bright spot in the long and sad history of Judah’s kings...

2 Kings 23:25, “And before him there was no king like him who turned to the Lord with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; nor did any like him arise after him.”

Josiah was the sixteenth king of Judah. Because he was the son of Amon and grandson of Manasseh, the “people of the land” enthroned him at the age of 8 upon the assassination of his father. He reigned for 31 years. Josiah’s regency was characterized by peace and reform.

Hence, the years of his reign were among the most tranquil that Judah ever experienced under a king. In fact, the Bible focuses almost exclusively on Josiah's spiritual reforms, which initially occurred in three stages.

1. The First Stage (632-628): Josiah's Personal Growth in Grace — Ascending to the throne at age eight (640 BC), Josiah was blessed with God-fearing advisors who resisted the idolatrous influence of his father. More importantly, however, at the age of 16, Josiah personally "began to seek the God of his father David" (2 Chronicles 34:3). This truly could have marked the day he came to saving faith—when God regenerated him and opened his eyes to behold the Savior!
2. The Second Stage (628-622): The Cleansing of the Land — At the age of 20, Josiah initiated drastic reforms and so began to cleanse Jerusalem and the land of Judah of idolatrous objects (2 Chronicles 34:3–7). It is noteworthy that this reform was more extensive than that of Hezekiah (2 Kings 18:4; 2 Chronicles 29:3–36). Josiah extended his cleansing of the land into the territory of fallen Israel; at the time Israel was nominally controlled by Assyria. Josiah personally supervised the destruction of the altars of the Baals, the incense altars, the wooden images, the carved images, and the molded images as far north as the cities of Naphtali. Josiah's efforts were aided by the death of the great Assyrian king, Ashurbanipal (~629/8 B.C.), which brought about a serious decline in Assyria's power and allowed Josiah freedom to pursue his reforms.
3. The Third Stage (622): Repairing the Temple and Reinstating Full Worship — At the age of 26 (622 BC), Josiah ordered that the Temple be repaired under the supervision of Hilkiah, the high priest (2 Kings 23). Recall:



2 Chronicles 33:4-5, "And he built altars in the house of the Lord of which the Lord had said, 'My name shall be in Jerusalem forever.' For he built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the Lord."

During Manasseh's reign, the worship of God was displaced with the worship and service of Baal and the many false gods of the Canaanites! Theirs was a morally corrupt and bankrupt religion which Manasseh imposed upon the nation. The result was that temple was re-allocated and so redesigned to house the worship of these false gods. It no doubt was at this time that a faithful scribe or priest hid a copy of God's word in one of the newly erected walls of the temple.

In light of all of this, at the time of Josiah the temple was in disrepair and so unusable for the worship and service of Yahweh! Accordingly, Josiah purposed to change this, and so he commissioned Hilkiah to go about the work of restoration which would have involved tearing down walls and false altars AND replacing the holy vessels for God's worship! In the process, a copy of the Book of the Law was discovered (2 Chronicles 34:14–15); most likely a scroll containing a copy of the book of Deuteronomy.³ When the book was read to Josiah, he was horrified to learn how far Judah had departed from the covenant and so the calling that God

had placed upon His people. This discovery provided a new momentum for the reformation that was already in progress. This reformation went way beyond the boarder of Judah to include the lands which Israel inhabited in the north.

2 Kings 23:15, “Furthermore, the altar that *was* at Bethel *and* the high place which Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who made Israel sin, had made, even that altar and the high place he broke down. Then he demolished its stones, ground them to dust, and burned the Asherah.”

And yet, Josiah didn’t stop even here! If you read on you would discover he endeavored to cleanse the cities of Samaria by which he killed all the priests of the high places on the altars, burned human bones on the altars, and destroyed all the temples on those high places.

It is important that you become familiar with this revival, because Jeremiah had a lot to say about it in his prophecy. To put it in a nutshell; while the king, those in leadership, and his advisors no doubt were sincere and moved by the glory of God, the “reformation” was superficial at best! In fact one of Jeremiah’s earlier prophecies has the prophet standing at the temple door, most likely at the height of the revival, and calling upon Judah.

Jeremiah 4:4, “Circumcise yourselves to the Lord and remove the foreskins of your heart, men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, lest My wrath go forth like fire and burn with none to quench it, because of the evil of your deeds.”

The people of God obviously didn’t heed Jeremiah’s call, for when Josiah died, so also did the revival!

Josiah’s Death (609 BC)

2 Kings 23:26, 29-30, “However, the Lord did not turn from the fierceness of His great wrath with which His anger burned against Judah, because of all the provocations with which Manasseh had provoked Him... In his days Pharaoh Neco king of Egypt went up to the king of Assyria to the river Euphrates. And King Josiah went to meet him, and when *Pharaoh Neco* saw him he killed him at Megiddo. And his servants drove his body in a chariot from Megiddo, and brought him to Jerusalem and buried him in his own tomb. Then the people of the land took Jehoahaz the son of Josiah and anointed him and made him king in place of his father.”

With this the revelation of God’s wrath against Judah on account of Manasseh had begun. The first to go in Judah was their godly king. In 609 B.C., Neco II of Egypt went from the Egyptian outpost in Megiddo to Harran to aid of the Assyrians whose king had been driven out of his capital by Babylonia and the Medes. Josiah wasn’t about to allow Israel to be “the battle ground of Egypt,” and so he went out in battle against Neco! Shockingly, Josiah was seriously injured! As such, he was driven by chariot back to Jerusalem where he died at the age of 40!

Yet God was still on the throne such that we conclude that Josiah's death NOT ONLY wasn't an accident IT WAS a grace to the king.

Isaiah 57:1, "The righteous man perishes, and no man takes it to heart; and devout men are taken away, while no one understands. For the righteous man is taken away from evil."

Though Josiah did all he could to reform the nation, nothing could stop the judgment that was soon to come upon the land and the nation on account of Manasseh's sin! As such, we understand Josiah's death to be the grace of God by which the Lord "removed him from the evil" that was about to come upon the land!

And this brings us to a key theme of Jeremiah, God's sovereignty over the nations.

God's Sovereignty over the Nations

Jeremiah 10 was presented to the people of God during the days of Josiah, most likely early in Jeremiah's ministry, prior to when the revival of 628 BC had kicked in. Recall, Jeremiah began his public ministry in the thirteenth year of Josiah (Jeremiah 1:2) which was 627 BC. As such, outright paganism and the worship of idols still could be found amongst the people. Accordingly, Jeremiah exhorted the nation, no doubt as a young man this way:

Jeremiah 10:1-5, "Hear the word which the Lord speaks to you, O house of Israel. Thus says the Lord, 'Do not learn the way of the nations, and do not be terrified by the signs of the heavens although the nations are terrified by them; for the customs of the peoples are delusion; because it is wood cut from the forest, the work of the hands of a craftsman with a cutting tool. They decorate *it* with silver and with gold; they fasten it with nails and with hammers so that it will not totter. Like a scarecrow in a cucumber field are they, and they cannot speak; they must be carried, because they cannot walk! Do not fear them, for they can do no harm, nor can they do any good.'

How typical of pagan religion! A bad omen is proclaimed and the adherents walk around fearing their shadow until something bad happens! Jeremiah's exhortation was simple: *"These false god's can do nothing- either good or bad! So do not fear them! In fact, if you are going to fear anyone or anything, fear the Lord!"*

Jeremiah 10:6-7, "There is none like Thee, O Lord; Thou art great, and great is Thy name in might. Who would not fear Thee, O King of the nations? Indeed it is Thy due! For among all the wise men of the nations, and in all their kingdoms, there is none like Thee."

It is notable that Jeremiah, who was called by God to be a "prophet to the nations" (Jeremiah 1:5), encouraged the people of Judah by proclaiming that every king's heart "is like channels of water in the hand of the Lord" (Proverbs 21:1). It is so important that we understand history in

light of this truth! God is the Sovereign Lord before whom the nations are “a drop in the bucket!”

Isaiah 40:22-24, “It is He who sits above the vault of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers, who stretches out the heavens like a curtain and spreads them out like a tent to dwell in. He *it is* who reduces rulers to nothing, who makes the judges of the earth meaningless. Scarcely have they been planted, scarcely have they been sown, scarcely has their stock taken root in the earth, but He merely blows on them, and they wither, and the storm carries them away like stubble.”

As such throughout the sordid history of Manasseh, Amon, and then the work and service of Josiah (from his life even to his death), God was on the throne!

Now when we look at the book of Jeremiah and all the struggles that this prophet underwent, and notice THE reason Jeremiah kept at it month after month, year after year, spanning forty plus years of ministry! Jeremiah knew that the Lord Almighty; who loved him, called him, and commissioned him, reigns!

Scholars suggest that on account of the similarity of Jeremiah 10 to Isaiah 40, 41, 44, 46,⁴ that Jeremiah had to have been well familiar with Isaiah! In fact, it is not a stretch to think of Jeremiah reading this portion of Isaiah and being prompted by God to go to the temple court and preach the words of Jeremiah 10! Truly, it was the message of the majesty and glory of God which Jeremiah used to confront his superstitious and timid countrymen. And it was this message which impelled Jeremiah unto a ministry of forty years of suffering, ridicule, ingratitude, rejection, persecution, and exile! God is on the throne!

Jeremiah 23:29, “‘Is not My word like fire?’ declares the Lord, ‘and like a hammer which shatters a rock?’”

Jeremiah 32:17, “Ah Lord God! Behold, Thou hast made the heavens and the earth by Thy great power and by Thine outstretched arm! Nothing is too difficult for Thee.”

Jeremiah 33:2, “Thus says the Lord who made *the earth*, the Lord who formed it to establish it, the Lord is His name!”

Lamentations 3:37-38, “Who is there who speaks and it comes to pass, unless the Lord has commanded *it*? *Is it* not from the mouth of the Most High that both good and ill go forth?”

In light of these glorious truths, how did Jeremiah respond? How ought we to respond?

Jeremiah 17:7, “Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord and whose trust is the Lord.”

Have you grown weary of doing well? Does your ministry to your spouse, children, work place, or school at times get the best of you? Are you at risk of “burning out” today? Then “set your

minds on things above” and understand that your calling is NOT to change a thing around you, BUT to be faithful with the charge at hand!

Jeremiah served forty plus years knowing that his ministry would yield little if not fruit. Josiah served thirty-one years as king over a nation which God had rejected (on account of Manasseh)! Why did they serve? Only for the love of the Lord! And it is our charge to do likewise! Let us server the Lord with a renewed zeal and passion regardless of the outcome!

End Notes

¹ Manasseh reigned longer than any other Judean king.

² cf. also 2 Kings 22:16-17.

³ We say this because Nehemiah (who prophesied around this time) contains multiple allusions to Deuteronomy. It is clear that the prophet was “obsessed” with this book! Furthermore, many of the reforms of Josiah reflect a renewed interest in Deuteronomic law.

⁴ cf. Is. 40:18–20; 41:7; 44:9–20; 46:5–7.

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Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10th Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on April 21, 2013. Greg is the preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church.