

Jeremiah

The book of Jeremiah spans about a fifty-year period, from the end of the seventh century to the middle of the sixth century B.C.E. The general historical situation taking us up to the beginning of the book of Jeremiah is as follows.

Israel (the Northern Kingdom) had long ago disappeared as an independent entity. Judah alone remained. Assyrian power and its sphere of influence was on the decline by the middle of the seventh century. Having previously been dominated by the Assyrians, Judah toward the end of this century enjoyed a bit of independence. By 628 under Josiah, Judah was politically free and economically prosperous, and had even begun expanding northward into formerly Israelite territory.

Life and Times of Jeremiah

640 Josiah began to reign as king of Judah

627 Jeremiah began his ministry

622 Josiah initiated religious and political reform (Deuteronomic Reform)

609 Josiah died at Megiddo

Jehoahaz (Shallum) made king; lasted three months

Jehoiakim installed king of Judah by the Egyptians

Jeremiah delivered his Temple Sermon

605 Battle of Carchemish: Babylonia asserted its power over Egypt

Jeremiah's scroll read before Jehoiakim, burned by Jehoiakim

598 Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem; first deportation of refugees to Babylonia

Jehoiakim died

Jehoiachin became king, was taken to Babylon

Zedekiah installed king of Judah by Babylonians

Jeremiah confronted Hananiah who broke the ox yoke

588 Jeremiah imprisoned by Zedekiah

587 Destruction of Jerusalem

Gedaliah appointed governor of Judea

582 Gedaliah assassinated

Jeremiah traveled to Egypt

562 Jeremiah died in Egypt

Jeremiah began his prophetic activity during the reign of Josiah. Josiah was the king of Judah from 640 B.C.E. until 609. The early years of Josiah's reign were a time of prosperity and political independence. In the evaluation of the Deuteronomic school, represented by the books of Kings, Josiah was a fine and faithful king.

Jeremiah became a prophet in 627 and continued during those years immediately preceding Josiah's reform movement. After the reform initiative in 622, there are no words from Jeremiah for about a decade (perhaps Jeremiah felt Josiah had succeeded in doing what was necessary). He resumed his prophetic ministry after the death of Josiah.

From this editorial introduction we learn that Jeremiah belonged to a priestly family from Anathoth in Benjamin. This is significant because it reveals one source of his antipathy to the Jerusalem priestly establishment. Admittedly we are dealing with a chain of evidence here, but this is how it goes.

Of special importance in Jeremiah's call narrative is the articulation of his mission. It is repeated throughout the book. He will break kingdoms apart, and plant kingdoms

Type	Form	Jeremiah Texts
A	Autobiography	1-25 including the complaints; 46-51
B	Biography	19:1-20:6 ; 26-29 , 36-45
C	Prose Sermons	7:1-8:3 ; 11:1-14 ; 18:1-12 ; 21:1-10 ; 22:1-5 ; 25:1-11 ; 34:8-22
	Complaints	11:18-12:6 ; 15:10-21 ; 17:14-18 ; 18:18-23 ; 20:7-13 ; 20:14-18

The core message was this: Yahweh had not abandoned his people. They had to be punished for their sins, but the covenant was still in effect. In fact it was a new covenant, new in the way God would relate to his people.

Ezekiel

Ezekiel's vision of God on a Throne-chariot presented the refugees in Babylon with a brand new idea. God is not stuck in a building in Jerusalem. He has wheels and can be anywhere. Even in "godless" Babylon.

God's character may be eternally the same, but the way God is apprehended changes. History has a way of forcing each generation to think of God in new ways--a process that continues to this day.

Ezekiel stayed in Babylonia for his entire career, being a prophet until at least 571 B.C.E. He was unable to perform the traditional priestly functions in exile, which included offering sacrifices of atonement and guarding the holiness of the community. Still, his vocation shaped his perspective on virtually everything, including religious obligations and relationships to God.

The book of Ezekiel is much easier to follow than the book of Jeremiah because of its logical and chronological structure. It also has a certain thematic unity. There are at least three major issues which interweave the book, surfacing in various ways.

First, Ezekiel gives considerable attention to the continued presence of God among his people, along with the reasons for God's withdrawal and conditions under which he would reappear. *Second*, Ezekiel probes the issue of moral responsibility for the religious and political failures of Judah. *Third*, though getting less attention than the preceding two, Ezekiel examines the nature and legitimacy of religious and political leadership in Judah and in the restored community. Be alert to these issues as we examine the book of Ezekiel.

598 Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem

Jehoiakim died, Jehoiachin became king

First deportation of Judean refugees to Babylonia, including Ezekiel and Jehoiachin

Beginning of Zedekiah's reign

593 Ezekiel's commission in the Throne-chariot vision

587 Destruction of Jerusalem and second deportation of Judeans to Babylonia

571 Last dated message of Ezekiel

Warnings (before 587 B.C.E.): [1-24](#)

Throne-Chariot Vision ([1-3](#))

Symbolic Acts ([4-7](#))

Vision of a Corrupt Temple ([8-11](#))

Symbolic Acts and Allegories of Disaster ([12-24](#))

Hope and Restoration (after 587 B.C.E.): [25-48](#)

Oracles Against Foreign Nations ([25-32](#))

Words of Hope after the Fall of Jerusalem ([33-39](#))

Vision of a Restored Temple ([40-48](#))

Chapters [1-24](#) contain Ezekiel's visions and prophetic pronouncements dating between 593 B.C.E. (the date of his initiating experience) and the fall of Jerusalem in 587. Much of the material was written in the first person as Ezekiel's autobiographical recollections. The pervasive tone of the entire first half of the book is divine anger.

Ezekiel never gave up hope in the rebirth of Davidic rule. Jehoiachin was still alive and in exile with Ezekiel. He remained the focus of the people's hope. The Judean refugees and those back in Palestine continued to look to the line of David for restoration of the nation. The mention of "one shepherd" expresses Ezekiel's hope that the two kingdoms, Israel and Judah, would once again be united. This reference to the line of David is one of the latest expressions of Davidic messianic expectation in prophetic literature.

But the reference to the Davidic leader as "a prince" rather than as king is somewhat puzzling. The use of this term is consistent with the restoration vision where David is uniformly referred to as prince ([40-48](#)). The question is this: Was this way of referring to David an expression of anti-monarchic sentiment on Ezekiel's part, or was he just expressing the old covenant's theocratic ideal that only Yahweh could be king? The issue of leadership, its shape and legitimacy, remained a major one throughout the exile and well into the period of restoration.

Ezekiel's most powerful image of restoration is the vision of the valley of dry bones ([37](#)). In it Yahweh took Ezekiel out to a vast valley filled with parched human bones (see [Figure 12.1](#)). God told him to prophesy to these bones, to implore them to come to life. As he preached the bones began to rattle and shake. They came together to make skeletons, then ligaments bound them together, and skin covered them. As Ezekiel continued to preach, a spirit-wind infused the bodies, and they became alive.

The dry bones were Israel of the exile, and Ezekiel foresaw the day when it would be reborn as a nation and returned to its land. It can also be taken as an affirmation of the life-giving potential of prophetic preaching. Above all, the word of God, accompanied by the spirit-wind of Yahweh, can bring the nation back to life.

Ezekiel, remember, was a priest as well as a prophet. His most elaborate depiction of restoration naturally involved that most sacred of areas, the temple complex in Jerusalem. In a vision dated to 573 B.C.E. (twenty-five years after the beginning of his exile, and twenty years after his call vision) he was given a vision of the restoration of the nation. The following are some of the important features of the restoration program as expressed in Ezekiel's vision. A rebuilt temple would be located in the geographical center of the tribes, which would be arrayed around it symmetrically, three to a side. The rights and privileges of serving in the temple itself would be given exclusively to priests from the line of Zadok of the family of Aaron.

The ground would be revived. A river of fresh water would flow from under the temple, and run all the way to the Dead Sea, in the process making the sea wholesome and the surrounding wilderness a paradise. Jerusalem would once again be the center of attention. Its name would be changed to *Yahweh is there* because he will again take up residence.

Overall, Ezekiel had a comprehensive vision of the need for holiness and how it would be accomplished. He had a priest's sense of the need for devotion and worship centering on the presence of Yahweh in the temple. He combined this with a prophet's attention to inward spiritual renewal and devotion. His combination of devotion, as defined by the Mosaic covenant, along with an openness to the work of the spirit of God, makes him a major figure in the emergence of Judaism.

Isaiah

Second Isaiah: Isaiah of the Exile (40-55)

Chapters 40-55 of the book of Isaiah most likely come from the hand of a prophet who lived in Babylonian exile in the sixth century B.C.E. Dated sometime within the period 546 to 538 B.C.E., they do not come from the hand of Isaiah of Jerusalem. We know virtually nothing about this prophet, not even his name. Scholars have taken to calling him Second Isaiah, or Deutero-Isaiah (which means the same thing, but is a fancier term derived from Greek).

Second Isaiah consists almost entirely of poetic passages, with little of the narrative type material found in First Isaiah.

New Exodus

Second Isaiah marks a dramatic change from the prophetic tone of the monarchy era voices of the likes of Amos and Jeremiah. Their words of judgment had by now come true. God had punished Israel and Judah completely (the "double punishment" in the text below) for their sins. Now things will be different. Second Isaiah has sometimes been called "The Book of Comfort" based on passages such as the following.

¹ "Comfort, comfort my people!" says your God. (40:1-2, 6, 8)

Creation-Redemption

The reason Second Isaiah talks about creation is to ground the redemptive capability of Yahweh in his power. Because he is the one who created the world, he is powerful enough to bring Israel out of captivity. In the following passage, Second Isaiah combines the creation myth with the expectation of redemption. (51:9-11)

Servant of Yahweh

Four poems in Second Isaiah speak of a servant figure, called the **servant of Yahweh**. They are known as the servant songs, or the songs of the suffering servant (see Table 10.2). For a long time scholars have seen these poems as related and have treated them together to derive a coherent identity of the servant figure.

Song	Isaiah	Theme
1	<u>42:1-6</u>	He will bring justice to the nations
2	<u>49:1-6</u>	I make you a light to the nations
3	<u>50:4-9</u>	My back to those who beat me
4	<u>52:13-53:12</u>	Bruised for our iniquities

Cyrus the Messiah

Second Isaiah contains, among other things, a clear example of theological interpretation of history. **Cyrus**, the Persian monarch who opposed the Babylonian empire, was viewed by the Judeans as their great deliverer. Second Isaiah even uses the term *messiah*, that is, *anointed one*, to refer to him in order to indicate the divine initiative behind his mission.

²⁴ "I am YHWH, who made all things, . . . ²⁸ who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd, he shall carry out all my plans.'" ¹

Second Isaiah clearly threw his support to Cyrus and promoted an anti-Babylonian policy. By 539 B.C.E. Cyrus was successful against the Babylonians.