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Jeremiah 1:1–3



THE WORDS OF Jeremiah son of Hilkiyah, one of the priests at Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin. ²The word of the LORD came to him in the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah, ³and through the reign of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, down to the fifth month of the eleventh year of Zedekiah son of Josiah king of Judah, when the people of Jerusalem went into exile.



LIKE MOST PROPHETIC books, Jeremiah begins with a superscription (i.e., a heading) indicating the time of the prophet's ministry. Dates in Judah were reckoned in accordance with the reign of a monarch, a common procedure in the ancient world.¹ As noted in the introduction, the forty plus years given for Jeremiah's ministry (ca. 627–584 B.C.) cover some of the most tumultuous and tragic events of the nation's history. Included among them were rebellions against foreign control, the death of Judean kings at the hands of foreign powers, the demise and virtual destruction of the nation itself, and the forced descent of the prophet into Egypt in the aftermath of the destruction.

Jeremiah was from a priestly family of Anathoth, a village about three miles north of Jerusalem, the capital city of Judah. Anathoth was part of the Benjamite inheritance and assigned as a Levitical city (Josh. 21:18).² It was also the home of the priest Abiathar, who centuries earlier had served David faithfully but who had backed Adonijah, Solomon's brother and rival for the throne, at David's death. Anathoth became the home in exile of Abiathar (1 Kings 2:26), and thus Jeremiah's hometown likely had deep roots in the priestly and Levitical traditions of the nation, providing the future prophet with an education suited to his task.

King Josiah attempted to free Judah from the control of Assyria and to set Judah on the road to spiritual reform. His thirteenth year coincides with the demise of Assyria's last strong king Assurbanipal and probably also includes his initial steps to alter Judah's politically subservient and religiously

1. See the comments on chronology and difficulties in reckoning chronology in the introduction on the life and times of Jeremiah.

2. For discussion of the location of biblical Anathoth near the modern Arabic village of Anata, see J. L. Peterson, "Anathoth," *ABD*, 1:227–28.

degenerate path. The eleventh year of Zedekiah is among the most somber in all of biblical history. Jerusalem was captured and destroyed by the Babylonians, Zedekiah himself was seized and blinded, and many Judeans were taken into exile by their captors (Jer. 52; cf. 2 Kings 25).



JEREMIAH'S MINISTRY IS embedded in the convulsive events leading to Judah's tragic demise. This is typical of the timely nature of biblical prophets and the books that record their work. The head-

ing to the book also bears a significant cultural marker: Time itself is reckoned according to the regnal years of a Davidic monarch. Eventually much of the world will adopt a chronological scheme that is dated to the birth of a descendant from David's line, that is, Jesus of Nazareth. These Davidic kings in Jeremiah 1:1–3, therefore, are in a chosen line of great significance; nevertheless, each of them failed in varying degrees to lead God's people from the paths of syncretism and idolatry.

The search for the original meaning of biblical prophecy is based on the conviction that the words and deeds of a prophet first address the pressing issues of a prophet's own day. Indeed, Jeremiah's life story is a reflection of the pain of Judah's failure, and his own suffering mirrors that of the people. But the very fact that a book of Jeremiah is still being read after 2,500 years is evidence that it was intended to instruct later readers through its portrayal of past events and its predictions of God's transforming moments to come. By God's grace and in light of subsequent biblical revelation, readers are also invited to find new light coming forth from the same words of the prophetic book, reflecting the transcendent quality of God's Word and his intention to instruct all generations of his people in the twin contexts of their common humanity and their inheritance among the saints.

Scripture provides additional contexts in which to place the words of Jeremiah. In the Old Testament the prophetic books of Zephaniah, Habakkuk, Nahum, and Ezekiel address audiences whose life spans overlap with those first addressed by Jeremiah. Previous prophetic models in Scripture include the accounts of Elijah and the prophecies of Amos, Isaiah, Micah (cf. Jer. 26), and Hosea. The covenant and Torah about which the prophet will speak are subjects well known to his audience. Whether they grasped the significance of either is debatable. Jeremiah certainly regards their adherence to them as inadequate!

The prophecy of Jeremiah not only interprets the significance of historical events; it offers specific judgments on corporate failure and includes promises that God would see the people through their self-generated demise

in order to heal the consequences of their failures. This pattern of historical judgment and redemption in Jeremiah is intended as more than a historical report about the past; it is also typological and analogical instruction for later generations, who are to see themselves corporately addressed as God's people of their day.



ACCORDING TO APOSTOLIC preaching, God "has not left himself without testimony" (Acts 14:17). The manner of God's self-revelation varies according to divine discretion. Jeremiah's historical rootedness is testimony to one facet of God's revelation, a timely witness intended not only for the generation to which it was first delivered but for subsequent generations as well. Jeremiah the prophet and the book called by his name are chosen vessels, brought forth in specific contexts, to communicate God's timely truth.

The prophetic superscription reflects a form of incarnational theology. Just as God's supreme revelation was his Word become flesh in Jesus Christ, so God's Word took historical form in the life of Jeremiah and acquired written form in a book. It is by consideration of God's revelation through the prophet Jeremiah and in his book that subsequent generations of God's people continue to find divine instruction.

For the people of God, the timely nature of Jeremiah's ministry takes on the primary character of corporate address, inviting the church to consider God's judging and redeeming activity within the historical process. For individual reflection, Jeremiah's words provide testimony that God uses both people and events to further his purposes and to instruct the faithful.