

LISTENING TO JEREMIAH

THE TEXT OF THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH



*Fragment of Jeremiah from the Dead Sea Scrolls
(Israel Antiquities Authority)*

The text of Jeremiah comes to us in two distinct forms, the Hebrew version in the Masoretic Text (from about AD 1000) and the Greek version in the Septuagint (before the time of Christ). The Greek version is the older of the two, but is somewhat shorter, and the arrangement of the material is quite different than the Hebrew version. Several fragments of Jeremiah were discovered in the Dead Sea Scrolls that date to about the time of Jesus or earlier, but inasmuch as they are not complete manuscripts, scholars cannot use them for basic translation (though they certainly examine the passages that appear in these fragments).

We know something of the original production of the work, since an important story is related in Jeremiah 36 which bears significantly upon its compilation. During the reign of Jehoiakim, God commanded Jeremiah to inscribe all his oracles from the beginning of his ministry to the present time (36:1-3), which covered a span of some years. This task Jeremiah completed by dictating his sermons to Baruch, his secretary (36:4; cf. 45:1). Since Jeremiah had been barred from the temple precincts, he sent Baruch with the scroll so that it might be publicly read (36:5-10). News of this public reading spread quickly, even to the royal officials of the king (36:11-19). When the matter had been reported to King Jehoiakim, the scroll was brought before him to be read there as well (36:20-21). The arrogant king's reaction was flippant and dismissive. He sat in the luxury of his winter palace and carved off the columns as they were read, throwing them into the brazier before him (36:22-24). When some of his attendants urged that he not burn the scroll, he petulantly demanded the arrest of Jeremiah and Baruch (36:25-26). Consequently, Jeremiah was forced to dictate his oracles once again to Baruch, who preserved them on a scroll including some expansions (36:27-28, 32).

It is not unlikely that Jeremiah periodically added to this original collection of oracles so that the present form of the book gradually took shape. Baruch may have been responsible for some of the biographical material written in the third person. Perhaps other editors might have had a hand also, at least some scholars think so.



Seldom does archaeology come face to face with someone actually mentioned in the Bible, but Baruch is one of those few. A hoard of 51 inscribed bullae (lumps of clay impressed with a seal) came to light in 1975, and among them was the seal impression of Baruch, Jeremiah's secretary. The seal inscription reads, "[Belonging] to Berekyahu son of Neriyahu the scribe" (36:4). The same hoard of bullae also contained seal impressions of two other people, both also named in the Book of Jeremiah, Jehoiakim's son, Jerahmeel (36:26), and Gemariah, the man in whose room the codified oracles were first read (36:10).

build and to plant" (1:10). His initial word from Yahweh concerned a terrible judgment on the near horizon, but while this word of judgment forms the bulk of his preaching, it was not God's final word. In fact, there would be a second word, and it would be a word of hope. Hence, his ministry would be both to "tear down" and to "build."

Two visions reinforce and explain his calling. The first was the branch of an almond tree (1:11-12). The meaning of the vision depends upon a word-play in Hebrew, since the word *shaqed* (= almond tree) is phonetically similar to the word *shoqed* (= watching). To a nation that ignored the Deuteronomic warnings and to a people who fostered a false sense of security, Yahweh was watching that his covenant word would be carried out.

The second vision was the metaphor of a boiling pot tilting toward the south (1:13-14). Though this northern threat is unnamed, it is virtually certain that Jeremiah was speaking of Babylon. Jeremiah was warned in advance that his audience would not be receptive, but he was assured that Yahweh would be with him just the same (1:17-19).

JEREMIAH'S CALL (1)

The call of Jeremiah is dated to the 13th regnal year of Josiah (627 BC), and his ministry extended through the collapse of the nation in 587 BC (1:2-3). By his own admission, he was only a youth at the time (1:6). He was divinely chosen and shaped for prophethood from the time of his conception (1:4-5). His call sets the agenda for his entire ministry. He was told from the beginning that his mission was "to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to



A spring almond branch blossoming in Jerusalem... Anathoth, Jeremiah's home village, remains a center for growing almond trees to this

TALKING POINTS

- *What might God's calling of Jeremiah, even before he was born, have to say about the value of prenatal life?*

- *Jesus was considered by some to be a return of the prophet Jeremiah (Mt.16:14). What was there about him and his message that may have reminded them of this ancient prophet?*

THE PROPHET'S EARLY MINISTRY (2-6)

While many of Jeremiah's oracles are undated (there are exceptions, i.e., 3:6; 21:1; 24:1; 26:1; 27:1; 32:1, etc.), most scholars agree that the early oracles of Jeremiah are found in chapters 2-6. Like several other prophets (Is. 3:13ff.; Ho. 4:1; Mic. 6:1-2; Eze. 20:4), Jeremiah uses the literary device of a covenant lawsuit to indict the nation for its rebellion against God (2:9). Suzerainty treaties broken by rebellion were normally handled in a legal form called a *ri'v* (= lawsuit). Several *ri'v* documents have been uncovered by archaeologists, and these lawsuits help us understand Ezekiel's metaphor.

Israel, the Brazen Lover (3:1--4:4)

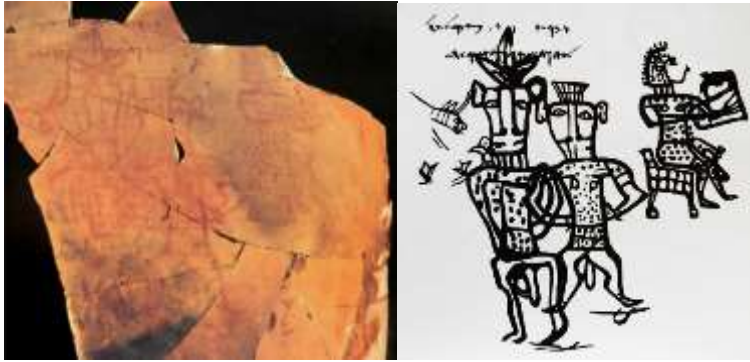
The background for this oracle is the Deuteronomic code regarding marriage and divorce (Dt. 24:1-4). According to Torah, if a woman was divorced due to "something indecent," and she married another man who also divorced her, she was forbidden to return to her first husband for remarriage. The covenant relationship between Yahweh and Israel was like a marriage covenant, and the nation had behaved like a faithless wife in following the gods of the pagans (3:20). Judah had no right to expect her first husband, Yahweh, to take her back (3:1). She had lived as an eager prostitute (3:2), brazen and unashamed (3:3b), and so desperate for sexual favors that she ambushed lovers in the desert like an erotic bandit (3:2b). She had attempted to pass herself off before God as merely a wayward child, but her feeble efforts at reconciliation were drowned by her unbridled adult passions (3:4-5). God would have been overjoyed to treat her as his child if she had been sincere (3:19), but the truth of her relationship was not that of a child to its father, but of an adulterous wife who has been unfaithful to her husband (3:20).

The prose section of the oracle (3:6-18) continues to develop this same theme, describing the nations of Israel and Judah as two adulterous sisters (3:6-7; cf. Eze. 23). The exile of Israel in 722-721 BC had been, in effect, the breaking of the marriage covenant by divorce (3:8a), but Judah, the sister who remained, was unmoved by the divorce (3:8b). She recklessly continued to ply her trade of religious prostitution (3:9-11). A number of important artifacts in the archaeology of ancient Judah demonstrate just how deeply the people of Israel had succumbed to religious syncretism, mixing the worship of Yahweh with the worship of the Canaanite fertility cult.

THE SUZERAINITY LAWSUIT

The suzerainty lawsuits from the ancient Near East uncovered by archaeologists followed a stereotypical pattern. Ezekiel follows this same pattern, except Yahweh is the suzerain and Judah is his vassal. It begins by rehearsing the memories of the exodus from Egypt, where the suzerainty covenant between Yahweh and Israel was first established (2:2-6), and it concludes with an indictment of Israel's fascination with the Canaanite fertility cult (2:20-25, 32-33).

- An appeal to the vassal to pay heed, and a summon to the sky and earth to be witnesses (2:12; cf. Dt. 32:1)**
- A series of questions implying an accusation of rebellion (2:5-6)**
- A review of past benefits in the suzerain-vassal relationship, and a declaration of the broken treaty (2:7-11, 13-30)**
- A warning as to the futility of help from foreigners (2:13-18, 36-37)**
- A declaration of guilt and a threat of impending action by the suzerain (2:31-37)**



This drawing and inscription excavated in southern Judah illustrates the religious syncretism of the nation. The inscription reads, "I bless you by Yahweh...and by his Asherah." Judah had so far succumbed to the fertility cult that someone actually depicted Yahweh as having a female consort!

In spite of the law forbidding the twice-married wife to return to her first husband, Yahweh invites his people back. Yahweh is quite capable of countermanding even his own laws, and if Israel will return, he will receive her—but only on his own terms (3:12, 14). The people would need to make a full repentance for the enormity of their sins (3:13), and of course, they would need righteous pastors (3:15). In fact, restoration was promised, and in it the immediacy of Yahweh's presence would be such that cultic objects of mediation, such as the

precious ark of the covenant, would no longer be necessary (3:16-18; cf. Re. 21:22). Over and again comes the poignant cry from the depths of Yahweh's pathos, "*Shuv* [= turn, return, repent], faithless people" (3:12, 14, 22; 4:1)! The oracle closes with a final appeal for a deep inward change (4:3-4).

The Coming Disaster (4:5--6:30)

The final oracles of Jeremiah's early preaching all revolve around the predicted Deuteronomic judgment in history. The war trumpet would shatter the fragile peace (4:5-6), for the enemy had already mobilized itself (4:7) and would descend like a desert sirocco (4:11-12). Though the popular idea was that Yahweh had unconditionally guaranteed peace and well-being for the nation, and even though this misconception was reinforced by the words of other preachers (6:13-14), such a message of peace was a false message (4:10; 5:12-13).

Jeremiah was deeply troubled. He was not emotionally aloof to either the internal rottenness of his nation nor the threatening disaster. It squeezed at his heart and pounded in his veins to speak of the ruthless destruction coming upon his own people (4:19-21). Like a woman dying in childbirth, the nation would be gasping out its own death rattles (4:31).

Still, the nation deserved what she was to receive! She was bringing the bitter consequences on herself (4:18; 6:19) with rampant dishonesty (5:1-2), sacred prostitution (5:7-9), cultic syncretism (5:19), stubborn rebellion (5:21, 23; 6:16-17, 28-30), social injustice (5:28-29), religious corruption (5:31; 6:13), worthless worship (6:20), brazenness (6:15), and above all, spiritual apathy (5:12). Still, though the enemy from the north was surely coming as the instrument of judgment (6:1, 4-6, 22-23), the destruction would not be total. Yahweh would restrain the forces of chaos from obliterating the nation entirely (5:10, 18).

TALKING POINTS

- *Why do you think Jeremiah used metaphors like the lawsuit and the divorce laws in the Torah to present his message to the people of Judah?*
- *Can religious syncretism be a threat to genuine faith in modern times?*
- *A theme in the prophets is that a remnant will survive: how does Jeremiah express this idea?*