LISTENING TO JEREMIAH

Critical to understanding the message of Jeremiah is the political upheaval that surrounded him. Jeremiah lived in the 7th century BC on the cusp of disaster. Several prophets had preceded him, in particular, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah, and all of them warned that doomsday was coming. Near the end of the 8th century, the Assyrians destroyed Samaria, the Israelite capital in the north, along with Syria (Aram), and both countries were annexed into the Assyrian Empire. Massive deportations of northern Israelites emptied out much of the population. Refugees who escaped fled southward to Jerusalem, quadrupling its size and straining its resources. The border between Assyria and Judah, once buffered by two intermediate states, was now only half a day's walk from Jerusalem. The exile of the northern nation in 721 BC must have created grave apprehensions in Judah, since many were left wondering if what had happened in the north might also happen to them.

Tiglath-pileser III (744-727 BC) had taken the Israelite Transjordan and the territory of Galilee, claiming in his annalistic records to have deported some 13,520 prisoners of war. Succeeding Assyrian emperors destroyed the northern capital of Samaria, deporting even more Israelites. (Detroit Institute of Arts)

THE KINGS OF JEREMIAH

When Jeremiah was a young man, international politics were making a significant turn. The Assyrian Empire, which had been a perennial threat for so many decades and had brought the northern Israelite nation to its demise, was on its last legs. Babylon, the new empire-builder, was in the process of gobbling up what was left of Assyrian territory.

Josiah was Judah's king during Jeremiah's early ministry, but he was shot and killed in the Megiddo Pass in 609 BC when he interposed the Judean army between the Egyptians and the Assyrians. Jeremiah was left to compose funeral dirges for his beloved monarch (2 Chr. 35:25). Soon, the last vestiges of the once powerful Assyrian Empire succumbed to the Babylonian advance, and now Judah faced a new superpower, the most advanced military in the history of the world to this point. Shallum (Jehoahaz), Josiah's son, was hardly up to facing such a formidable adversary. To make matters worse, Judah lay squarely

Royal Names

One of the challenges in reading Old Testament narratives is that sometimes kings had more than one name. Jeremiah calls Josiah's son Shallum, while Kings and Chronicles typically call him Jehoahaz. The name of Josiah's son, Eliakim, was changed by the Pharaoh to Jehoiakim. Still later, the name of Judah's last king, Mattaniah, was changed by the king of Babylon to Zedekiah.

between two superpowers, Egypt to the south and Babylon to the north. Decisions of state largely were made by trying to predict which superpower would win the day. As it turned out, Jehoahaz only lasted three months until he was deposed and deported to Egypt by Pharo-Neco II (Jer. 22:10-12). In his place, the Pharaoh installed Jehoahaz's brother, Jehoiakim, as a vassal king and required exorbitant tribute, typical of a suzerainty-vassal relationship (2 Kg. 23:31-35).

Jehoiakim (609-598 BC) was a man on the horns of an acute dilemma. On the one hand, he had been installed as a vassal king by the Egyptians. Breathing down his neck from the north, however, were the ever-aggressive Babylonians. Within six years of his coronation, the Babylonian armies had put Jerusalem to siege, and to save himself, Jehoiakim was forced to change his fealty.[1] Now, he was a vassal of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II. However, when the Egyptian army repulsed the Babylonians in 601/600 BC, Jehoiakim, who at heart was pro-Egyptian, changed his fealty back to Egypt (2 Kg. 24:1). This betrayal of his Babylonian suzerain would spell disaster, and reprisals were not long in coming. Jerusalem once more was invaded by the Babylonians, and this time, Jehoiakim was chained for deportation, though he apparently died before he was deported (2 Chr. 36:6; Jer. 22:18-19). In his place, his teenage son, Jehoiachin, was installed in office. Within three months, Jehoiachin surrendered, and he and massive numbers of Judeans were deported to Babylon. The Babylonian army looted the temple treasury and left only the poorest in the land (2 Kg. 24:10-16).[2] In his place, Nebuchadnezzar installed his uncle, Zedekiah (Mattaniah), as a puppet king, and he would reign as a vassal for 11 years before he rebelled and brought down the final collapse of the capital and the exile of the whole nation in 587 BC.

The Babylonian Chronicle, composed in cuneiform, describes Nebuchadnezzar's siege of Jerusalem (British Museum, London)

Jeremiah's ministry, then, was conducted during the reigns of these final kings of Judah, from Josiah to Jehoiakim to Jehoiachin to Zedekiah (Jer. 1:2-3).

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[1] As a sign of "good faith," Jehoiakim was ordered to send some of his young men of the nobility to Babylon for education in Babylonian culture and literature. Among those deported were Daniel and his fellows (Da. 1:1-7).

[2] One of those deported to Babylon in what is typically called the 1st Deportation was a young priest named Ezekiel, whose ministry would be conducted entirely in a Jewish ghetto on the banks of the Kebar Canal in Babylon (Eze. 1:2-3).

TALKING POINTS

- *Isaiah describes the Assyrians as "Yahweh's war club" (Is. 10:5), used to discipline his unfaithful people (Is. 10:5)? Do you think God disciplines his people in the modern world, also?*
- *The young Jeremiah witnessed the loss of his beloved King Josiah and composed funeral dirges for him (2 Chr. 35:25), yet he says nothing about Josiah's reforms? Why?*
- *How were the exiles of both Israel and Judah to be understood as acts of God, and why was it important to see these tragedies in this light?*

JEREMIAH AND THE PROBLEM OF FALSE SECURITY

Throughout his ministry, Jeremiah faced an entrenched mood of false optimism. Micah, a century earlier, had opined "…they say…'Is not Yahweh among us? No disaster will come upon us!'" (Mic. 3:11), and now, Jeremiah complains about false prophets who "dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious" (Jer. 6:14; 8:11). Whence came this false sense of security?

This artifact, part of a stela erected by the king of Aram to commemorate a war effort, contains the earliest known reference to the "house of David" outside the Bible. It was discovered at Tel Dan in 1993 by Israeli archaeologist Avraham Biran. The enhanced line in the square contains the phrase "house of David."

It is probably fair to say that such ambivalence derived in large measure from a misunderstanding of God's covenants with Abraham and David and a failure to take seriously God's covenant with Moses. To be sure, God's covenants with Abraham and David seemed, at least on the face of it, to be unconditional. God had promised to Abraham that the land of Canaan would be given to the Israelites forever (Gen. 13:14-17). Centuries later, he had promised to David that his descendants and his kingdom would endure forever (2 Sam. 7:16). To be sure, the northern Israelites had succumbed to the Assyrians and the kingdom of Israel had disappeared into the dustbin of history. However, the northerners could be blamed for rejecting David's family and the temple, for substituting kings of their own choosing, not to mention building alternative shrines at Bethel and Dan while developing a non-Levitical priesthood (1 Kg. 12:26-33). Such deviation was eloquently denounced by Abijah as a rebellion against the kingdom of Yahweh (2 Chr. 13:4-12). The kingdom of Judah, on the other hand, had remained faithful to the house of David, and indeed, while in the history of the north there had been no less than eight dynastic changes, there had been no deviation from David's family in the south nor the temple built by Solomon. So, how does one contend with false optimism? This was the burden of Jeremiah.

TALKING POINTS

- *How would you define false security, and do you think this can be a problem for modern people of faith?*
- *Jeremiah not only contended with an audience who didn't want to hear what he had to say, he also contended with false prophets within the community of Israel. What might be false voices today within the church with which God's people must contend?*

THE MAN JEREMIAH

Jeremiah ben Hilkiah lived at about the mid-point in history between Moses and Christ. We know very little about his life prior to his call to ministry, apart from a handful of basic facts. His father's name was Hilkiah (1:1), a man who was said to be happy when his son was born (20:15). Jeremiah's name *Yirmeyahu* means "Yahweh will establish." He was a descendent of the priests living in Anathoth about three miles north of Jerusalem, one of the Levitical cities in the tribal allotment of Benjamin (Jos. 21:18; 1 Chr. 6:60). If his branch of the Levitical family was the one banished to Anathoth by Solomon (1 Kg. 2:26-27), the family had once been prominent and may have traced their antecedents back to Eli, the high priest in the time of Samuel (1 Sa. 22:20; cf. 14:3).

> **THEOPHORIC NAMES**
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> *Many biblical names in the Old Testament are theophoric, which is to say, they are names compounded with some form of the divine name, usually El (God), of which there are about 135, or Yah/Yahu (Yahweh, of which there are more than 150). For English readers, the clue is often in the final letters of the name in suffixes like -el or -ah, though sometimes the theophoric element is at the beginning.*

Priests lived more or less ordinary lives, and Jeremiah's family home was likely the typical Israelite four-room house built of mud-bricks and sparsely furnished. Typical meals would have included goat's milk, wine diluted with water, eggs, vegetables, cheese, salt, flat bread, and cakes made from dates or figs.

At the beginning of the Iron Age, a new type of house begins to appear in the archaeological record among the Israelites, the so-called "four-room house." Built of stone, it usually had an upper story as well as roof access. Scholarly speculation is that the arrangement of rooms facilitated quarantine for various types of uncleanness.