

Summary

With the single exception of the Book of Isaiah, which contains the works of more than one prophet, the Book of Jeremiah is the longest of the prophetic books of the Old Testament. Jeremiah contains a considerable amount of material of a biographical and historical nature in addition to the prophet's own words. This material is especially valuable because it reveals the personality of the prophet more clearly than any of the other prophetic books reveal their writers' personalities. Furthermore, the text provides information concerning the more important events in Jeremiah's career.

Jeremiah's life and teachings had a profound effect on the future development of both Judaism and Christianity. In the New Testament, many passages indicate that both Jesus and Paul not only accepted certain ideas from Jeremiah but gave them a central place in their own interpretations of the meaning of religion. For this reason, along with others, Jeremiah is often regarded as the greatest of the Hebrew prophets.

The period in which Jeremiah lived and worked was one of the most critical in Hebrew history. His public ministry began during the reign of King Josiah (640–609 B.C.) and lasted until sometime after the fall of Jerusalem and the beginning of the Babylonian captivity. He encountered strong opposition from King Jehoiakim (609–598 B.C.) and King Zedekiah (597–586 B.C.), and on more than one occasion, his life was threatened. After the fall of Jerusalem, the Babylonians permitted him to remain in his homeland; many of his fellow countrymen were taken into captivity. Later, he was taken to Egypt against his will by a group of exiles who found it necessary to flee Jerusalem for their own safety. In Egypt, Jeremiah died after a long and troublesome career.

The collection of writings that make up the Book of Jeremiah includes oracles, addresses, prayers, and exhortations, all of which were spoken by the prophet himself. Arranged without any reference to either topical or chronological order, the text is interspersed with materials that, though relevant to Jeremiah's work, were contributed by other persons. We shall attempt only a brief summary of the more important ideas set forth in Jeremiah's teachings.

The book begins with an account of Jeremiah's call to be a prophet. These passages are written from the perspective of Jeremiah's later years, when it seemed clear to him that even before Jeremiah was born, Yahweh had a plan or purpose for him to fulfill. Jeremiah's earliest prophecies, like those of Zephaniah, are believed to be concerned with the threatened invasion of Judah by the Scythians. He felt that his country would be completely devastated as proper punishment for the sins that its citizens committed. That his predictions in this respect were not fulfilled was seized upon by his critics as evidence that he was a false prophet. One of the important events that took place a few years after Jeremiah began his prophetic work was the discovery of the law book in the Temple at Jerusalem. This book, the main part of what we now call the Book of Deuteronomy, was declared to be the word of Yahweh, and King Josiah made it a part of the law of the land. For a time, Jeremiah was enthusiastic about King Josiah's decision: The laws were intended not only to correct many of the social injustices that

prevailed in the land but also to protect the worship of Yahweh from contamination by the evil influences of heathen forms of worship. It was hoped, and apparently with good reasons, that the enforcement of these laws would spark a great and sorely needed reformation. Jeremiah observed the situation both before and after the new laws were introduced. He became convinced that the conduct of the people was no better under these laws than it had been before, an observation that led to some very important consequences in Jeremiah's conception of religion and its purpose in the lives of the Hebrew people.

The reason for the failure of the Deuteronomic reformation was to be found not in the character of the laws but rather in the motives that were dominant in the lives of the people. The prophet's conception of human nature is well expressed in his statement "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots? Neither can you do good who are accustomed to doing evil." Humans are so constituted that they follow their desires rather than their intellect; for this reason, they cannot change their evil ways until they experience a change of heart. Furthermore, Jeremiah contended that humans cannot change their nature by themselves. Such reform can occur only through cooperation with Yahweh, and Yahweh can act on human hearts only when humans recognize their need for it. Without this inner transformation in human nature, all reformative movements are destined to fail.

After leaving his hometown of Anathoth to live in the city of Jerusalem, Jeremiah experienced continual opposition from both political and religious leaders of Judah. The occasion that prompted some of this opposition was an address — or perhaps a series of addresses — concerning the Temple and the services that were being conducted in it. Because of the formal character of these services and their failure to change the spiritual lives of the people, Jeremiah saw that something very drastic would have to be done in order to bring people to their senses. People were putting their trust in the Temple, feeling certain that so long as it remained in their midst, no evil could befall them. For people to understand that the true meaning of religion consists in a change from within rather than conformity to external requirements, Jeremiah felt that it was necessary to undermine the trust that people placed in external objects. Therefore, the prophet declared that the day was coming when the Temple would be destroyed. The ark of the covenant would be taken away, and the nation that called itself the chosen of Yahweh would be taken into captivity. These statements aroused the anger of the priests and King Jehoiakim.

Jeremiah was charged with treason and would probably have been put to death had not some of his friends succeeded in hiding him until the wrath of his enemies subsided. When it was no longer considered safe for him to appear in public, Jeremiah dictated a series of oracles in which the policies of King Jehoiakim and his subordinates were severely criticized, and warnings were given concerning what would happen if these were not changed. The scroll on which these oracles were written was sent to the king by a messenger who saw to it that the document was read aloud in the king's presence. King Jehoiakim was displeased as he listened to the reading. Taking the scroll from the reader, he cut it into shreds and then threw the remnants into a fire. When news of what

the king had done reached Jeremiah, he dictated the entire scroll over again, adding a specific warning to Jehoiakim, and sent the new copy back to be read again.

Nothing that Jeremiah taught during his career was more significant than his doctrine concerning the New Covenant. In Chapter 31 of his book, we read: "The time is coming,' declares the Lord, 'when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.'" The Old Covenant, based on laws that were decreed as far back as the time of Moses, was a contract, or agreement, between Yahweh and the Israelites, in which the people agreed to obey all of the commandments given to them. But the Israelites did not live up to the terms of that agreement, and Jeremiah believed that he knew the principal reasons why they had not done so: the evil desires and wrong motives that were parts of their human nature. The only thing that could bring about a right relationship with Yahweh would be a change of heart — in other words, a new nature. Such change was unattainable except by means of the New Covenant, in which Yahweh promises to do for the Israelites that which they cannot do for themselves. Speaking for Yahweh, Jeremiah declares, "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people." Jeremiah concludes by saying that when this is done, specific rules no longer will be necessary in order for people to know how they ought to behave. With changed natures and the right desires present within them, people will know what is the morally correct thing to do in any situation.

Closely associated with this conception of the New Covenant is Jeremiah's teaching concerning individual responsibility. The prophets who preceded Jeremiah usually spoke in terms of a social solidarity, which meant that Yahweh's relationship to Israel concerned the nation as a whole. All citizens would be judged and either punished or rewarded. When the people of Judah responded to Jeremiah's warnings of impending disaster by saying that they were being punished not because of their own sins but because of the sins of their ancestors, Jeremiah challenged this ancient doctrine. He declared that each individual is accountable for his own conduct: "In those days people will no longer say, 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.'"

Analysis

The individual experience of religion, in contrast with mere external forms of worship, is the dominant theme in all of Jeremiah's teachings. For him, the relationship between a person and Yahweh is the most essential element in genuine religious experience. The external forms of worship, such as the offer of sacrifices, payment of vows, and participation in Temple services, are meaningless except insofar as they might contribute toward a changed nature in which Yahweh's spirit takes possession of a person's mind and heart.

Jeremiah believed that Yahweh used even the Babylonian captivity of Jerusalem as a means for bringing the Israelite people to a full realization of the fact that Yahweh could be worshiped in a strange land without any of the external factors associated with the

Temple in Jerusalem. In a foreign land, they would learn that true religion is a matter of the heart and can be experienced by any individual who establishes a right relationship with the deity, a lofty conception of religion and one that was far beyond the understanding of the majority of people. Conformity to external requirements is always an easier course to follow, and during the centuries that followed Jeremiah's prophecies, the ritualistic element in religious practices received greater emphasis. Nevertheless, Jeremiah's conception of religion was never lost completely. Some people always adhered to it, and from time to time, new teachers emphasized Jeremiah's views.

Despite his pessimism with reference to the immediate future of the Judean kingdom, Jeremiah never abandoned the hope that eventually the divine purpose would be realized by his own people, in their own land. Throughout the Book of Jeremiah, predictions of impending disasters are usually followed by the words "Nevertheless, I will not make a full end." Jeremiah's hope is symbolized in his buying a piece of land even though he was well aware that his personal captivity was close at hand.

Jeremiah's own religious life is revealed to a considerable extent in his recorded prayers, which uniquely illustrate the intimate relationship that existed between the prophet and the deity whom he worshiped. These prayers are usually in the form of conversations and are characterized by a sincerity and frankness seldom found in prayer. Jeremiah opened his mind and heart to Yahweh and did not hesitate to state whatever he felt to be the truth. If he thought Yahweh had been unjust in dealing with him, he expressed his complaints in clear and unmistakable terms. But his prayers were never monologues in which he did all of the talking. After he spoke, he would listen for Yahweh's response, and the entire conversation would have a significance for him that went far beyond a more formal type of prayer. Jeremiah's personal honesty, as well as his courage and remarkable insights, inspired later generations to admire and esteem him.