**St. Margaret’s English Community – RCIA**

**The Great Prophets of the Exile and Post-Exilic period**

In our last class, we examined the rise of the prophets of the 8th century, contemporaneously with the rise of the Kingdom of Assyria that conquered both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms. As I mentioned then, by the time of the deaths of both Jeroboam II and Uzziah in the 740’s BC Assyria was coming into one of her greatest and strongest periods with the terrible reign of King Tiglath-Pileser III (744-727 BC). This king conquered one nation after another, and introduced horrific terror tactics into Assyrians conquering tactics – holding entire cities hostage unless they surrendered a rebelling king, and then carting off the entire population to exile, replacing the population with other conquered peoples.

By 734 BC the Israelites of the North were taken into exile. By the end of the time of the writings of the prophet Isaiah, the Southern Kingdom has also fallen and the people were taken away also in exile to the east – as far as Babylon. This is why the exile is referred to as “The Babylonian Exile.”

The great prophets of the Exile period and the post-Exilic time of the return of the people are JEREMIAH (627 to 582 BC) and EZEKIEL (593 to 573 BC).

**The Book of Jeremiah: [***NAB* pp 934-997]

The *Book of Jeremiah* is the longest book of the prophets (in the traditional Hebrew text), but the book is considered second to Isaiah in its theological and liturgical usage. One difference with the *Book of Isaiah* is that in *Jeremiah* we have a much more complete biography of the prophet and his life. He is also spoken about in the *Book of Lamentations* and in *Baruch* are influenced by the scribe of Jeremiah.

The *Book of Jeremiah* opens with his CALL as a prophet with quite a bit of historical material so that we can place it in the 13th year of the reign of King Josiah (about 627 BC). In the beginning (v. 6) he claims that he is too young for this role. Some scholars look at the phrase, “*Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, before you were born I dedicated you, a prophet to the nations I appointed you*,” (v. 5) that 627 BC is the actual year of his birth. But most scholars mark that year (627 BC) as the time he begins his ministry, and he continues to preach past the final exile period of 586 BC and does not disappear from history until 582 BC. So Jeremiah holds the record of the prophet with the longest continual prophetic ministry – for some 45 years.

The *Book of Jeremiah* begins with the reforms of King Josiah’s that were then – following his death in 609 BC - followed by a series of failed kings (heirs) caught up in a difficult struggle between Egypt (that at this time “controlled” or strongly influenced the Kingdom of Judah) and Babylonia – a strong adversary of Egypt. Josiah’s sons one after the other capitulated or undid the great reforms he had instituted to protect Judah from being conquered and sent into exile as happened to the Kingdom of Israel.

At the outset, I want to also add a small caveat to the *Book of Jeremiah*. While this is a very rich part of the Sacred Scriptures, it does not have the same sense of order as we would perhaps like. It was put together from smaller manuscripts – sometimes from various sources – and then placed into this large collection, with the editors of the earliest collections (the Deuteronomic school) deciding how best to present the message of Jeremiah.

There are **three major time periods** during which Jeremiah worked.

The **first period** was during the reign of King Josiah from the time of Jeremiah’s call in 627 to at least the beginning of King Josiah’s reforms, about 622 BC – but perhaps better seen as extending to his death mentioned above in 609 BC. The evidence of this period is in the first oracles in chapters 1 through 6, calling for **conversion and reform** (and thus paralleling what the king was attempting to do for Judah).

The **second period** took place during the reign of Josiah’s son, King Jehoiakim (609-598 BC). It was in this period that the reforms instituted by King Josiah collapsed and Jehoiakim moved in the opposite direction re-establishing many pagan practices in Judah.

The **third period** of Jeremiah’s ministry took place in the 12 years between the first destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians (598 BC) and its second and final destruction in 586 BC, with a very brief period of activity by the prophet from 586 to 582 BC.

These three time periods form an outline for Jeremiah’s life. But returning to what I said earlier, the oracles and prophesies do not unfold in a chronological manner. Rather, they are set out by certain principles or themes – which could be seen in 5 divisions here:

1. Jeremiah, chapters 1-25: Oracles and accounts involving the evil of Judah under three kings (Josiah, 1-6; Jehoiakim, 7-20; Zedekiah, 21-24).
2. Jeremiah, chapters 26-36: Stories about Jeremiah and oracles from the the reigns of Jehoiakim and Zedekiah.
3. Jeremiah, chapter 37-45: The story of Jeremiah’s last days as told by perhaps *Baruch*.
4. Jeremiah, chapters 46-51: Oracles against foreign nations.
5. Jeremiah, chapter 52: An appendix describing the fall of Jerusalem in 586 (see 2 Kings 25 to complete the story of Jeremiah’s words and refer to the maps found there).

In the Greek text of the Old Testaments (*Septuagint*) the oracles concerning foreign nations are in a different sequence (appearing around chapter 25), and similar oracles also appear in the Books of both Isaiah and Ezekiel.

I would point out that the current text of the *Book of Jeremiah* that you see in your Bibles is a restoration brought about after the discovery of the Hebrew manuscripts at QUMRAN.

[](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:View_of_the_Dead_Sea_from_a_Cave_at_Qumran.jpg)

**Excursus: *What are these* Qumran *scrolls?***

The Dead Sea Scrolls (Qumran Scrolls) were discovered in a series of twelve [caves](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cave) around the site originally known as the "[Ein Feshkha](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ein_Feshkha) Caves" near the Dead Sea in the [West Bank](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/West_Bank) (then part of [Jordan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jordan)) between 1946 and 1956 by [Bedouin shepherds](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bedouin_people) and a team of [archeologists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archaeology). The practice of storing worn-out sacred manuscripts in earthenware vessels buried in the earth or within caves is related to the ancient Jewish custom of [Genizah](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genizah).

The texts have great historical, religious, and linguistic significance because they include the second-oldest known surviving [manuscripts](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical_manuscript) of works later included in the [Hebrew Bible canon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Development_of_the_Hebrew_Bible_canon), along with [deuterocanonical](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deuterocanonical) and extra-biblical manuscripts which preserve evidence of the diversity of religious thought in late [Second Temple Judaism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Temple_Judaism). Almost all of the Dead Sea Scrolls are held by the [state of Israel](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Israel) in the [Shrine of the Book](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shrine_of_the_Book) on the grounds of the [Israel Museum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Israel_Museum).

Many thousands of written fragments have been discovered in the Dead Sea area. They represent the remnants of larger manuscripts damaged by natural causes or through human interference, with the vast majority holding only small scraps of text. However, a small number of well-preserved, almost intact manuscripts have survived – fewer than a dozen among those from the Qumran Caves. Researchers have assembled a collection of 981 different [manuscripts](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manuscripts) – discovered in 1946/47 and in 1956 – from 11 caves. The 11 [Qumran Caves](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qumran_Caves) lie in the immediate vicinity of the [Hellenistic-period](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hellenistic_period) Jewish settlement at [Khirbet Qumran](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khirbet_Qumran) in the eastern [Judaean Desert](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Judaean_Desert), in the [West Bank](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/West_Bank). The caves are located about one mile (1.6 kilometres) west of the northwest shore of the [Dead Sea](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dead_Sea), whence they derive their name. Scholarly consensus dates the Qumran Caves Scrolls from the last three centuries [BCE](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BCE) and the first century [CE.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common_Era) Bronze coins found at the same sites form a series beginning with [John Hyrcanus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Hyrcanus) (in office 135–104 BCE) and continuing until the period of the [First Jewish–Roman War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Jewish%E2%80%93Roman_War) (66–73 CE), supporting the radiocarbon and [paleographic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paleography) dating of the [scrolls](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scroll).

In the larger sense, the Dead Sea Scrolls include manuscripts from additional Judaean Desert sites, dated as early as the 8th century BCE and as late as the 11th century CE.

**The Message of Jeremiah**

Jeremiah’s birth is in a small town called Anathoth, north of Jerusalem, in an area controlled by the tribe of Benjamin. It is conjected that his father was a priest (*Levite*) steeped in the Deuteronomic tradition of that period. Jeremiah proved to be a great defender of the best of the northern tradition of Hosea and Deuteronomy (written also in this period), and a true southerner in love with Zion and Jerusalem.

In style, he favors longer oracles than most other prophets, and puts a lot of emotional dramatic language into them. Jeremiah also prepares the way for *Ezekiel*, who brings the art of the elevated an literary oracle to its highest perfection.

Jeremiah was more a speaker than a writer, and he used colourful imagery in describing battles, plagues, and the terrors of war as well as everyday images drawn from the art of pottery, metalwork cooking and human sexuality.

The descriptions that fill the *Book fo Jeremiah* come not only from the prophet himself but also from stories told about him by the prophet *Baruch* and certain theological commentaries in Deuteronomy that refer to him and his mission and call. Jeremiah never stopped preaching against the two major evils of his time: ***idolatry*** and ***injustice***. He was never put off even when he suffered or was persecuted for his message. He had a deep compassion for his people and for the COVENANT, and called people continually back to their relationship with YHWH. He had a great sensitivity both to what God asks (of us) and what humans need to find (in their life). One famous modern Jewish scholar refers to Jeremiah as the prophet of God’s *pathos* – of God’s divine sympathy. When the people refused to heed his message, he felt great personal sorrow. But even more, he felt the pain borne by God for this betrayal. In one moving event in his life, he is commanded by God to remain unmarried as a witness to the terrible conditions that are coming to the land to make the idea of raising children a horror instead of a joy (Jer. 16: 1-4).

More than anything else, the message of Jeremiah was one of obedience to the divine will express in the covenant God had made with Israel. In this way he stands with the other prophets before him, but most closely with *Hosea* who stressed the tender love of God and the divine willingness to always receive back the people. YHWH desires to forgive their infidelity and to treat Israel again as a beloved wife (Jer. 2:203; 3:12; 3: 19-20).

Because the people did not respond to the call of YHWH, Jeremiah’s words of hope for their repentance waned. By the time of Jehoiakim and Zedekiah, he had despaired that anything could turn back the hardened hearts of the people, and nothing could then turn back God’s punishment – deserved for their sins. In a few places, the prophet claims God ordered him not to intercede on their behalf (Jer. 7:16; 11:14).

The condemnations of Jeremiah are very close to those of Amos, Hosea and Isaiah. He warns against the policies of the kings to try to make a pact first with Assyria and then with Egypt (Jer. 2: 17-18). He compares the people to a camel in heat for their lust with pagan idols (2:23-24); he condemns their oppression of the poor and powerless (2:33-34); and he condemns their widespread adultery and fornication (5: 7-8), as well as their stubborn rebellion against the Covenant (5:23). In between each condemnation, **he calls on the people to turn back to YHWH** (3:22; 4:1; 7:3; 8:5; 18:8)/ But his greatest scorn is kept for those who turn to pagan statues and idols for strength. He describes in mocking tones the piety of people who call a piece of wood “father.” (2:27-28), and bow down before a gilded and richly clothed idol that is as dead and unmoving as a scarecrow in a field (10: 3-5). To regain their loyalty to Yahweh, he calls upon the memory of the EXODUS event and the tender care of God for the people in their sojourn in the desert years, hoping to move them to repent (2:2-3; 7:22-23; 11: 1-5; 19:4-5).

His warning is that if Judah refuses to heed the WORD that Jeremiah brings them from God, then God will surely permit an enemy to destroy them. The prophet then sees a vision of a foe from the north pouring destruction over the land like a pot of boiling water being tipped on its side (Jer. 1:13-15). This “foe from the north” is never named but could be none other than the Babylonian army on the march. Jeremiah returns to this theme often (4:5-8; 4:13; 5:15; 6:22; 10:22), and resembles the fiery prophet Nahum with his battle scenes against Judah (4:5-29; 6:1-5). Jeremiah repeats over and over his warnings to the people who ate not too receptive. Another favourite image is taken from the work of forging metal objects. Just as ores have to be burned (fired) so that the metal will melt and separate and be able to be shaped into tools and weapons, so too God will burn away the bad ore of Israel and Judah - and purify it to get good metal (6:27-30). He warns repeatedly that the punishment that will come from God will be so severe it can be named “terror on every side” (6:25; 20: 3, 10; 46:5; 49:29).

At times Jeremiah sounds despondent. He cries out over the evil he sees all around him. He cries out that “death” has climbed up into the windows and has walked into their palaces (Jer. 9:20). He laments the incurable wound that only gets worse until the patient dies, and no healing ointments can be found anywhere (8:22; 30:12013)/ He imitates funeral laments for the dead: “*Take up lamenting and weeping for the mountains, and wailing for the desert pastures, because they have been laid waste so no one can pass by*” (9:10).

**Thematic images**: use of visions and parables for his message

*Visions Parables*

The almond tree (1:11-12) Jeremiah’s bachelorhood (16:1-4)

The boiling pot (1:13-19) The potter at work (18: 1-12)

The loin cloth (13:1-7) The broken pot (19:1-20:6)

The basket of figs (24:1-10) The yoke of iron (27:1-28:17)

The wine drinkers (25:15-38) The field purchase (32:6-44)

The pile of stones (43: 8-13)

The book in the river (51:59-64)

**The Temple Sermon**

Soon after Jehoiakim became king and began to turn back his father’s reforms. Jeremiah went to the Temple of Jerusalem to proclaim a warning. This “temple sermon” was so powerful and shocking that the editors of *Jeremiah* have accounts of it in two different places (chapter 7 and 26). He shocked his listeners, religious people who had gathered in the temple precincts, who had come to pray to God for protection – his cry was that they were wasting their time. He declared that God would wipe out the Jerusalem temple just has he had earlier destroyed the sanctuary of Shiloh (Northern Kingdom) where the Ark of the Covenant had been kept at the time of Samuel. In Chapter 7 here we see Jeremiah’s arguments at great length, pointing out the constant idolatry and hypocrisy of the people, and promising that the wrath of God’s justice cannot be stopped. Chapter 26 is a shorter – and probably closer to the original words of the prophet – version. It also includes the reactions of both those who heard the oracle and the authorities who had to deal with it. Jeremiah’s message angered the people, the priests and the prophets who were attached to the Temple, and they rose up and seized him and threatened his life (26:8). The princes, who were the civil authorities rushed up to the gate of the temple where law cases were heard, and held a trial right on the spot. The priests and prophets pushed for his death, but when Jeremiah said in his own defense that he was acting on God’s command calling them to repent and return to the Lord, he convinced both the princes and the crowds that he was a prophet and should be spared. They argued that the prophet Micah had spoken the same kind of message a hundred years earlier during the reign of King Hezekiah, and the people feared putting him to death. On this occasion, the princes decided to let Jeremiah go free, but they failed to convince the priests and prophets who continued to be major opponents to Jeremiah and his mission. While adding to Jeremiah’s personal anguish it did not deter him.

The oracles in chapters 20 to 23 show that he often singled out the leaders, priests and other prophets for particular warnings – so it is also easy to see why he faced so much opposition. He persisted in warning the people to repent or see the fall of Jerusalem. (Read Jeremiah 22:30; 27:12; 38:17).

While King Jehoiakim loathed him and tried to arrest and imprison him, even having him thrown in an open cistern (37-39), King Zedekiah feared him and did not want to kill him. His most severe condemnation of the prophets is found in chapter 23 (23:26, 30) and accuses them of living in adultery, dishonesty, and even idolatry (23:14).

In chapter 28, Jeremiah denounced the message of Hananiah, a prophet who was loudly proclaiming that God would soon defeat the Babylonians. Both prophets – Hananiah and Jeremiah – performed symbolic actions. Jeremiah wore a yoke around his neck to show the years of slavery ahead, while Hananiah broke it in two to show the coming liberation. And both spoke from divine authority (“*Thus says the Lord*.”) The people were obviously confused by this mixed message. Jeremiah used two proofs against Hananiah: he predicted that God would strike him dead as a sign that his message was false (28:16), and he challenged the right of a prophet to proclaim a word of salvation unless God makes it come to pass (read Jer. 28:7-9).

Jeremiah uses on other argument against these “prophets of hope”. He claims to have stood in the heavenly court when God made known his decisions and to have been sent back o speak the divine word (Jer. 23). This is similar to the scene recorded about Micaiah ben Imlah in 1 Kings 22 who was opposed by 400 prophets. For both Micaiah and Jeremiah the ultimate litmus test for prophets was their ability to hear and understand the divine word while being in some way taken up into the actual presence of God and his angels who are deciding what to do on earth. This is the claim to be a true MESSENGER of God. This is why often the formula is “*Thus says the Lord…*”