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JEREMIAH

INTRODUCTION

The Jeremiah Scroll

The editors of the scroll have Jeremiah's ministry spanning the 40 years from 627 to 587 (see 1:1-3). Though 3:6 and 25:3 speak of Josiah, the bulk of Jeremiah's oracles are located in the reigns of Jehoiakim (609-598) and Zedekiah (597-587). The reign of Jehoiakim saw the rise of Babylon as the dominant power in the region after Nebuchadrezzar defeated the combined forces of Assyria and Egypt at Carchemish in 605. Jehoiakim favoured alliance with Egypt, which was happy to support Judah as a buffer against the encroaching Babylonians. Jeremiah condemned the failure of the people to be faithful to the covenant with YHWH. They were rejecting God's blessing, and were inviting down on themselves the curses spelled out in the Torah if they refused to obey their God. Jeremiah saw Babylon as the instrument chosen by YHWH to punish Judah for its infidelity. The court did not want to listen, basing its confidence on the promises made by their God YHWH to David, and they remembered how Jerusalem was 'miraculously' saved by YHWH a hundred years earlier (701) when Judah was devastated, but Jerusalem was spared. The priests rejected the very idea that a foreign god could conquer YHWH's city and temple. Jeremiah's was a lone voice, and his contemporaries dismissed him and his 'oracles' as the ravings of a religious crank.

However, he was proved right. In 598 the Babylonians laid siege to Jerusalem. Jehoiakim died just before or during the siege, and, when the city fell, his son Jehoiachin, the last king of Judah, was taken into exile along with anyone who might be in a position to stir up opposition to Babylon, as well as any citizen whose skills might be useful to the conquerer. Nebuchadrezzar put Jehoiachin's uncle Zedekiah on the throne.

Zedekiah kept vacillating between submission to Babylon and courting favour with Egypt. In 588 the Babylonian army again laid siege to the city. This time they showed no mercy. The city was burnt and the temple razed to the ground. More people were taken into exile. It was the end of an era. Judah, the last of the tribes of Israel, was utterly devastated.

It was Jeremiah's lot to minister as a prophet during the terrible final years of Judah's decline. This accounts for the unrelenting criticism of the policies that led to the disasters of 597 and 587, and the dire warnings of divine punishment that all but fill his scroll.

As one would expect, the exiles struggled to make sense of their experience. The fact that Jeremiah was right caused them to want to preserve his words and to ponder their meaning. If there was to be any hope, they must, at all costs, not repeat the behaviour of those who had brought down upon them the righteous anger of YHWH. While the members of the Deuteronomic School, along with the Priestly School, the Isaiah School, and no doubt others with their special points of view, were working on the Torah and the Isaiah scroll, they were also working on the Jeremiah scroll, preserving Jeremiah's oracles, but also drawing out the implications of his words for them and for their future.

There is a close connection between Jeremiah's oracles and the position of the Deuteronomic School who were responsible for completing the Book of Deuteronomy and for the writing the 'history' of Israel and Judah (the Books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings). Both Jeremiah and the Deuteronomic School see the basic issue as Judah's failure to be faithful to the Torah and the Covenant.

There is still no consensus in deciding how much of the scroll can be attributed to Jeremiah, and how drawn out was the process of composing the scroll as we have it. R. P. Carroll in his *The Book of Jeremiah* (SCM Press 1986, page 49) states:

Few exegetes agree on the weight to be given to the role of the editors in the production of the book, and there is no consensus of scholarly opinion on such matters as the extent to which the Deuteronomists worked on the different levels of tradition, the relation between the poetry and the prose, the connections between a 'historical' Jeremiah, and the tradition, the figure of Baruch as amanuensis, biographer, creator of this tradition or creation of one level of the tradition, and the dating of the book and its parts.

Some try to assign as much as possible of the scroll, whether poetry or prose, to the prophet (for example, Bright and Holladay). Others argue that the process of editing and re-editing went on for so long, and represents so many attempts to make sense of so many different situations, that it is not possible to discern with confidence the texts that come from Jeremiah himself (for example, Carroll). The following paragraphs present my best attempt to get a hold on this complex material.

To read the Jeremiah scroll we need to put ourselves among the exiles in Babylon as they tried to grasp what they understood as YHWH's will in using the Babylonians to humble Judah. We need to picture the elders, the priests, and scholars of various 'Schools', struggling to understand what had gone wrong. Jeremiah's oracles would have been an important source for their reflections, and their insights are incorporated into the scroll. Some of these insights are expressed in homiletic form, aimed at inspiring the other exiles to learn from Jeremiah. As one would expect, the homilies expressed what YHWH had revealed to Jeremiah by drawing out the implications of Jeremiah's words in ways that connected with the exiles' experience.

The process did not stop there. Jeremiah spoke clearly about the catastrophe that Jerusalem was calling down upon itself by its failure to live in a way that was faithful to the covenant. The extraordinary fact of the return from exile re-awakened hope that there would be a new spring if only they learned from Jeremiah and stayed faithful to YHWH who had proved his fidelity and demonstrated that his choice of them was not over. Back in Judah after the return from exile, members of the Deuteronomic School as well as members of the various Priestly Schools, and others, continued to present Jeremiah to their contemporaries. Based on his oracles they present a 'portrait' of Jeremiah, and they present their reflections as oracles revealed to Jeremiah by YHWH. They are not claiming as a historical fact that all the words attributed to Jeremiah were in fact spoken by him. Rather, enlightened by Jeremiah's words, they express their attempts to make sense of their experience by drawing out the implications of Jeremiah's words for their contemporaries.

Their exegesis, their explanations, their desire to make Jeremiah's warning relevant to their contemporaries, meant a continual expansion of the scroll. This process went on for centuries. Because of this, it is notoriously difficult to achieve any certitude in establishing the exact context in which individual parts of the scroll were composed. Ancient editors with different points of view made their own arrangements of the material and gave their own comments so that the final text lacks any overall shape.

Introduction to Jeremiah

The second century BC Septuagint Greek Version of Jeremiah is shorter than the official Massoretic Hebrew text by as much as a seventh, and points to a shorter Hebrew original. Some of the longer Hebrew text may have already existed in other manuscripts, but it is likely that parts of the Hebrew text post-date the Septuagint, and that the formation of the Hebrew text as we have it was still going on into the second century BC. Generation after generation of scribes continued to be fascinated by the clarity of Jeremiah's warnings, but even more so by his conviction of the passionate love of YHWH for his people.

Another significant difference between the Masoretic Hebrew text and the Septuagint Greek text is the position and sequence of the 'Oracles against the Nations'. These are located at the end of the Hebrew scroll (chapters 46-51), whereas the Greek scroll has them, in a different order, from 25:14 to 32:38.

Our aim in this introductory commentary is to see what we can learn from the inspired oracles of Jeremiah, as well as from the inspired reflections of those whose words are found in the Jeremiah Scroll. If a reader is looking for a thorough analysis of the text as well as a critique of other commentaries it is hard to go past the commentary by William McKane. McKane's two volume work is part of the International Critical Commentary Series published by T&T Clark Edinburgh (Volume 1, 1986 - reprinted with corrections 1999; volume 2, 1996). It has 174 pages of Introduction, and 1,396 pages of commentary. McKane thoroughly examines the Hebrew Massoretic Text, and constantly compares it with the Greek Septuagint Version, the ancient Greek Versions of Aquila, Symmachus and Theodotion, the Latin Vulgate, the Syriac Peshitta and the Aramaic Targum. He pays close attention to the work of two medieval Jewish Rabbis: Rabbi Solomon Izhaqi (Rashi) born at Troyes in the Champagne region of northeastern France in 1040, and Rabbi David Kimchi, who was born in the city of Narbonne in the Provence area of southern France in the year 1160.

McKane looks at every significant modern commentary, but pays special attention to W. Thiel (*Die deuteronomistische Redaktion von Jeremiah 1-25*, published in 1973) and H. Weippert (*Die Prosareden des Jeremiabuches*, published in 1973). Thiel's thesis is that much of the prose in the Jeremiah scroll comes from the Deuteronomic School. By contrast, Weippert argues that much of the prose is by Jeremiah himself. McKane is not convinced that the prose is by Jeremiah or is contemporary with him. Without denying a contribution to the Jeremiah scroll by members of the Deuteronomic School, he claims that the link between the prose of the Jeremiah scroll and the writings of the Deuteronomic School is a tenuous one. McKane speaks of 'a complicated, untidy accumulation of material, extending over a very long period, and to which many people have contributed' (Volume 1, Introduction page xlviiii).

Throughout his commentary, McKane presents the views of other scholars, and gives reasons for his own. Besides the authors already mentioned, he constantly refers to the following:

Barthélemy, D., *Critique Textuelle De L'Ancien Testament*. *Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis* 50/2 (Fribourg and Göttingen, 1986).

Boadt, L., *Jeremiah 26-52*. (Willmington, Delaware, 1982).

Bright, J., *Jeremiah: Introduction, Translation and Notes*, Anchor Bible 21 (Garden City, New York, 1965).

Brockington, L.H., *The Hebrew Text of the Old Testament. The Readings adopted by the Translators of the New English Bible* (Oxford and Cambridge, 1973).

Carroll, R.P., *Jeremiah: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (London, 1986).

Cornill, C.H. *Das Buch Jeremia* (Leipsig, 1905).

Duhm, B., *Das Buch Jeremia. Kurzer Hand-Commentar zum AT*, p (Tubingen and Leipsig, 1901).

Ehrlich, A.B., *Randglossen zur Hebräischen Bibel, Textkritisches, Sprachliches und Sachliches*, iv Jesaia, Jeremia (Leipzig, 1912).

Giesebrecht, F., *Das Buch Jeremia. Handkommentar zum AT*, iii, 2 (Göttingen, 1894, 1907).

Holladay, W.L., *Jeremiah i* (Philadelphia, 1986); *Jeremiah ii* (Mineapolis, 1989).

Hyatt, J.P., *The Book of Jeremiah*. 1B 5 (New York and Nashville, 1956).

Janzen, J.G., *Studies in the Text of Jeremiah*. Harvard Semitic Monographs 6 (Cambridge, Mass., 1973).

Jones, D.R., *Jeremiah*. The New Century Bible (London, 1993).

Nicholson, E.W., *The Book of the Prophet Jeremiah 1-25 and 26-52*. The Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible (Cambridge, 1973, 1975).

Peake, A.S., *Jeremiah and Lamentations i & ii*. Century Bible (London, 1910, 1912).

Rosenberg, A.J., *Jeremiah Volume 2. A New English Translation* (New York, 1985).

Rudolph, W., *Jeremia*. Handbuch zum AT 12 (Tübingen, 1968)

Schneider, D., *Der Prophet Jeremia*. Wuppertal Studienbibel (Wuppertal, 1977).

Streane, A.W., *The Double Text of Jeremiah (Massoretic and Alexandrian) compared together, with an Appendix on the Old Latin Evidence* (Cambridge, 1896).

Volz, P., *Der Prophet Jeremia*. Kommentar zum AT 10 (Leipsig, 1928).

Weiser, A., *Das Buch Jeremia Das Alte Testament Deutsch 20/21* (Göttingen, 2969).

Accepting that there is as yet no consensus among Jeremiah scholars, I suggest dividing the text into three parts. In Part One (chapters 1-25) we start with an expectation that the poetic sections represent Jeremiah's oracles as edited by later scribes. Following the Septuagint positioning Part Two consists in the Oracles against the Nations (Hebrew 25:15-38 and chapters 46-51). Here we start with an expectation that the prose material and the poetic oracles represent attempts by later scribes to apply Jeremiah's insights to their changed circumstances. Part Three (Hebrew chapters 26-45) covers the life and times of Jeremiah. We assume they are a later creation.

Inspired by Jeremiah?

1. His life and times

As we look for inspiration in the Jeremiah scroll it is important to have an overview of the scroll. As explained on page 212 in introducing Part Three of the scroll (chapters 26-45), a third of the total scroll is given over to describing various encounters that Jeremiah had with King Jehoiakim, King Zedekiah, and various others. They tell us something about the setting in which Jeremiah uttered his inspired word. They tell us also something of the special interests of the scribes who put the scroll together.

2. Divine punishment

Two-thirds of Part One (chapters 2-25) consist in declarations of the divine punishment that was coming upon Judah because of the people's infidelity, and the whole of Part Two (chapters 25:15-38 and 46-51) consists in declarations of the divine punishment that would be inflicted on the surrounding pagan nations. Together these sections on punishment make up just under half the entire scroll. This is explained by the times in which Jeremiah ministered. The sin of Judah that brought down God's punishment is expressed succinctly by Jeremiah:

My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.

–Jeremiah 2:13

I YHWH test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their deeds.

– Jeremiah 17:10

It is essential that as we read this material on divine punishment we remember the key assumption that Jeremiah shared with his contemporaries that whatever happens in history is an expression of God's will. We examined this assumption in the Introduction (see pages 16-17). While we cannot follow Jeremiah in this assumption, one lesson we can learn from him is that what we do matters, and that we cannot simply wish away the consequences of the decisions we make.

Some of these declarations of punishment call for repentance (a change of mind and heart and behaviour) with a view to avoiding the punishment (for example 3:11-25; 4:1-2, 14; 6:8; 7:3; 18:11).

Return, faithless Israel. I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful. I will not be angry forever. Only acknowledge your guilt, that you have rebelled against YHWH your God.

– Jeremiah 3:12-13

Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place.

– Jeremiah 7:3

In fact repentance was not forthcoming, but we can learn the importance of changing our way of thinking and deciding when it becomes evident that we are wrong. Only the truth can set us free.

3. Jeremiah's intimacy with God

Jeremiah's words were unwelcome. He was sidelined as a doomsday quack. His life was in danger. We cannot but be impressed by the constancy he showed in continuing to proclaim his unpopular message, and the trust that he had in YHWH. For his prophetic call and experience see, for example, 1:4-13, 17-19; 15:20-21; 17:14-18; 23:18. He has quite a lot to say about so-called prophets who do not listen to God and so do not proclaim God's word (see, for example, 2:8; 5:13, 31; 6:13; 14:13-16; 23:14-40; 27:16; 29:8-9). Anyone claiming to speak in God's name has a lot to reflect on here.

Along with this radical trust went an honesty in expressing his personal suffering and the doubts he experienced as well as the anger he felt at God's giving him his ministry and then appearing to leave him high and dry, especially when the situation made it appear that his words were not being fulfilled. He felt used and even deceived. In no other prophetic scroll do we find such feelings expressed as powerfully and convincingly (see especially the introduction on page 132 to the section from 11:18 to 20:18).

This helps account for the importance of Jeremiah's words for the exiles in Babylon who, for many years, saw no hope of relief. It was the same for the exiles who returned to Yehud, only to find that their high hopes were not realised as they continued to languish, politically (there was no hope of recovering their independence), and economically (Yehud was a small, land-locked, fraction of pre-exilic Judah). Jeremiah's complaining was in the context of his continued belief in God's goodness and fidelity. This honest combination continues to encourage and inspire us today.

4. YHWH in Jeremiah's scroll

It would be tragic if the extensive focus on divine punishment (see page 76) were to obscure Jeremiah's conviction concerning the special love YHWH has for his people.

I have forsaken my house, I have abandoned my heritage; I have given the beloved of my heart into the hands of her enemies.

– Jeremiah 12:7

As the loincloth clings to one's loins, so I made the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah cling to me in order that they might be for me a people, a name, a praise, and a glory. But they would not listen.

– Jeremiah 13:11

I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.

– Jeremiah 31:3

You show steadfast love to the thousandth generation, but repay the guilt of parents into the laps of their children after them, O great and mighty God whose name is YHWH of hosts.

– Jeremiah 32:8

In a daring way, Jeremiah speaks of God's feelings of regret at having to punish:

I thought how I would set you among my children, and give you a pleasant land, the most beautiful heritage of all the nations. And I thought you would call me, My Father, and would not turn from following me.

– Jeremiah 3:19

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My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain! Oh, the walls of my heart! My heart is beating wildly; I cannot keep silent; for I hear the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war.

– Jeremiah 4:19

For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me.

– Jeremiah 8:21

O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people!

– Jeremiah 9:1

Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he the child I delight in? As often as I speak against him, I still remember him. Therefore I am deeply moved for him; I will surely have mercy on him.

– Jeremiah 31:20

The people are obstinate in their infidelity. YHWH, however, is always faithful to the covenant he has with his people (see 3:12; 11:3-4; 31:3-34; 32:40).

Let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am YHWH; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight.

– Jeremiah 4:27

Surely I know the plans I have for you, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

– Jeremiah 29:11-14

Because it is YHWH who is punishing, Jeremiah knows that the deserved punishment cannot be the final word. YHWH will bring the exiles home and restore 'his land'(7:3), 'his heritage'(12:8), 'his vineyard'(12:10). See especially chapters 30-33.

I will set my eyes upon them for good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up, and not tear them down; I will plant them, and not pluck them up. I will give them a heart to know that I am YHWH; and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart.

– Jeremiah 24:6-7

But as for you, have no fear, my servant Jacob, and do not be dismayed, O Israel; for I am going to save you from far away, and your offspring from the land of their captivity. Jacob shall return and have quiet and ease, and no one shall make him afraid. For I am with you, to save you ... you will be my people, and I will be your God

– Jeremiah 30:10-11,22

Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel! Again you shall take your tambourines, and go forth in the dance of the merrymakers. Again you shall plant vineyards on the mountains of Samaria; the planters shall plant, and shall enjoy the fruit.

– Jeremiah 31:4-5

With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back, I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.

– Jeremiah 31:9

5. What YHWH asks of his people

Jeremiah goes to the heart of Yahwism when, in the tradition of the prophets who went before him, he challenges his contemporaries to live justly. In one of his more powerful statements he challenges King Jehoiakim to follow the example of his father, Josiah:

Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice; who makes his neighbors work for nothing, and does not give them their wages; who says, "I will build myself a spacious house with large upper rooms," and who cuts out windows for it, paneling it with cedar, and painting it with vermilion.

Are you a king because you compete in cedar? Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? says YHWH. But your eyes and heart are only on your dishonest gain, for shedding innocent blood, and for practicing oppression and violence.

– Jeremiah 22:13-17 (see 5:1; 5:25-28; 7:5-6)

Without justice, religious cult is valueless.

The priests did not say, "Where is YHWH?" Those who handle the law did not know me.

– Jeremiah 2:8

Of what use to me is frankincense that comes from Sheba, or sweet cane from a distant land? Your burnt offerings are not acceptable, nor are your sacrifices pleasing to me.

– Jeremiah 6:20 (see 7:21-22; 14:12)

YHWH asks for sincerity of heart.

If you swear, "As YHWH lives!" in truth, in justice, and in uprightness, then nations shall be blessed by him, and by him they shall boast.

– Jeremiah 4:2

The house of Israel is uncircumcised in heart.

– Jeremiah 9:26

YHWH wants his people to obey his voice:

But this command I gave them, "Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people; and walk only in the way that I command you, so that it may be well with you."

– Jeremiah 7:23

They have forsaken my law that I set before them, and have not obeyed my voice, or walked in accordance with it, but have stubbornly followed their own hearts and have gone after the Baals, as their ancestors taught them.

– Jeremiah 9:13-14

They do not know the way of YHWH, the law of their God ... They all alike had broken the yoke, they had burst the bonds.

– Jeremiah 5:4-5

Thus says YHWH: Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls. But they said, "We will not walk in it."

– Jeremiah 6:16

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YHWH wants his people to speak and to do the truth.

You shall say to them: This is the nation that did not obey the voice of YHWH their God, and did not accept discipline; truth has perished; it is cut off from their lips.

– Jeremiah 7:28

They bend their tongues like bows; they have grown strong in the land for falsehood, and not for truth; for they proceed from evil to evil, and they do not know me.

– Jeremiah 9:3

YHWH wants his people to be faithful to the covenant he has made with them.

I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness.

– Jeremiah 2:2

He wants them to ‘fear him’, that is to say, to not lose a profound sense of awe in his regard.

Do you not fear me? says YHWH; Do you not tremble before me? I placed the sand as a boundary for the sea, a perpetual barrier that it cannot pass; though the waves toss, they cannot prevail, though they roar, they cannot pass over it. But this people has a stubborn and rebellious heart; they have turned aside and gone away. They do not say in their hearts, “Let us fear YHWH our God, who gives the rain in its season, the autumn rain and the spring rain.

– Jeremiah 5:22-24

YHWH wants his people to ‘know’ him; that is to say, to live in communion with him, and enjoy the intimacy of love with which he, ‘the fountain of living water’(17:13), longs to bless them.

Let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am YHWH; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says YHWH.

– Jeremiah 9:24