

PROLOGUE

JEREMIAH 1

¹The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, ²to whom the word of YHWH came in the days of King Josiah son of Amon of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign.

³It came also in the days of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah, and until the end of the eleventh year of King Zedekiah son of Josiah of Judah, until the captivity of Jerusalem in the fifth month.

This is clearly editorial. Jeremiah's name means 'may YHWH loosen (the womb)' if the verb root is *rāmâ*, or 'May YHWH exalt' if the root is *rûm*.

Jeremiah is linked to the priestly tradition of Anathoth (verse 1). Abiathar, the last chief priest of Eli's family, was exiled to his estate at Anathoth for having supported a rival of Solomon (see 1 Kings 2:26). Eli saw the destruction of the sanctuary at Shiloh (Jeremiah 7:12; 26:6). It is ironic that from Anathoth comes a prophet who will see the destruction of the Jerusalem temple.

Those responsible for preserving 'the words of Jeremiah' (verse 1) did so because they recognised them as 'the word of YHWH' (verse 2), the word of their liberator God who sent Moses to free them from slavery and form them into a people (see Exodus (see Exodus 3:7)).

It is surely no accident that Jeremiah's ministry is stated as lasting from the thirteenth year of Josiah's reign (627) to the end of Zedekiah's (587) – covering a symbolic 40 year period. It is true that Josiah is mentioned in 3:6 and 25:3, and that the oracles in Part One of the scroll are mostly given without any attempt at dating. However it is clear that the bulk of Jeremiah's oracles are located during the reigns of Jehoiakim (609-598) and Zedekiah (598-587).

Jeremiah lived through 'the captivity of Jerusalem' (verse 3; see 52:27-34) in 597, the attempt by Zedekiah to organise an anti-Babylonian alliance in 584 and the consequent destruction of the city and its temple in 587. He witnessed the exile of many of Judah's leading citizens to Nippur in Babylonia and fades from the scene when he is taken forcibly into exile in Egypt (see 43:5-7).

There are close parallels with the call of Moses (Exodus 3:10-12) and the call of Gideon (Judges 6:14-22). In each we have a commission (verse 5), an objection (verse 6), a reassurance (verses 7-9) and a sign (verse 9).

The word 'know' in verse 5 speaks of intimate communion. The word 'consecrate' (שִׁקֵּץ) followed by 'appoint' speaks of Jeremiah having been set aside for mission by the Holy One. Though his ministry was entirely to his own people, he is declared to be 'a prophet of the nations' (verse 5), not just because the scroll contains oracles against foreign nations (see 25:15-38 and its expansion in 46-51), but also because his word has a message for the nations that the real power in world politics is YHWH.

Jeremiah's objection and God's reassurance are conventional (see Exodus 3-4 in regard to Moses, and Judges 6 in regard to Gideon). Some scholars, wanting to read these verses as biographical, suggest that verse 2 refers to the year of Jeremiah's birth. This would make him 18 at the beginning of Jehoiakim's reign. 'You shall speak whatever I command you' (verse 4) echoes words spoken to Moses (see Exodus 7:2; Deuteronomy 18:18). YHWH's reassurance, 'I am with you' (verse 8) echoes words spoken to Moses (Exodus 3:12), and to Gideon (Judges 6:16). 'To deliver you' underlines the essential quality of YHWH as the God who liberates.

Jeremiah's commission was to be a prophet. This requires a profound purification, to ensure that the words he speaks are indeed God's words. Hence the touching of his mouth by God (compare Isaiah 6:6-7), and God 'putting' (נָתַן, literally 'gifting') his words into Jeremiah's mouth (verse 9).

Because his words were not listened to, and because of the tragic circumstances in which he was called to carry out his mission, the bulk of his ministry consisted in plucking up, pulling down, destroying and overthrowing (verse 10; see 12:14-17; 18:7-9; 24:6; 31:28; 42:10; 45:4). However, because he was a prophet of YHWH, whose faithfulness transcends all human folly, the last word, as we will see, was about building and planting. In the circumstances it required immense faith to believe that there could be anything to hope for.

⁴Now the word of YHWH came to me saying,

⁵"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

⁶Then I said, "Ah, Lord YHWH! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy."

⁷But YHWH said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. ⁸Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says YHWH."

⁹Then YHWH put out his hand and touched my mouth; and YHWH said to me, "Now I have put my words in your mouth."

¹⁰See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

¹¹The word of YHWH came to me, saying, "Jeremiah, what do you see?" And I said, "I see a branch of an almond tree."

¹²Then YHWH said to me, "You have seen well, for I am watching over my word to perform it."

¹³The word of YHWH came to me a second time, saying, "What do you see?" And I said, "I see a boiling pot, tilted away from the north."¹⁴Then YHWH said to me: Out of the north disaster shall break out on all the inhabitants of the land. ¹⁵For now I am calling all the tribes of the kingdoms of the north, says YHWH; and they shall come and all of them shall set their thrones at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem, against all its surrounding walls and against all the cities of Judah. ¹⁶And I will utter my judgments against them, for all their wickedness in forsaking me; they have made offerings to other gods, and worshiped the works of their own hands.

¹⁷But you, gird up your loins; stand up and tell them everything that I command you. Do not break down before them, or I will break you before them.

¹⁸And I for my part have made you today a fortified city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall, against the whole land—against the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and the people of the land. ¹⁹They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says YHWH, to deliver you.

Verses eleven and twelve involve a play on the similarity in sound between 'almond' (šāqed) and 'watching' (šōqēd). Anyone can see an almond. To see that YHWH is watching requires a special grace from God, given only to a 'seer'. YHWH's word spoken through Jeremiah is to be taken with the utmost seriousness, since YHWH is 'watching over my word to perform it' (compare Isaiah 55:10-11). 'My word' points back to verse 9, and forward to verses 13-16.

Verses 13-1 offer a striking image. A cooking pot on the boil and tipping to the south. We see the Babylonians heading south and laying siege to Jerusalem. Verses 15-16 read like a further elaboration. Verse sixteen has the ring of the Deuteronomic School about it. One of their key ways of explaining the destruction of Jerusalem was to see it as a punishment for idolatry. The people of Judah failed to obey the first commandment which required exclusive loyalty to YHWH (see Exodus 20:3).

Jeremiah will need courage to carry out the ministry which God is giving him. He will be hated in the palace and the temple, and he will find no support in the streets or market places. YHWH, however, will give him the strength he needs: 'Don't break down' (verse 17; see 1:8); 'I am with you to deliver you' (verse 19; compare 1:3).

Events proved Jeremiah right in his challenge to the established convictions of throne and temple. We are being prepared to hear the will of YHWH in the words of Jeremiah. His contemporaries ignored him, and suffered the consequences. Those responsible for the editing of the scroll don't want their contemporaries to forget the lessons learned from the destruction of their city and the exile. There is something more important than political know-how, and it is communion with YHWH – something that is possible only by obedience to the covenant.