

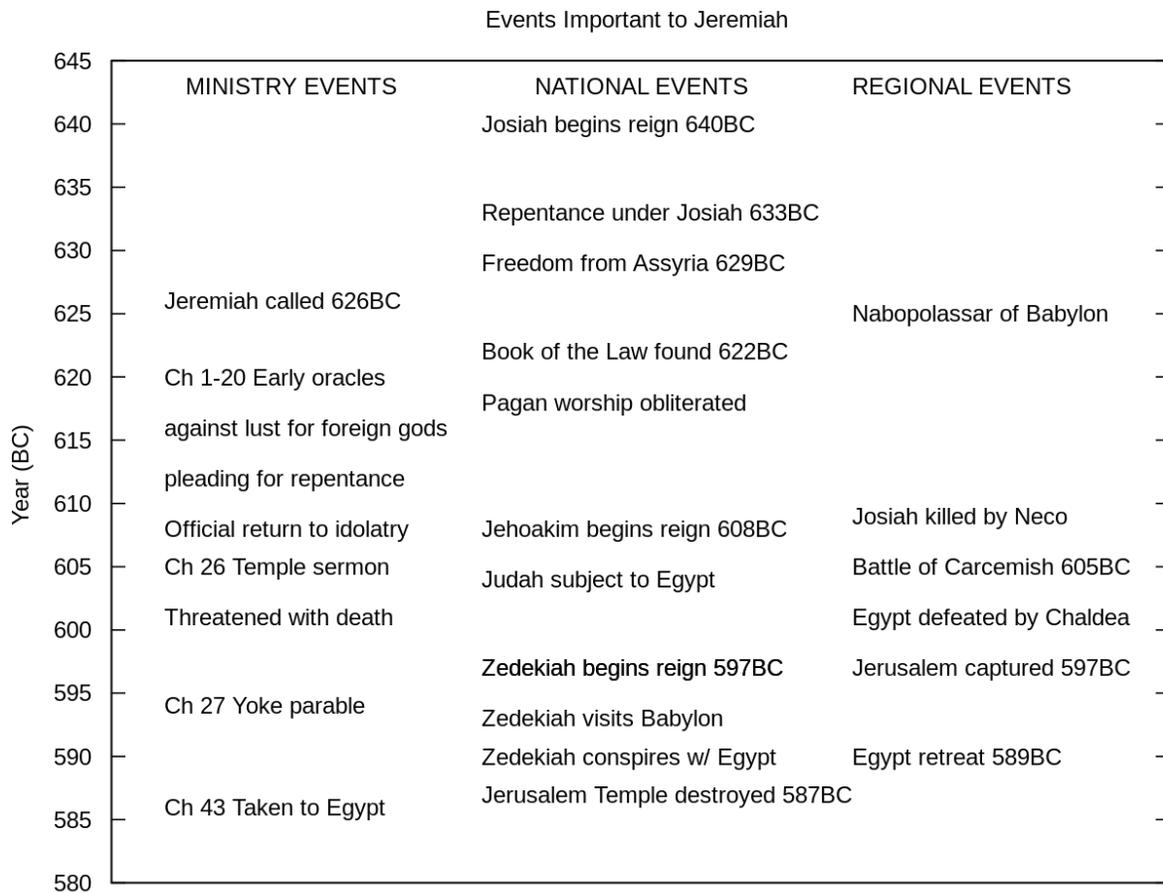
GOD DEMANDS A RIGHTOUS PEOPLE

Prophets' Call for Righteousness

October 13, 2021

Historical Context of Jeremiah

The two great events in the history of Judah during the time of Jeremiah were the religious reform of Josiah (622 BC) and the destruction of Jerusalem and Judah (587 BC). The latter included the exile of many of its leaders and citizens (597 and 587 BC). These events also took place in the context of major upheavals in the surrounding nations. Jeremiah started to proclaim his message during the time of the decline of Assyria and the ensuing conflict between Egypt and Babylon for the domination of the Fertile Crescent.



The loss of Assyrian control in Syria-Palestine permitted Judah to feel more independent (especially during the reign of Josiah). This feeling of independence was obvious in the way Josiah approached his religious reform. It included the removal of all Assyrian religious practices that had become a part of the religious life of Jerusalem and elsewhere. He also took control of the Assyrian provinces that had once been the Northern Kingdom, Israel.

The reform is referenced in 2 Kings 22 and 23 in the 18th year of Josiah. It seems to have been quite comprehensive and even seems to have extended into the Northern Kingdom. The reform was the most extensive and far-reaching in the history of Israel though its effects were not very long-lasting.

Josiah instituted sweeping cultic reforms after learning of a number of religious prohibitions that had been neglected for centuries because of the loss of the *Book of the Law*. Based on the cultic activity that his reforms targeted, its focus seems likely to have been on establishing the Levitical line as the sole administrators of the priesthood. The temple in Jerusalem was to be the sole location for the appropriate worship of the one true God, Yahweh.

There is archaeological evidence for some of these religious practices during this time period as it relates to the Biblical account. I highlight the high places, the idolatrous priests, and the veneration of Asherah.

High Places (any raised platform dedicated for formal sacrificial worship)

In 2 Kings 23 these high places were located at the city gates. Jeroboam was said to have built them at Dan and Bethel to accompany the golden calves he set there. Some of the high places were full-scale temples and others were open-air shrines. There is no archaeological evidence for the destruction of any cult sites at or near the time of Josiah. Those outlined in 2 Kings 23 were known from the 10th – 8th centuries BC and all met their end before the 7th Century BC and were never rebuilt. All of the cultic sites were destroyed before or during the siege of Sennacherib. By the time of Josiah, worship not conducted in Jerusalem would likely have been on a small scale or private.

Idolatrous Priests (unauthorized priests to burn incense at altars around Jerusalem)

In 2 Kings 23 there is also a reference to those who burned incense to Baal, the sun and moon, and the whole host of heaven. Archaeological discoveries found at the sanctuary in the Israelite royal fortress at Arad confirm the presence of members of priestly families known from the Bible (Meremoth, Joshaphat, Pashur, the sons of Gilgal, and the sons of Korah). A text was also found mentioning the *house of Yahweh* which is understood as a reference to the Arad sanctuary and its dedication to Yahweh. These findings indicate early *idolatrous priests* outside of Jerusalem who were associated with the priestly lineage and with sanctioned Yahweh worship. Rather than opposing the laws of God, these priests may have been viewed as obstructing Josiah's consolidation of cultic authority. They were competition but not idolatrous priests.

Tel Arad Temple or sanctuary is an ancient Hebrew temple from the Kingdom of Judah, dating back to 950 BC. The citadel and sanctuary were constructed at the time of King David and Solomon.

During the reign of either King Hezekiah or Josiah, this temple was dismantled. The temple at Arad was uncovered by archaeologist Yohanan Aharoni in 1962 who spent the rest of his life uncovering its mysteries.



Veneration of Asherah

There were major conflicts with the worship of Asherah. It was seen as a threat to the official religion of the Israelites. The primary concern of Josiah was to consolidate official cultic practices under his authority. He burned the image of Asherah and beat it to the dust. He then threw the dust upon the graves of the people.

Significance of Reforms

The reforms centralized the worship of Yahweh in Jerusalem and this resulted in its purification. Josiah reinstated the Passover and Sabbath celebrations. It led to the reestablishment of the religious and political independence of Judah and Israel from Assyrian domination.

The reforms improved public morality and the administration of justice. But the priests of the outlying sanctuaries lost their jobs as a result of the centralization of worship in Jerusalem. The priests became dissatisfied and disgruntled after the other shrines were abolished. The reform led to the creation of an elite priesthood who monopolized worship in Jerusalem. Those outside of Jerusalem became subordinated to those in the city.

The reforms succeeded in organizing religious activity but it failed to result in a genuine spiritual revival. The reform was superficial and overall the people became less enthused about the revival.

During this time period Scripture points to another reality. The sins of idolatry remained entrenched among the people. According to Jeremiah, the decision by God to place the people in exile was not simply a problem of obedience or disobedience. Patrick Miller (Old Testament scholar) noted: However successful Josiah's reforms may have been, resistance to the reform is evident from the book of Jeremiah. Both its narrative and its prophecies suggest that there was a fairly widespread continuing devotion to other cults than the worship of Yahweh and that the single devotion to Yahweh in the one sanctuary was fairly short-lived.

Fast Forward to Rebellion in Babylon (595 BC)

A rebellion in Babylon seemed to have stirred hopes of Judah's breaking free of Babylonian domination. In 594 BC envoys from Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre, and Sidon met with Zedekiah in Jerusalem to plan a revolt against Babylon, a move that Jeremiah thought was a disaster and contrary to the will of God. The plans did not go anywhere. Zedekiah went to Babylon to settle things with the Babylonians and assure them of his loyalty. But within five years the leadership in Judah pushed Zedekiah into open rebellion. The Babylonians reacted quickly. The account of their siege of Jerusalem and the end of Judah is in the final chapters of Kings and Jeremiah. Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed after the temple was looted. Many of the leaders were executed, and many people were taken into exile. Zedekiah was forced to watch his sons being executed before he was dragged off to Babylon.

A number of Judeans were left behind, including Jeremiah. Much of what is recorded in the book conveys the experiences of Jeremiah and his prophetic message. But that message also includes embellishments that were made at a later time. The anguish of the prophet over the heedlessness of the people overlaps with the anguish of God. Laments by Jeremiah provide a glimpse into the inner struggle of those who were called by God to an often-demanding task. The overall presentation of the prophet (which centers in his frequent conflicts with false prophets, with kings, with religious and political leaders) provides important material for understanding and interpreting the prophetic role in the Old Testament.

Jeremiah 4:5 – 6:30 (Sin and Judgment)

These chapters represent as well as any the gist of Jeremiah's prophecy. They mix indictment and denunciation of the sins of the people (including the sins of the leadership) with announcement of judgment that at many points seem to be right at their doorstep. The vivid description of siege elements and the laying waste of the land (4:19-26) suggests that the devastation prophesied has in fact been experienced. But the oracles themselves are anticipatory in form and character.

Whatever the particular moment of his proclamation (or of an editorial addition) the oracles point to the future and announce a judgment that is imminent. Jeremiah warns of a foe from the north who is close at hand and will soon bring destruction (1:15). That foe has clearly come to be understood as the Babylonians.

The first set of oracles (4:5-31) announces an imminent disaster and destruction. Chapter 5 then turns the prophetic lens upon the people to lay out in some detail what has been going on that merits such a devastating attack by a foreign power. Whatever may have been the political reasons contributing to the Babylonian move against Judah, this chapter makes clear that the attack is an act of divine judgment for sins that are both social and spiritual. In 2:1-4:4 the focus was on the abandonment of Yahweh and the idolatry of the people. In this section the sins that are lifted up as the basis for judgment include social injustices and the failure and corruption of the religious and political leaders of the community.

In Chapter 6 Jeremiah returns to the themes of Chapter 4, warning the people of the disaster at hand. He reminds the people of the judgment they are about to endure.

Jeremiah 11:1-17 (Broken Covenant)

Now we see the emphasis on the covenant relationship of God to Israel. It articulates this relationship in terms that are deeply rooted in the formal identity of Israel as a covenant partner with the Lord. Israel is bound in obligation to the One who redeemed them from slavery and brought them into a land of abundance and plenty. The most extended formulation of that covenant relationship is to be found in the *Book of Deuteronomy* (Chapter 30). The question of whether the words in this section come from Jeremiah or from Deuteronomistic editors is difficult to determine. It is also difficult to determine if these words were connected directly to the failure of the reform of Josiah or represent a latter message to the community that explains what has already happened to them.

Most of our attention to the covenant relationship has always focused on Jeremiah 31. We relate more to this chapter because it talks about a new covenant that is inscribed on our hearts. But we cannot talk about a new covenant without first talking about an old covenant. Few Scripture passages uncover what the Biblical covenant was all about as does Jeremiah 11.

While the focus of covenant thinking is usually on the demands placed on the human community, the whole concept makes no sense if one does not look at the basis of the covenant (for the rationale for entering into such a relationship). A covenant with God is established to recall the experience of having been redeemed and then it looks forward to the possibilities of a future life that is promised by the same God. But it is not a covenant relationship until the community takes on its responsibilities to the redeeming and promising God. Obedience to the divine instruction is an obligation. It is the point of the covenant. But such obedience (understood as the law) is also the means to a full life. The divine instruction is embodied in the law and is a gift that offers the possibility of rich outcomes. When the gift is not accepted than the outcome is death. It became the central message of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah 34:1 – 35:19 (Obedience)

In these chapters the book returns to the present situation and the primary word of judgment. Two contrasting examples are set before us. One is a demonstration of the covenant disobedience of the community as a whole. It is exemplified in this instance in their violation of the sabbatical principle described in the Deuteronomic code (Deuteronomy 15) and set forth by Zedekiah.

The other example is the continuing faithfulness of the Rechabites to the demands of their ancestor, Jonadab, and the life-style of their clan. The example of the Rechabites' obedience makes (by contrast) the same point as is made in the story of the violation of the sabbatical release.



The Rechabites belonged to the Kenites who accompanied the Israelites into the Holy Land and dwelt among them. The main body of the Kenites dwelt in cities and adopted established habits of life that included no drinking of wine and no living in cities. They were commanded to always lead a nomadic life.

The Rechabites adhered to the law laid down by Jonadab and were noted for their fidelity to the old established customs of their family that was prevalent in the days of Jeremiah. It is these characteristics that is referred to by God for the purpose of making his point to the King of Judah. And as a reward for their fidelity, God proclaims that there will be a descendant of Jonadab in his service.

Rechabites were known as *sons of water drinkers*.

Bedouin tribe was found near Dead Sea who were descendants. Many Muslims claim descent from Rechab.

The Independent Order of Rechabites (also known as the Sons and Daughters of Rechab) is a fraternal organization and society founded in England in 1835 as part of the wider temperance movement to promote abstinence from alcoholic beverages. Always well connected in upper society and involved in financial matters, it gradually transformed into a financial institution which still exists (and still promotes) abstinence.

The Order has been active in Australia from 1843 (promoting temperance and it acts as a benefit society). A branch was established in the United states in 1842 and also flourished for a time. In the United Kingdom the Order trades under the name of Healthy Investment.

Jeremiah 52:1-34 (Destruction of Jerusalem)

This chapter functions as an appendix to the *Book of Jeremiah*. It is a slightly modified version of 2 Kings 24:18-25:30. It recounts in summary fashion the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem, the looting of the temple, the execution of the leaders, and the exile of many Judeans. The account concludes with a report of King Jehoiachin's release from prison so that he could sit at table with the king of Babylon.

The version in Jeremiah offers more detail about the items taken from the temple, enumerating the exiles taken to Babylon during three different deportations. The report records and helps to preserve the memory of the beauty and value of that which had been in the temple. The king and the temple were so significant that the pain and sense of hopelessness would have been self-evident. The number of those executed and exiled emphasized the decimation of Judah.

The final paragraph offers a modest anticipation of restoration. In the context of the larger story of the people of God we see in this final chapter the beginnings of restoration that keeps alive the hope in a ruler from the line of David.

Two realities are placed side-by-side and are identified with each other. One is the anger of God that expels Judah and Jerusalem from the very presence of the Lord. It is the devastating destruction of Jerusalem, the temple, and the people. The other is a purely historical report of a military event. How these two things are to be seen together is not disclosed. They are simply placed alongside each other so that we are to hear them as one reality with a double perspective (each as real as the other).

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Minor Prophets