

Jeremiah Lecture Notes—Summer 2011

Jeremiah 1-2

Jeremiah 1:1-3

--These verses are an editorial superscription to the Book of Jeremiah. These verses provide the reader with the historical context of Jeremiah's prophetic ministry (627-586 BC)¹ and his personal family background. The reader may see the Introduction notes for further details of background.

--Anathoth—While the traditional understanding of the reference to Anathoth connects Jeremiah to the exiled priestly family of Abiathar, others have pointed out that the text never makes that assertion, only stating that he was “of the priests which were at Anathoth.” Still, the connection to Anathoth in 1 Kings 2 certainly points the reader in this direction. Bright has pointed out that the connection also ties Jeremiah to the Eliad priesthood in Shiloh from an earlier period, which would explain his emphasis on ancient tradition, his mention of Shiloh, and his close ties to Hosea.²

Jeremiah 1:4-10—Jeremiah's call

--Yahweh's call to Jeremiah is very personal, even before birth. This signifies a very special relationship between Jeremiah and Yahweh. God chose Jeremiah for an important task. This task would bring hardship & pain to Jeremiah, which is the backdrop for some very personal moments.

--In a way no other prophet of Israel did, Jeremiah had a strong sense of urgency to his prophetic office. This feeling is based upon Yahweh's words in v. 5, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you. And before you went out from the womb I consecrated you. I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.”

--“Knew”—This word (Hebrew יָדָע *yada`*) often connotes commitment and intimacy in the Bible (See for example, Gen. 4:1, Amos 3:2, Hos. 6:6). Thus the word has been translated “I chose you,” “I knew you intimately,” and “I knew you for my own.”³ The parallel use of יָדָע (*yada`*) in Amos 3:2 (translated “chosen” in NIV) is instructive. God had “known” Israel, and thus they were expected to follow him. This word often has covenant implications. When the LORD “knows,” “chooses,” or possibly even “calls” someone, he or she has an obligation. Anything less than total obedience is rebellion. As Miller points out, it also implies that God would watch over the one He knew,⁴ a point to which Yahweh returns later in the chapter. (For the concept of Yahweh knowing one before birth, the reader might cf. Psalm 139, esp. vv. 13-14.)

¹ This representation of Jeremiah is not in ignorance of the current scholarly doubt concerning the ability to confirm the historicity of the biographical narratives in the Book of Jeremiah. This study will assume, however, that the basic narrative outline and depiction of Jeremiah is historical. Certainly, the “construct” nature of the representation of Jeremiah is undeniable. Nevertheless, the basic description of Jeremiah will be considered acceptably accurate for this study.

² J. Bright, *Jeremiah*, Anchor Bible, p. LXXXVII.

³ See Bright, Thompson, and NEB for these translations.

⁴ P. Miller, “Jeremiah,” *New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 580.

--“Consecrated”—Yahweh had set Jeremiah apart. This is the Hebrew word **קִדֵּשׁ** (*qadesh*), the adjective form of which means “holy.” Jeremiah was set apart by God for a particular task. As the LORD is “holy” and “set apart,” so He sets his servants apart⁵ and “appoints” them to certain tasks.

--“Appointed”—God appointed Jeremiah a “prophet to the nations.” The implications of this appointment are several. First, while his primary mission might be to Judah, it would go beyond the borders of his home nation. Second, this designation points out the total sovereignty of Yahweh in the world.

--In verse 6-10, Jeremiah shrinks back from God’s call and is reassured by Him. “Ah Lord God” is a typical lament exclamation, expressing emotion. This attitude is not unusual in call narratives (i.e. Moses and Gideon), and might even reflect a healthy reticence to jump into such a lofty position. As a “youth,” Jeremiah was not prepared to deal with the weightiness of being a prophet, a spokesman for God, especially perhaps a prophet to “the nations.” He had no training. Furthermore, the prophets who had gone before him often fared poorly in the arena of public opinion and their lives were typically filled with difficulty. Perhaps only a fool would happily and hastily jump into the position of a prophet!

--The LORD’s answer to Jeremiah is a powerful promise. He assures Jeremiah that he will indeed be a prophet. This is reminiscent of the promise of “prophet like Moses” in Deut. 18:18. There the Lord says, “He will tell them everything I command him” (NIV).

--Furthermore, in v. 8, the LORD acknowledges implicitly that the task would be difficult, because He would “deliver” or “rescue” him. This word (Hebrew **נָצַל** *natsal*) is used in reference to the exodus from Egypt (Ex. 3:8, and often) and of David with God rescued Him from a bear (1 Sam. 17:37). No harm would befall Jeremiah. He could rest in the fact that Yahweh was with him.

--Yahweh then “touched Jeremiah’s mouth” and “placed (His=God’s) words in (Jeremiah’s) mouth.” This phrase is parallel to Deut. 18:18, again placing Jeremiah’s call within the sphere of covenantal history and in the stream of prophetic history, even connecting Jeremiah with Moses, the quintessential spokesman for God. As Norman Habel has pointed out, Jeremiah is “confronted with the word. . . . The reality of the word as an overwhelming force of God’s self-revelation is attested throughout the book.”⁶ The “word of God” is a continued emphasis of the Book of Jeremiah, and Jeremiah can not escape the force of that word in his life and mind. Jer. 20:9 and 23:9 reinforce the power of the word of God within Jeremiah.

--Verse 10 contains the actual commission of Jeremiah. God has literally appointed him as an “overseer” over nations and kingdoms, beginning with Judah, of course. He has given the prophet authority, based upon His own authority and sovereignty, to both build and destroy nations. In his ministry, Jeremiah will announce God’s plans for both activities.

Jeremiah 1:11-16—Call Visions

--Yahweh is “watching” to see that His word of judgment will be fulfilled. The LORD does not overlook or ignore the actions of His people. He is constantly watching.

⁵ Of course, one should not overlook that Jesus has set all believers apart for His service.

⁶ N. Habel, “The Form and Significance of the Call Narratives,” *ZAW* 77 (1965), 297-323.

--This vision is reported with an interesting play on words. The word for "almond branch" is שֶׁקֶד (shaqed) while the word for "watching" is שֹׁקֵד (shoqed). The only difference is one vowel. This similarity in pronunciation is the point of the visual image. This is first of many visual "words" in the Book of Jeremiah.

--The word to be fulfilled is the "boiling pot" of judgment, poured out because of their two-fold sin, forsaking Yahweh and worshiping false gods. Scholars have debated the identity of foe from the north" in this verse. Did Jeremiah mean, at this point, the Assyrians, Babylonians, or even the Scythians, who were wreaking havoc on the Assyrians at this point in history? The better question might be, did Jeremiah know, or even care? Most of the conquering powers came from the north, and would continue to do so in the future. The point of the vision is that like the boiling contents of the pot are destructive, so the enemy would destroy Judah for rebelling against Yahweh.

Jeremiah 1:17-19—Divine Charge and Promise

--In v. 17, Jeremiah is challenged to prepare himself and to boldly proclaim the word of Yahweh. In vv. Yahweh reaffirms His promise to protect Jeremiah. He uses military symbolism to describe this protection. Jeremiah would be as impregnable as the strongest city. Although the people of Judah, especially the leadership, would attack Jeremiah, they could not conquer him. The chapter ends with the repetition of 1:8b, further reiterating God's promise.

Jeremiah 2:1-8—Judah's Idolatry and Apostasy

--2:1-3—With great similarity to Hosea, Yahweh reminds Judah of His love, literally of their marriage to him, their honeymoon, and His love and care for them, like the passionate and intimate love of a new husband for his wife. As Amos had pointed out, God had chosen them from all the nations in the world (Amos 3:2), as a sort of first fruits, and that election carried both benefit and obligation.

--2:4-8—But Judah had forgotten Yahweh. This also reflects the words of Hosea, where Israel is condemned for lack of knowledge of God.

--In v. 5, Yahweh asks what injustice they found in Him. Was there a reason for leaving Him to serve idols, which were "emptiness" or "worthlessness"? In fact, they have now become as worthless as the gods they serve. This could lead to a discussion of where Christians in 21st century America stand in relation to God and the "things we serve." The *gods* of commercialism, prosperity, and wealth have so permeated modern (post-modern?) Christianity that one might ask if the church has not become like the "worthlessness" it serves.

--In vv. 6-8, Judah, and especially her leaders, is condemned for failure to acknowledge God's role in her blessings and to seek Him for counsel. Instead, they have gone to the Baals, the pagan gods of their neighbors. The priests and leaders no longer go to Yahweh for counsel and leadership. Thus, their inheritance has become an abomination to Yahweh. The bride has become a disgusting shadow of herself, and Yahweh is now forced to reject her, as He has been rejected.

--In Jer. 2:9, Judah is condemned in legal terms, using the common *rib* form. This is a lawsuit, or court of law, term. They have been found guilty in God's court and will now be judge.

Jeremiah 2:9-13

--Do people change gods? Not usually, rather nations live & die for their own gods. This is the great sin of Judah. Verse 11 is, indeed, the crux of the matter. While the Canaanites were guilty of idolatry, Judah was guilty of apostasy. Their worship of Yahweh had become so paganized, that He was no longer distinguishable from Baal. Indeed, they were one and the same. The people of Judah were worshiping Yahweh and Baal as one and the same god.

--They have left Yahweh, “the spring of living water,” and served other gods, digging “their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.” This is an incredibly powerful statement. The LORD gives his followers all that they need to life, yet they tend to seek self-sufficiency and self-reliance, or even worse reliance upon another “god.”

--When we serve what we make, we are doomed to failure because only Yahweh can be our source of refreshment, strength, and nourishment.

--John 4—Does Jesus allude to this text? “Whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:14 NIV). We must seek our sustenance from Him. Yet, where do we look? That is the question!