

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH

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The biblical records of the times in which Jeremiah ministered are 2 Kings 21—25 and 2 Chronicles 33—36. His contemporary prophets were Zephaniah and Habakkuk before the Exile, and Ezekiel and Daniel after it began. A greater concentration of writing prophets existed just before the fall of Judah than at any other time in biblical history.

King Manasseh had been Judah's most ungodly king, but toward the end of his life he repented (2 Chron. 33:15-19). He was responsible for many of the evil conditions that marked Judah in Jeremiah's earliest years (cf. 15:4; 2 Kings 23:26). His long life was not a blessing for faithfulness, as his father Hezekiah's had been, but an instrument of chastening for Judah.

King Amon succeeded Manasseh and reigned for two years (642-640 B.C.). Rather than perpetuating the repentant attitude that his father had demonstrated, Amon reverted to the policies of Manasseh's earlier reign and rebelled against Yahweh completely. This provoked some of his officials to assassinate him (2 Kings 21:23).

Josiah was eight years old when his father Amon died. He began reigning then and continued on the throne for 31 years (640-609 B.C.). Josiah was one of Judah's best kings and one of the four reforming kings of the Southern Kingdom. He began to seek the LORD (Yahweh) when he was 16 years old and began initiating religious reforms when he was 20 (2 Chron. 34:3-7). Jeremiah received his call to minister in the thirteenth year of Josiah's reign, when the king was 21, namely, 627 B.C. (1:6). Josiah's reforms were more extensive than those of any of his predecessors. He began the major projects when he was 26. During these years Assyria was declining as a world power and Neo-Babylonia was not yet the dominant empire it soon became.

One of Josiah's projects was the repairing of Solomon's Temple (2 Kings 22:5; cf. 2 Kings 12:4-16). During its renovation, Hilkiah, the high priest and possibly Jeremiah's father, discovered the Mosaic Law, which had been lost for a long time (cf. 2 Kings 22:8). This discovery spurred a return to the system of worship that the Book of Deuteronomy specified (2 Kings 23).

Josiah also did much to clear the land of idolatry, sacred prostitution, child sacrifice, and pagan altars—not only in Judah, but also in some formerly northern Israelite territory. He also reinstated the Passover. Unfortunately for Judah, Josiah felt compelled to travel to Megiddo to try and block Pharaoh Neco II from advancing north to assist the Assyrians in resisting the westward expanding Babylonians. Josiah died at Megiddo, in 609 B.C., at the age of 39. His death was a tragic loss for Judah.

Some of Jeremiah's prophecies date from Josiah's reign. Zephaniah also ministered in Judah during the reign of Josiah, as did the prophetess Huldah (2 Kings 22:14-20). There have been many attempts to date all the various sections of Jeremiah. However, much of this is guesswork, and even conservative commentators disagree about the dating of many sections of the book.

Three of Josiah's sons and one of his grandsons ruled Judah after his death. The first of these, though he was the



second son, was Jehoahaz, who ruled for only three months in 609 B.C. The Judean people favored Jehoahaz, but Pharaoh Neco, who by slaying Josiah gained control over Judah, found Jehoahaz uncooperative. Therefore, Pharaoh deported him to Egypt as a prisoner where he died (22:10-12). God gave Jeremiah a few prophecies during this king's brief reign.

Jehoahaz's older brother Jehoiakim succeeded him on Judah's throne, thanks to Pharaoh Neco who appointed him. He reigned for 11 years (609- 598 B.C.). Jehoiakim was a weak king who changed allegiances between Egypt and Babylon whenever he thought a change might be to Judah's advantage. During his tenure, Prince Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon defeated the allied Egyptian and Assyrian forces at Carchemish, thus establishing Babylonian supremacy in the ancient Near East (605 B.C.). Shortly thereafter, the now King Nebuchadnezzar, as he had become, invaded Canaan, conquered some cities, and took some of the nobles, including Daniel, as exiles to Babylon (Dan. 1:1-3). Jehoiakim refused to follow Jeremiah's counsel to submit to the Babylonians. Instead he showed his contempt for the prophet by burning his prophecies (ch. 36). Jeremiah despised this king for his wickedness (22:18-19; 26:20-23; 36).

Jehoiakim rebelled against Babylon in 601 B.C., so the Babylonians deposed him and took him to Babylon (2 Chron. 36:6). Later they allowed him to return to Jerusalem where he died in 561 B.C. (cf. 22:18-19). Several of Jeremiah's prophecies apparently date from Jehoiakim's reign. Habakkuk probably also ministered at this time, as the content of his book suggests.

Jehoiakim's son Jehoiachin succeeded his father but only reigned for three months (598-597 B.C.). During that time Nebuchadnezzar attacked Jerusalem and carried off a large portion of the city's population (in 597 B.C.). The king was evil, and Jeremiah predicted that none of his sons would rule over the nation (22:30). He ended his days in Babylon, enjoying the favor of the Babylonian king Evil-merodach (52:31-34).

Zedekiah was the third son of Josiah to rule Judah, and he too ruled under Nebuchadnezzar's sovereignty (597-586 B.C.). The Babylonian monarch summoned Zedekiah to Babylon in 593 B.C. (51:59), but he rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar by making a treaty with Pharaoh Hophra (589- 570 B.C.) under pressure from Judean nationalists (chs. 37—38). This resulted in the final siege of Jerusalem in 588 and its fall two years later in 586 B.C. (ch. 39).

The Babylonians took Zedekiah captive to Riblah, in Syria (Aramea), where they executed his sons and put out his eyes. He died later in Babylon. Since Jeremiah advocated surrender to the Babylonians, Nebuchadnezzar allowed him to choose where he wanted to live when Jerusalem fell, and the prophet elected to stay where he was.

Shortly after he defeated Zedekiah, Nebuchadnezzar set up a pro-Babylonian Judean named Gedaliah as his governor of Judah (40:5-6). But a group of Jewish nationalists under Ishmael's leadership assassinated Gedaliah within the year (586 B.C.; 41:2). This ill-advised act resulted in the rebels having to flee to Egypt for safety from Nebuchadnezzar. They forced Jeremiah to accompany them against his will (chs. 42—43). There the prophet evidently spent the remaining years of his life and produced his final prophecies.