

## Beyond the Norm—the Prophet in Israel Radical Thoughts, Radical Actions Jeremiah—Case Study

“From the day of the destruction of the Temple, prophetic inspiration was taken away from the prophets and given to children and madmen.” Rabbi Yohanan, Babba Batra 12b

### Background on Jeremiah (ca. 650 BCE-570 BCE)

Born in the village of Anatot northeast of Jerusalem to a priestly family, Jeremiah received the call from God to serve as a prophet ca. 625 CE (39 years before the destruction of the Temple). He prophesied after the Assyrians had destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE during the reigns of the last kings of Judah. His prophecies continued during the Babylonian siege, the exile, and captivity. He died in Egypt.

### Arc of his Prophecies

Like many of his predecessors Jeremiah excoriated the Judeans for their worship of idols as well as their lack of moral rectitude. He thunders the punishment God will bring for Judah's sins but also proclaims how God waits for the Judeans to repent. Jeremiah clearly predicts the oncoming attack from Babylonia and the Judeans' exile. He delivered God's message that the Judeans would return within 70 years and as a prophet during the exile, he counsels hope and loyalty, but not rebellion.

### Background on the Near East

The Assyrian Empire was replaced by the Babylonian Empire as the strongest power in the region. Egypt was the second strongest power. Judah had been a vassal state to Assyria, then became independent for a short time but ultimately became a province of Babylonia, an empire under Nebuchadnezzar. The king of Judah tried to retain their short-lived independence by forging an alliance with Egypt, a futile strategy.



".....AND MAKE IT SNAPPY!"

## Case Study: Jeremiah

Read the text assigned to your group and respond to the questions together. Each group will summarize their text and share their learning with the entire lab.

### 1. The Call 1:1-19

- What do you learn about Jeremiah's personality from the call?
- How does God communicate with Jeremiah?
- Is this an ecstatic moment when Jeremiah loses consciousness or is he rooted in reality during the call from God?

### 2. The Message 5:1-31

- What are the sins of Judah?
- How widespread is the immorality?
- What do you learn about the organization of society in Judah from chap. 5?
- What did the Judeans learn from the destruction of Israel at the hands of Assyria in 722 BCE?
- What will happen to Judah as a result of their sins?
- Is there any way that Judah can escape the fate Jeremiah describes in verses 14-17?

### 3. The Message 29: 1-14 (After the destruction of the Temple and the exile)

- What is the message Jeremiah gives to the remnant of Judah and why?
- What's the warning to the Jews in captivity?
- The beginning of this chapter details how the letter arrived in Babylon—why do you think it's included here?
- What's the feeling Jeremiah is trying to imbue within the exiled community?

### 4. Jeremiah's Art-- Language of Poetry: Chapter 5, 6, 30:1-9

- What poetic devices does Jeremiah employ?
- How effective do you think his language would be?
- Aside from poetry, what are other literary devices you notice in these two chapters?
- Do you consider his words an art form?
- In chapters 30 and 36, Jeremiah switches from oral to written message at God's request. Why the switch?

**5. Language of Allegory: Chapter 13:1-11 and 18:1-12, 30:1-9**

- What's the meaning of each allegory?
- Why use an allegory to transmit one's message?
- Who is delivering the message and who's receiving it?
- Do you think an allegory would work for Jeremiah to speak to the nation of Judah?
- In chapters 30 and 36, Jeremiah switches from oral to written message at God's request. Why the switch?
- If you have time, scan chapters 27 and 28. How does Jeremiah become a human allegory? Could you view this as a form of performance art?

**6. Reaction of the King, the Priests, and the People to Jeremiah's prophecies**

**Jeremiah 18:18-23, 20:1-2, 7-10, 26:4-19, 32:1-5, 38:1-28, 39:11-14**

- How do the various kings react to Jeremiah's prophecies of doom and condemnation?
- Who are the people who rescue Jeremiah?
- How great was the danger to Jeremiah when he spoke God's words?
- The Babylonian king protected Jeremiah. Do you think that placed him in danger or saved him? (39)

**7. Who is the inner Jeremiah?**

**Jeremiah 11:18-12:6; 15:10-21, 20:7-18**

- How would you describe the inner Jeremiah? What range of emotions can you discern from the verses.
- What do you think the personal cost was to Jeremiah for serving as God's prophet?
- Abraham Joshua Heschel calls the prophets "morally maladjusted." What do you think he means and how does this affect the inner Jeremiah?
- There is a tradition among early 20<sup>th</sup> century Christian Bible scholars of deeming the prophets to be mad. Some scholars diagnose the various prophets, e.g. according to E.C. Broome, Ezekiel was a paranoid schizophrenic. How do you respond to those who turn to a psychological diagnosis?

**Do you express your anger, dismay, moral outrage, and visions of the future in your art?**

**How?**